

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE ABOUT INFANTS WHO DIE UNBAPTIZED

FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN, S.J.

*The author traces the history of Catholic doctrine about the fate of infants who die unbaptized: (1) from Augustine's teaching that they are condemned to hell where they suffer "the least of its pains"; (2) to the medieval doctrine of Limbo as the state in which those infants, although excluded from the vision of God, enjoy a natural happiness; (3) to the consoling words that John Paul II, in *Evangelium vitae*, addressed to a woman who had caused her child to be aborted, that when she had repented and was reconciled to God, she could ask forgiveness from her child who was now "living in the Lord."*

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS CONTINUED TO AGREE with Augustine that infants, although they seem to be the most innocent of God's creatures, are born alienated from God by a guilt they inherit from our first parents; infants can be freed from this guilt only through the redeeming grace of Christ, which they would receive in the sacrament of baptism. However, the Church has not continued to hold with Augustine that infants who die unbaptized are condemned to hell where they must suffer what he described as "the mildest punishment."¹

During the twelfth century an important development took place in Catholic thought regarding the kind of punishment God inflicts on those who come before his judgment innocent of any personal sin but still bearing the guilt of original sin. Early in that century Anselm of Canterbury² and Hugh of St. Victor³ still held with Augustine that infants who died unbaptized would suffer in hell. But later in the same century Peter

FRANCIS A. SULLIVAN, S.J., is professor emeritus of the Gregorian University, from which he earned his S.T.D. His areas of special competence are ecclesiology and ecumenism. His recent publications include: "Infallibility," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Henry Newman*, ed. Ian Ker and Terrence Merrigan (2009); and "Ecclesial Communities' and their 'Defectus Sacramenti Ordinis,'" *Ecumenical Trends* 39.3 (2010). Forthcoming are two articles: "Catholic Tradition and Traditions"; and "The Development of Doctrine on the Salvation of the Adherents of Other Religions, in Vatican II and the Postconciliar Magisterium."

¹ Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium* c. 93 (PL 40, 275).

² Anselm of Canterbury, *De conceptu virginali et de originali peccato* c. 28, in *Opera omnia*, 6 vols., ed. F. S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1946–1961) 2:170–71.

³ Hugh of St. Victor, *Summa sententiarum*, tract. 5, cap. 6 (PL 176, 132).

Abelard proposed that while the alienation from God caused by the guilt of original sin would exclude infants who died unbaptized from the beatific vision of God, it would deserve no other penalty than that.⁴ The fact that Peter Lombard introduced this opinion into his *Sentences*⁵ guaranteed its wide adoption among theologians in the 13th century, at the beginning of which it was confirmed by Pope Innocent III who declared in 1201 that the penalty for original sin is deprivation of the vision of God, while the torments of hell are suffered by those guilty of actual sin.⁶ This declaration led to the conclusion that it was not appropriate to speak of those who did not suffer such torments as being in hell, and the term “limbo” (from the Latin *limbus*, meaning “fringe”) was adopted as the name of the state for infants who died unbaptized. Thomas Aquinas proposed reasons for believing that infants in limbo would enjoy a state of natural happiness, and would not be saddened by their exclusion from the beatific vision.⁷

From the 13th century on, Catholic theologians commonly taught that limbo is the eternal state of infants who die unbaptized, on the grounds of a twofold argument: (1) since infants are not capable of the desire for baptism that could supply for the lack of the sacrament, the actual reception of baptism is the only way they could have been freed from the guilt of original sin before their death; and (2) while such guilt would exclude them from the beatific vision, it merited no other penalty. While this was the common belief of the faithful, it never became the official teaching of the Catholic Church, even though Pope Pius VI defended this teaching as free of Pelagianism when the Jansenist Synod of Pistoia in 1786 charged it with heresy.⁸

At Vatican I a draft of a dogmatic constitution, *De doctrina catholica*, included the statement: “Those who die with original sin alone will forever lack the blessed vision of God.”⁹ This did not become definitive Catholic doctrine, since that draft was never voted on by the council. However, it did show that some in the drafting commission had wanted the council to rule out speculation by Catholic theologians about ways that infants who died unbaptized might be freed from the guilt of original sin and enjoy the vision of God. As it turned out, such speculation did become quite vigorous 50 years later, during the first half of the 20th century. In 1954, William Van

⁴ Peter Abelard, *Commentaria in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, liber II (*Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis* 11) 169–70.

