

Is Limbo Ready to Be Abolished? Limbo Revisited

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IN MARCH 1985, I wrote an article titled “Is Limbo Still in Limbo?” for *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. Dr. Grisez and Fr. Kenneth Baker, S.J., both taught that it was a simple theological theory, implying that there may be other possibilities for these children’s eternal happiness, but not revealed by God.¹ *Teaching of Christ: A Catholic Catechism for Adults*, originally published in 1975, had this to say about limbo:

The Church has never made any official pronouncement on the reality or nature of limbo; but it does teach that baptism in some form is required for salvation.

Many contemporary scholars have suggested that God will provide for the eternal salvation of these persons, enabling them in some way to obtain grace by a baptism of desire before death. Revelation does not give any certainty on this point. God remains infinitely merciful, but the gifts of grace are entirely gratuitous, and we are not certain that the mercy He shows them will include the gift of supernatural beatitude. For this reason the Church insists that the faithful take care so that their children are baptized promptly. The vision of God is so precious a gift

I wish to thank Gilles Emery, O.P., Michael Carey, O.P., and Juan-Diego Brunetta, O.P., for their criticisms of the text.

¹ German Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 354, note 20; Kenneth Baker, S.J., *Fundamentals of Catholicism*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 173–74.

that we must take every reasonable step to obtain it for ourselves and for those entrusted to our care.²

Nevertheless, I tried to show that canonizing all unbaptized children did not seem possible in light of several general councils of the Church.

Father Jean-Hervé Nicolas proposes another theory. In their suffering and death, unbaptized babies could be mysteriously conformed to Christ who endured a violent death for our salvation. This conformation could be understood as redemptive and salvific. So, we could imagine that such a death “conforms” infants to Christ’s death: that would be neither a “moral conformation” to Christ (this way is open to adults only, after the age of discretion), nor a “sacramental conformation” to Christ (since it is precisely what such babies lack), but a conformity or conformation *secundum imitationem operis*.³ As we shall see, there are still some difficulties in canonizing unbaptized babies immediately after death.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now teaches quite clearly the following:

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.⁴

But is the hope for their salvation merely “wishful” or sentimental thinking itself as a basis of hope? People also hope that the Church changes her teaching on contraception as well. How can the theologian overcome the strong evidence of the sacred Magisterium concerning the necessity of Baptism and the clear teaching that the unbaptized are in hell? Here below are the major problems as stated by the sacred Magisterium, that is, three popes, and two general councils of the Church, which the theologian must surmount, interpret, or perhaps evolve in order to defend the teaching found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1261.

² Ronald Lawler, O.F.M. Cap, Donald Wuerl, and Thomas Comerford Lawler, eds., *The Teaching of Christ: A Catholic Catechism For Adults* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1976).

³ Cf. J.-H. Nicolas, *Synthèse dogmatique: De la Trinité à la Trinité* (Fribourg-Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1985), 851–52.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1261, quoting Mk 10:14, emphasis added.

Recently, the International Theological Commission published a lengthy document, *The Hope of Salvation*, in essence saying that we hope God will do what we humans are unable to do, if children are not baptized sacramentally before they die.⁵ This is based upon St. Thomas's dictum, "God did not bind his power to the sacraments so as to be unable to bestow the sacramental effect without conferring the sacrament."⁶ So, given the love of Jesus for children, it is likely that they will be saved. Yet, the commission maintains that we do not know with certitude, if they really are saved, since it has not been revealed.⁷

Further, the commission suggests that it is a sign of the *sensus fidelium* that all non-baptized children may be saved because God has other means to save them besides the ones he has revealed. A sign of this is that whereas before the Second Vatican Council, there was no Mass of the dead offered for the unbaptized, after the council, one was crafted and is full of hope. Appealing to the principle of *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, together with the Church's desire for the salvation of all as well as Christ's coming to save all, it may be the case that by this desire, it is possible that unbaptized infants are saved. Yet as they put it, "none of these considerations . . . may be used to negate the necessity of Baptism nor to delay the conferral of the sacrament."⁸ What the commission seems to be saying is that we are certain that validly baptized babies do go to heaven, but we do not know for certain that unbaptized babies go there but we can hope that they do.

