

# Where Do We Go from Here? The Concept of Limbo

**ISSUE:** What is limbo? What does the Catholic Church teach concerning limbo?

**RESPONSE:** Theologians developed the concept of limbo to explain the destiny of those who die without Baptism yet who have not committed actual sin. This concept is applied primarily to infants and children (including the unborn) who die before they are baptized. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that limbo is a place of perfect natural happiness, but without the supernatural vision of God (the “beatific vision”), to which no creature has a natural right.

Limbo has never been a formally defined doctrine of the faith, but rather is a theological opinion used to harmonize (a) the necessity of Baptism; (b) God’s universal salvific will (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4); and (c) the fact that such children are without actual sin. Despite contemporary ridicule, limbo remains a respectable theological opinion that may be held by the faithful.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not use the term “limbo.” However, in paragraph 1261 the Catechism does address the status of children 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” (Mk. 10:14), 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 (original emphasis).

**DISCUSSION:** We are conceived and born in a state of sin and separation from God (cf. Catechism, no. 404). Our Lord said to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5). In addition, at the conclusion of St. Matthew’s Gospel He instructs the remaining eleven apostles to go to all the nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).

Based on Jesus’ clear teaching, the Church has always emphasized the need to be reborn as a child of God through Baptism in order to be able to experience the glory of heaven. Further, two Church Councils (Florence, 1439-45 and Trent, 1545-63) have affirmed that one cannot go to heaven “without the waters of regeneration or the desire for it.” What about those, especially infants, who, through no fault of their own, are unable to receive or even desire (at least in the ordinary sense of the word) Baptism before their death? This is the question that led to the theory of limbo.

After all, God created man in His image and likeness, and wills that all men be saved and come to knowledge of truth (1 Tim. 2:4). He takes no pleasure in eternal torments inflicted upon man, and does not predestine anyone for hell (cf. Catechism, no. 1037). Yet consigning infants to the eternal torments of hell seems arbitrary and not necessarily the result of one’s free choice against God.

## Historical Overview

Limbo has sometimes been used in reference to the “Limbo of the Fathers,” meaning the abode of the just men and women of the Old Testament who were awaiting their promised deliverance by Our Lord when He

“descended to the dead.” More typically, however, limbo, or the “Limbo of the Infants,” is used in reference to unbaptized children who died without committing actual sin.

The idea of limbo, or the state of natural beatitude for infants dying without the Sacrament of Baptism, has been a universally recognized concept since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians. St. Thomas (1224-74) taught that in limbo there would be a pain of loss (i.e., the effect of not experiencing the beatific vision), but not the pain of sense (i.e., they experience natural beatitude rather than the torments of hell).

The only time the Church has addressed the subject was in a 1794 document by Pope Pius VI entitled *Auctorem Fidei*. This document did not affirm the existence of limbo, but rather condemned the Jansenists as teaching something “false, rash, and injurious to Catholic education” when they taught that limbo was a heretical fable and that the eternal damnation of infants who die without Baptism was revealed doctrine. In other words, this papal document was issued to defend a common teaching from slander, and not to defend the existence of limbo. Limbo remained at that time—as it remains to this day—an open question that one may accept or reject so long as one’s beliefs do not conflict with other Church teachings. The Jansenists’ rejection of limbo was tolerated, but their public statements concerning those who held views different from theirs were censored.

There have been no magisterial pronouncement concerning limbo since *Auctorem Fidei* in 1794. Since that time, there have been relatively few theologians who have held the opinion that infants who die without Baptism are condemned to the fires of hell. Especially during the last century, more theologians have expressed their dissatisfaction with limbo and have formulated theories as to how such infants may be saved. Such speculation is legitimate to the extent revealed truths (i.e., the necessity of Baptism for salvation) are respected. Yet we need to understand that while limbo is only a theory, it’s going to come under attack in an age that downplays the importance of organized religion and the need to be Catholic in favor of a universalist approach to salvation. The theory of limbo at least recognizes the need to address realistically, yet sympathetically and compassionately, the truth that we enter into the world in a state of enmity, not union, with God.

