



On the verge of a ‘Theology’ of Euthanasia?

25 Questions call for answers

The issue of organ transplantations is important and calls for profound theological reflections and discussion, so that the Orthodox Church may utter its substantial speech at an all-Orthodox, rather than local, level.

The controversy until now has moved around the Brain Death Determination Tests. Are these tests, as specified by the Harvard Medical School, valid? Why have new data resulted in speaking about two sorts of death: brain death and clinical death? Why are the donor’s organs removed before his/her clinical death and after his/her brain death? It is known that the organs, except for some very few, cannot be recovered from a dead corpse because in most cases these organs are useless after the heart has stopped beating. It is certain that the organs are removed from a living being, whose brain is not functioning, according to the questionable tests by Harvard. Who can know the moment the soul departs from the body? Who can determine the mystery of death? Can the Church support the removal of organs before the definite dissolution of the interrelation between soul and body? Shouldn't the Church take into account the reaction of many scientists in Greece and abroad against the Harvard Brain Death Determination Tests as well as against the use of two sorts of death, brain death and clinical death?

All the above are linked to the evidence of the discussion so far. In the writer’s view, any intervention to remove the donor’s organs before his/her definite death is unacceptable because it means taking away the donor’s life, even when this is done for the sake of curing another patient. ‘The end does not justify the means’. The mystery of death shall remain a mystery for ever. Nobody should disintegrate it or determine it in their personal medical or theological views.

And while the entire discussion had lain in the framework of the above reflections, a book was published which shifted the whole level of working out a solution, ultimately coming against the

mystery of death. This book was written by archimandrite Nikolaos Chatzinikolaou and published by the “Centre of Biomedicine and Ethics” under the title of ‘Free from the genome’. The chapter entitled ‘Spiritual morality and pathology of the transplantations’ (pages 315-345) states some views which go beyond the discussion so far. These views will be highlighted in the following text, followed by some 25 questions which call for an answer.

On page 318 of the book one reads : “Life is a gift of God, but not one that belongs to the donor only. It also belongs to its receiver. Life is ours as well. It is the paramount field of exercising our free will. Life is not donated to us in order to live in selfishness and possessiveness, but is rather offered to us so that it can be so much our life that we can even offer it. This is the reason why we love and take care of our life more than anything else. This is done both with great caution, because it is God’s gift, and in our free will, because it is our life. The best way to return it to God is by offering it to our neighbour. "There is no other way to save our souls than through our neighbour" (Saint Macarius the Egyptian).

Question 1

By all means our life is the field of exercising our free will. However, when our free will fails to lead us to God, isn’t this offering of our life moving along the horizontal axis of man-to-man relations and therefore plainly humanitarian?

Question 2

Could the statement that “Life is ours as well” serve as the theological foundation for choosing to do whatever we wish with our life?

Question 3

What is the meaning of the line “and let us commit our entire life to Christ our God” said in the Holy Liturgy?

Question 4

Could it be that the author of the book is confusing the phrase “the ministering to the saints” (2 Corinthians 8, 4) with the verb ‘commit’ as in “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23, 46) or in “they committed them to the Lord” (Acts 14, 23) and in “let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.” (1 Peter 4, 19) ?

Question 5

Why is the quotation from Saint Macarius used arbitrarily in relation to issues that were non-existent at that time?

Question 6

When the quotation from Saint Macarius is used arbitrarily and detached from its context isn’t there a risk of launching the idea that any humanitarian offering is sotiriological per se, therefore rendering the life in the sacraments of our Church unnecessary? Could it be that the balanced meaning of the quotation from Apostle Peter mentioned in Question 4 above gives us the complete answer, devoid of risky, polarizing views?

Question 7

Since the text is about offering and love, could it be that at the same time it testifies the fact that the organs are removed from a living person, since the dead, or even -in their mind- the brain-dead, do not afford their free will for offering and love?

Question 8

Aren't we using nice words to persuade the people of God to make an offering which is no longer an offering? Otherwise, if the donor is alive, why isn't he/she entrusting the issue of his/her death to the Lord of life and death?