⁵ Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, Lib. II, dist. 33, cap. 2.

⁶ Innocent III, *Maiores ecclesiae causas*, letter to Humbert, Archbishop of Arles (DS 780).

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 2; *De malo* q.5, a. 3, 4.

⁸ Pius VI, bull *Auctorem fidei* (1794) (DS 2626).

⁹ Vatican I, *Schema reformatum constitutionis dogmaticae de doctrina catholica*, cap. 5, no. 6, in *Acta et decreta sacrorum conciliorum recentiorum: Collectio lacensis*, 7 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1870–1890) 7:565.

Roo, a colleague of mine for many years in the Faculty of Theology of the Gregorian University, published an article entitled “Infants Dying without Baptism: A Survey of Recent Literature and Determination of the State of the Question.”¹⁰ His study of what had been written by Catholic theologians during the previous 30 years in favor of the opinion that those who died as infants could be freed of the guilt of original sin without having received the sacrament of baptism, showed that the solutions offered were based on the classic doctrine that the lack of baptism *in re* could be supplied by baptism *in voto*, or by death for Christ, as was recognized in the case of the Holy Innocents. Thus, it was proposed that infants might receive an illumination at the moment of death that would enable them to desire baptism, or that the desire of their parents or of the Church that they be baptized, would provide the needed *votum baptismi*. The painful and even violent death that many infants suffer was also proposed as supplying for baptism. Van Roo concluded his survey of this literature thus:

As the question stands today, we are in the presence of a common theological teaching and a conviction which runs through a number of documents of the Church contrary to the new positions. This evidence of a common teaching of theologians and of a *sensus Ecclesiae* blocks the way to the various solutions seeking salvation for the infants dying without baptism. Nor does the recent wave of literature change the situation.¹¹

The various positions generally have been advanced by their authors with sufficient prudence and caution, avoiding any affirmations, looking to the Church for a sign of encouragement. No such sign has been given. . . . Given the present state of the question, then, I would say that one is not free to affirm that all infants are saved, or that infants dying without baptism are given a means of salvation other than baptism *in re*.¹²

Clearly, in Van Roo’s opinion the arguments proposed in favor of the salvation of infants who die without baptism were not convincing enough to outweigh the common teaching that they would be consigned to limbo. On the other hand, he certainly did not share the opinion of another colleague at the Gregorian, Sebastian Tromp, who, as secretary of the Theological Commission in the preparatory phase of Vatican II, drafted a chapter about infants who die unbaptized that was to be included in the proposed *Schema de deposito fidei pure custodiendo*. In his draft he rebuked as “rash and dangerous”¹³ the recent theories proposed by

¹⁰ William A. Van Roo, S.J., “Infants Dying without Baptism: A Survey of Recent Literature and Determination of the State of the Question,” *Gregorianum* 35 (1954) 406–73.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 472.

¹² *Ibid.* 473.

¹³ See Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995–2006) 1:245.

Catholic theologians to explain how such infants could be saved without baptism, and he insisted that the doctrine excluding such infants from salvation was taught definitively by the ordinary universal magisterium.¹⁴ Tromp's chapter on this question was dropped from the *schema de deposito fidei* because it was approved by only a minority of the Central Preparatory Commission.¹⁵ The question about the salvation of infants who die unbaptized is not mentioned in any of the documents of Vatican II. On the other hand, the theologians involved in the work of the council were surely aware of the ongoing and lively discussion regarding ways that infants dying without baptism could be freed of original sin and be saved; many of the bishops must also have been aware of this. The council's silence on the question, as well as the Central Preparatory Commission's rejection of Tromp's effort to have the council condemn such speculation, suggests that the mind of the council was to let the discussion continue without hindrance.