The Tradition

The first document comes from Pope Innocent III in a letter to the archbishop of Lyons (1206) where he teaches the fate of unbaptized children:

original (sin), therefore, which is committed without consent, is remitted without consent through the power of the sacrament (Baptism); but actual (sin) which is contracted with consent, is not mitigated in the slightest without consent. . . . The punishment of original sin is deprivation of the

⁵ International Theological Commission, "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised," www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html.

⁶ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 67, a. 7; cf. III, q. 64, a. 3; III, q. 66, a. 6; III, q. 68, a. 2.

⁷ 79. It must be clearly acknowledged that the Church does not have sure knowledge about the salvation of unbaptized infants who die. . . . What we do positively know of God, Christ, and the Church gives us grounds to hope for their salvation, as must now be explained.

⁸ International Theological Commission, "The Hope of Salvation," preface.

vision of God, but the punishment of actual sin is the torments of everlasting hell.⁹

One will notice that being deprived of the vision of God is considered a “punishment” but implied here is that the unbaptized children suffer no torments nor anything contrary to their wills. The phrase “everlasting hell” is used for those who committed actual sin. Therefore, the punishment that emerges from their condition is something objective not subjective. They may not even know that it is a punishment according to St. Thomas.¹⁰ It flows rather from the nature of original sin, not from the direct or intentional will of God, which all inherit save the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, and for which the babies are not responsible.

Some years later the Council of Lyons I (1274) also uses the word *hell* as the “place,” analogously speaking so it would seem, where the unbaptized children go with mortal sinners: “The souls of those who die in mortal sin or with original sin only, however, immediately descend to hell, yet to be punished with different punishments.”¹¹ Some 37 years later, Pope John XXII will teach in a letter to the Armenians that they will go to a “different” place: The Roman Church “teaches . . . that the souls . . . of those who die in mortal sin, or with only original sin, descend immediately into hell; however, to be punished with different penalties and in different places.”¹² Here one should note that the words “different places” are used and spiritual entities do not actually live in a place, since they are outside of space and time. So the words must be metaphorical not analogical.

Later, Pope Benedict XII in 1341 writing on the errors of the Armenians addresses the question of unbaptized children:

Also the Armenians say that the souls of children who are born from Christian parents after the passion of Christ, if they die before they are baptized, go to a terrestrial Paradise in which Adam was before sin; but the souls of children who are born after the passion of Christ from

⁹ Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Adolfus Schönmetzer, S.J. (Rome: Herder 1965), §780.

¹⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. Jean Oesterly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 5, 4: “But that perfect good for which man was made is that glory which the saints possess is beyond natural knowledge. . . . And therefore the souls of children do not know that they are deprived of such a good (the beatific vision), and do not grieve on account of this; but knowledge which they have by nature, they possess without grief.”

¹¹ DS §858.

¹² DS §§925–26.

non-Christian parents and who die without baptism go to the place where the souls of their parents are.¹³

Here two errors are highlighted by the pope, namely, unbaptized children of Christian parents go to Adam's paradise when they die, and if they are from non-Christian parents, they could go either to heaven, hell of the damned, or purgatory.

Next, the Council of Florence (1439–45) goes even further doctrinally and states a definition, which does not seem to be a mere theological opinion: It has likewise been defined that “the souls of those who depart in actual mortal sin or in original sin only, descend immediately into hell but to undergo punishments of a different kind.”¹⁴ If unbaptized babies descend immediately into hell, then the theory of limbo according to Aquinas among others is used to explain the consequences of being in “hell.” If the theory of limbo were merely a theory, then one still has to explain the meaning of “hell” as used in the Council of Florence. To say that it is only a common doctrine of the Church but to be distinguished from the faith of the Church seems disingenuous.¹⁵

One more document, written by Pius VI in 1794, actually uses the word “limbo” for the first time in magisterial documents. Here the pope condemns Jansenists who claim that the doctrine of limbo is an invention of the Pelagians. He writes:

The doctrine which rejects as a Pelagian fable that place of the lower regions (which the faithful generally designated by the name of the limbo of 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 fire, just as if, by this very fact, that those who remove the punishment of fire introduced that middle place and state free of guilt and punishment between the kingdom of God and eternal damnation, such as that about which the Pelagians idly talk, (this is) false, rash, injurious to Catholic schools.¹⁶

¹³ DS §1008.

