

What do Catholics believe about limbo?



Father John Dietzen

Question Corner

Q. Your recent answer concerning the church's regulations for delaying baptism was helpful. As a deacon working with our parish baptism team, however, I believe it would have been good to say something about limbo, which I'm sure is a concern to some readers of your column. We don't hear much about that Catholic belief anymore. (New York)

A. It's true we hear little about limbo (Latin for "fringe" or "border"), but for good reason. While some Catholics still think of it, along with heaven and hell, as a third possible "place to go" after death, the fact is the church never had much to say officially on the subject.

For centuries Christians assumed that God took care of deceased unbaptized infants in his own way.

Limbo later became the subject of heated argument when a heretical sect called Jansenists taught that all infants dying without baptism were condemned eternally to hell.

In 1794 Pope Pius VI condemned this theory. He said, in effect, that though one may believe in a limbo, a "middle state" between heaven and hell, and still be a Catholic, that is not Catholic teaching (Errors of the Synod of Pistoia, No. 26). This remains the only significant mention of limbo in any Catholic document.

As you note, one seldom hears the word any more. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which touches on everything seriously connected with Catholic faith, doesn't mention it. The reason seems to be that limbo implies some sort of two-tiered final goal for human beings: One is eternal life with God, the other a "natural" happiness apart from God (limbo) where people "go" who through no fault of their own do not reach the top level.

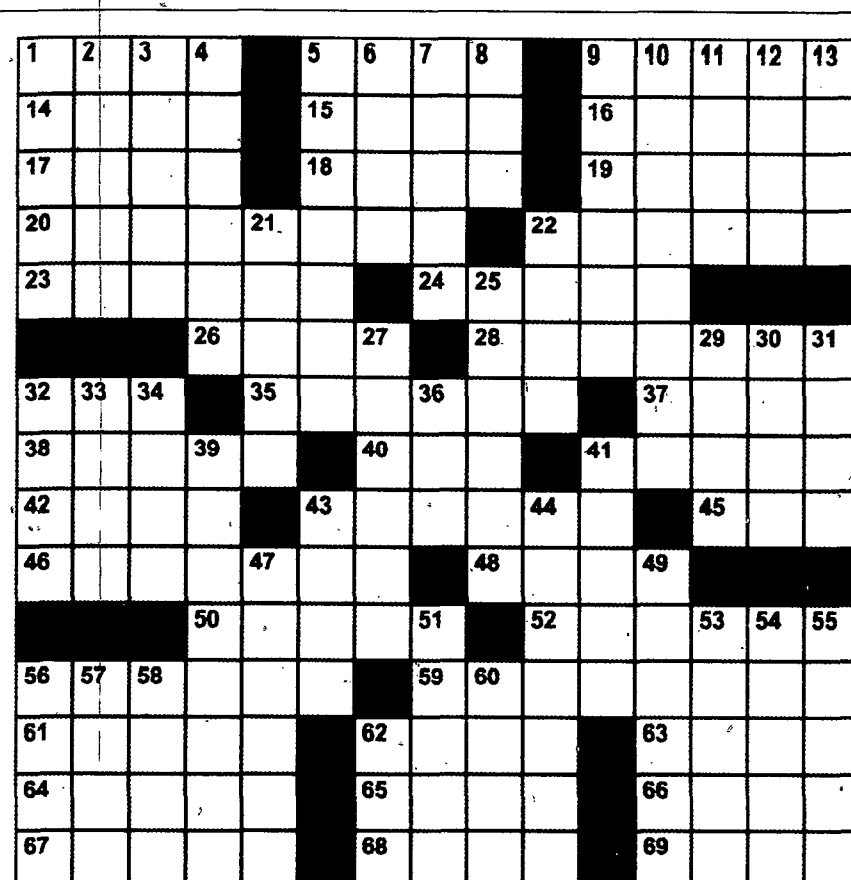
Catholic faith and the catechism clearly teach otherwise. There is only one final goal, one desire for happiness for all humanity — life with and in the God who created us. We may attain that goal, or we may reject it by our own fault, but there is no half-happiness somewhere in between.

God has, by creation and redemption in Christ, raised us to share in his life far beyond our natural capacity. Having done this, there is no going back, no reintroducing of an eternal half-way house for any members of the human family.

It is good for people to realize that there is no authentic Catholic teaching about limbo. Whatever mysteries we must negotiate in exploring questions about what happens to the unbaptized, we will need to find those answers without resorting to something called limbo.

As Pope John Paul II has explained often, those answers are found in the genuine and reassuring teachings of our Catholic faith about God and our relationship with him.

Father John Dietzen is a columnist for Catholic News Service. Questions may be sent to him at Box 325, Peoria, IL 61651, or e-mail jjdietzen@aol.com.



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