Given this fact, one can ask whether Vatican II made any contribution to the discussion of this question. In my opinion, it did make an important contribution by insisting so strongly on the universality of the salvific will of God. The basic difficulty with the traditional doctrine about limbo is that Christian salvation is eternal life in the enjoyment of the beatific vision of God, from which infants in limbo are excluded through no fault of their own. This raises the question about the sense in which it can be said that God wills their salvation. While Vatican II did not address this problem, it did insist, more strongly than any previous council had done, that the salvific will of God is truly universal. In *Lumen gentium* no.13 the council gave emphatic expression to this universality by describing those called to salvation as "*omnes universaliter homines.*" In *Gaudium et spes* no. 22 there is the powerful statement: "Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the holy Spirit offers to everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery in a manner known to God."¹⁶

I have seen no commentary on this text that applied it to the salvation of infants who die unbaptized. However, in his commentary on chapter 1 of *Gaudium et spes*, Joseph Ratzinger stressed a point in this text that can throw light on that question. I refer to the point that, in his view, justified his contention that article 22 of *Gaudium et spes*

¹⁴ Ibid. 310.

¹⁵ Ibid. 311.

¹⁶ The English translation of the Vatican II documents that I use throughout is from Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990).

represents an advance over *Lumen Gentium*. The latter lays too much stress on man's activity. . . . Here on the contrary it is decisively acknowledged that the way of salvation is God's affair and cannot be defined by us. . . . It is God or his Holy Spirit who offers his salvation to man and associates him with it. . . . Salvation is not a "work" of man. Wherever it occurs, it must ultimately be a sharing in the Easter mystery of cross and resurrection.¹⁷

I would apply Ratzinger's thought to the question under consideration here by saying: "The way of salvation for infants who die unbaptized is God's affair and cannot be defined by us. It is God or his Holy Spirit who offers to those infants a salvation that must be a sharing in the Easter mystery of cross and resurrection." Since what has been thought to exclude those infants from salvation is their lack of baptism, either *in re* or *in voto*, one can also invoke Aquinas's doctrine that "God did not so bind His power to the sacraments as to be unable to bestow the effect of a sacrament without the sacrament."¹⁸ Applying this to the case of the infant who dies unbaptized, we can say that God did not so bind his power to the sacrament of baptism that he cannot free an infant from the inherited guilt of original sin without the sacrament.

In the years following Vatican II, the council's stress on the universality of the salvific will of God strengthened the conviction among many Catholic theologians that God's will to save every human person must be efficacious for infants who die without having been baptized. An article I find particularly significant, both for its author and for the journal in which it appeared, is Jean Galot's "La salvezza dei bambini morti senza battesimo" in *La civiltà cattolica*.¹⁹ Galot argues that the development from Augustine's doctrine that infants who die unbaptized are condemned to hell where they suffer "the least of its pains," to Aquinas's belief that they enjoy a natural happiness in limbo, was motivated by the conviction that for God to inflict even the least pains of hell on infants as punishment for the inherited guilt of original sin was incompatible with God's mercy. However, Galot insists, this well-intentioned solution, motivated as it was by the consideration of God's infinite mercy, still left the infants to suffer the eternal separation from God, which in fact is the essential pain of damnation.²⁰ Galot concludes that the exclusion of unbaptized infants from

¹⁷ Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967–1969) 5:162.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3, q. 64, a. 7.

¹⁹ Jean Galot, S.J., "La salvezza dei bambini morti senza battesimo," *La civiltà cattolica* 122 (1971) 228–40.

²⁰ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1994) no. 1035: "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."

salvation is incompatible with God's universal salvific will. He then invokes the principle that Vatican II urged theologians to remember that "in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their connection with the foundation of the Christian faith."²¹ Galot does not actually use the term "hierarchy of truths," but his argument is based on the same principle. The problem with the limbo solution was that it based the exclusion of unbaptized infants from the presence of God—in effect their eternal damnation—on the necessity of baptism, for whose lack they could not supply by its *votum*. Galot offers the following solution.

