

Pastor's Column

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The following article, "Organ Donation—The Lifesaving Agreement" was written by Brenda Rees and appeared in The Tidings, the Catholic weekly of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 2006:

The unselfish act of becoming an organ donor recently took on a new shine with the revelation that Pope Benedict XVI is the first pope on record as being a card-carrying organ donor.

In a 1999 interview with the Zenit News Agency in Rome, the pope revealed that he had registered years ago and always carries his documents with him. "To donate one's organs is an act of love that is morally licit, so long as it is free and spontaneous," he said.

That is good news to the 7,000-plus people in California alone who are waiting for donations of kidneys, livers, hearts, and more that will prolong and enhance their lives.

"What the pope has done is given us a model to look up to, someone who is respected and who understands what organ donation is all about," says Tenaya Wallace of One Legacy Transplant Donor Network, a federally designated entity that coordinates donors with possible waiting list recipients in Southern California.

In fact, organ donation is considered by the church as an act of charity and love, says Wallace. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life), Pope John Paul II described organ donation as "everyday heroism."

"A particularly 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 itself to the sick who sometimes have no hope." (*Evangelium Vitae*, n.86)

So with all this praise and encouragement for organ donation, why is it hard for people to either register as an organ donor or encourage loved ones to do the same? Why is there such a high demand for donors and few who really step forward in the time of need?

"Many people agree to the concept of organ donation but only half really subscribe to it," says Reg Green who started the Nicholas Green Foundation after his seven-year-old son Nicholas was shot to death while vacationing in Italy in 1999. Various organs, tissues, and corneas of Nicholas were transplanted in seven recipients who, says Green, were eternally grateful for the family decision.

Most of the time, says Green, sudden death is such a shock to families that the idea of organ donation doesn't enter the equation. Many donations often come from people involved in serious unexpected accidents such as a violent death or car crashes. Emotions, he says, take over and the family is dealing with new-found grief that is life changing.

"There is also a feeling that the procedure will mutilate the body, especially in the case of accidents," adds Green. "But doctors (who remove the organs, tissues, etc.) have such respect for the donor. They realize this person is doing a very sacred thing. They treat donors with the utmost honor and respect."

Another common misconception is the idea that being brain dead is somehow similar to being on life support, says Wallace. "Families need to understand that when a person is brain dead, there is no more hope or treatment," she says. "Brain death is a slow progression." Only those who have been officially declared brain dead can be an organ donor candidate.

Also, Wallace adds that many people think their bodies are not "donor-worthy" which is completely wrong. "They think that if they have diabetes or cancer they can't donate," she explains. "That is not always the case. We encourage people not to automatically rule themselves out. Our oldest organ donor was in a lady in her 80s; our oldest bone donor was a gentleman who was 99..."

Register to Be an Organ Donor

There are two ways to register to be an organ and tissue donor in California, which helps to ensure your wishes are followed and greatly eases the decision for your family:

1. At the DMV when you apply for a driver license or ID card. (Check "Yes" every time to update your information on the donor registry and print a pink donor dot on your license.)
2. Online at www.donateLIFEcalifornia.org or www.doneVIDAcalifornia.org. (These secure sites are reviewed only by transplant personnel and easily let you make changes.)

I have registered. Have you? Will you? Give the gift of life. Be an organ donor!

Fr. Mike