Opinion
Guest Voices



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Many conservative Catholics are upset with Pope Francis, who they complain is changing church doctrine, but they hardly blinked when Pope Benedict got rid of Limbo, a Catholic doctrine that had been taught for centuries.

Careful readers will note that rather than closing Limbo, as reported by the media, what the International Theological Commission did under Benedict in 2007 was downgrade Limbo from church doctrine to a hypothesis or theory. It no longer must be presented as church teaching. In other words, you don't have to believe in Limbo, but you can if you want.

Make no mistake about it, though, Benedict killed Limbo just as much as the Second Vatican Council killed the Latin Mass. Hypothesis or not, no one is going to teach it. Limbo will become a theological anachronism that historians of theology note but everyone else ignores. It is not mentioned, for example, in "The Catechism of the Catholic Church."

Limbo was a theological solution to the problem of what happens to good but unbaptized people after they die. The New Testament is full of passages that say baptism is necessary for salvation. Catholic teaching said baptism was necessary to wash away original sin, which we inherited from Adam and Eve.

But sending unbaptized infants to hell seemed especially cruel. How could God, who is described as merciful and loving in the parable of the prodigal son, do such a thing?

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We need to remember that for the ancients, hell or Hades was the underworld, the place of the dead. Thus, in the creed when we say Jesus "descended into hell," we are not speaking of the place of eternal damnation but the domain of the dead. No church father before Augustine thought unbaptized children would be punished.

St. Augustine, however, believed unbaptized children would experience the misery of the damned but be consigned to the mildest part of hell. Augustine was such a theological giant that there was reluctance to question his teaching, especially when all theologians at the time were men without children.

Around 1300, the term Limbo, from the Latin "limbus," meaning edge or boundary, became used for the dwelling place of the good or innocent dead who were not baptized. This is distinguished from purgatory, where sinners are purified before they go to heaven, and hell, where the biggest sinners spend eternity.

Medieval theologians debated how much innocent babies suffered in Limbo, and as time went on, the consensus view was that they did not suffer at all. They experienced natural happiness but not supernatural happiness. Also debated was whether they would remain in Limbo forever or just until the end of time.

Theologians twisted themselves into pretzels trying to reconcile what Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, church councils and others said about Limbo and unbaptized infants. For an example, see the 1910 Catholic Encyclopedia.

Limbo eventually came to be seen as a temporary holding area or waiting room at the edge of hell where the unbaptized would be kept until the end of time, when they would be admitted into heaven. Residing there were not only unbaptized children but also the patriarchs and other good people from the Old Testament. It was also open to the millions of good people who had never heard of Jesus.

When I grew up in the 1950s, this was all clearly taught in the Baltimore Catechism along with all the other dogmas we had to accept to be a Catholic. No good Catholic could question such teaching.

Benedict threw it out the window. He threw open the gates of heaven for the unbaptized, reversing centuries of church teaching.

> Anyone who pays attention to what Jesus says about his Father will have not only strong hope but absolute certainty that unbaptized children go directly to heaven.
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Strictly speaking, the International Theological Commission was only willing to affirm that there are "strong grounds for hope that God will save infants when we have not been able to do for them what we would have wished to do, namely, to baptize them into the faith and life of the Church."

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Of course, the church would never admit something it was teaching or doing for centuries was dumb. Rather, it has to find some way to pretend it was all a misunderstanding. Allowing Limbo to be a hypothesis is the theological equivalent of reforming the liturgy but allowing people to continue attending the traditional Latin Mass, in the belief that it will eventually die out.

The theological commission argues that Limbo "never entered into the dogmatic definitions of the Magisterium, even if that same Magisterium did at times mention the theory in its ordinary teaching up until the Second Vatican Council." That is a sophisticated way of saying the church can never be wrong. But there is no question that most Catholics in previous centuries thought Limbo was a dogma of the church. Thousands of parents were told their unbaptized infants were in Limbo.

What Pope Benedict did was the greatest change in church teaching since the Second Vatican Council. In terms of its pastoral impact on ordinary Catholics, it ranks up there with the major changes that came out of Vatican II. While mourning their dead infants, parents can now rest assured that their unbaptized children have gone to heaven.

If it had been Pope Francis who questioned Limbo, he would have been condemned by conservatives for challenging church dogma. Benedict could get away with it because accusing him of unorthodoxy would have gone against stereotypes, akin to President Richard Nixon going to China.

In the history books, Benedict will be remembered as the pope who resigned and as the pope who got rid of Limbo.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 28-May 11, 2023** print issue under the headline: Pope Benedict 'closed' Limbo and no one complained.