

UNBAPTIZED BABIES: YOUR SAINTS IN HEAVEN

I'd like to emphasize a category of saints not well understood. They are babies who die in miscarriages or infancy before they can be baptized. Many Catholic parents have experienced miscarriages. Most of us know relatives and friends who have felt the shattering loss of a child. They may wonder if they will ever see those children.

They will! To understand how and why, we must first address the confusion that originated in ideas about a place called "limbo." In Catholic teaching, the word limbo has referred to a state of being after death which is not heaven, hell, or purgatory. It has been used in two ways: first, limbo was where good people who died before Christ went until Christ's death and resurrection. Second, limbo was where unbaptized infants were thought to go. The first meaning of limbo is generally accepted in Catholic theology. The second meaning of limbo as the home of unbaptized infants was commonly taught until the 1960s, but it was never defined as dogma in the way heaven, hell, and purgatory are defined.

Even though this limbo was never Catholic dogma, some theologians proposed its existence. They thought it was the only possible explanation for what would happen to children who died before baptism. The Revised Edition of the *Baltimore Catechism*, No. 3, for example, stated: "Infants who die without baptism of any kind do not suffer the punishment of those who die in mortal sin. They may enjoy a certain natural happiness, but they will not enjoy the supernatural happiness of heaven."

The New Testament says that Baptism of water is necessary (John 3:5), but Catholics have always believed that God does not demand the impossible. That is why we accept Baptism of "blood" (martyrdom) and of "desire." Some theologians taught that water, blood, or desire were the only possibilities for Baptism. And since deceased unbaptized infants would not have any of these, they could not go to heaven.

But God is not limited to these kinds of Baptism. Since Christ's death and resurrection, babies who die without Baptism don't just go into the darkness. They go through death into a new life where Jesus is present to them, and their death is a baptism in the sense that Jesus spoke of his own death as a "baptism" (Luke 12:50): It is a real participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus because they walk through the valley of death into the loving arms of Jesus. They have not rejected Jesus by personal mortal sin, and it is not possible that Jesus would reject them.

I have been a priest for over 47 years, and have often talked with parents whose babies died in a miscarriage before Baptism could be administered. They may have been taught that such babies went to limbo, but deep down they still felt that their children were with God. When I explained that limbo was not official Church teaching, and that unbaptized babies do share in the baptism of Christ's death and resurrection, they would say, "I knew it! I knew Jesus would take care of my baby." In my opinion, the feelings these parents had in their hearts came from the Holy Spirit. Their children are indeed with God in heaven.

Now the Church's official teaching gives them added reason for confidence. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that the burial Mass for unbaptized infants entrusts them to God's care. God's mercy and Jesus' tenderness toward children allow us to hope there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism (C 1261). We trust that Jesus who said, "It is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost" (Matthew 18:14), welcomes the little ones with the same warm embrace he gave the children of his time.

Parents whose children die in miscarriages or infancy should realize, then, that their children have gone before them into the presence of God. One moment in God's presence gives them more knowledge and love than we can gain in a lifetime. They know and love their parents, pray for them, and watch over them. So parents should name those children, count them as members of the family, and pray to them often. One day the children they surrendered in sorrow will embrace them joyfully and welcome them to a home where there will be no more parting or pain.