For the solution to this problem . . . the necessity of baptism has to be put in its place. It is secondary to the salvific will, which is the regulating principle of the whole economy of salvation. In determining the fate of those infants, one ought not to have begun with the consideration of the necessity of baptism. Historically the question was put badly, because one sought exclusively to solve the problem of this necessity. Rather, one ought to have begun with the certitude that God has provided for the salvation of these infants, and then have asked how the necessity of baptism is verified in their case. Failing to follow this basic method, theologians proposed theories that sought first of all to be in accord with the necessity of baptism, but that are not in accord with the divine salvific will. They failed to recognize that the necessity of baptism is only a means instituted by God for the realization of his plan of salvation, and therefore it cannot conflict with his plan with regard to the salvation of those infants.²²

Recall that Van Roo had remarked, toward the end of his survey, that theologians had been looking to the Church for a sign of encouragement, but no sign had been given. But within four years after the close of Vatican II such a sign was given, not in the form of a doctrinal statement, but in the form of a new *Ordo exsequiarum* (Order of Funerals), approved by Pope Paul VI and promulgated on August 15, 1969. This Order included funeral rites for deceased children, not only for the baptized but also for the unbaptized. Prior to this date it had been the custom to celebrate a Mass of the Angels for the funeral of a baptized child, but no mass at all for an unbaptized child, who would not be buried in consecrated ground. The fact that the new Order contained funeral rites for an unbaptized child was not only very consoling for the parents of such a child, but must also have been encouraging for theologians who had been looking for such a sign. They must have been even more heartened by the prayers the Order specified to be said in the several parts of the funeral rites for the child who died without baptism.²³

²¹ Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio* no. 11.

²² Galot, "Salvezza" 239-40, my translation.

²³ *Order of Christian Funerals Approved for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America* (New York: Catholic Book, 1989) nos. 278, 282, 289, 293, 322, 325.

FUNERAL MASS

Introductory rites

My brothers and sisters, the Lord is a faithful God who created us all after his own image. All things are of his making, all creation awaits the day of salvation. We now entrust the soul of N. to the abundant mercy of God, that our beloved child may find a home in his kingdom.

Opening prayer

God of all consolation, searcher of mind and heart, the faith of these parents is known to you. Comfort them with the knowledge that the child for whom they grieve is entrusted now to your loving care.

Final commendation

Let us commend this child to the Lord's merciful keeping; and let us pray with all our hearts for N. and N. Even as they grieve at the loss of their child, they entrust him/her to the loving embrace of God.

You are the author and sustainer of our lives, O God, you are our final home. Trusting in your mercy and in your all-embracing love, we pray that you give him/her happiness forever.

RITE OF COMMITTAL

Lord God, ever caring and gentle, we commit to your love this little one, who brought joy to our lives for so short a time. Enfold him/her in eternal life. We pray for his/her parents who are saddened by the loss of their infant. Give them courage and help them in their pain and grief. May they all meet one day in the joy and peace of your kingdom.

Concluding prayer

God of mercy, in the mystery of your wisdom you have drawn this child to yourself. In the midst of our pain and sorrow, we acknowledge you as Lord of the living and the dead and we search for our peace in your will. In these final moments we stand together in prayer, believing in your compassion and generous love. Deliver this child out of death and grant him/her a place in your kingdom of peace.

These prayers clearly encourage the parents of the deceased infant to have hope that their infant “may find a home in his kingdom,” that God will “give him/her happiness forever,” that they and their child will “meet one day in the joy and peace of God's kingdom,” and that God will “grant him/her a place in God's kingdom of peace.” Clearly the Church no longer holds that infants who die without baptism are in limbo and forever excluded from God's kingdom of peace.

It seems likely that Ratzinger, speaking as a theologian, would have agreed with this statement, because, in his interview with Vittorio Messori, published as *The Ratzinger Report*, he is quoted as having said: “Limbo was never a defined truth of faith. Personally—and here I am speaking more as

a theologian and not as Prefect of the Congregation—I would abandon it, since it was only a theological hypothesis.”²⁴

