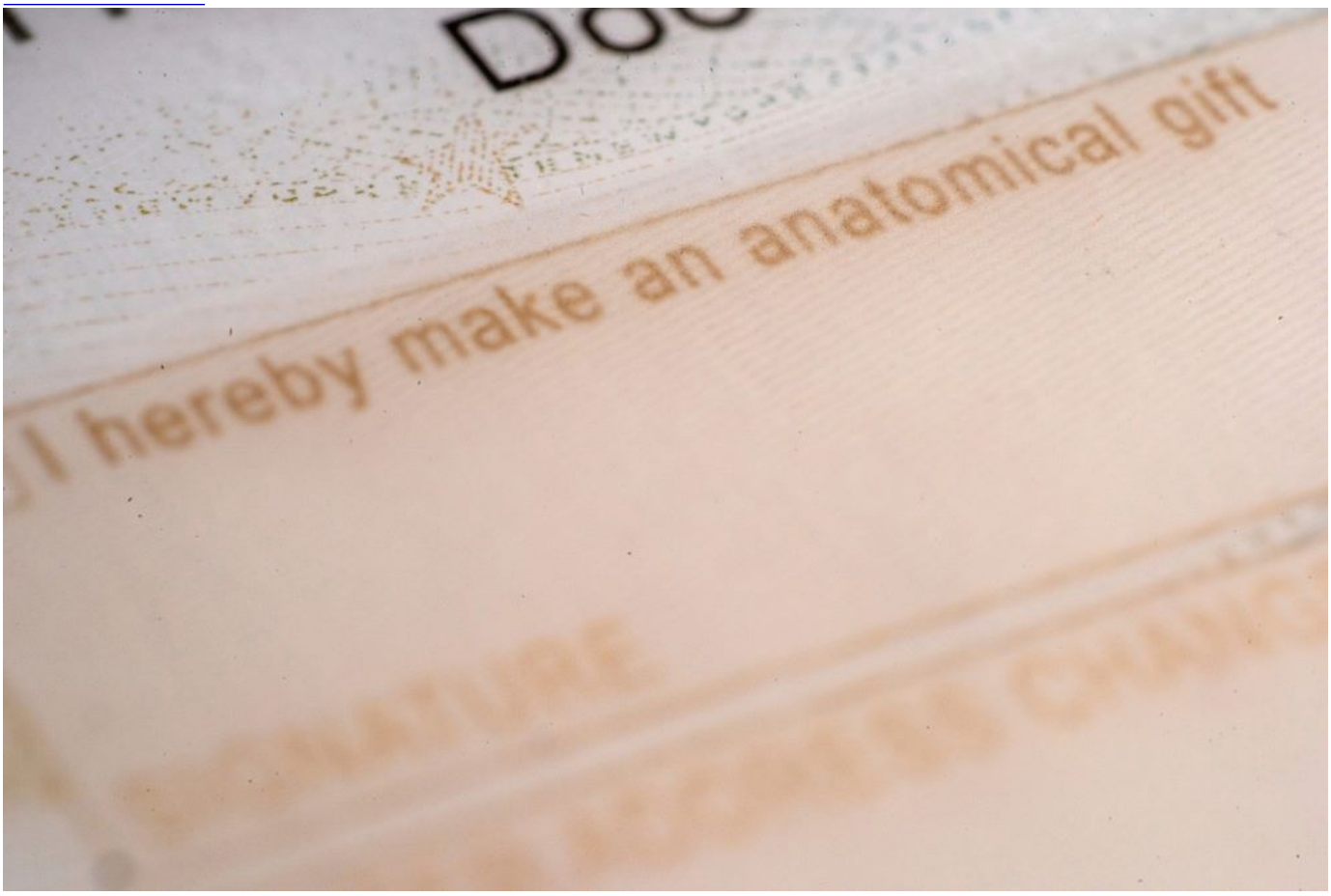
Opinion

Guest Voices



The organ donor entry on the back of a driver license is photographed in New York, Oct. 25, 2024. More than 103,000 people currently sit on the national transplant waiting list. (AP/Patrick Sison, File)



by Jim McDermott

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 4, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Each year in March or April, St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York holds an ecumenical prayer service honoring organ donors and their families. As a practice it's remarkable for its longevity — started by organ recipient Lorraine DePasquale and her husband Anthony in gratitude, the church has been holding this celebration of life for 29 years now.

