

HEART TRANSPLANT

Commitment of Christians to the donation of organs

Sermon by Pastor Francisco Javier Rivera Mardones, 31 August 2008, in the Sunday service with the attendance of leading authorities, among them the Minister of Health María Soledad Barría, Minister of the Secretary General of the Presidency Edgardo Riveros, parliamentarians Enrique Accorsi and Marcelo Forni, Subsecretaries of Health and Culture, President of the Medical College, Counselors, Journalists, Notary Fernando Gomila and other civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

On this special morning in which we have heard impressive and moving testimonies of persons with transplants and donor families, of the anguish and long waiting lists, often unfruitful in producing an organ, and the scarce national culture regarding this theme. At the same time we have seen the spontaneous reply of many Christians, who have come forward today to legally certify before the Notary, present here today, their willingness to be donors. I would like to introduce this reflection responding first to some question that we have been asked with respect to the Biblical position on this subject.

Man is a being who has a beginning but no end. From the maternal womb, God has put eternity in the heart of man, and while we walk on this earth, we do so in this fragile tabernacle, our body, that shelters our spirit. God has revealed to us that the instant man dies

the body returns to the dust from which it came and the spirit returns to God.¹

The word *death* comes from the Greek *tanatos* which means separation. At that moment the spirit separates from the body which begins its final and irreversible process of corruption and the soul goes to God awaiting the resurrection of the just.

But many wonder, What will become of my heart in the resurrection, what about my liver, my corneas or other parts of my organism that I have donated to other people?

We can read in the letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, who were Greek citizens, cultured people from the Hellenic peninsula, there in the land of Hippocrates, Plato and Socrates, and the great philosophers and scientists, who certainly inquired into the enigma of the destiny of body and soul. These Corinthians asked the apostle precisely this question:

"How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"²

And in a long chapter in the letter that he writes to them we find a very diligent analysis given to explain this material, responding with clarity:

*There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies;...³
...The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable;...⁴
...it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body....⁵*

This tabernacle in which we presently live will decompose. He clarifies this concept by adding:

*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,
nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable⁶*

There are many practical examples that can help us understand this subject, thinking, for example of personas who die burned up in some fire, or in the Twin Towers, perhaps in an accident or mutilated in a war, or devoured by sharks in the sea, shipwrecked mariners torn apart by predators, etc. Were there some impediment, that is to say if life, if the spirit were to continue within the body or if we were to argue that we need the organs of our earthly body in order for our life to be glorified, then we would have no theological explanation for these cases.

We could even think of the first transplant to a living being that God did when, to resolve the anguish and solitude of Adam, he put him to sleep and extracted a rib in order to give life and form to his companion.

Thus as Christians, as pastors, as teachers of the Word, we can with authority and propriety urge our people, the flock that we care for, and orientate ourselves generally, after medically and legally certified death, to give our organs which will eventually extend the life or improve the quality of life for other persons.

Other derived problems may dangerously distort and twist this noble objective. Thus the law and the authorities should prevent and avoid the abuse and bureaucracy that might surround the donation of organs, such as the temptation to provoke euthanasia or anticipate death in some persons.

In 1967 Doctor Christian Barnard, brought up in the villages of South Africa, a humble man who walked many kilometers in his childhood in order to carry out his studies, suddenly jumped into the arena carrying out the first heart transplant, introducing along with these scientific advances new ethical challenges.

That is why I said at the beginning that these are new acts in the future of mankind. Formerly theologians, pastors, and Christians did not have to think about these subjects because it was not viable, not even imagined that transplants could take place. These are subjects arising from recent events in history and certainly today these and other challenges emerge in the field of ethics. In a much accelerated manner they come to us presenting all the implications of bioethics without suspecting even the definitions, exigencies and reflections that tomorrow might bring us.

Nevertheless, we can be at peace since we can always find in the Word of God illumination to walk and decide correctly. It is inconceivable that God would leave us in the dark, in a dead-end street. We can say that in fifty or a hundred years into the future, whatever time it may be, that we are always going to find in the Word of God direction for our lives. It is written:

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*⁷

God cannot lead us blindly on a path that leaves us without answers. Through prayer, exegesis, hermeneutics, and diligence we can seek answers to difficult questions presented to us by mankind. Christianity is not obsolete. The Word of God has not ceased, has not concluded, has not lost its effect, does not die, and does not wear out with the passing of time.

*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*⁸

said the Lord.

I would like to conclude this service, this commitment service, by telling you about the most important transplant you can have, and to which multitudes of patients continue to submit.

Man's heart is corrupt. The heart of the natural man needs a transplant. The prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Ezekiel clearly warned about the need for man to have a heart transplant

God realized that the being he had created, as the fruit of his disobedience, of his egocentrism, of his impassioned search to satisfy his own needs, lacked a unifying spirit and would act only according to his own convenience. Scripture tell us that

every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood⁹

God also observed the earth and saw that it was corrupt and as a result was full of violence. It is interesting how corruption came about and is associated with violence. The Bible is certainly not talking here about ecological deterioration of the earth, but specifically about humanity, since it adds:

for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways...¹⁰

and therefore God's perfect plan diagnosed and established that mankind merited a transplant. If we go to the prophetic books we see that both the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel clearly express this problem, one preaching in Jerusalem when the Babylonian hosts neared the city, having already taken almost the entire nation, and the other, Ezekiel, already suffering exile in a far off land, since the land fell as a consequence of their internal divisions, their disobedience, and for seventy years they had to live in exile, far from their native land. There the prophet Ezekiel brought the voice of hope, the prophetic voice. In chapter 36 verses 24-26 he says:

*²⁴For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land.
²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.
²⁶I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you **your heart of stone** and give you a heart of flesh.*

Notice the discernment and the provision of God with respect to the new heart he would give them because the heart man has is of no use. This heart with which we are born naturally needs to be submitted to a divine operation. It needs to enter God's clinic, Christ's operating room, in order to extract that heart of stone which is insensitive to spiritual things, that heart that cannot look transcendentally into the future. There is no such thing as annihilation of the soul. Man's decision here on earth determines where he will spend eternity. At the resurrection he will live eternally separated from God (condemnation), or eternally in communion with God (salvation).

