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Pamphlet 003

Aborted Babies and Baptism

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What happens to the souls of babies who die before baptism? This remains a mystery. We are free to believe that they are in heaven with God, but this has not been revealed and the Church does not have a definitive answer to this question. We simply say that we entrust these children to the mercy of God.

There has been an attempt by theologians throughout the centuries to reconcile two essential teachings of the Church - the necessity of Baptism for salvation and God's infinite mercy and his desire that all human beings be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4). The Church teaches us that God commands us to be baptized and to baptize, but his actions in bestowing sanctifying grace are not limited to the sacraments. God in his mercy offers his salvation to every human being sometimes in ways known only to Him.

Since the twelfth century, the opinion of the majority of theologians has been that unbaptized infants are immune from all pain of sense. This was taught by St. Thomas Aquinas, Scotus, St. Bonaventure, Peter Lombard, and others. Pope Innocent III decreed: "The punishment of original sin is the deprivation of the vision of God; of actual sin, the eternal pains of hell." (III

Decr., xlii, 3). Pre-born babies are incapable of committing an actual sin.

St. Thomas taught that these infants are not saddened by the loss of the beatific vision, either because they have no knowledge of it, and are not aware of their loss; or because, knowing it their will is entirely conformed to God's will and they are conscious that they have missed an undue privilege through no fault of their own. (De Malo, Q.v, a.3) In addition to this freedom from regret at the loss of heaven, these infants may also enjoy some positive happiness. St. Thomas says: "Although unbaptized infants are separated from God as far as glory is concerned, yet they are not separated from Him entirely. Rather are they joined to Him by a participation of natural goods; and so they may even rejoice in Him by natural consideration and love," (In II Sent., dist. XXXIII, Q. ii, a. 5). Again (a.2) he says: "They will rejoice in this, that they will share largely in the divine goodness and in natural perfections."

In the 18th century a heretical sect called Jansenists taught that all infants dying without baptism are condemned to the fires of hell. In 1794, Pope Pius VI condemned this teaching. He said, in effect, that one may believe in a limbo, a "middle state" of happiness that is not in heaven with God, and still be a Catholic (Errors of the Synod of Pistoia, No. 26).

That remains the only significant mention of limbo in any official Catholic document.

The 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "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," allows 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." (#1261)

In 1995 Pope John Paul II issued his encyclical "Evangelium Vitae" or the "Gospel of Life". What he says in addressing women who have had abortions is relevant to the question of what happens to the souls of aborted babies:

"I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

To the same Father and to his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child. 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. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life." (E.V. #99)

If you know someone who is struggling with a past abortion, please refer to our Priests For Life website for resources.

Encourage the person to go on a Rachel's Vineyard Retreat (a ministry of Priests for Life) which is designed to help men and women who have participated in abortion to find healing and peace. See the following link for more information: www.rachelsvineyard.org/.

If you know someone who is struggling with the loss of a child through a miscarriage, I recommend [Elizabeth Ministry](#). This ministry is an international movement designed to support women and their families during the joys, trials and sorrows of the childbearing years. Elizabeth Ministry's mission is to cherish children, encourage families and build community. They offer peer support, mentoring, spiritual nourishment, educational and inspirational resources.