

Comment:

Limbo in limbo

The development of doctrine is a strange business. P.J. FitzPatrick writes of the selective amnesia that is sometimes practised by Catholics about doctrines that were once taught quite authoritatively and widely believed. An invitation to examine a doctoral thesis on the notion of limbo brought back memories of the passionate debates in the 1950s about the fate of babies who die unbaptized. A doctrine that was much controverted among theologians only forty years ago has now become a research topic in the dusty archives of history.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) ignores limbo entirely — consigns it to limbo, so to speak. The topic cannot be so blithely avoided, in the recent flurry of encyclopedias of Catholic doctrine. They all assure us that the doctrine that babies who die unbaptized go, not to heaven but to a state of purely natural happiness called limbo, was never definitively taught by the Magisterium. Fine — true enough; but is that the end of the matter? Most Catholics regarded it as certain as anything else. Most Catholics have never been able to make the appropriate discriminations between defined dogma and widely received belief. The issue, after all, was not purely academic. On the contrary, by insisting on the absolute necessity of being ‘born again by water and the Holy Spirit’ to have entry into the kingdom of heaven, the Christian faith seems clearly enough to imply that those who die unbaptized, with no grievous sin of their own, must nevertheless be excluded from the beatific vision on account of original sin. St Augustine saw no way out of concluding that infants who died unbaptized were simply damned. Peter Abelard, innovative as ever, argued that their sole punishment was lack of the beatific vision. St Thomas Aquinas, squirming to square it with Augustine’s view, held what was to be the most widely accepted doctrine until the 1960s: namely, that the *limbus puerorum* was a state of perfect natural happiness, just the same as would have been open to us all if God had not established the Christian order of salvation.

As many ministers could testify, the agonizing incomprehension of parents who suffer the loss of a baby often includes anxiety about his or her fate. Whatever is the case in other regions of the Catholic world, where people do not always have much opportunity of hearing the current teaching of the Church at all, let alone of reflecting on it and

making it their own, it has to be said that, even in Western European and North American parishes, the destiny of the unbaptized remains a fearful mystery. The silence of the *Catechism* has not always released grieving Catholics from what we once all believed. Anyway, according to canon law (1183 paragraph 2), a baby who dies unbaptized is allowed a church funeral only with the express permission of the bishop, on the understanding that the parents intended to have him or her baptized, as the *Rite of Funerals* agrees. Limbo is perhaps not such an obsolete notion.

People cope. Just the other day, a couple of Catholics, well educated and with good jobs but without a notion of what is going on in Catholic theology and certainly without a copy of the *Catechism* in the house, discovered that one of the twins they were expecting had died in the womb. The medical advice was to carry both babies to term. The couple went straight home from the clinic and, with tears and prayers, splashed holy water on the place where the dead baby was felt to lie, touching the spot with the bit of dried-up Palm Sunday greenery from behind the mirror on the mantelpiece, and giving him the name they had chosen — ‘christening him’. They later asked a friendly priest if they had done the right thing. Fortunately the local maternity hospital had well established ceremonies, as well as counselling services, for miscarriages and still-born babies. But the rite that they invented surely placed their loss in the context of the death of Christ — implicitly rejecting the idea that their child could at best be destined to enjoy a state of purely natural happiness. Their inventiveness surely also shows how deep the theological intuitions can be, in people with little or no doctrinal formation beyond what they received in Catholic schools in the 1970s.

The subtleties of the theologians are now history. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1910) says that those dying in original sin need have no worse fate than that of being excluded eternally from the vision of God — ‘In this sense they are damned, i.e. they have failed to reach their supernatural destiny, and this viewed objectively is a true penalty’. But this is not to deny the possibility of perfect *subjective* happiness for those dying unbaptized — ‘and this is all that is needed from the dogmatic viewpoint’. That is the kind of thinking that prevailed into the 1950s, in theological circles. Has ignoring it freed us all? Amnesia is not always the best therapy.

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