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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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FAREWELL TO LIMBO?

For maybe a couple of weeks now I've known that I was going to write about Limbo, or to be more precise, the document published a few months ago by the International Theological Commission in Rome entitled *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized*, which was widely reported as the document in which the Pope did away with Limbo, at least as a final destination for unbaptized babies. With Limbo on my brain, I began noticing how often the word popped up, not in theological discussions, but just in normal speech. You hear it a lot. Indeed it is so common a word that I doubt we even notice it much, unless it happens to be on the mind for other reasons. In just one issue of a major Chicago newspaper, I ran into it four times, and I wasn't even looking for it. A downsizing was in progress somewhere, and many employees were in Limbo, waiting for news on their jobs. A proposal regarding the Chicago Public Schools was in Limbo. Detained terrorists of a certain stripe might be subjected to "extraordinary rendition" and could end up in an Albanian Limbo. People who needed passports for travel under new regulations but whose passports had not yet arrived were in a state of Limbo with regard to their summer vacation plans. It would seem that even if all unbaptized babies are permanently relocated out of Limbo, the place is still going to be pretty crowded – and not just with people, but with proposals, plans, legislative measures, dreams and documents – at least if our ordinary language usage is any indication.

Of course, neither the document nor the Pope who approved its publication speaks of such a

relocation as if it were within the power or the prerogative of the Pope to do such a thing. The Church here is not about the business of passing sentence or anyone with regard to their eternal fate. She never does this, not even in canonizing a saint. The activity underway here is theology, faith's attempt to understand itself, specifically with regard to God's will for those infants who die without benefit of baptism. As the document points out in its introduction, at first glance "this topic may seem to be peripheral to theological concerns," and its importance rather slight. Yet it obviously brings into play theological matters that are not at all slight or unimportant. The discussion of the fate of unbaptized babies will demand a discussion of God's will to save all people, of Christ as the one necessary mediator between God and man, of the necessity of baptism for salvation, of the reality of original sin and the link between original sin and the loss of heaven, and of the creation of humanity "in Christ." These are not insignificant matters, but central to the Christian faith. Follow any one of them, or all of them together, for long enough and you end up in Limbo.

The ITC's statement is divided into three sections: a review of the history of the question; an explanation of the theological principles involved in the question; and a summary of the conclusions that the ITC believes we can draw from what was said in the first two sections.

The review of the history of the question begins with the Bible and runs down to Vatican II. In the Bible we see clearly articulated both God's will to save all people, and the necessity

of sacramental baptism for salvation. These two seem to be in tension, with the second placing a limit on the first. The Scriptures teach that both are true, so we cannot just throw one or the other overboard. Instead, we must reflect on the matter as best we can, to see how both are true. The case of the death of unbaptized infants must be resolved within this tension.

In antiquity, both East and West, the necessity of baptism was emphasized. In the East, both Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen used a kind of “neither...nor” formula which ends up sounding a lot like the heart of the doctrine behind Limbo. God is a just judge, and infants who die without baptism receive neither praise nor punishment from the Just Judge. True, they have committed no sin, but then neither have they practiced the virtues, which are necessary for the purification of all those born into this life. So they do not suffer torment, but neither is their fate that of the baptized. What this means precisely for the young, unbaptized soul, neither of the Greek Fathers says. It is best, they think, to leave the matter to God, whose judgments it is not fitting to probe too deeply.

In the West, Augustine had no such hesitations. His controversy with the Pelagians (who insisted that humans are not born in sin, and that therefore there is no real need for either a Savior or salvation), moved the issue of the death of unbaptized infants more to the center of concern. Nobody wants to hear that such babies are condemned to Hell, and Pelagius and Julian (Augustine’s chief opponents) played on such sentiments, in effect daring Augustine to say that such children are damned. Their argument was simple and elegant: If all are born in original sin, then those who die without baptism (which removes original sin) die in sin and must be in Hell. But such a notion is repugnant to nearly everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike. Therefore, it is more sensible to accept that these children are in fact saved, and that

there is no original sin into which humans are born. Jesus did not come to save us from sin, nor was his coming, strictly speaking, necessary at all. He came, rather, just to be a good example for us, a kind of motivational speaker to urge us to put forth our natural powers for good, which powers are more than enough to gain for us God’s approval and our “salvation”.