At the 2001 Synod of Bishops, Archbishop George Pell of Sidney spoke on the need to develop an authentic Christian hope. He said:

One could say that there is considerable silence and some confusion on such Christian hope especially as it touches the last things, death and judgment, heaven and hell. Limbo seems to have disappeared, purgatory has slipped into limbo, hell is left unmentioned, except perhaps for terrorists and infamous criminals, while heaven is the final and universal human right; or perhaps just a consoling myth. Christian teaching on the resurrection of the body and the establishment of a new heavens and earth, the heavenly Jerusalem, are a vindication of the values of ordinary decent living, while the final judgment, the separation of the good from the evil, marks the establishment of universal justice not found in this life.

### **Parental Desire**

While Baptism is ordinarily required for salvation, the Church recognizes that God is not bound by His sacraments and can still bring about the salvation of the unbaptized.<sup>1</sup> In this vein, the Church has recognized *Baptism of blood* (dying for the faith) and *Baptism of desire* (when catechumens die before they actually receive the sacrament, or others who would have desired Baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity) as having the same effects as sacramental Baptism (cf. Catechism, nos. 1258-60).

The Catechism summarizes the necessity of Baptism in paragraph 1257:

The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this

sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are “reborn of water and the Spirit.” *God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments* (original emphasis, footnotes omitted).

Just as an adult who is invincibly ignorant of the need for Baptism *may* be saved through an implicit Baptism of desire, even more can we hope that an infant who died without Baptism may be saved. St. Bernard of Clairveaux, a 12th-century doctor of the Church, proposed that an unbaptized baby could aspire to heaven because of the faith of his or her parents. This seems consistent with the fact that it is the parents’ faith that brings about the child’s Baptism and even with the larger reality of the Communion of Saints, through which our faith and prayers can help bring about others’ salvation (cf. Lk. 5:18-20; 1 Cor. 7:12-14). And so the way of the Church, beautifully summarized in Catechism, no. 1261, above, is to confidently entrust these little ones to the mercy and loving providence of Our Heavenly Father.

### **Pastoral Concern**

The Church’s teaching is very compassionate and consoling toward those who have had miscarriages or who have suffered the deaths of young children before they were baptized. The Church’s pastoral concern is especially needed in the context of embracing women whose children have died through abortion. Unfortunately, the Church’s outreach in this area has been unnecessarily confused by a mistranslation of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (“The Gospel of Life”). The English translation of paragraph 99, addressed to women who had an abortion, provides as follows:

The Father of mercies is ready to give you His forgiveness and His peace in the Sacrament of reconciliation. *You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost, and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord.* With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone’s right to life (emphasis added).

The italicized material is not found in the official Latin text, which instead provides as follows: “You can entrust your infant with hope to the same Father and to His Mercy” (“*Infantem autem vestrum potestis Eidem Patri Eiusque misericordiae cum spe committere*”).

The official translation, without saying more than what we know about the state of departed infants, again expresses the confident entrustment of these little ones to our merciful Father as provided in Catechism, no. 1261. Those who struggle with the death of an unbaptized infant, or a miscarriage, or are seeking healing from the pain of an abortion should take comfort in the position of the Church. God is merciful, and Jesus desired all children to come unto Him (cf. Mt. 19:13-14). The Church entrusts such children to the mercy of God.

### **Why the Wait?**

One consequence of a more presumptuous approach to the necessity of infant Baptism that we see today is the putting off of the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism. Yet the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) in 1958 provided as follows:

The practice has arisen in some places of delaying the conferring of Baptism for so-called reasons of convenience or of a liturgical nature—a practice favored by some opinions, lacking solid foundation, concerning the eternal salvation of infants who die without Baptism.

Therefore this Supreme Congregation, with the approval of the Holy Father, warns the faithful that infants are to be baptized as soon as possible . . . Pastors and preachers are exhorted to urge the fulfillment of this obligation.

The current Code of Canon Law (canon 867) affirms that parents should have their children baptized within the first weeks after birth, and without delay if there is danger of death. This seems to counter the view that we can simply presume with certainty that unbaptized children will go to heaven.

Research and discussion on the subject of limbo and the state of unbaptized babies are not closed. In the meantime, let us put all our hope in the Lord, trusting in His infinite mercy and His immense love for His little ones.

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<sup>1</sup> See CUF's FAITH FACT "Without the Church There Is No Salvation."

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**Catholics United for the Faith**

**827 N. Fourth St.**

**Steubenville, OH 43952**

**(800) 693-2484**

**www.cuf.org**

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