It's also noteworthy for its relative rarity. Though each of the last three popes spoke out in favor of organ donation — Pope Benedict XVI even revealed prior to his election that he carried an organ donor card with him as "an act of love" — services like the one at St. Patrick's are few and far between. And homilies on organ donation are largely nonexistent.

It would be understandable if people in the pews took that silence as a sign that their parish, and by extension the Vatican, has issues with the idea of organ donation. But that's not actually the case, said Rabbi Joshua Rabin in a phone interview. In his role as a community and government liaison at New York's organ donation resource LiveOnNY, Rabin advises leaders of different faiths about organ donation. "As a general rule clergy of all religions are very passionate about encouraging their congregants to have advanced medical directives on a whole variety of issues, including organ donation," he said in a phone interview.

More often than not the real issue behind clerical silence on organ donation, says Rabin, is a lack of appreciation of the need. Clergy don't realize that it would help their congregants if they preached on it. "Often the case I have to make [with clergy] is, 'I know you're supportive of it, but I need your congregants to know that you're supportive of it. Because if you don't, there's a decent chance that they could say no to it.' "

> 'I always like to emphasize organ donation as a final act of charity.'
> —Rabbi Joshua Rabin
>
> Tweet this

The comments of past popes is a great place to start, Rabin finds. In our fractious times, there is the temptation to interpret the truth of a church leader's position on

one issue based on how we view them more generally. "The past three popes have had a lot of similar views, but also a lot of very different views about a variety of things," Rabin acknowledges. "But one thing they had all in common was their strong support of organ donation."

In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II referred to the practice as "a particularly praiseworthy example" of the "everyday heroism" by which a culture of life can be created. Likewise, in 2014 Pope Francis described organ donation as "a testimony of love for our neighbor." In 2019 he talked about it again, saying it was a "concrete gesture of solidarity and generous love [that] makes it clear that life is something sacred."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, too, is quite clear: "Organ donation after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity."

Simple references like this used in a homily can be more helpful than clergy might realize to dispel anxiety or misunderstandings that people may have. Some Catholics don't know that the church approves of the practice. Others fear that if they or their loved ones donate organs, they won't be able to be buried in a Catholic cemetery with their families. Some even worry about the resurrection. If I give an organ like my heart away, what will happen to me on "the last day?"

Approximately 60% of Americans, roughly 170 million people, are currently signed up to be organ donors according to Donor Alliance. But even that group needs help from religious leaders, Rabin says. "I like to tell people, 'If you've registered, it's a solid A-. You're 90% of the way there." The final 10%, he explains, is educating their loved ones, so that when they die, their wishes are understood and followed.

By speaking about organ donation ahead of time or holding events like prayer services, parish and diocesan leaders enable families to understand the church's thinking on the practice long before they need to and to bring any questions they have. You don't want loved ones having to deal with these issues for the first time in the midst of their grief. "It's a very different conversation when the family is dealing with the shock of what has just transpired," Rabin says.

Advertisement

In addition to noting the teaching of the church on organ donation and the consistent support of recent popes and other church leaders for the practice, Rabin suggests looking to our ideals as people of faith. "I always like to emphasize organ donation as a final act of charity," Rabin explains. It's charity of a unique kind, he adds: "Like a lot of religions, Judaism recognizes that there are different levels of charity. The highest level is when you do something and it's not possible for you to get paid back by the other person." In this season of Lent, when Christians celebrate the self-sacrifice of Jesus, organ recipients, donors and their families offer a powerful present-day witness to that act of love.

The timing of the service at St. Patrick's each year around Easter is not a coincidence either, notes Joy Oppedisano, president of TRIO Long Island, which runs this and other events like it throughout the year. "It's a season of rebirth. Donors are so grateful for the second chance at life," Oppedisano said. She notes that having a service like this is of great help to others, too, particularly the families of donors who have died. "It helps them get through the grief," Oppedisano said. "People return every year. They feel it offers such solace." And it provides a powerful witness to St. Patrick's never-ending flow of tourists, who may never have considered becoming donors. "It's a way to capture their attention," she said.

According to U.S. government statistics, 103,223 people currently sit on the national transplant waiting list. Every eight minutes another person is added to that list, and every day 13 Americans die waiting. Organ recipients, donors and their families are likely to be found in every parish and Catholic institution in our country. So, too, are those waiting.

The thinking of the church is clear. We just need to proclaim it.