

Whatever Happened to Limbo?

by Gerald M. Fagin, America Magazine, March 18, 2002

The Catechism of the Catholic Church includes a reassuring and pastorally sensitive statement on the future life of infants who die without baptism: *“As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,’ allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church’s call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism”* (No. 1261).

This statement places the children in the hands of a loving and compassionate God who invites them to share in eternal life. It offers consolation to the loved ones of such infants and projects an image of a God of unconditional love.

So what happened to limbo? Nowhere in the current catechism is there any treatment of a belief that was part of the common teaching of the church for over 700 years. Traditionally described as an intermediate state between heaven and hell, limbo was a place of “natural” happiness free of suffering and pain but a place without a share in the eternal life that God promises to those who die in grace.

There was the limbo of the fathers (*limbus patrum*), where great people of faith like Abraham and Moses and the prophets who lived before Jesus awaited Jesus’ redemptive death and resurrection. This limbo was eliminated when Jesus came to lead all these people to heaven.

Most Catholics, however, were more familiar with the limbo of infants (*limbus infantium*), where unbaptized babies were destined to remain forever. These infants were not seen as worthy of eternal punishment, because they had committed no sin and had in no way freely rejected God. They had been born, however, without sanctifying grace because of the stain of original sin, and were therefore not able to share in the eternal life of union with God where they could see God face to face. In contemporary terms, limbo was envisioned as a giant day care center where children were well cared for and lived happily, even if separated from their parents.

In the fourth century, Augustine, trapped in the logic of his teaching on the necessity of baptism for salvation, consigned (we hope reluctantly) infants who died without baptism to the fires of hell, though he did grant that their pain was mitigated and not as harsh as those condemned for sins of their own initiative. Many theologians in the Middle Ages, in an attempt to show some respect for the authority of Augustine and yet some measure of common sense and compassion, postulated a middle state in which infants would experience natural happiness but would be deprived of the face-to-face vision of God.

Though limbo was never officially defined in any church council or document, it became, like other unchallenged elements of the Christian worldview, a part of the common teaching and almost universal catechesis of the church. Since the late 19th century, it was written on the psyche of every young Catholic through the Baltimore Catechism. For example, Baltimore Catechism No. 3 states, with its usual air of certainty: “Persons, such as infants, who have not committed actual sin and who, through no fault of theirs, die without baptism, cannot enter heaven; but it is the common belief they will go to

some place similar to limbo, where they will be free from suffering, though deprived of the happiness of heaven” (Q. 632). Most Catholics, of course, made no distinction between defined doctrines and what appeared in the catechism. It was all church teaching, to be accepted without question.

This teaching, in the broader context of the doctrine of original sin, led to an urgency to baptize infants who died at birth or were in danger of death. Nurses, doctors and ordinary Christians were instructed to baptize in these circumstances to ensure the infants’ entrance into heaven. As late as 1966, when I began the study of moral theology, my course notes on the morality of the sacraments included several graphic pages on the procedure for intrauterine baptism in cases where the fetus was in danger of death.

It is not my intent to deny the need for infant baptism or to discourage the practice of baptizing infants in danger of death. Such a loving sacramental ritual gives expression to the faith of the community and its desire to include this child in the Christian community. Such a baptism celebrates the gift of this life and God’s love for this person from the moment of conception, and it offers the child God’s grace and the support, love and prayers of the community. My concern here is with the urgency in the past to baptize infants in danger of death primarily out of fear that the child would be assigned eternally to limbo.

Shortly after the Second Vatican Council, the New Catholic Encyclopedia, while acknowledging the growing number of theologians who defended theories that tried to justify salvation for unbaptized infants, concluded its entry on limbo with a reaffirmation of the traditional teaching. *“For the time being only limbo as a solution to the problem seems to preserve intact the doctrine and practice of the Church concerning the absolute necessity of Baptism for eternal salvation”* (Vol. 8, p. 765). More recent resources continue to describe the teaching on limbo, but often with the sense that it is best viewed as a teaching that should simply be allowed to fade quietly away, a teaching that cannot be reconciled with the Christian affirmation of God’s universal salvific will. As Peter Phan puts it in Responses to 101 Questions on Death and Eternal Life, *“limbo has outlived its purpose.”*

It also seems that preaching and catechesis about limbo have largely disappeared since the Second Vatican Council, so that younger Catholics are often unaware of the teaching and unaffected by it. Certainly, its absence from the Catechism of the Catholic Church officially confirms the closure of limbo as a place for unbaptized infants.

In the hierarchy of truths of Catholic teaching, limbo, of course, was never ranked high by theologians, nor was it a major concern in testing a person’s orthodoxy. But over many centuries the teaching did touch immediately and personally the lives of parents and relatives, who found little consolation in the fact that their children who died without baptism were in limbo rather than heaven. In fact, this teaching raised questions for many grieving Christians about the eternal status of their unbaptized infants and no doubt was a cause of pain for many parents and relatives. For example, a Jesuit friend of mine told me how distraught he was as a seven-year-old when the pastor declared that my friend’s recently stillborn younger brother was not in heaven but in limbo.

For these reasons, the absence of limbo from the Catechism raises some searching questions for our reflection:

- Has the church changed its teaching on the fate of infants who die without baptism?

- Was the church simply mistaken, not about a defined dogma, but about a teaching that profoundly touched the lives of many Christians?
- Does the church have a responsibility in integrity to state clearly that this is no longer church teaching and to explain why this teaching has changed, or is it adequate simply to let the teaching quietly disappear from the church's catechesis and worldview?
- Does this change in a pastorally sensitive teaching imply that other such teachings are also open to reevaluation and change?

Whatever our answers to these broad-ranging questions, the good news is that we are now assured in hope that those unbaptized infants were actually in heaven all along and that our God is a more loving and compassionate parent than we were perhaps led to believe.