

## The latest on Limbo

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 6, 2006 All Things Catholic

**Time Is Running Out!** *NCR* is moving its e-mail lists to a new user-authenticated system. To continue to receive e-mail alerts for this column, you must re-subscribe before Oct. 12. Follow this link: [Sign-up Page](#)[1]. The new system will help you and us control spam.

The International Theological Commission, a body of 30 theologians who advise the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is meeting this week in the Casa Santa Marta, the hotel on Vatican grounds where the cardinals were lodged during the conclave of 2005.

The commission is putting the finishing touches on a document concerned with the fate of unbaptized babies, seeking to push beyond the traditional solution of Limbo. Members say the document will have a broad sweep as a reflection on eschatological hope.

Two points that have been muddled in much media coverage:

- The commission's documents have no official standing in themselves, so its conclusions do not automatically mean that the church has cancelled or dropped Limbo;
- If that decision is eventually taken, it would not mean that for 2,000 years unbaptized babies couldn't get into Heaven, but as of a certain date they now can. It would mean instead that the church has rejected one hypothesis, which was never officially a matter of faith, as to how to reconcile two important truths: the generosity of God, and the necessity of baptism for salvation.

A Vatican Information Service news release of Oct. 2 indicated that Pope Benedict has furnished "precise indications" to the commission, urging it "to overcome the traditional orientation" of Limbo.

In this regard, it's worth recalling what then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger told Vittorio Messori in an interview that became *The Ratzinger Report* in 1984:

*"Limbo was never a defined truth of the 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. It formed part of a secondary thesis in support of a truth which is absolutely of first significance for the faith, namely, the importance of baptism. ?. One should not hesitate to give up the idea of 'limbo' if need be (and it is worth noting that the very theologians who proposed 'limbo' also said that parents could spare the child limbo by desiring its baptism and through prayer); but the concern behind it must not be surrendered. Baptism has never been a side issue for the faith; it is not now, nor will it ever be."*

The commission is also working on documents on the role of theology as a "science of the faith," and on the foundations of natural moral law in the light of the teachings of John Paul II's encyclicals *Veritatis splendor* and *Fides et ratio*. Sources say that one concern of the latter document is to clarify that the church's positions on moral questions such as abortion or homosexuality are not a matter of imposing a "Catholic" position in a pluralistic world, but rather a defense of universal principles arising from human nature.

\* \* \*

Austrian scholar Johannes Schwarz recently completed a doctoral dissertation on the subject of Limbo, and discussed his conclusions in an interview with Kath.Net, the Austrian Catholic news agency.

Schwarz explained that the term "Limbo" (from the Latin *limes*, meaning "border") entered Catholic theological tradition in the 11th century, as a way of balancing the church's teaching on the necessity of baptism for salvation against the perceived injustice of excluding unbaptized babies. The idea was that unbaptized babies cannot enter Heaven, but they don't suffer the sensory pains of Hell and may enjoy a certain natural happiness.

Limbo was never officially defined, Schwarz explained, but it was more or less assumed in theological literature until the modern period.

In the 20th century, there have been two principal hypotheses that would allow unbaptized babies to reach Heaven: baptism by blood, and baptism by desire.

The first, Schwarz explained, holds that death is a quasi-sacrament because it conforms one to Christ. The "desire" theory takes various forms: that an illuminated soul desires baptism at the moment of death; that there's a vicarious desire for baptism on the part of the baby's parents or the church; that such a desire is a natural "relic of creation."

The lengths to which people will sometimes go, Schwarz said, was illustrated by the famed Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, who flirted with the idea of reincarnation for unbaptized babies as a way of giving them a second chance.

Schwarz himself believes Limbo has a "greater probability" than other theories, but that doesn't seem to be the way the winds are blowing.

**Time Is Running Out! NCR is moving its e-mail lists to a new user-authenticated system. To continue to receive e-mail alerts for this column, you must re-subscribe before Oct. 12. Follow this link: [Sign-up Page](#)[1]. The new system will help you and us control spam.**

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is [jallen@ncronline.org](mailto:jallen@ncronline.org)[2]

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/28/2017 - 08:12):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/latest-limbo>

**Links:**

[1] <http://ncrcafe.org/node/27>

[2] <mailto:jallen@natcath.org>