

“Moral Reflections on Heart Transplant Surgical Procedure,”

Excerpt from *Melita Theologica* 20/1 (1968): 1-11

In order to dispel doubts and misgivings about the fact of a donor's death, once death has been satisfactorily defined, it has been suggested that the fact of the donor's death should be established by a medical board completely independent from the surgical team entrusted with the performance of the transplant. It should be made clear that the consent of both recipient and donor, or the person responsible for the latter, has been freely secured before the operation can be undertaken. Adequate safeguards should qualify every stage of the procedure in order to ensure that human bodies are treated with all the respect and reverence due to them. Even so, responsible medical opinion has been expressed that future hope for critically ill heart patients may not lie in the way of heart transplant techniques until, at least, storage methods are so perfected that hearts could be preserved in a usable state till required for transplanting, and as long as the technique itself has not advanced to the stage in which it will offer reasonable promise of success.

Thus, to quote one representative of this line of thought, the outstanding medical scientist Dr Irvine H. Page, who directs research at the Cleveland Clinic and edits the scientific journal 'Modern Medicine', has confessed that he looks with grave moral misgivings upon the cavalier attitude that is lately being adopted towards the human body, which he still regards as the sacred vessel of man's soul and spirit.

Dr Page views with concern the medical attitude to meddle too lightly with the human body since he feels and fears that disregard for the human body may easily lead to disregard for human life in general. He believes that rather than

¹ Mgr Carmelo Muscat (1926-2009) was Professor of Moral Theology at the University of Malta.

push precipitately into experiments that entail unnecessary risks, research should proceed at a slower pace and that the application of its results to human beings should advance more cautiously still.¹ In the meantime, other alternatives are being proposed which, if successfully developed, may furnish the answer sought through the still questionable heart transplant procedures. Such alternatives include the implantation of artificial hearts and the special breeding of animals that could supply genetically reliable organs for humans, as suggested by the American Dr Lederberg and the leading Italian surgeon Professor Valdoni.

I feel, in agreement with Norman St John-Stevas, that the question which must be ultimately asked and answered with regard to heart transplant techniques is: Do such procedures confirm or deny man's essential nature? On the answer to this question rests the test of their morality. An affirmative answer would, in my opinion, warrant the application to the pioneers of heart transplants the words of encouragement addressed by Pius XII to the pioneers of corneal transplants, to whom the Pope said: "Since you assure us that corneal transplants constitute for many patients a promise of cure or, at least, a means of relief and improvement in their condition, we encourage you to help your patients by making every possible and legitimate use of these means with all the discretion and prudence required in every case."²

¹ cf. A. Rosenfeld, "Will Man Direct His Own Evolution," *Life International*, November 1, 1965: 58.

² Pius XII, Discourse on General Transplants, in *Atti e Discorsi di Pio XII*, 18 (1956): 265.