¹⁴ DS §1306.

¹⁵ International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation*, §40.

¹⁶ DS §2626. Here the papal commission asserts that “[p]apal interventions during this period, then, protected the freedom of the Catholic Schools to wrestle with this question. They did not endorse the theory of limbo as a doctrine of faith. Limbo, however, was the common Catholic teaching until the mid-twentieth century.” But can one say that the teaching on limbo was then erroneous, which would be a reasonable conclusion of the commission? This would seem to raise more problems than solutions.

Quite rightly, this paragraph is merely getting facts in line with reality and rightly, the *Hope of Salvation* says that Pius VI was mere protecting “the freedom of the Catholic schools to wrestle with this question.”¹⁷

The Challenge for the Theologian

The problems facing the theologian from the documents seem hopeless for reconciling the Tradition with the present *Catechism* because one is dealing with either metaphorical or analogical knowledge using words such as “punishment,” “descend,” “place,” and “penalty,” which will have different meanings for adult sinners and unbaptized children. The major question is simple: How can an all-good and all-loving God “punish” someone who has not consented to personal sin and therefore is personally innocent? Further, how can an all-good God create innocent children who die soon afterward, and then are given a punishment for something they did not do?¹⁸ St. Thomas provides an answer when he writes:

I answer that, Punishment should be proportionate to fault, according to the saying of Isaiah (27:8), “In measure against measure, when it shall be cast off, thou shalt judge it.” Now the defect transmitted to us through our origin, and having the character of a sin does not result from the withdrawal or corruption of a good consequent upon human nature by virtue of its principles, but from the withdrawal or corruption of something that had been superadded to nature.¹⁹

Here Aquinas is referring to the withdrawal of sanctifying grace, a gift over and beyond human nature, caused not by God but by the sin of Adam and Eve. Hence, God does not cause the punishment but allows it to flow from the nature of original sin. Of its very nature, original sin deprives one of the beatific vision. The notion of punishment as punitive from the point of view of the receiver implies something contrary to his will and the infliction of pain. But the little ones do not deserve either; and if Aquinas is correct, they are not punished in this sense since they have committed no sin but only possess inherited sin. So, we can say, they are punished objectively speaking because they are deprived of some wonderful gifts, and because of their sinful condition, inherited from Adam but not chosen. This is what makes punishment and penalty analogical.

¹⁷ International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation*, 26d.

¹⁸ For a study of the major medieval theologians, Thomas and Thomists of that time in particular, see the article of Serge-Thomas Bonino, “La théorie des limbes et le mystère du surnaturel chez saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue Thomiste* 101 (2001): 131–66.

¹⁹ *ST Supplementum*, Appendix I, q. 1, a. 1.

Thomas continues:

Nor does this sin belong to this particular man, except in so far as he has such a nature, that is deprived of this good, which in the ordinary course of things he would have had and would have been able to keep. Wherefore no further punishment is due to him, besides the privation of that end to which the gift withdrawn destined him, which gift human nature is unable of itself to obtain. Now this is the divine vision; and consequently the loss of this vision is the proper and only punishment of original sin after death: because, if any other sensible punishment were inflicted after death for original sin, a man would be punished out of proportion to his guilt, for sensible punishment is inflicted for that which is proper to the person, since a man undergoes sensible punishment in so far as he suffers in his person.²⁰

What Thomas is saying is that the punishment coming from the mere absence of sanctifying grace without consent to mortal sin, therefore, does not inflict pain but merely is an absence of a good beyond human nature. This also implies that grace is not, strictly speaking, owed or due to human nature but a pure undeserved gift. Aquinas again distinguishes:

Hence, as his guilt did not result from an action of his own, even so neither should he be punished by suffering himself, but only by losing that which his nature was unable to obtain. On the other hand, those who are under sentence for original sin will suffer no loss whatever in other kinds of perfection and goodness which are consequent upon human nature by virtue of its principles.²¹

Moreover, Thomas insists that the unbaptized children do not grieve, rather “they will rejoice for that they will have a large share of God’s goodness and their own natural perfections.” And if they will know they lack grace to have the beatific vision, this “will not cause sorrow in children who die without Baptism, anymore than the lack of many graces accorded to others of the same condition makes a wise man to grieve.”²²

