

Dear Fr. Kerper

Can I baptize someone?



►► **Dear Father Kerper:** Last year my 10-month old granddaughter died suddenly. Neither of her parents wanted her baptized and now I realize that I should have baptized her myself as soon as she was born. I remember hearing years ago about “limbo,” a place for the souls of unbaptized children who cannot be with God. Is this the best I can hope for? It seems so cruel. Should I have baptized my granddaughter to save her from being lost?

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail dearfrkerper@parablemag.com.

I'm very sorry about the loss of your granddaughter. The sudden death of a young child always causes immense grief. In the midst of your mourning, I hope that a careful review of Catholic teaching about these matters will provide some consolation and healing of your own feelings of regret.

To begin with, the Church does indeed teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. Moreover, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into beatitude.” Here, the Church’s humble admission of her own limited knowledge about the mysterious ways of God opens the way to hope.

Up until recent times, “limbo” was often the only alternative offered. Some background will help.

Limbo comes from the Latin word *limbus*, which means the hem of a garment. Gradually *limbus* came to mean the outskirts of a town. As theologians began to visualize heaven, hell, and purgatory in graphic terms, they saw limbo as a “suburb,” which was close to the heavenly city but still outside its gates. Theologians needed this heavenly suburb for two kinds of good people: unbaptized innocent children and unbaptized righteous adults who, through no fault of their own, had never been baptized because they lived before Christ or had never heard the gospel.

Please know that the Church has never *definitively* taught that the unbaptized go to limbo – or anywhere else. For example, *The Roman Catechism* (printed in 1566) and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) say nothing at all about limbo. For sure, limbo worked its way into some older catechisms and was commonly accepted by many as doctrine; but it was only an acceptable opinion, which coexisted with lesser known — and more hopeful — opinions.

Ludwig Ott’s *Fundamentals of Catholic Doctrine*, published in 1952, cites several alternative opinions. First, he mentions St. Cajetan’s theory of “vicarious baptism of desire,” which means that the prayers and desire of the parents and entire Church for the child’s baptism somehow work with God’s grace to affect salvation. Another theory is “baptism of suffering,” which asserts that a child’s expe-

rience of suffering and death is a “quasi-Sacrament.”

In another place Ott writes: “There is also the possibility that God, in an extraordinary manner, remits original sin to those children who die without baptism, and communicates grace to them, as His power is not limited by the Church’s means of grace.” However, he adds this warning: “The existence of such an extra-sacramental communication of grace cannot be proved.” As such, it remains an opinion lacking the reliability of doctrine. Limbo is the same.

In 2007, the International Theological Commission published a thorough study of these matters. The Commission, with the support of Pope Benedict XVI, pointed to “serious and liturgical grounds” that provide “hope that unbaptized infants who die will be saved and enjoy the Beatific Vision.” While baptism remains the ordinary and certain way of assuring the salvation of infants, you must have hope that God, in God’s own mysterious way, can give her the fullness of life.

Now, let’s consider whether you should have baptized your granddaughter on your own.

Every human being, including non-believers, has the ability to baptize another person *validly*. However, the Church authorizes this *only* in cases of imminent death. Hence, you were perfectly correct to refrain from baptizing your granddaughter and should never feel guilty. Your patient sensitivity toward the rights of her parents, who have opted out of the Church, is highly commendable.

As you grieve for your granddaughter, call to mind St. Paul’s advice to bring “prayers and supplications” before “the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4)

May your reflections about the mysterious status of so many innocent unbaptized people, including your precious granddaughter, gradually lead you from mournful worry to joyful hope.

— Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth.