

# Limbo reflects ‘restrictive view of salvation’

VATICAN CITY – After several years of study, the Vatican’s International Theological Commission said there are good reasons to hope that babies who die without being baptized go to heaven.

In a document published April 20, the commission said the traditional concept of limbo – as a place where unbaptized infants spend eternity but without communion with God – seemed to reflect an “unduly restrictive view of salvation.”

The church continues to teach that, because of original sin, baptism is the ordinary way of salvation for all people and urges parents to baptize infants, the document said.

But there is greater theological awareness today that God is merciful and “wants all human beings to be saved,” it said. Grace has priority over sin, and the exclusion of innocent babies from heaven does not seem to reflect Christ’s special love for “the little ones,” it said.

“Our conclusion is that the many factors that we have considered ... give serious theological and liturgical grounds for hope that unbaptized infants who die will be saved and enjoy the beatific vision,” the document said.

“We emphasize that these are reasons for prayerful hope, rather than grounds for sure knowledge,” it added.

The 41-page document, titled “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized,” was published in *Origins*, the documentary service of Catholic News Service. Pope Benedict XVI authorized its publication earlier this year.

The 30-member International Theological Commission acts as an advisory panel to the Vatican, in particular to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Its documents are not considered expressions of authoritative church teaching, but they sometimes set the stage for official Vatican pronouncements.

The commission's document said salvation for unbaptized babies who die was becoming an urgent pastoral question, in part because their number is greatly increasing. Many infants today are born to parents who are not practicing Catholics, and many others are the unborn victims of abortion, it said.

Limbo has never been defined as church dogma and is not mentioned in the current Catechism of the Catholic Church, which states simply that unbaptized infants are entrusted to God's mercy.

But limbo has long been regarded as the common teaching of the church. In the modern age, "people find it increasingly difficult to accept that God is just and merciful if he excludes infants, who have no personal sins, from eternal happiness," the new document said.

Parents in particular can experience grief and feelings of guilt when they doubt their unbaptized children are with God, it said.

The church's hope for these infants' salvation reflects a growing awareness of God's mercy, the commission said. But the issue is not simple, because appreciation for divine mercy must be reconciled with fundamental church teachings about original sin and about the necessity of baptism for salvation, it said.

The document traced the development of church thinking about the fate of unbaptized children, noting that there is "no explicit answer" from Scripture or tradition.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine concluded that infants who die without baptism were consigned to hell. By the 13th century, theologians referred to the "limbo of infants" as a place where unbaptized babies were deprived of the vision of God, but did not suffer because they did not know what they were deprived of.

Through the centuries, popes and church councils were careful not to define limbo as a doctrine of the faith and to leave the question open. That was important in allowing an evolution of the teaching, the theological commission said.

A key question taken up by the document was the church's teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation. That teaching needs interpretation, in view of the fact that

“infants ... do not place any personal obstacle in the way of redemptive grace,” it said.

In this and other situations, the need for the sacrament of baptism is not absolute and is secondary to God’s desire for the salvation of every person, it said.

“God can therefore give the grace of baptism without the sacrament being conferred, and this fact should particularly be recalled when the conferring of baptism would be impossible,” it said.

This does not deny that all salvation comes through Christ and in some way through the church, it said, but it requires a more careful understanding of how this may work.

The document outlined several ways by which unbaptized babies might be united to Christ:

- A “saving conformity to Christ in his own death” by infants who themselves suffer and die.
- A solidarity with Christ among infant victims of violence, born and unborn, who like the holy innocents killed by King Herod are endangered by the “fear or selfishness of others.”
- God may simply give the gift of salvation to unbaptized infants, corresponding to his sacramental gift of salvation to the baptized.

The document said the standard teaching that there is “no salvation outside the church” calls for similar interpretation.

The church’s magisterium has moved toward a more “nuanced understanding” of how a saving relationship with the church can be realized, it said. This does not mean that someone who has not received the sacrament of baptism cannot be saved, it said.

Rather, it means that “there is no salvation which is not from Christ and ecclesial by its very nature,” it said.

The document quoted St. Paul's teaching that spouses of Christians may be "consecrated" through their wives or husbands. This indicates that the holiness of the church reaches people "outside the visible bounds of the church" through the bonds of human communion, it said.

The document said the church clearly teaches that people are born into a state of sinfulness - original sin - which requires an act of redemptive grace to be washed away.

But Scripture also proclaims the "superabundance" of grace over sin, it said. That seems to be missing in the idea of limbo, which identifies more with Adam's sinfulness than with Christ's redemption, it said.

"Christ's solidarity with all of humanity must have priority over the solidarity of human beings with Adam," it said.

Liturgically, the motive for hope was confirmed by the introduction in 1970 of a funeral rite for unbaptized infants whose parents intended to present them for baptism, it said.

The commission said the new theological approach to the question of unbaptized babies should not be used to "negate the necessity of baptism, nor to delay the conferral of the sacrament."

"Rather, there are reasons to hope that God will save these infants precisely because it was not possible to do for them that what would have been most desirable - to baptize them in the faith of the church and incorporate them visibly into the body of Christ," it said.

The commission said hopefulness was not the same as certainty about the destiny of such infants.

"It must be clearly acknowledged that the church does not have sure knowledge about the salvation of unbaptized infants who die," it said.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, was president of the commission and head of the doctrinal congregation when the commission began studying the question of limbo in a systematic way in 2004.

U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada now heads the commission and the doctrinal congregation. Cardinal Levada met with the pope to discuss the document Jan. 19 and, with the pope's approval, authorized its publication.