Why Limbo as Such Is Only a Theory

The word “limbo” means “rim,” “hem,” or a border to something, and, in this context, the rim of hell. Before Thomas, it was forged at the turn of the twelfth century, about forty years before Aquinas’s teacher, St. Albert

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *ST* Supplementum, Appendix I, q. 1, a. 2.

the Great, began to write.²³ Perhaps the reason the Angelic Doctor's teaching was not officially embraced by the Magisterium was due, in part, to the fact that he makes "limbo" for unbaptized children a state of natural happiness, which suggests it could not be hell strictly taken. For an unbaptized infant who has died, not seeing God as a mere objective punishment and natural happiness can co-exist and so are not contraries. This would seem to suggest that truly the infants do not suffer any personal punishment. But for those who have univocal minds, analogical punishment seems to be no punishment at all.

These souls with original sin only know and love God naturally. When compared with someone who possesses the beatific vision, this happiness appears to be almost no happiness at all. When considered from a purely natural point of view, it seems quite satisfactory. When considered from the perspective of the people in the hell of the damned, these children are in bliss. What is interesting, however, from the vantage of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is that hell is no longer thought of in terms of a genus but a species.²⁴ Let us take a look, one by one, of the numbers dealing with hell.

Number 1033 of the *Catechism* is interesting for the theology of limbo because hell is defined as a state for mortal sinners freely chosen, especially with regard to the love of neighbor. So, unbaptized children cannot fall into this category:

We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor, or against ourselves: "He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren. To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell." (§1033)

²³ Cf. Richard Weberberger, O.S.B., "Limbus puerorum. Zur Entstehung eines theologischen Begriffes," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 35 (1968): 83–133, and 241–59, and 112–13.

²⁴ In contrast to the *Catechism*, it is clear in St. Thomas that hell has four states or places as seen in *ST* III, q. 52, aa. 1–8: hell of the lost, hell of the Holy Fathers awaiting Christ, the abode where children live who die without Baptism, and finally, purgatory. Therefore the word and reality of "hell" is a genus for Aquinas.

Number 1034 of the same *Catechism* says that those in hell are called evil-doers. But the children who are not baptized cannot be called evil-doers nor did they refuse to believe in Jesus:

Jesus often speaks of “Gehenna” of “the unquenchable fire” reserved for those who, to the end of their lives, refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost. Jesus solemnly proclaims that he “will send his angels, and they will gather . . . all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire,” and that he will pronounce the condemnation: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!” (§1034)

Number 1035 pronounces that eternity of hell will be the lot of those who die in the state of mortal sin and its chief punishment is that separation from God. But unbaptized children are not absolutely separated from God by their choices but by something attributed to another (Adam and Eve’s choice) as Thomas had already taught:

The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire.” The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs. (§1035)

This idea of eternal punishment in the Tradition goes back to the Church, which clearly and unequivocally teaches that this state is perpetual as seen, for example in the Council of Lyons (1254): “Moreover, if anyone without repentance dies in mortal sin, without a doubt he is tortured forever by the flames of eternal hell.”²⁵ What those flames actually are is not clearly taught by the Church as they could be physical or spiritual, but one should note that the eternity of hell is for those who die “unrepentant in mortal sin,” which is precisely not the case of unbaptized infants.

In my original article, I attempted to use St. Thomas’s idea that “hell” or “infernus” was a genus not a species with a fourfold analogy of state: hell of the damned, hell of purgatory, hell of the Holy Fathers awaiting Christ, and hell of those in limbo. This distinction is found in Aquinas’s *Supplementum*.²⁶ What is interesting from the perspective of today’s *Catechism*, as shown previously and will be shown by the next number, is that “hell” is a word reserved exclusively for those who have left this world in

²⁵ DS §839.

²⁶ Cf. *ST Supplementum*, q. 69, aa. 1–7.

the state of mortal sin. In the earlier numbers, the *Catechism* teaches that those in mortal sin have explicitly and definitively chosen to live and die in it. However, with regard to purgatory, we find a different state of existence from hell:

The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.²⁷ The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire.²⁸ As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.²⁹ (§1031)

The key words in number 1031 is “entirely different” implying therefore, it seems, that it is not an analogous part of hell, even though the souls in purgatory do not see God either. We also know from revelation that this state is eliminated at the end of time.

