

The background of the entire page is a soft, light blue-toned image showing a pair of hands gently cupping a heart. The hands are positioned on the left and bottom, with the heart centered in the upper right. The overall aesthetic is clean, compassionate, and medical.

Giving SOMETHING *of ourselves*

A Message on Organ and
Tissue Donation and Transplantation

Giving So That Others Might Live

Today's fast-changing society presents new challenges and opportunities to give life and love to others. It seems that almost every week, new medical knowledge about our human bodies comes to light. Yesterday's medical miracles become today's reality. Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Christiaan Barnard of South Africa captivated the world by performing the first heart transplant. Since then, transplantation has become common practice around the globe.

Donors can be either living or dead. The most commonly known donations, particularly with respect to organs, occur after the death of the donor. The focus of this leaflet is on donations from donors who have died.

Generous people are donating organs or tissues so that others might live, or live more fully. Here are some examples:

Every organ donation for the health and well-being of another is "a gesture which is a genuine act of love. It is not just a matter of giving something that belongs to us but of giving something of ourselves, for 'by virtue of its substantial union with a spiritual soul, the human body cannot be considered as a mere complex of tissues, organs and functions ... rather it is a constitutive part of the person who manifests and expresses himself through it.'"

Pope John Paul II

Organs

- a kidney donation frees a child, man or woman from a life on dialysis;
- the gift of a healthy lung offers new life to someone who has cystic fibrosis;
- the donation of a liver cures someone suffering from liver failure;
- a heart transplant gives life to someone with severe heart disease.

Tissues

- donated skin tissue can help someone who is disfigured or severely burned;
- the gift of bone tissue replaces bone destroyed by tumours or infection;
- a cornea donation enables someone who is visually impaired to see;
- blood and bone marrow donors help people with leukemia.

Survey after survey shows that the vast majority of Canadians support organ and tissue donation. The supply, however, has not kept pace with the demand; Canada's rate of donation currently ranks lowest of all industrialized countries. There are many reasons for this gap, including a healthier population, better driving records, an aging population, health care workers' reluctance to request donations, and people's failure to discuss their intentions with family members.¹

We hope that the information in this leaflet will underline for members of the Catholic community the Church's strong support for organ and tissue donation and will encourage them to consider this option as a profound act of charity and as a means of expressing solidarity with those who are suffering.

The Church is strongly in favour of organ and tissue donation and transplantation

It may surprise some people that the Catholic Church is strongly in favour of organ and tissue donation. The gift of an organ or tissues to another person is in keeping with the Church's teaching on respect for the life and dignity of the human person, including our belief in the resurrection of the body. Donating part of our physical body after death does not compromise what is eternal any more than cremation or the natural decaying of the body in the ground would.

The psalmist² sang of the wonders of ourselves, the wonders of God's works as we were each knitted together in the womb. The early Fathers of the Church knew that God's glory is the human person fully alive. The human body, our glorious, wonderfully knit-together expression of life, is a marvel of interconnectedness and interdependence. It is a model of how all life and human society should live in harmony and in the service of God and each other.

As Christians, we know we are called to imitate Christ and continue his life-giving work in our time and place. Jesus healed the sick and brought comfort to the suffering. In imitation of him, our mission of healing and compassion challenges us to be generous to our neighbours, particularly those who are suffering from a physical illness that can be healed or relieved.

In his 1995 encyclical,³ Pope John Paul II reminds us that *The Gospel of Life is celebrated above all else in the daily living of life which should be filled with self giving for others*. He tells us that *A particular praiseworthy example of such gestures is the donation*

of organs performed in an ethically acceptable manner, with a view to offering a chance of health and even life to the sick who sometimes have no other hope.

Pope John Paul II, in an address to the 18th International Congress of the Transplantation Society on August 29, 2000, further said that every organ donation for the health and well-being of another is a noble gesture, a gesture which is a genuine act of love. *It is not just a matter of giving something that belongs to us but of giving something of ourselves, for 'by virtue of its substantial union with a spiritual soul, the human body cannot be considered as a mere complex of tissues, organs and functions ... rather it is a constitutive part of the person who manifests and expresses himself through it.'*⁴

Ethical Criteria for Organ and Tissue Donation⁵

Particular Principles When the Donor Is Dead

- 1) Vital organs that occur singly in the body (e.g., the heart) can be removed only after death.
- 2) The donor's consent must have been well informed and freely given in advance, in writing or in discussion. In the absence of this consent, the consent of the family or proxy is needed. Any previously expressed objections of the deceased person must be respected.
- 3) There must be moral certainty that the donor is dead. *Here it can be said that the criterion adopted in more recent times for ascertaining the fact of death, namely the complete and irreversible cessation of all brain activity, if rigorously applied, does not seem to conflict with the essential elements of a sound*

*anthropology. Therefore a health-worker professionally responsible for ascertaining death can use these criteria in each individual case as the basis for arriving at that degree of assurance in ethical judgment which moral teaching describes as 'moral certainty.'*⁶

Particular Principles When the Donor Is Living

- 1) The recipient's need must be serious and there must be no other treatment options.
- 2) The benefit to the recipient must be proportionate to the risk taken by the donor.
- 3) There must be no coercion; the donor's consent must be well informed and freely given.
- 4) The functional, as distinct from anatomical, integrity of the donor must not be impaired. (For example, giving a kidney is acceptable, but giving the heart is not, as a donor is able to function with one kidney but not without a heart.)

General Principles

- 1) There must be respect for the human life, integrity and dignity of both the donor and the recipient.
- 2) The choice of recipient must be based on clinical factors, not on those that are discriminatory (e.g., based on sex or race) or utilitarian (e.g., based on social status). Any criteria other than medical *would prove wholly arbitrary and subjective, and would fail to recognize the intrinsic value of each human person as such, a value that is independent of any external circumstances.*⁷
- 3) Payment for organs or tissues is unacceptable because commercialization would violate the dignity of the human person.

Special Questions

The scientific community is searching for solutions to the shortage in human organs for transplant. Two proposals are *xenotransplantation* and the *cloning of embryos* to harvest stem cells.

Xenotransplantation

Xenotransplantation is the use of animal parts for transplantation. A common and acceptable example is the use of heart valves from pigs. In discussing the still experimental nature of xenotransplantation, Pope John Paul II quoted with approval the insight of his predecessor Pius XII: *...for a xenotransplant to be licit, the transplanted organ must not impair the integrity of the psychological or genetic identity of the person receiving it; and there must also be a proven biological possibility that the transplant will be successful and will not expose the recipient to inordinate risk.*⁸

Cloning of Human Embryos

Embryonic stem cells are seen as having enormous potential to relieve the organ shortage because they are capable of growing into any cell, tissue or organ in the human body. These cells are being retrieved from extra embryos that are not used in *in vitro* fertilization procedures; some clinicians want to create and clone embryos for the sole purpose of harvesting their stem cells. Notwithstanding the great potential for good, the retrieval of these cells is morally unacceptable because it results in the death of the embryo. Catholic teaching holds that the embryo is a human being and must be treated as a person. How can we create life and then destroy it? A human person, including the embryo, must never be used as a means to an end.

The Church, however, supports the use of stem cells from the blood of umbilical cords as well as the use of adult stem cells. Beginning on January 1, 2001, the Catholic University of Rome will open a stem-cells bank, using cells from the blood of umbilical cords to regenerate human organs and tissues. There is also promising research on the use of adult stem cells, such as from bone marrow or muscles. *The progress and results obtained in the field of adult stem cells show not only their great plasticity but also their many possible uses, in all likelihood no different from those of embryonic stem cells.*⁹ The use of adult stem cells enables scientific progress while respecting human dignity and integrity.