On page 319 the following sentence boldly admits that the organs are removed from a living being: "When is the value of life more respected and acknowledged: as expressed towards the donor who irreversibly departs or towards the recipient who gets a chance to live?"

Question 9

How can the author be sure about the "irreversibility"? Can't God intervene in man's irreversible judgments?

Question 10

Why is the author wondering about "which of the two, the donor or the recipient, is more respected"? Has the Church ever evaluated the degree of respect owed to all persons?

Question 11

The author again accepts the fact that the donor is alive, since he talks about his/her "irreversible departure". So, would the author agree to taking off the donor's life? Can the Church take part in taking a man's life off? On the same page (319) the author talks about an "unlikely miracle -that's what it is".

Question 12

Is the author excluding the possibility of a miracle? All miracles are by their very nature "unlikely events". How can the author determine God's free intervention to act miraculously? Why is God excluded once and forever from the miracles?

I am afraid that Lazarus, the dead man in the town of Nain and Jairus' daughter would not get a chance to be brought back to life if they lived today, because their organs would have been removed for reasons of "offering" with the blessings of the pastors of the Church.

On page 320 the following phrase is mentioned: "Medicine is faced with a dilemma and is called to proceed in love before two people who are dying. Of the two people, the one can ultimately build his/her life with the ruins, the remnants of the other's life".

Question 13

What kind of "love" is this, since it kills someone to let the other live? Are we allowed to kill in the name of love?

Question 14

Is this all making new grounds for the way of a 'theology' of euthanasia or even of suicide at a later stage?

On page 323 we read: "The 'conscious consent' for the disposal of one's body after his/her death is a par excellence sacred act of self-denial and love, because such a disposal implies for the donor to:

A...

B...

...

G. "Lastly, to assign at the moments of his/her thriving sobriety the right -and therefore the reliance on the doctors and relatives- to have his/her heart stopped by them at the moment they think right, instead of letting the heart stop on itself later, resting in full confidence that both doctors and relatives will wish his/her own pure good".

Question 15

Isn't there a crucial contradiction in the text, since it firstly stresses the disposal of one's body "after his/her death" and secondly talks about an act of love? There comes again the question of whether one is still able to love after his/her death.

Question 16

Isn't the author refuting his own argument by speaking about a "thriving sobriety"? Can the dead be sober?

Question 17

What is the Orthodox reflection or tradition that gives someone the power to ask for his/her heart to be stopped by doctors "instead of letting the heart stop on itself later"? The text is crystal-clear: the Church is recommended to bless an intervention on a living being. Who will assume such a responsibility? What kind of 'theology' shall attune to the extent of such non-theological absurdities?

Page 331 of the book clarifies the issue: "There is also the case when respect to man means not simply to allow him/her to die, but even to facilitate his/her death".

Question 18

Where has the author found any teaching of the Orthodox Church about "facilitating" one's death?

Further on, the author is trying to give an Orthodox touch in his novel and unacceptable "theology" by invoking the "Prayer in the agony of death" included in the "Mikron Euchologion". He points out the sentence:

"Free Thy servant from this intolerable grief and his/her pursuing bitter disease, and comfort him/her among the souls of the righteous".

Question 19

How does the prayer calling for the "freedom from grief" compare to the procedure of organ removal, which causes intolerable pain to the body and makes the death event more grievous, given the fact that the human being is still alive as we stated above?

Question 20

Isn't the prayer for the "peaceful end of our life" annulled by the violent intervention for the removal of organs from the living donor? How can the Church pray for a peaceful end and at the same time recommend a violent end?

The inconsistency of the text is obvious in its 'good' moments. On page 330 we read: "We intervene on the body only to cure. Every attempt that promotes the body's corruption is also corrupting the soul and therefore it is sinful. Thus the process of the body's deterioration ought to be purely natural and never enforced". And on page 329 we read: "Death should never be accelerated for whatever reason. We have no right to remove anything from the body or break the union of soul and body or shorten the time of the body-soul inherence by any moment".

