

Participants publish their side of brain death debate

VATICAN CITY - Breaching normal protocol, several participants in a 2005 Vatican-sponsored conference over the ethics of declaring someone brain dead have published the papers they delivered at the debate.

Many of the papers reproduced in "Finis Vitae: Is Brain Death Still Life?" argue that the concept of brain death was devised mainly to expand the availability of organs for transplant and claim that some patients who had been pronounced brain dead continued to live for months or even years.

Publication of the papers, which the Vatican had decided not to publish, is evidence of the strong feelings about brain death held by a minority of the members of the Pontifical Academy for Life.

Roberto De Mattei, vice president of the National Research Council of Italy who is not a member of the academy, said he edited "Finis Vitae" in order "to expand the debate and bring it to a wider audience."

While differences of opinion among theologians, philosophers and scientists, especially on ethical issues, are nothing new, it is unusual that participants in a Vatican conference published the papers that the Vatican specifically decided not to publish.

"The concern of many is that the Vatican has not taken the appropriate position when doubts exist about the end of human life," Mr. De Mattei told Catholic News Service April 20.

"The moment of the separation of the soul from the body is shrouded in mystery, just as the moment of when a soul enters a person is," he said.

But when faced with questions about the moment of ensoulment at the beginning of life, the church's position always has been to assume the soul enters at conception in order to ensure the greatest possible defense of human life, he said. Those who

question whether brain death is really death are simply asking that the church extend its defense of human life if there is the minimal possibility that the soul remains in a body that has a heart beat, respiration and blood circulation, even if those are supported artificially, De Mr. Mattei said.

Bishop Fabian W. Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb., whose paper from the 2005 meeting is included in "Finis Vitae," asked how the Catholic Church can accept a lack of brain function as a definition of death yet still oppose the willful destruction of human embryos, which have not yet developed a brain.

The question was part of the discussion at a 2006 Vatican meeting; the Pontifical Academy of Sciences decided to publish the 2006 papers and transcripts of the discussion, while it decided not to publish those from the 2005 meeting.

"The embryo has a potential brain under development," said Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, chancellor of the science academy. He insisted there is a difference between an embryo with "the potential development of the complete body with the brain" and a situation in which there is "only the body without the brain."

Mr. De Mattei said the Pontifical Academy of Sciences' position is not surprising, given that most of its members and consultants are experts in the hard sciences, but not philosophy and theology.

"The transplant lobbies defend brain death because they are defending an enormous market," he said.

If a brain-dead person weren't really dead, then the removal of vital organs for transplant would be synonymous with homicide.

In 1985 and again in 1989, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences recognized brain death as "the true criterion for death."

The science academy book, "The Signs of Death," also emphasized the fact that in a speech in 2000, Pope John Paul II agreed that "the complete and irreversible cessation of all brain activity (in the cerebrum, cerebellum and brain stem), if rigorously applied, does not seem to conflict with the essential elements of anthropology."

Still, Bishop Sanchez said the academy had “invited those who are critical” of the Vatican’s position to the 2005 meeting in order to hear their arguments and determine whether there was enough new material to warrant another more formal gathering.

The formal gathering was the one held in 2006, which ended with the publication of a nine-page statement titled, “Why the Concept of Brain Death Is Valid as a Definition of Death.”

Among the signatories of the statement were Cardinal Georges Cottier, then-theologian of the papal household; Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family; retired Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan; and Bishop Elio Sgreccia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life.