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# Organ donation -- the life-saving agreement

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By Brenda Rees

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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 the 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 so 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, takes 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's 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."

Misconceptions can be remedied by education, says Wallace, but communication is also a vital component of those considering organ donation. "We encourage people to register to be a donor," she says pointing to a new California website (see sidebar). "By signing up online you can leave an effective way that your wishes will be fulfilled."

Still, if that's too much for some people, Wallace and Green stress that people need to talk to their family members about their wishes. "Have a conversation with your loved ones before something tragic happens,"



says Green. "Let them know what you want to happen if you suddenly pass away."

For the Greens, the sudden and violent loss of their son will never be forgotten. Still, Green points out that because of all the media attention in Italy to the senseless crime, more people jumped on the organ donation bandwagon.

In fact, in the first few days following Nicholas' death, the number of people signing organ donor cards in Italy quadrupled. Donations there almost triple the rate they were in the year before he died.

Even though Green and his family have met the thankful recipients who benefited from Nicholas' body, he still grieves for his young son who he says "was pure and ready to ascend to the stars."

"There is some consolation with the process," he says. "It puts something on the other side of the balance. It will never bring my son back but it can help somewhat with the grief."

### Register online to be an organ donor

Californians have a brand new opportunity to make a difference in the lives of those who are waiting for valuable organs, tissues and corneas. An official state donor registry was launched in April 2005 allowing anyone aged 13 or older to sign up so that there can be no possible doubt about their wishes.

Until now, drivers put the familiar pink dot on their licenses, thinking that was enough. But, all too often, no one else in their family knew about it. In the numbness of sudden death from accidents or violence, billfolds and wallets are often overlooked.

The California Senate unanimously passed last May, SB 689, which would allow drivers to sign on to the new registry at the DMV as they apply for or renew a driver's license or ID card. That bill is currently before the assembly for committee hearings.

But anyone can register online, simply and without charge. Visit [www.donateLIFeCalifornia.org](http://www.donateLIFeCalifornia.org) or in Spanish at [www.doneVIDAcalifornia.org](http://www.doneVIDAcalifornia.org) and sign up on a secure database that will only be accessible as "read-only" to authorized, non-hospital organ and tissue recovery personnel.

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