

THE DOCTRINE OF LIMBO IN CATHOLIC TRADITION

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WHAT IS LIMBO?

The word Limbo derives from the Latin word *limbus* meaning “edge” or “fringe.” It denotes the region “on the fringe” of the abyss of Hell. Thomas Aquinas teaches that Hell or Hades, properly speaking, consists of “four abodes” (*Summa theologiae* Supp, q. 69, aa. 1-7):

1. Limbo of the Fathers (natural paradise for the Old Testament saints; now empty)
2. Limbo of the Children (natural paradise for unbaptized children with original sin alone)
3. Purgatory (for the those dying in a state of grace but requiring further purification)
4. Gehenna (the fires of Hell for the damned)

Limbo of the Children is technically in Hell, but lacks all the sensory punishments associated with Hell. Since unbaptized children lack the grace of God, they are unable to see God in Heaven:

Jesus answered: “Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Since unbaptized children have never committed a personal sin, they cannot be punished. Yet, without baptism they have no grace to be able to see the infinite God. Consequently, they are in a state of happiness without sensory pain but not able to see God. This state is called “limbo.”

WHY LIMBO IN THE OLD TESTAMENT? CHRIST HAD NOT YET DIED AND RISEN.

Catholic tradition teaches that the Old Testament faithful (e.g. Abraham, Moses, David) went to the Limbo of the Fathers when they died because the gates of Heaven were not yet open to them. When Christ redeemed mankind on the altar of the cross, His soul “descended into Hell,” where He freed these faithful people from Limbo and brought them to Heaven. Christ describes the Limbo of the Fathers in Luke 16:19-31 as “Abraham’s Bosom.”

WHY LIMBO IN THE NEW TESTAMENT? THE NEED FOR BAPTISM.

Infants are conceived with original sin and without sanctifying grace: “For behold I was conceived in iniquities; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 50:7).

For this reason, Christ teaches: “Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Infants (on account of the sin of Adam and Eve) lack grace and can only receive it through baptism. However, many children die without the grace of baptism. Since the Catholic Church believes that infants are conceived in original sin, she has never taught that unbaptized babies are “saved” or “go to Heaven.” Instead, tradition has posited that these unbaptized infants go to the *Limbo of the Children*, where they enjoy natural happiness without the supernatural vision of God. Some Catholic theologians have also suggested that the fathers and mothers of these children can see these children and communicate with them. Some Catholic theologians have even suggested that the infants in Limbo will be resurrected with glorious bodies at the end of time.

CATHOLIC SAINTS, POPES, AND COUNCILS ON THE TOPIC OF LIMBO

“And so also in those who fail to receive the gift [of baptism]...perhaps on account of infancy, or some perfectly involuntary circumstance through which they are prevented from receiving it, even if they wish...will be neither glorified nor punished by the righteous Judge, as unsealed [by baptism] and yet not wicked, but persons who have suffered rather than done wrong. For not every one who is not bad enough to be punished is good enough to be honored; just as not every one who is not good enough to be honored is bad enough to be punished. (St. Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 40* on the Topic of Baptism, AD 329-390)

“The idea that infants can be granted the rewards of eternal life without even the grace of baptism is utterly foolish.”

-Pope Saint Innocent I, Letter to the Bishops of the Church, A.D. 417

“Likewise it has been decided that whoever says that infants fresh from their mother's wombs should not be baptized...let him be anathema.”

-Council of Carthage, Canon 2, A.D. 418

“Those dying with only original sin on their souls will suffer no other pain, whether from material fire or from the worm of conscience, except the pain of being deprived forever of the vision of God.”

-Pope Innocent III (1160-1216), *Corp. Juris, Decret. l. III, tit. xlii, c. iii -- Majores*

“The souls of those who die in mortal sin or with original sin only, immediately descend into Hell, yet to be punished with different punishments.”

-Pope Gregory X, *Second Council of Lyons*, 1274, ex cathedra

“The Roman Church teaches...that the souls of those who depart in mortal sin or with only original sin descend immediately to Hell, nevertheless to be punished with different punishments and in disparate locations.”

-Pope John XXII, *Nequaquam Sine Dolore*, 1321 AD

“The souls of those who depart this life in actual mortal sin, or in original sin alone, go down straightaway to hell to be punished, but with unequal pains.”

-Pope Eugene IV, Council of Florence, *Laetentur Caeli*, July 6, 1439

“Regarding children, indeed, because of danger of death, which can often take place, since no help can be brought to them by another remedy than through the sacrament of baptism, through which they are snatched from the domination of the devil and adopted among the sons of God, the sacrosanct Roman Church advises that holy baptism ought not to be deferred for forty or eighty days...but it should be conferred as soon as it can be done conveniently.”

