

## The Fate of Unbaptized Infants

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 23 February 2019

Our Lord establishes the necessity of baptism for salvation, affirming unequivocally that “unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Baptism of water is the ordinary means of incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ, outside of whom there is “neither salvation nor remission of sin.”<sup>1</sup> The Church teaches that there can also be baptism of blood (martyrdom) and baptism of desire, which are extra-sacramental means sufficient to save a person’s soul in the absence of baptism of water. However, in the absence of *any* kind of baptism at all, a person remains in the state of original sin, and it is a *de fide* teaching that those who die in original sin are excluded from the Beatific Vision.

Friendship with God was a free gift given by the Creator to His creation, to which the latter has no strict right, and which man forfeited by original sin. Because the original justice and holiness possessed by Adam was received for the entire human race, of whom he is the head, through his sin he forfeited this for all of his descendants (excluding Our Lady by her Immaculate Conception). Thus, nor can the children of Adam claim any right to enter into the kingdom of God except through the means established by divine institution, namely, through baptism, whether that is baptism of water, blood, or desire. Consequently, it is perfectly in-line with justice if those who die in a state of original sin, with no personal sin, are still deprived of the Beatific Vision.

This has been dogmatically proclaimed by two ecumenical councils. “The souls of those who die in mortal sin or with original sin only,” declared the Second Council of Lyons, “immediately descend into hell, yet to be punished with different punishments.” This is not only reaffirmed by John XXII in *Nequaquam sine dolore*, but also by *Laetentur caeli* of the Council of Florence, which describes those who die in mortal sin and those who die with original sin alone as being “punished...with unequal pains.” This is a *de fide* teaching, and consequently, the contrary proposition—that those in a state of original sin may receive the Beatific Vision—is heretical.

The question then arises as to how these principles apply to the case of infants—who do not have the use of reason—who die without water baptism. Is it possible that original sin could be removed through extra-sacramental means? Both baptism of blood and baptism of desire necessarily entail free choice, which an infant is not capable of, and so some have proposed a vicarious baptism of desire through the prayer of the parents, or some kind of baptism of blood through the child’s suffering and death. Other possibilities include the idea that the child could attain the use of reason immediately before death so that he may decide for or against God in that moment. While these theories are possible, “their actuality cannot be proved from Revelation,”<sup>2</sup> and they pose serious difficulties in light of established doctrinal teaching that render them theologically improbable.

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1 Boniface VIII, *Unam sanctam*.

2 L. Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1974), 114.

If a person who lacks the use of reason can suddenly attain the use of reason and make an irrevocable choice immediately before death, this would necessarily entail that he either receive sanctifying grace (if he accepts God) and go to heaven, or commit a mortal sin (if he rejects God) and go to hell. This would necessarily eliminate the possibility that one could die in a state of original sin alone, without having committed a mortal sin, which would render it nonsensical and redundant for the Church to define that dying in a state of original sin alone excludes one from the Beatific Vision. Further, it would have been pointless for the two aforementioned ecumenical councils to distinguish between those who die in original sin and those who die in mortal sin, because it would be impossible for one in original sin to *not* be in mortal sin at the point of death.

Rather than give weight to these speculations, the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Church's preeminent theologian, is very clear: he exhorts parents to have their children baptized at the earliest opportunity, because there is "no other remedy" for infants who die without baptism of water.<sup>3</sup> If contrary opinions are not well-founded, then what actually happens to those who die in original sin alone, which includes (but is not limited to) unbaptized infants? This is where the question of limbo becomes relevant, which refers to a special place or state in hell for these persons where they live in a state of natural happiness, but are still deprived of the Beatific Vision.

With respect to hell, theologians distinguish between the *poena damni* (exclusion from the Beatific Vision) and the *poena sensus*, which is added to the punishment of the damned in accordance with the sins they committed in this life. While some theologians, such as St. Augustine, opine that unbaptized infants suffer a mild form of the *poena sensus*, the more probable opinion held by the Scholastics is that they suffer the *poena damni* only.<sup>4</sup> Man has both a natural and a supernatural end; while the achievement of the supernatural end requires sanctifying grace (which requires some form of baptism), there is no reason why those who die in original sin alone cannot achieve their natural end as human beings.

In the modern era, there has been a systematic attack on limbo, which is often dismissed as merely one theory among others. On the contrary, it belongs to the category of theological conclusions, and it is the position held by the majority of theologians throughout Church history. In rejecting limbo, one would be forced to admit that the Church erred for centuries in approving the writings of these theologians. However, the Church cannot habitually err in such judgments because she enjoys the divine assistance of the Holy Ghost: "...it would be contrary to the truth, if, proceeding from some particular cases, one were to conclude that the Church's Magisterium can be habitually mistaken in its prudential judgments, or that it does not enjoy divine assistance in the integral exercise of its mission."<sup>5</sup> This principle is why in his papal bull *Auctorem fidei*, condemning the Synod of Pistoia, Pius VI writes that to discredit limbo is "false, rash, and scandalous to Catholic schools."

In this same papal bull, another principle is expounded which further supports this conclusion: the Church cannot habitually enact defective, burdensome, or useless discipline, and the contrary proposition is "false, rash, scandalous, dangerous, offensive to pious ears, injurious to the Church and to the Spirit of God by whom it is guided, at least erroneous." Ecclesiastical

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3 *Summa Theologiae III*, q. 68, art. 3, co.

4 See footnote 2.

5 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum veritatis*, 24.

law has always mandated that parents have their children baptized as soon as possible; this was codified into the 1917 Code of Canon Law and repeated in the 1983 Code.<sup>6</sup> Many laws were instituted to deal with extraordinary circumstances, such as that which mandates immediate baptism for infants in danger of death, and the purpose was to provide a remedy in a case of necessity when the salvation of souls was at stake. If it were possible to entertain good hope of the salvation of unbaptized infants, as many modern theologians have argued, then this discipline would have indeed been useless and burdensome.

The proposition that a person may enter heaven while still remaining in original sin is heretical, and while the idea that unbaptized infants may somehow receive a baptism of blood or desire is not doctrinally objectionable in itself, it poses difficulties in light of established Church teaching. All things considered, the most probable answer to the question regarding the eternal fate of unbaptized infants is that they go to limbo, which is either a place or state in hell in which they live in a state of natural happiness and suffer only the *poenas damni*. This has the status of a theological conclusion—a virtually revealed truth—and therefore cannot simply be dismissed out of hand.

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<sup>6</sup> cf. 1917 CIC, c. 770; 1983 CIC, c. 867.