The first doctrinal statement of the magisterium to recognize the new status of the question regarding infants who die without baptism is found in *Pastoralis actio*: Instruction on the Baptism of Infants issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on October 20, 1980.²⁵ The intention of this instruction was to explain why the Church continues to insist that infants should be baptized within a few weeks of their birth, and why parents should not be persuaded by the argument that baptism should be deferred until the child is mature enough to make its own decision. Against such an argument, the CDF declared: “By its doctrine and by its practice, the Church has shown that it knows no other means than baptism to assure to infants their entry into eternal beatitude. That is why it is careful not to neglect the mission it has received from the Lord to cause to be reborn of water and the Spirit all those who can be baptized.” It then continued: “With regard to infants who have died without having received baptism, the Church can only commit them to the mercy of God, as it does in the funeral rites that it has created for them.”²⁶ In this statement the CDF clearly recognized that while the Church cannot be sure that infants who die without baptism are saved, neither is the Church sure, as it used to be, that because they had neither received the sacrament nor had the desire of receiving it, they must retain the guilt of original sin, which excludes them from the vision of God. It is noteworthy that the CDF invokes the new funeral rites for unbaptized infants as supporting its statement that one can only commit them to the mercy of God.

The next official document that treats the question of infants who die unbaptized is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This was first promulgated in 1992 by Pope John Paul II, who also promulgated its revised and definitive text in 1997. Both of these editions contain the following statement about infants who die without baptism.

1261. 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.

²⁴ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985) 147.

²⁵ CDF, *Pastoralis actio, Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (hereafter AAS) 72 (1980) 1137–58.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 1144.

In the margin is a reference to no. 1257, which repeats the sentence quoted above from the CDF instruction *Pastoralis actio*. Here, however, it follows that quotation with the principle affirmed by Aquinas, giving it emphasis with italics: “*God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.*” Here, I believe, the *Catechism* suggests that when the Church entrusts unbaptized infants to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them, she has good reason to trust that God will do for them what baptism would have done.

A further step in the development of doctrine about infants who die unbaptized can be seen in the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* issued by John Paul II in 1995, where he spoke of infants, while they are still in their mothers’ wombs, as “the personal objects of God’s loving and fatherly providence,” and declared that “Christian Tradition . . . is clear and unanimous, from the beginning up to our own day, in describing abortion as a particularly grave moral disorder.”²⁷ After having expressed a strong condemnation of the crime of direct abortion, John Paul went on, toward the end of his encyclical, to address pastoral words of exhortation and consolation to women who have had an abortion. He said to them:

The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your 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. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord.²⁸

One can well imagine the consolation that a woman, whose conscience was burdened with the guilt of having chosen to abort her child, would find in the words the Holy Father addressed to her. I suggest that one can also find in these words an indication of the mind of John Paul II with regard to the present state of her aborted child. The idea that the mother can ask forgiveness from her aborted child would suggest that they share the communion of saints. The affirmation that her child “is now living in the Lord” would suggest that it is now living in the presence of God. One can hardly say this about a child in limbo, who would be forever excluded from the vision of God. Theologians who had been looking for signs of encouragement from the Church for their efforts to justify belief in the salvation of infants who die unbaptized have good reason to see in these words of

²⁷ John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* no. 61 (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1995) 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.* no. 99, pp. 177–78.

John Paul II not only a confirmation of the progress made thus far but also a step further toward the official acceptance of this belief.

It would seem, however, that John Paul's further step must have struck some influential member of the Roman Curia as "a step too far." The evidence for this surmise is that the definitive Latin text of *Evangelium vitae* that was published in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* simply does not have the sentence that reads: "You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost, and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord." In its place, the definitive Latin text has "Infantem autem vestrum potestis Eidem Patri Eiusque misericordiae cum spe committere" ("You can commend your infant with hope to the same Father and his mercy").²⁹ No explanation is given for the substitution of this sentence for the one that was in the encyclical as it was originally published. Even more puzzling is the fact that on the Vatican website, which gives the text of *Evangelium vitae* in eight languages, the translations into seven modern languages (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish) all have the original sentence, while the Latin has the sentence that was substituted for it in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. Undoubtedly the Latin is the definitive text, but almost anyone who goes to the Vatican website for the text of *Evangelium vitae* will choose one of the modern languages, and will not know that a sentence that was in the encyclical as originally published, and that would be consoling for a mother whose infant died unbaptized, is not found in the Latin text.

