

Summary Paper

The Catholic Church has a raging debate about God's punishment for sinners. Especially, the punishment inflicted upon those who come before his judgment when they are innocent of personal sin. The debators' claim that among these are those who are bearing the guilt of original sin. Augustine was first to advance the school of thought, those infants who died unbaptized, although innocent of any personal guilt would suffer in hell. A thought by Anselm of Canterbury, Hugh of St. Victor and the Catholic Church at large. It is worth noting that this thought, although famous, is inconsistent with God's salvaging will and mercy. Peter Abelard proposed that, although infants who died unbaptized would be excluded from the beatific vision of God, they would deserve no extra penalty (Galvin, 2000). This opinion was widely adopted by the 13th century and consequently confirmed by Pope Innocent III through his declaration that the penalty for original sin is deprived of the vision of God. The other private sins will send the person to a torment in hell. In the new light, the infants who died prior to baptism were said to be in limbo, enjoying a state of natural happiness yet excluded from the beatific vision of God. Although the latter was the common belief of the faithful, it never became the official teaching of the Catholic Church despite Pope Pius VI defending it before the Jansenist Synod of Pistoia in 1786 (Sullivan, 2011).

Since then limbo has been seen as the eternal state of infants who died before baptism. This is because, they did not get the chance to desire baptism which brings redemption from the original sin. The question of how to save these infants without baptism intensified in the 20th century. One side favored the argument that the infants who died before baptism could be saved from death for Christ if they were Holy Innocents and by the desire of their parents to have them baptized (Galvin, 2000). The painful death of these infants was also proposed to save them. However, this school of thought failed to convince the common teaching that these infants would be consigned to the limbo. This matter proved to be delicate thus excluded from the Vatican II, however, like the previous council it insisted on the universality of God's salvation. The doctrine of the universality of God's salvation is an extension of the Thomas Aquinas' doctrine that the salvation power of God is not bound to the sacraments (Sullivan, 2011). Thus, by extension, to the case of infants who died prior to baptism the thought has been that God did not bind His salvation power to the sacrament of baptism that He cannot redeem the infants from the guilt of original sin without the sacrament. This idea gained popularity, particularly in the post Vatican II period, partly because it is consistent with God's mercy to save all mankind regardless of age (Galvin, 2000).

The church does not have burial rites for infants who died without baptism. The church buries the baptized infants in a consecrated ground. However, a doctrinal statement in the form of the Order of Funerals that included funeral rite of infants (baptized and unbaptized) issued and approved by Pope Paul VI in 1969 was not only consoling to the parents and guardians of such infants, but also a solution to the theologians who have been in recognition of God's salvation will on the deceased unbaptized infants. These rites offered solace to the parents and family of the deceased infants in the form of a hope that the infant would find a place in God's kingdom. This seems to put an end to the debate and that the Catholic Church holds nothing against the infants who die without baptism, upholding God's universal salvific will (Sullivan, 2011).

Consequently, official documents from the Vatican have been consistent with this new status accorded to the infants who die without being baptized, for instance, the instruction on the baptism of infants (CDF) issued in 1980 and the catechism of the Catholic Church promulgated in 1992 by Pope John Paul II all of which entrust these infants to God's mercy as Jesus had called all children to come to Him in the Gospels (Galvin, 2000).

References

- Galvin, J.. Salvation. (2000) Outside the Church. In P. Phan, The Gift of the Church. Collegeville: Liturgical Press. p. 249-266.
- Sullivan, F. (2011) The Development of Doctrine About Infants who Die Unbaptized. NY: Theological Studies. 72 (1), 3-14.