

COLUMNISTS

Vatican II puts notion of 'limbo' in limbo

In the weeks following the disputed presidential election in Florida, one word kept popping up in the press, even on the front page of *The New York Times* (as recently as the day this column was written, on Dec. 13). Perhaps only Catholics of an older generation would have noticed it. The word was "limbo."

In its common usage today, limbo refers to a condition of oblivion or neglect, something like a state of suspended animation. A decision is put on hold, unresolved.

A random sampling of recent stories in major papers in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom discloses how frequently the term is used.

The *Financial Times* of London referred to the "legal limbo" in which the U.S. found itself after the presidential election. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Tallahassee, Fla., was "in limbo" while awaiting one of the high court's decisions. The *Washington Post* noted that the Bush people were caught "in the heart of 'campaign limbo'."

Even food services were drawn into it. The *Daily Telegraph* of London quoted the owner of a catering company in Virginia: "We're totally in limbo. We have people who aren't sure if they're going to be having an event and people who are putting us on hold because maybe they will."

There were also references beyond the



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

presidential election. The *Houston Chronicle* reported that Texas Congressman Tom DeLay stood alone "in budget limbo," and *The New York Times* observed that the new senator-elect from Washington State, whose victory was delayed for three weeks because of recounts, had finally arisen "from limbo."

But the many references to limbo have not been limited to politics. A theater review in *The New York Times* described the characters in "Icarus" as in "a kind of limbo, waiting for something to happen so that life can be different and meaningful." The *Toronto Star* characterized three well-known National Hockey League stars as being in "various forms of NHL limbo."

The *Times* of London indicated that 450,000 insurance policy-holders had been "left in limbo" when their company, Equitable, failed to find a buyer and closed its doors. Finally, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a network TV show,

just pulled off the air, was placed "in near-cancellation limbo."

The examples could easily be multiplied. A recent search of Lexis-Nexis on the Internet brought up 731 entries containing some mention of limbo in the print media. One suspects, however, that only a handful of the journalists using the word were fully aware of its religious derivation.

Limbo is a theological term which means, in Latin, a border or an edge. It refers to a state of eternal, natural happiness reserved for infants and very young children who die without baptism, while still "tainted" by original sin.

Even the great fifth-century bishop and theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo, believed that these unbaptized infants and children went "straight to hell," as the old saying put it, because they were not in the state of grace when they died. Augustine conceded, however, that they did not suffer any of the pains of hell since they had committed no personal sins.

Some medieval theologians sought to mitigate the harshness of Augustine's teaching. While they agreed with him that grace is necessary for entrance into heaven, and that only baptism confers grace on infants and children under the age of seven, they regarded Augustine's position as irreconcilable with the love and mercy of God.

So they "invented" limbo. In their view,

God would not condemn unbaptized infants and children to hell for all eternity. A loving and merciful God would assure them a place or state of natural happiness. But it is a place or state that is just beyond the "border" of heaven, because these children lack the essential requirement for entrance into heaven, namely, grace.

Limbo remained part of Catholic teaching and belief for centuries thereafter, at least until the Second Vatican Council. During that time, it was assumed that limbo was a source of comfort to mothers who had lost their babies. They were assured that their deceased child would enjoy a state of natural happiness forever.

But when the mothers asked the predictable follow-up question, "Will I ever see him (or her) again?" the priest would shake his head sadly, like a salesperson who wasn't authorized to give the customer a better deal.

According to the late Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, Vatican II "tacitly buried" limbo. No one had actually declared it dead; it just wasn't spoken of again, not even in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

In other words, limbo itself went into "limbo."

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Magi represent us at the birth of Christ

Epiphany (Jan. 7): (R3) Matthew 2:1-12; (R1) Isaiah 60:1-6; (R2) Ephesians 3:2-3A, 5-6.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem there came to do him homage wise men from the East. They were called Magi, men skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. They were soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. Later on, the word Magus developed a much lower meaning: that of fortune-teller, a sorcerer, a magician and a charlatan. But, at the time of birth of Jesus, the Magi were good and holy men, who sought the truth.

In those ancient days, men believed in astrology, that they could foretell the future from the stars, that man's destiny was settled by the star under which he was born. About 7 B.C. there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. And in the years 5 to 2 B.C. there was an unusual astronomical phenomenon. In these years, the Dog Star shone with extraordinary brilliance. To ancient astrologers, such a star would undoubtedly mean the birth of some great king. Just about this time there was in the world a strange feeling of expectation for the coming of a king. Even the Roman historians Vespasian, Suetonius and Tacitus knew about this. Augustus, the Roman emperor when Jesus was born, was being hailed as the savior of the world, and Virgil, the Roman poet, wrote his fourth eclogue, known as the Messianic Eclogue, about the golden days to come.



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

When Jesus was born, men were waiting for God.

So during the reign of Herod, wise men came from the East searching for a little child who had been born to be king of the Jews. Herod, of course, being only half Jew and half Idumean, was deeply disturbed. He had been king from 40 B.C. till his death in 4 B.C. He was called Herod the Great; and in many ways he deserved the title. He had brought peace to Palestine, was a great builder and could be generous, especially in times of famine. But he was insanely jealous. He murdered his wife Mariamme and three of his sons. Augustus said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. (Augustus was playing on words: in Greek, *hus* is the word for a pig, *hubs* is the word for a son.)

The wise men from the East naturally expected the king of the Jews to be born in a palace, so they asked Herod about his birth. Herod was deeply disturbed, but he consulted the scribes who told

him that according to Micah 5:2 the boy was to be born in Bethlehem. Herod informed the wise men and told them to search for the child. He said he too wanted to worship the child, but his one desire was to murder him.

The wise men found their way to Bethlehem. Tradition says there were three wise men, because they had brought three gifts. Later legend made them kings. And still later legend gave them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Still later, legend described each. Melchior was an old man who brought the gift of gold. Caspar was young who brought the gift of frankincense. Balthasar was swarthy, who brought the gift of myrrh.

Gold is the gift for a king. Seneca tells us that in Parthia it was the custom that no one could ever approach the king without a gift. And gold, the king of metals, is the fit gift for a king of men. Jesus was "the Man born to be King." But he was to reign, not by force, but by love; and he was to rule over men's hearts, not from a throne, but from a cross.

Frankincense is the gift for a priest. The sweet perfume of frankincense was used in the temple worship. The function of a priest was to open the way to God for men. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, which means a bridge-builder. The priest is the man who builds a bridge between men and God. That is what Jesus did. He made it possible for men to enter into the very presence of

God.

And myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came into the world to die, to die that we might live. Thus, even at the crib of Jesus, it was foretold that he was to be King, Priest and Redeemer.

The Magi represent us. Like them, let us adore him and offer the gold of our love, the frankincense of our prayers and the myrrh of our sacrifices.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, January 8

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 or Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 or Titus 2:11-14, 3:4-7 or Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Tuesday, January 9

Hebrews 2:5-12; Mark 1:21B-28

Wednesday, January 10

Hebrews 2:14-18; Mark 1:29-39

Thursday, January 11

Hebrews 3:7-14; Mark 1:40-45

Friday, January 12

Hebrews 4:1-5, 11; Mark 2:1-12

Saturday, January 13

Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 2:13-17



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