For Augustine, this kind of mindless, smiley-face optimism made a mockery of both our human experience and Christ’s gospel. Does the world look and feel like it’s populated by people who are basically good on their own and in no need of God’s grace? Do our own hearts and personal histories speak of freedom from sin and a natural, invincible capacity for good? Yeah, right. And the gospel of Christ certainly does not speak in such upbeat tones. The New Covenant is in his blood, and it is established for the forgiveness of sins; belief in Christ’s name and acceptance of baptism are required for salvation; the parables make clear, over and over again, that the way is hard and the gate is narrow, and that eternal loss and condemnation are real possibilities. Fighting for the very life of gospel truth against the Pelagians, Augustine did not shrink from the awful-sounding conclusion regarding unbaptized infants. Hard as it is



to say, he said it: They are condemned, they are in Hell, for they died without baptism and so died in sin, and no one in sin can be at home in God. The most we can hope for is that their punishment is of the very lightest kind.

In time most theologians interpreted Augustine’s “punishment of the lightest kind” to mean “denial of the beatific vision.” Unbaptized infants could not see God, but otherwise they had no sufferings and lacked nothing. Theirs was a “natural” happiness – not the supernatural beatitude of Heaven, but with nothing of torment or torture in it. To use the image of space, since the fate of these unbaptized children could not be in Heaven, it must be in Hell, but only just barely

in Hell, at the very edge of Hell, at its hem, and in Latin, the original meaning of *limbo* was the hem of a garment, that which belongs to the garment, but only just, as its outermost boundary.

Drawing on this doctrine, Dante made Limbo the First Circle of his Hell. It has a kind of verdure (green enamel), a dull light, and a stately, castled city, within which dwell the souls of the righteous pagans. Although Dante tells us that the souls of the unbaptized children are also there, we are presented with none of them in canto IV of the *Inferno*, which describes all that he saw in Limbo. In Hell's First Circle there are no cries of pain, only sighs.

With the passage of time the sense of the faith came to regard Limbo with more suspicion. At Vatican II there was, briefly, an attempt to get the council to define Limbo as the fate of all unbaptized children, the which would serve both to affirm the doctrines of original sin and the necessity of baptism, and to urge parents to see to the baptism of their children as soon as possible after birth. The council fathers refused to take this step, saying that such an understanding was not what was believed by the vast majority of their people.

Which leaves us where? The ITC does not retreat an inch from the doctrines of original sin and the necessity of the grace of Christ for the salvation of anyone. It affirms these as a part of the faith, attested in the Bible and believed in through all ages of the Church. Yet from the very beginning the Church has always known that "baptism" is, or can be, more than the sacrament administered in the usual way by the Church. That is "baptism by water" and is indeed the normal, ordinary way that a person is baptized into the grace of Christ and receives the forgiveness of all sin, including original sin.

"Ordinary," however, is not "only," and from the earliest days of the Church we have also known a "baptism by blood," and a "baptism by desire," which also open the way to salvation. Baptism by blood is received by those who have faith and who die for it, even if they have died before undergoing baptism by water. These are true martyrs, and here it is important that the

Church has the Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28, the feast of the babies killed by Herod in his attempt to get at the newborn Jesus. Despite their tender age, they are in Heaven, not Limbo. The ITC notes that one of the reasons why this issue of unbaptized babies is more of a concern now is because of the huge number of abortions performed in the modern world, together with the wholesale discarding of embryos that is routine in most fertility clinics. Infants, whether born or unborn, who die by violence may in fact have a kind of "baptism by blood" after the manner of the Holy Innocents.

Then there is "baptism by desire," in which a person has faith and wants to be baptized, but dies before that can be accomplished; such a person is saved. This would seem to work fine for adult catechumens, and not at all for infants, who cannot have the desire for baptism. Yet there is more here than a first glance reveals. Faith is always required for baptism, and in the case of infants, the faith required is supplied by the Church, or more specifically, by the parents and godparents who bring the child to the waters of baptism. The ITC suggests that in an analogous way the Church, established by Christ as the instrument of universal salvation in the world, may provide the desire for baptism for those babies who die without the sacrament.

In using an extension of the traditional notions of baptism by desire and by blood to cover the case of unbaptized infants, the ITC is doing nothing original. A number of theologians have been thinking along these lines for a while. The ITC is not saying that they are right, only that they may be right, and that such opinions are not contrary to the faith. The fact is we do not know what happens with unbaptized infants and so, as the ITC stresses, there can be no definitive pronouncement. There is, however, good reason to hope for the salvation of these children.

So Limbo, although not "abolished" by the Church is a theological opinion that is ever less likely to be used. Limbo as a literary place has been made secure, even immortal, by Dante's poetry. And as a part of our everyday language, well, it seems pretty solid there, too.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of:
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by:

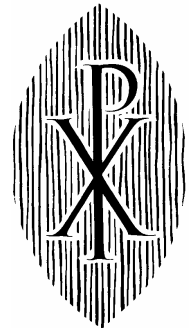
Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll:
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name:

Address:

City, State, Zip Code:

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*