²⁷And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

But as God is very wise, preceding this act he illustrates in a way easy to understand, using an old refrain that existed at that time which says:

The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge¹¹

Do you understand the symbolism? The parents eat sour grapes and the children's teeth suffer, they are set on edge. It was an explanation that came from the Decalogue with respect to the judgment of God which would fall on up to the third and fourth generations if they continued to repeat the errors of their parents. Nevertheless, by having a heart transplant it says: look, now never again will they repeat this saying because He will give them His Spirit and nobody will have to teach another; all will be able to know God, from the smallest to the greatest. It will not be necessary to wear the commemorative stripes, the biblical texts hanging on their clothes or tied to their wrists, nor to carve them on the lintels of their houses and doors, as was commanded of old in order to help them remember God's commandments. Now he would write them in our hearts, not on dead external stone, but in our minds, in the heart of each man God will write his Word, his principles, his commandments. Therefore each person is responsible for his own acts, and the Holy Spirit, from our inner being, is the one who prompts us to carry out the work of God.

So, my beloved people, in this morning, this day in which we have generously offered to contribute as bishops and pastors and Christian people, to give a clear YES and to enhance this donation, we want to also understand that life is more than the body and in the end Nancy, her children and her husband, to whom God has given and extension of life on earth, will return to dust. Her family will return to dust. I will return to dust. You will return to dust. And the kings and governors and everyone else will return to dust because from dust were we made. But there is something transcendent, the spirit, which can inhabit a transplanted heart and leap into eternity.

We want to leave in your mind, in your thoughts, this concept from the Word of God. Every human being, without exception, every human being needs a transplant. The heart we are born with will not do. It is decadent, earthly, hard as stone, egocentric. It needs to be changed. Man needs a new heart. That is what the Lord says. We want to emphasize that today, because it is the transcendent message that crosses history, races, languages, peoples, and nations, and will be in effect until the Lord comes. Hence we have the certainty that some day we will rise again with him, all those who have believed in the necessity of a transplant, have recognized their corrupt nature, and have submitted to the treatment offered by the doctor of our souls.

Scripture is very clear. It speaks in strong language, words that at times ring in our ears, words we may not want to hear regarding our inner reality, our spiritual condition, but today we want to extend to you a call, a plea, that you consider the Word of God very deeply. *Faith comes by hearing* and we want you to hear these words and let them stir up your heart and draw you to the Lord.

We also, through the years, have verified in our own life the truth and effectiveness of the Word which is alive and gives life, instills encouragement, illuminates the inner being and really does what God has ordained it to do.

Imagine the prophet Ezekiel or the prophet Jeremiah, go back 700 years before Christ, two thousand seven hundred years ago. Their message still speaks to men today. The good news is translated into more than two thousand languages and dialects. God exhorts us to remove ourselves a little from the transitory scene that touches us as we walk through life and put ourselves in tune with the Lord. The most important thing is to give our lives to Christ; the most transcendent thing is to recognize the necessity of having a heart transplant. We want to leave that call, that hope, that invitation, with you.

God is inviting you to go to his holy clinic, his blessed operating room, to take out that heart of stone that is insensitive. You say, but I am sensitive, I have emotions and feelings. But are you sensitive to the transcendent things of God? The natural heart

oppresses the needy, exploits the poor, does not return what is borrowed, steals, spills blood, extorts interest, is not capable of producing justice, and does not respect marriage vows. Many of us were like that, but the church is full of people with transplants. Whoever does not have a transplant cannot be a Christian. The Scripture speaks of this new birth, both in the Old and the New Testaments, and therein lies the force, the vigor of the church that has stood since the day of Pentecost, through two thousand years of persecution, martyrdom, various kinds of opposition, as well as times of prosperity and liberty such as we have living in our country, building up families, towns and nations. But if we look at other places in our world today it is not so and we do not know what tomorrow holds for us.

God grant that all of us may channel our lives toward the future, able to make the best decisions for the future and give our lives over to the Lord.

We are going to offer a final prayer through this song and pray for the particular needs each one may have. Perhaps someone has come this morning very burdened with complex and difficult situations of health, work, family problems, economics, and you say I am not able to donate my organs, my heart is cast down, broken, wounded. I am suffering such and such. We believe that the Lord Jesus even now is able to console your spirit, strengthen you, and supply your need.

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*¹²

Amen.

Lic. Francisco Javier Rivera Mardones

- 1.- *Ecclesiastes 12:7;*
- 2,3,4,5,6.- *1 Corinthians 15:35,40,42,44,50;*
- 7.- *Psalm 119:105*
- 8.-*Luke 21:33;*
- 9.- *Genesis 8:21;*
- 10.- *Genesis 6:11;*
- 11.- *Ezekiel 18:2;*
- 12.- *Matthew 11:28*

Translation: Joan Meger