Talk to Your Loved Ones

Donating a kidney, bone marrow, skin or even blood from your own body when you are alive and healthy to help another person takes courage, selflessness and great faith that your gift will help the other and not endanger your own ability to function with integrity and human wholeness. This is never an easy decision to make. It helps to include in the decision-making process family and friends who love you and care about your well-being.

Even though there is broad public support for organ donation, most people have not signed donor cards or discussed with their families the possibility of their organs and tissues being donated at the moment of death. This may be because most of us do not find it easy to talk about or even think about our own death or the death of people close to us.

If we do not leave instructions to donate our organs or tissues (in writing or in full discussion with our families), we may leave them to face a tough decision when someone they

love and for whom they have responsibility is dying. Without knowing your wishes, they will be asked to reach beyond their own suffering and find the courage to agree that a gift of life from the one they love should be used to help someone in need. If you decide you would like to donate, make sure your family and friends understand your wishes. Evidence shows that up to 96 per cent of relatives agree to organ donation if they already know the individual's wishes, compared to only 58 per cent when the family has not previously discussed the issue.¹⁰

Decide to Give

Organ donation is not an obligation; it is an act of self-giving. It is a decision that must be made freely, based on knowledge, clarity of mind and concern for the needs of others.

If you are willing to give your organs, and your province has organ donor cards (e.g., in connection with the issuing of your driver's licence or health card), please obtain one, sign it and keep it safe. If a donor card isn't available, prepare one or write a letter for your family, the person who holds your power of attorney, your caregivers and your doctors. Give these people copies of your letter or card and carry one with you at all times in case of accident. In many instances, organs must be transplanted quickly if the operation is to be successful.

Confronting the reality of death and taking steps to relieve your family of facing the difficult decision of organ donation on their own is an act of love. Talk to your family and your doctor as soon as possible. Let them know your wishes clearly, then put it in writing for their sake as well as for the sake of others.

As Christians, we know that Christ died for us and is risen. His triumph over death is ours as well. He has freed us from death and enabled us to reach out to take the hand of God. As we reach for God's hand at the moment of our death, we have the opportunity to reach out to our neighbour and offer the gift of life.

Notes

1 See *Organ and Tissue Donation and Transplantation: A Canadian Approach*, Report of the Standing Committee on Health, April 1999.

A study prepared for the British Columbia Transplant Society reported that in twenty years the transplant gap will have quadrupled. In the year 2000 5,441 Canadians who need transplants won't have gotten them and by 2020 18,278 people will be waiting for organs but only 2,028 will be available. See Elaine Carey, "Organ Shortage to Worsen," *The Globe and Mail*, June 21, 2000.

2 *For it was you who formed
my inward parts;
you knit me together
in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully
and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
(Psalm 139:13-14, NRSV)*

3 Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, Vatican, 1995

4 Pope John Paul II. "Cloning, involving use and destruction of human embryos is morally unacceptable." *L'Osservatore Romano* no. 35 (1657) – 30 August 2000: p. 1.

5 See also Catholic Health Association of Canada, *Health Ethics Guide*, Ottawa, 2000.

6 Pope John Paul II, *L'Osservatore Romano*, op.cit.

7 Pope John Paul II, *ibid.*

8 Pope John Paul II, *ibid.*

9 The Pontifical Academy for Life, *Declaration on the Production and the Scientific and Therapeutic Use of Human Embryonic Stem Cells*, August 25, 2000.

10 *Organ and Tissue Donation and Transplantation*, op.cit.

This leaflet has been produced by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) and the Catholic Health Association of Canada (CHAC).

COLF was jointly founded by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Knights of Columbus to promote respect for human life and dignity and the essential role of the family.

CHAC is a national Christian association committed to health care in the tradition of the Catholic Church. It represents health care and social service organizations including 127 hospitals and homes, as well as health professionals involved at all levels of health care throughout the country.

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Copies may also be ordered from the CHAC office at 1247 Kilborn Place, Ottawa, ON K1H 6K9; fax: (613) 731-7797; tel: (613) 731-7148; e-mail: chac@web.ca.

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