The *Catechism*, quoting Lyons II, teaches that “[t]he holy Roman Church firmly believes and confesses that on the Day of Judgment all men will appear in their own bodies before Christ’s tribunal to render an account of their own deeds.”³⁰

Finally, the *Catechism* makes note that:

Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation.

At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love. (§1022)

Since unbaptized infants cannot choose for or against Christ, their “retribution” may not be “eternal” as we shall see.

For Thomas, because children (he does not specify if baptized or not) dying before the use of reason have no deeds to account for, teaches in the *Supplementum* that “[c]hildren who have died without reaching the

²⁷ Cf. Council of Florence (1439), DS §1304; Council of Trent (1563), DS §1820; *ibid.* (1547), §1580; see also Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* (1336), DS §1000.

²⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 3:15; 1 Pet 1:7.

²⁹ St. Gregory the Great, *Dial.* 4, 39 (PL 77, 396); cf. Mt 12:31.

³⁰ CCC, §1059, citing Council of Lyons II (1274): DS §859; cf. DS §1549.

perfect age will be present at the judgment, not be judged, but to see the Judge's glory."³¹

But how is it possible for the unbaptized children to see the glory of Jesus if that glory is supernatural? For one thing, Thomas does not say it is supernatural glory; but it could be. Second, he says "children" without any qualifications. Third, seeing Christ's glory with human eyes does not yet mean the beatific vision. I would think the humans that are damned will also see something of his natural glory physically. Perhaps Thomas caught a glimpse of a possible solution to the ultimate fate of the unbaptized babies. Unlike the fallen angels and mortal sinners, it is not clear that the unbaptized children's wills are fixed either for or against the supernatural order. This means a new possibility could exist for them.

Can We Communicate With Them?

In order for humans to pray to them, God would have to give them infused ideas, since their knowledge comes about by turning in on themselves and beginning to reason together with any ideas that God may decide to infuse into their intellects. It sometimes happens that mothers who aborted their children pray to them for forgiveness. Does this make sense? In the case of aborted children, all we can do is assume that God could allow these children to receive the requests made to them by their parent(s) who aborted them. Also, an infused idea might prompt them naturally to pray for their mothers and/or whoever fathered them. Writing on the mercy of God for people praying in the state of mortal sin, St. Thomas teaches:

On the other hand, God hears the prayer of a sinner proceeding from a good natural desire, not from justice, because the sinner does not merit this, but rather out of pure mercy, provided however the four conditions mentioned above are fulfilled, namely that the prayers are for himself, for things necessary for salvation, piously and perseveringly.³²

Applying St. Thomas's thought on adults in this life to the unbaptized souls in limbo, it could also mean that during their sojourn in limbo, they might be praying for their own ultimate salvation and this could be granted them from the pure mercy of God. Is such a scenario possible?

A New Defense Based Upon Bernard Leeming's Theory

Origen is the author of *apokatastasis* or the notion that there would be a universal restoration or reunion of all souls and angels at the end of time.

³¹ *ST Supplementum*, q. 89, a. 5, ad 3.

³² Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 83, a. 16; Kevin D. O'Rourke, O.P., *Religion and Worship*, vol. 39 (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964).

All persons, angels, and humankind would ultimately be saved regardless of their choices against God. This was condemned as heresy by the Fifth Ecumenical Synod of Constantinople (553) when it said: "If anyone says or holds that the punishment of the demons and of impious men is temporary, and that it will have an end at some time, that is to say, there will be a complete restoration of the demons or of impious men, let him be anathema."³³ Nevertheless, one segment of persons not mentioned in this condemnation: the personally innocent souls without Baptism are omitted. So, it could be the case, notwithstanding the Church's silence, Bernard Leeming, Vincent Wilken,³⁴ and now I, repropose that the possibility for the unbaptized children remains that they will be given initial grace for the beatific vision but only at the end of time, since their wills are not irrevocably fixed in evil but only in natural goodness. The original sin, which they possess, is only analogously a "sin" since it lacks a choice on their part, that is, they did not commit it. *The Hope of Salvation* does make the point that "the church has never taught the 'absolute necessity' of sacramental Baptism for salvation; there are other avenues whereby the configuration with Christ can be realized" (66b).