-Pope Eugene IV, Council of Florence, *Cantate Domino*, February 4, 1442

“If any one denies, that infants, newly born from their mothers' wombs, even though they be sprung from baptized parents, are to be baptized; or says that they are baptized indeed for the remission of sins, but that they derive nothing of original sin from Adam, which has need of being expiated by the laver of regeneration for the obtaining life everlasting,--whence it follows as a consequence, that in them the form of baptism, for the remission of sins, is understood to be not true, but false, let him be anathema.”

-Council of Trent, Session 5, Part 4

“The faithful are earnestly to be exhorted to take care that their children be brought to the church, as soon as it can be done with safety, to receive solemn Baptism. Since infant children have no other means of salvation except Baptism, we may easily understand how grievously those persons sin who permit them to remain without the grace of the Sacrament longer than necessity may require, particularly at an age so tender as to be exposed to numberless dangers of death.”

-*Catechism of the Council of Trent*; Issued by Pope Saint Pius V in 1547 A.D.

“Noticing that frequently by various Apostolic Constitutions the audacity and daring of most profligate men, who know no restraint, of sinning with license against the commandment “do not kill” was repressed; We who are placed by the Lord in the supreme throne of justice, being counseled by a most just reason, are in part renewing old laws and in part extending them in order to restrain with just punishment the monstrous and atrocious brutality of those who have no fear to kill most cruelly fetuses still hiding in the maternal viscera. Who will not detest such an abhorrent and evil act, by which are lost not only the bodies but also the souls?”

-Pope Sixtus V, Apostolic Constitution *Effraenatam* (Against Abortionists), 29 October 1588

“The doctrine which rejects as a Pelagian fable that place of the lower regions (which the faithful generally designate by the name of limbo of the children) in which the souls of those departing with the sole guilt of original sin are punished with the punishment of the condemned, exclusive of the punishment of fire... is false, rash, injurious to Catholic schools.”

-Pope Pius VI, *Auctorem Fidei*, August 28, 1794

“Q. 100 - Where do infants go who die without Baptism?

A. - Infants who die without Baptism go to Limbo where they do not enjoy the sight of God, but also do not suffer. This is because having original sin, and it alone, they do not merit heaven, but neither do they merit purgatory or hell.”

-*Catechism of Pope Saint Pius X*, first published in 1910 AD

“If what We have said up to now deals with the protection and the care of natural life, it should hold all the more in regard to the supernatural life which the newly born infant receives with Baptism. In the present economy there is no other way of communicating this life to the child who has not yet the use of reason. But, nevertheless, the state of grace at the moment of death is absolutely necessary for salvation. Without it, it is not possible to attain supernatural happiness, the beatific vision of God. An act of love can suffice for an adult to obtain sanctifying grace and supply for the absence of Baptism; for the unborn child or for the newly born, this way is not open...”

-Pope Pius XII, October 29 1951, Congress of the Italian Catholic Association of Midwives

“The Church has shown by her teach and practice that she knows no other way apart from baptism for ensuring children’s entry into eternal happiness.”

-Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1980 AD, with approval of Pope John Paul II

THREE DOCUMENTARY OBJECTIONS TO LIMBO

Objections to Limbo are typically based on three recent documents: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the English version of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, and the 2007 report produced by the International Theological Commission regarding the salvation of infants.

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (1994)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says cautiously that Catholics are “allowed” (not obliged) to “hope” that there is a way of salvation for infants who die unbaptized (para. 1261). However, the Catechism also emphasizes that “the Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that *assures* entry into eternal beatitude” (para. 1257).

EVANGELIUM VITAE BY POPE JOHN PAUL II (1995)

Well-meaning Catholics involved in pro-life work often appeal to Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* no. 99 which in some English versions states that aborted babies “now live with the Lord.” However, this last sentence does not appear in the official Latin version of the papal encyclical. Hence, the affirmation that aborted babies “live with the Lord” is not part of the finalized and ratified encyclical but an interpolation without any papal authority. See *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 87 [1995] p. 515.

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION REPORT “THE HOPE OF SALVATION FOR INFANTS WHO DIE WITHOUT BEING BAPTIZED” (2007)

The “International Theological Commission” (ITC) consists of thirty theologians who act as an advisory panel to the Vatican, in particular to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The reports and documents of the ITC are *not* considered expressions of authoritative Church teaching, but they sometimes set the stage for official Vatican pronouncements. Consequently, a document released by an advisory board is not binding or authoritative on the Catholic Church. While this document calls the limbo of children into question, it by no means closes the door on the traditional teaching of limbo.