

August 1956

## Recent Papal Addresses to Cornea Donors and Congress of Fertility

John J. Lynch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Lynch, John J. (1956) "Recent Papal Addresses to Cornea Donors and Congress of Fertility," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 23: No. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol23/iss3/3>

## RECENT PAPAL ADDRESSES

to

Cornea Donors

and

Congress of Fertility

commentary by

John J. Lynch, S.J.

Professor of Moral Theology, Weston College,  
Weston, Mass.

WITHIN a single week during this past month of May, Pope Pius XII delivered two allocutions on medico-moral topics. The first was concerned principally with the question of corneal transplants; the second, addressed to participants in the Second World Congress of Fertility and Sterility, dealt with artificial insemination and with one method of procuring seminal specimens, namely, masturbation. As so often happens when papal pronouncements of this kind are made, both allocutions were promptly reported by the various press services of this country, but with varying degrees of completeness and accuracy. Perhaps now that the original texts of those addresses are available, it will be possible to determine somewhat more precisely what His Holiness actually had to say on several points which are of practical importance to modern doctors.<sup>1</sup>

One thing to keep in mind when allocutions such as these are pub-

<sup>1</sup>*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 48 (1956), 459-67; 467-74.

AUGUST, 1956

lished is that they surely will not contain anything sensational in the newspaper sense of the word, or even anything theologically novel. Usually when the Pope speaks by way of allocution on such matters, his purpose is either to confirm with papal authority a doctrine which has been previously taught by private theologians generally, or to call attention again to some point which the authoritative teaching Church has already declared to be so. Occasionally a debated issue may be decided one way or the other and a theological dispute thus finally settled. As far as the May allocutions are concerned, it seems quite safe to say that they are of the type which merely confirms or re-affirms established moral principles and conclusions. There appears to have been no intention on the part of the Pope to resolve any theological dispute in such a way as to declare now as illicit any medical procedure which previously had been defended as morally permissible. In other words our revised *Ethical and*

*Religious Directives for Catholic Hospitals* still remains a dependable guide, even in those medical areas which Pius XII traversed in these recent pronouncements.

#### CORNEAL TRANSPLANTS

One of the most significant items in the first of these two allocutions is the Pope's express declaration that he was restricting his discussion of organic transplantation to one specific procedure, namely, to the removal of corneas from bodies of the recently deceased for the purpose of restoring sight to the blind. "We restrict Ourselves," said Pius at the beginning of his address, "to the religious and moral aspects of the transplantation of the cornea, not between living individuals (of that We shall not speak today), but from the dead body to the living."

This explicit limitation of the question is important for this reason. It has for some time been a matter of disagreement among moralists whether organic transplantation from one living human being to another can be reconciled with the moral principles governing bodily mutilations.<sup>2</sup> Without now going into the details of that dispute, it can be said by way of practical conclusion that up to the time of this allocution there had been sufficient theological authority behind the more favorable opinion to justify its use in cer-

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of this dispute, cf. Fr. Gerald Kelly's article which appears elsewhere in this issue of LINACRE QUARTERLY.

tain circumstances. Now after the allocution it can safely be asserted that, since the Pope deliberately chose not to intervene in the matter on so opportune an occasion, he is willing that the discussions continue among theologians, at least for the time being, and that he does not feel that there is as apparent as yet evidence sufficient to decide the moral issue of organic transplantation *inter vivos*. Therefore, no. 40 of our *Directives* remains still a valid norm for problems of this sort:

Ordinarily the "proportionate good" that justifies a directly mutilating procedure must be the welfare of the patient himself. However, such things as blood transfusions and skin grafts are permitted for the good of others. Whether this principle of "helping the neighbor" can justify organic transplantation is now a matter of discussion. Physicians are asked to present practical cases for solution if such cases exist.

It is still, of course, possible that at some later date papal pronouncement—either for or against—will be made on this phase of organic transplantation. But at the moment the question of live donor transplants remains *in statu quo*.

Returning then to the problem which Pius chose to discuss, namely, corneal transplants procured from cadavers, we note his moral appraisal of this practice is merely confirmatory of the solution which theologians had previously been giving: considered objectively and merely as a surgical procedure, this type of keratoplasty meets with no moral objection, provided only that certain precautions are observed. The first such precaution refers to

an habitual attitude of mind whereby we remain constantly aware of the relative dignity of a human cadaver. As the onetime abode of a spiritual and immortal soul and as temple of the Holy Ghost, the human body—destined itself for resurrection and eternal life—merits even in death a proportionate respect and reverence. Even in the legitimate uses to which a corpse may be put for the benefit of the living, no doctor should allow himself to develop the exclusively clinical mentality which would regard a human cadaver as no more than dead animal tissue.