It would seem that if God can give to the souls of the baby martyrs (the Holy Innocents) sanctifying grace immediately rendering them capable of seeing God with the aid of *lumen gloriae* but without their consent or the consent of their parents who were in total ignorance of the cause of the deaths of their children, God could give the same grace to those in limbo at any instant. It would not be an imposition but a pure gift without their consent, just as baptized babies are given the gift without their consent and sometimes even without their parents' consent. As St. Thomas expressed it this way: "The soul is naturally capable of grace, as Augustine says; simply from the fact that it is to the image of God, it is capable of God through grace."³⁵ The Church's teaching however precludes that option of God's gift at "any instant" based upon the teaching of the councils and popes. But does this teaching also include the notion of "forever"? The limbo of the just was not forever,³⁶ so, will the unbaptized children be denied the beatific vision forever? Or, do they

³³ DS §411.

³⁴ Bernard Leeming, "Is Their Baptism Really Necessary?" *Clergy Review* (1954): 66–85, 193–222, 321–40; Vincent Wilkin, *From Limbo to Heaven* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961).

³⁵ *ST* I–II, q. 133, a. 10.

³⁶ The reason for Christ's descent into "hell" was to release those souls as well as the souls in purgatory. Cf. *ST* III, q. 52, aa. 5 and 8. It is interesting to note that in the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas refrains from using the phrase "limbo of the just," but in the *Supplementum*, it is used in q. 69, a. 6.

have a possible future of being with God in a beatific-vision state of existence? This seems to have been overlooked by *The Hope of Salvation*.

At the end of time, since it is clear that there are only two states in existence at the final judgment (Mt 25: 34, 41), it seems fitting, based upon God's indissoluble love for the unbaptized babies, that he could grant them sanctifying grace much as he grants the same through the Baptism of water, or blood, or perhaps the desire of parents (according to the opinion of Cajetan). While it is possible that he may grant this grace to unbaptized babies, we are not certain that he will in fact choose to do this for them, since God has not revealed this as a fact to us.

It is more certain, however, that unbaptized children will not be in the "hell" as described by the *Catechism*, and, at least, it is reasonable by arguments of fittingness to piously believe that they may be in heaven due to a gratuitous gift of grace at the end of time. Moreover, it could be argued that had God revealed this latter option, the Christian faithful would not as readily have their children baptized, the ordinary way through which dying babies enter into heaven. (Even parents do not tell their children everything.) Since it is God's antecedent will to save children, certainly, through Baptism of water or blood, it is more fitting that he not reveal this last option of doing so at the end of time, even though reason and devotion suggest it is more fitting and probable that he do this than leave these unbaptized infants in their merely natural state of existence.

Why not give unbaptized infants the grace to get into heaven simultaneously at the final judgment by a generous act of his will? And, why only at the end of time? Based on early ecclesial documents, God has chosen to keep them in their state of original sin at death to preserve the ordinary way infants get into heaven if they suddenly die. However, when the world ends, it is fitting that he grant them postredemptive grace (my terminology), just as it was fitting that he granted preredemptive grace to the Holy Innocents and John the Baptist, St. Joseph, and even more so the Blessed Mother based upon the sufferings of Jesus Christ for all.³⁷

First, Christ suffered and died for the children with the same merciful love as he did for every person in the material cosmos.³⁸ While his redemption is not fruitful to sinners who reject his grace, it can be fruitful in children, as shown by the power of Baptism, and would be fruitful by gratuitously giving initial grace to unbaptized children at the end of time. To say that "a major weakness of the traditional view of limbo is that it is unclear whether the souls there have any relationship to Christ"

³⁷ This would fit it with International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation*, 88–92, concerning the children's relationship to Christ as redeemer.