I do not know of any explanation for this change except for a remark made in a note to a document entitled "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptised," which was issued by the International Theological Commission in 2007.³⁰ Endnote 98 of this document reads:

It is notable that the *editio typica* of the encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, has replaced paragraph 99 which read: "You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord" (a phrasing which was susceptible to a faulty interpretation), by this definitive text: "Infantem autem vestrum potestis Eidem Patri Eiusque misericordiae cum spe committere" (cf. AAS 87 [1995], 515), which may be translated as follows: "You can entrust your child to the same Father and to his mercy with hope."

Evidently someone had judged that the pope's original sentence had been "susceptible to a faulty interpretation," and had convinced him that it should not be retained in the definitive Latin text. It hardly seems possible

²⁹ John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* no. 99, AAS 87 (1995) 515.

³⁰ International Theological Commission, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html (accessed August 16, 2010). This document is also available in Spanish and Italian.

that the change could have been made without his approval. But we are not told what the “faulty interpretation” was, of which his sentence was thought to be susceptible. I surmise that his sentence could be taken to mean that we can not only hope that infants who die without baptism are in heaven; we can also be sure of it. I think that is a reasonable interpretation of what the pope actually said, when he told the mother that her child “is now living in the Lord.” And that is why I suspect that someone convinced the pope that he had gone “a step too far.” The reason he might have given is that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* had not gone beyond saying that we can hope that the infants are saved. I think it is also significant that the title of the document on this question that was issued by the International Theological Commission in 2007 was: “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptised.” In the course of this lengthy document the ITC offered a very positive assessment of the theological and liturgical reasons for hoping that those infants are saved. However, it did not go beyond recommending hope. Rather, it twice insisted that we cannot go beyond hope to sure knowledge. It first stressed this point in the paragraph that concluded its section entitled: “Reasons for Hope.”

It must be clearly acknowledged that the Church does not have sure knowledge about the salvation of unbaptised infants who die. She knows and celebrates the glory of the Holy Innocents, but the destiny of the generality of infants who die without baptism has not been revealed to us, and the Church teaches and judges only with regard to what has been revealed. What we do positively know of God, Christ and the Church gives us grounds to hope for their salvation.³¹

The ITC returned to this theme toward the end of its study, saying:

Our conclusion is that the many factors that we have considered above give serious theological and liturgical grounds for hope that unbaptised infants who die will be saved and enjoy the Beatific Vision. We emphasise that these are reasons for prayerful *hope*, rather than grounds for sure knowledge. There is much that has not been revealed to us. We live by faith and hope in the God of mercy and love who had been revealed to us in Christ, and the Spirit moves us to pray in constant thankfulness and joy (I Thess 5:18).³²

I conclude this study by asking, what does the Catholic Church now hold and teach about the fate of infants who die without baptism? Someone might prefer to put the question this way: What should a confessor or spiritual advisor say to a woman who has had an abortion, if she asks him about the present state of her child? My answer is that he should certainly not tell her that her child is in limbo enjoying a natural happiness, but will never be admitted to heaven. Rather, he should tell her that the Church encourages her to hope and pray that her child is in heaven. But may he go further than this, and tell her that in a letter addressed to the whole

³¹ Ibid. no. 79.

³² Ibid. no. 103.

Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II told a woman who had an abortion that her child was now living in the Lord? Could he then leave her consoled by what the Holy Father had said? Or must he tell her that after his letter had been published, the pope had taken back what he had said, because it could mean we can be sure that children who die without baptism go to heaven, and we cannot be sure of that, since it has not been revealed?

Here I would ask, is it certain that it has not been revealed that unbaptized children go to heaven? My reply is that there are good reasons to believe that it has been revealed, in somewhat the same way that the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary is revealed, that is, by being implicitly contained in truths that have been explicitly revealed. As revealed truths in which the salvation of unbaptized children has been implicitly revealed, I would propose two: the sincere will of God for the salvation of every human person, and the tender love of God for little children, which was revealed by Jesus when he said to his disciples: "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Mt 19:14). I think that anyone who seriously meditated on these two truths and applied them to God's providence for infants who die unbaptized, could well become convinced that God in his loving mercy does for those infants what the sacrament would have done, so that nothing can hinder them from coming to him and living with him forever.