A further proviso stipulated by His Holiness—one which is not unfamiliar either to theologians or to physicians—is the matter of requisite consent. Apart from exceptional cases, it would usually not be permissible to remove corneas from a corpse, even for the very laudable purpose of transplantation, without the consent of the next of kin (or of others whose right it might be to make proper disposition of a body) or contrary to the explicit refusal of the deceased expressed before death. This condition, as the Pope asserts, is dictated not only by the humane consideration which is due the bereaved; it is also a matter of strict right to be scrupulously respected.

Granted these precautions, however, it is clearly the teaching of Pius XII that the transplantation of corneas from the dead to the living is beyond moral reproach. More than that, he calls

it a positively virtuous thing for one to specify before death that his body be used for legitimate medical research and training. Such a decision, however, is usually not of obligation; and His Holiness warns against any intemperate form of propaganda in this regard which would create the false notion that one is ordinarily required in conscience so to dispose of his body for the benefit of others. He insists, too, that this right of choice is no less the prerogative of the poor than it is that of the wealthy or socially prominent. Civil laws on this matter, he concludes, should be so formulated as to guarantee proper respect for the rights of all concerned while at the same time providing for the legitimate requirements of medical science.

The allocution touches also upon an incidental point which sometimes causes concern to doctors and laymen alike. Is it wrong to accept, or even to demand, financial recompense for bequeathing one's body for medical purposes? The Pope's answer again confirms what theologians ordinarily have taught:

It is beyond doubt that grave abuses can occur if compensation is demanded; but it would be going too far to declare immoral every acceptance of recompense or every demand for one. The case is analogous to that of blood transfusion: it is creditable for the donor to refuse recompense; it is not necessarily a fault to accept it.

What the Pope is saying equivalently is that there is nothing intrinsically immoral in accepting payment either for giving one's blood or for agreeing that one's

body after death should be used for medical purposes. Circumstances of an individual case could be such as to make this financial consideration mercenary to the point of sin. But the lone fact of monetary recompense does not of itself introduce an element that is necessarily immoral.

#### MALE FERTILITY TESTS

One serious misrepresentation of the second May allocution was the report carried in some newspapers that the Pope had condemned any direct method of seminal sampling for the purpose of determining male fertility. This simply was not so. The Pope's own words throughout this section of his address make it abundantly clear that he was considering only one means of procuring seminal specimens, namely, deliberate masturbation ("*masturbatio directe procurata*").<sup>3</sup> This was the only practice, relative to male fertility tests, which the allocution condemned. And in speaking as he did, the Pope was doing no more than reiterating, most clearly and most emphatically, what theologians and the Church had always taught with regard to direct masturbation, that no purpose, however, laudable, can justify this abuse of the sexual faculty.

<sup>3</sup>This address, like the one which preceded it, was delivered in French. However, in this section dealing with seminal sampling, the Pope spoke in Latin (the most common language of theologians), presumably because he wished to avoid even the remotest possibility of being misunderstood.

Consequently there is no need to modify in any way the conclusions which theologians had already formulated on the matter of seminal sampling for legitimate medical research. *Ethical and Religious Directives* explicitly state:

n. 29. The unnatural use of the sexual faculty (e.g., masturbation) is never permitted, even for a laudable purpose.

n. 38. Sterility tests involving the procurement of the male specimen by masturbation or unnatural intercourse are morally objectionable.

And *Medico-Moral Problems*, II (14-17) distinguishes most carefully between those concrete sampling procedures which are morally permissible and those which are not. (Cf. also LINACRE QUARTERLY, May, 1954, pp. 4-57.)

#### ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION

There is scarcely need of going into any great detail here as to the Pope's remarks in this same allocution on artificial insemination. His moral judgment of this practice was there expressed by repeating verbatim words he had addressed some seven years ago to a group of doctors convened in Rome:

As regards artificial insemination, there is not only reason for extreme reserve, but it must be entirely rejected. To say this is not necessarily to proscribe the use of certain artificial means designed only to facilitate the natural act or to enable that act, performed in a normal manner, to attain its end.

The Pope was speaking then of so-called homologous insemination (there was never any doubt among theologians as to the immorality of donor insemination), and it is the common understand-

ing of moralists that he thereby condemned any form of human fecundation which might be attempted altogether independently of natural conjugal relations. The full import of this pronouncement has been adequately explained by Gerald Kelly, S.J., both in the February, 1956 issue of LINACRE QUARTERLY and in *Medico-Moral Problems*, II, 17-22. Except to expatiate at some length on the ethical reasons underlying his

condemnation of artificial insemination, His Holiness added nothing to his teaching on the subject in his more recent allocution. He did, however, mention in passing—and for the first time, to my knowledge—a point that is theologially indisputable, namely, that "attempts at human artificial insemination '*in vitro*' . . . must be rejected as immoral and absolutely illicit."