Question 21

The author of the book needs to clarify the relevance of the lines on "the death that should never be accelerated" and on the "natural and never enforced deterioration of the body" with his previous statements about "facilitating a man's death". These last lines seem to reverse the author's own well-stated views. Could this be an attempt to disorientate the readers by presenting also a few sound theological thoughts?

Question 22

By writing "we have no right to remove anything from the body" is the author also rejecting the transplantation of double organs from living donors to living recipients? Is he rejecting bone marrow transplantation? Finally, is he also rejecting blood transfusion?

On page 325 the following are mentioned: "The transplantation is not as valuable for the recipient -he/she is given biological life- as it is for the donor -he/she gives organs but receives the juices of spiritual life".

Question 23

Since the transplantation is not so valuable for the recipient, how come this whole argumentation on love and offering? Is there an interest in the spiritual gain of the donor?

Question 24

What is the meaning of "the juices of spiritual life"? Is this a teaching of a new ascetic in our Church? Spiritual life comes by struggling within the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Following this new proposal, will a man live a spiritual life the moment he/she gives his/her organs while alive? Will he/she become a spiritual person at the moment he/she is dying?

On page 335 we read: "The Lord Himself, in His counsels to the holy Apostles during the Last Supper emphasized the superbness of the act of offering one's own life to the others by saying: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lays down his life for his friends" (John 15, 13). But

also Apostle John gives us an even stronger point in his first letter: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." (1 John 3, 16)".

Question 25

Is it legitimate to make use of quotations from the Holy Scriptures only to support our theological claims?

In explaining the quotation "and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10, 15), Saint John the Chrysostom writes: "Jesus keeps saying this to declare that He is no deceiver" (EPE edition 14, 121). In John's Gospel (10, 17-18) we read: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." Saint John the Chrysostom explains: "Let us be extremely careful about 'I have authority to lay down my life': Who can't sacrifice his life? Everybody can kill himself if he so wishes. So, this is not the meaning of Jesus' words. Look what He meant: I have such authority to sacrifice my life, that nobody can ever take it off me if I don't let them, and this is impossible for man because man has no authority to sacrifice himself in any other way except by only killing himself. And if we are arrested by insidious people who can kill us, we have no power to sacrifice or avoid sacrificing our life, because they take off our life against our will. Whereas in the case of our Lord, this is not so, but although other people sought to take off His life, He had the authority not to sacrifice His life. So, after he had said "No one takes it from me", He then added "I have authority to lay it down" meaning that He had the power to sacrifice His life, which man cannot do because many other people have the power to take off man's life.

However, Jesus didn't say this from the beginning (and if He had, nobody would have believed that) but waited until the events had born witness to His power by the several times He managed to flee from His insidious would-be arresters and then told His disciples "No one takes my life from me". So, if this is true, we understand that the following is true as well: when He may wish to take up His life again, He will have authority to do so, because as His death has been superior to man's death, there is no doubt left that if He has indeed such authority as to lay down His life of His own accord only, then this same authority lets Him take it up again. So, from the first argument Jesus has proved the second argument as well, and through His death He has demonstrated His Resurrection too." (EPE edition 14, 125-127).

In his comment on "we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3, 16), Saint John rephrases: "I told you these words so that you love one another", meaning that John wanted to guide his pupils to amity, so he wasn't at all blaming them for not sacrificing their lives for the sake of the brothers. Coming back to Jesus, "just because there had been persecution by the majority of the people and the accusations had been terrible and intolerable and capable of crushing even the most noble-minded person, for this reason Jesus first foretold many events to His disciples and prepared their souls and then He mentioned about His sacrifice and revealed that all this was happening for their own sake..." (EPE edition 14, 481).

The community of our Church cannot be convinced by theological acrobatics or skirmishes. There is great responsibility and nobody is allowed to request through his contradictory views the acceptance of an issue which, if not dealt with theological prudence, can bring the Orthodox approach towards respecting every individual and towards the mystery of death against hard times.

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