

Vatican responds to changes in theological thought

VATICAN CITY - In its recent document on unbaptized children, the Vatican's International Theological Commission demonstrated how church teaching can be responsive to changes in theological thought, Christian beliefs and the "signs of the times."

The document, published April 20, critiqued the traditional understanding of limbo, arguing instead that there was good reason to hope unbaptized babies who die go to heaven.

Some people saw that as a reversal of a centuries-old Catholic principle. But rather than announcing a radical break with the past, the commission said it was assessing an issue in theological evolution.

The very first sentence of the document signaled an important distinction when it spoke of the "hierarchy of truths" in Catholic doctrine. The teaching on limbo was among those never addressed by Scripture and never defined as dogma and is therefore subject to theological development, it said.

"When the question of infants who die without baptism was first taken up in the history of Christian thought, it is possible that the doctrinal nature of the question or its implications were not fully understood," it said.

More specifically, the commission said the theological tradition of the past, specifically the Augustinian tradition, seems to have a "restricted conception of the universality of God's saving will."

That's an extremely sensitive issue today, one that goes beyond the fate of unbaptized babies and has implications for the church's relations with non-Christian religions.

The new document repeats traditional Catholic teaching that all salvation is through Christ and has a relationship with the church. But it emphasizes more than once that

God's saving ways are ultimately mysterious and that the holiness that resides in the church can reach people outside "the visible bounds of the church."

The modern theologians cited by the document include the late Jesuit Father Karl Rahner and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, both of whom had presented arguments for abandoning the concept of limbo.

It also cited a collection of Catholic doctrinal documents edited by the late Jesuit Father Jacques Dupuis, recipient of some criticism by the Vatican's doctrinal congregation in the late 1990s when Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, was its head.

But the document goes beyond strictly theological opinions. It repeatedly refers to the "sensus fidelium" - the sense of the faithful - to illustrate how Christians increasingly reject the idea that the vision of God would be denied to innocent babies.

One reason the Second Vatican Council rejected attempts to strengthen teaching against the salvation of unbaptized infants was that bishops felt it was "not the faith of their people," the document said.

It referred to an important teaching of Vatican II, which said that the whole body of the faithful shares in Christ's prophetic office and "cannot err in matters of belief."

To support its conclusions on limbo, the theological commission's document also cited the need for the church to read the "signs of the times" in order to better understand the Gospel.

In unusual detail, it listed several such signs that support the idea of hope for the salvation of unbaptized infants: the warfare and turmoil of the international scene and the church's awareness of its mission as a bearer of hope; greater emphasis on God's love and mercy in a world of suffering people; renewed concern for the welfare of infants in societies that are scandalized by the suffering of children; and increased dialogue with people of other faiths, which encourages the church to have greater appreciation for the "manifold and mysterious ways of God."

Perhaps the clearest instance of the commission's ranging outside traditional

theological boundaries was when it cited in a footnote the Live Aid and Live 8 charity rock concerts of 1985 and 2005 as examples of global concern for children.

The International Theological Commission, which acts as an advisory body to the Vatican, has always had a predominantly European membership, but this document was prepared by a drafting committee made up of nine theologians from five continents. Father Dominic Veliath, a Salesian from India, headed the committee.