³⁸ DS §2304; DS §794.

ignores St. Thomas at least.³⁹ Writing about the Word in the Trinity, he clearly states,

The Word has a kingship not only with rational natures, but also universally with every creature. For the Word contains the “patterns” of everything which God creates, analogously to how the human artist has an intellectual conception which contains the “models” for his works of art. Thus, then, the totality of creatures are nothing but a kind of real expression and representation of that contained in the conception of the divine Word. This is why all things are said to be made by the Word (Jn 1:3). So it was fitting that the Word was united to the creature, namely, to human nature.⁴⁰

Second, from examining the magisterial teaching, it becomes clear that unbaptized children, before reaching the ability to reason, do not go to heaven but rather to another state of existence called “hell,” in earlier centuries, later called “limbo” in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by theologians. However, since these innocents have not committed any grave or personal sins, theirs cannot be one of everlasting punishment since they have done nothing personally or actually wrong. As a result, their wills are not fixed in moral evil, rather, their wills are fixed in natural goodness.

When a human person is created, the will is not fixed either in personal moral goodness or evil. It is only as he matures that he gains the ability to reason about the true and good, and he slowly enters into the realm of being morally good or evil. Still the will remains *vertibile* or flexible or fickle even in the state of sanctifying grace. If a person dies as an unbaptized baby, he does not choose for or against God supernaturally, but does choose God naturally, since he can only be in a naturally happy state of being.

In the next life, the unbaptized babies will have no natural will against God. In this life too, no natural will against God exists in babies, otherwise they would be born in the state of mortal sin as well as original sin. It is absolutely clear in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and St. Thomas that personal sin and inherited sin are two really distinct kinds of sin, making them analogous.

That a change of will in eternity is not possible for angels and men, I totally agree; however, it may be possible for unbaptized babies because they will come back to earth temporarily for the last judgment to receive a body. Absolute fixity of will for or against God in the supernatural order

³⁹ International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation*, 90.

⁴⁰ SCG IV, ch. 42 (§3803).

arises from a personal and irrevocable choice. God gives what a person wants. God no longer forgives the people in hell (devils and mortal sinners) because they have definitively chosen to be unrepentant and separated from him. In the case of baptized babies who die, their fixity in God comes solely from gratuitous grace without also their personal choice.

God does not impose grace on anyone capable of a free act. It is a gratuitous gift, which may be possible for these unbaptized infants. They have no personal animus or will against God, but have a natural desire for him. That is all God needs to elevate them. The same is true for living babies. If living babies had a will totally opposed to God, then Baptism would not do them any good either, whether of water or of blood. Furthermore, Baptism by water or blood is only an instrument of communicating grace, a communication that God does not, absolutely speaking, need in order to give sanctifying grace. For example, He did not baptize John the Baptist, nor Isaiah, nor Jeremiah, nor possibly St. Joseph, and certainly not the Blessed Virgin Mary. With the exception of Mary who was immaculately conceived, the others were gratuitously sanctified in the womb whereby original sin was removed. Thus, for any unbaptized child, to be baptized by water or blood, sanctified in the womb or in heaven at judgment is not a contradiction.

Third, the Councils of Orange and Trent and Thomas himself teach that initial grace is never merited;⁴¹ so the Holy Innocents simply possessed sanctifying grace gratuitously by a kind of Baptism of blood freely accepted by God. This flowed somewhat from a loving and ineffable will of God who can choose to give grace to whom and when he will.

Fourth, regardless of the almost necessity of Baptism in this life, God will cease using all the sacraments once time has ceased. Then, it would be fitting that he grant the unbaptized children sanctifying grace, given his antecedent desire to save all mankind who pose no obstacle. It seems probable therefore in the case of the unbaptized infants that he do so. Perhaps Thomas also saw this when he mentioned that at the end of time, "they (children) will see the glory of Christ."⁴²

Conclusion

In summary, it seems reasonable to think to or to have a pious belief that, barring any official magisterial document regarding the fate of unbaptized infants and those unable to do a human act (the insane), God will ultimately save them gratuitously, but only at the end of time. Our hope

⁴¹ DS §388; DS §1525; *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 5.

⁴² *ST Supplementum*, q. 89, a. 5, ad 3.

is based on the infinite mercy of God and his love, and Christ's passion and death and postredemptive grace. This theory can be said to be supported by the Magisterium itself because none of its teaching seems to exclude the possibility of postredemption of the unbaptized infants, but only at the end of time. N·V