

## CARAVAGGIO'S *CHIAROSCURO*: HOPE AMIDST LIGHT AND SHADOWS

In the masterpieces of Michelangelo Merisi da **Caravaggio**, an unmistakable interplay occurs between light and shadow, mysteriously co-existing on canvas. In the art world, it is called a **chiaroscuro**, an Italian term (lit. light-dark) describing the dramatic effect of contrasting areas of light and dark. I have long marveled at his work, wondering how he pulls off the contrast. The term has been appropriated in theology to describe an unfathomable mystery, such as surrounds the **vexing issue** of death before baptism. Funeral Masses can be moments of tremendous grace, both for the family and the priest called upon to provide solace in time of grief. But when the death in question is of an infant, no amount of experience can prepare one for such a devastating tragedy. Through the centuries, the Church has tried to make sense of suffering in the light of the passion and resurrection of Christ, framing her teachings appropriately given unusual circumstances.

Catholic teaching stresses the necessity of baptism for salvation, understood properly and considering its many nuances. Still, we squarely face the reality that some infants die without benefit of water baptism, (which removes original sin) while simultaneously acknowledging that they **cannot be guilty** of personal sin. Then what? The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches (para. # 1261): “As regards *children who have died without Baptism*, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,’ allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is the Church’s call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism.”

In his encyclical “The Gospel of Life” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 25 March 1995), St. John Paul II went so far as to discuss the souls of those babies lost through abortion. He wrote: “The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can **with sure hope** entrust your child.” (my emphasis added) In 2007, the **International Theological Commission** did a detailed study on this question entitled, “The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Without Being Baptized.” The papally appointed theologians acknowledged (para. #66): “On the basis of the command as found in Mt 28:19ff. and Mk 16:15, and of the prescription laid down in Jn 3:5, the Christian community has from the earliest time, believed in the necessity of Baptism for salvation...” The Catechism is carefully nuanced: “Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament.” (CCC # 1257) But the ITC document also adds: “The Church has never taught the ‘absolute necessity’ of sacramental Baptism for salvation; there are other avenues whereby the configuration with Christ can be realized.”

One can posit the Baptism of desire and the Baptism by blood as two such avenues. These are not opposed to water baptism, and ought never to be set against them. What does the study conclude? The authors call the question a chiaroscuro. In faith as in art, we observe the same phenomenon— **balancing light and shadow**, trying to make sense both of God’s mercy as well as the truth that the door to salvation is opened through baptism. St. Thomas Aquinas speculated that babies who die before Baptism, though deprived of the bliss of heaven, enjoy a full natural happiness.

The state of Limbo was proffered as a solution, which remains a possible theological hypothesis. But Limbo has **no clear foundation** in revelation, even though it has long been used in traditional theological teaching to describe a state of natural happiness, though deprived of the beatific vision. Ask anyone over age 65 and educated in Catholic schools—chances are they were taught about Limbo.

Yet, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) **never mentions** Limbo, a significant omission. Nor is it ever mentioned in the Church’s liturgy. On the contrary, the Feast of the Holy Innocents would seem to argue against Limbo, as we honor those innocent babies slaughtered by Herod. The ITC document continues: “Within that mystery, the question of the eternal destiny of infants who die unbaptized is ‘one of the most difficult to solve in the structure of theology’” (quoting theologian Yves Congar) and recognizes the complexities involved in this vexing question. (Para. #70) Vexing indeed! Still, we believe in the organic

development of doctrine and there is room to discern a positive development, especially in light our modern culture. Children are our greatest hope, yet our sinfulness has caused these little ones unbridled suffering. I consider the war-torn regions of the world in which children have never known peace in their lifetimes or the millions of lives lost each year through abortion.

The ITC document notes that in the last fifty years, “the magisterium of the Church has shown an increasing openness to the possibility of the salvation of unbaptized infants, and the *sensus fidelium* seems to have been developing in the same direction.” (para. #78) But it also wisely cautions: “It must be clearly acknowledged that the Church does not have sure knowledge about the salvation of unbaptized infants who die. She knows and celebrates the glory of the Holy Innocents, but the destiny of the generality of infants who die without Baptism has not been revealed to us, and the Church teaches and judges only with regard to what has been revealed.” (para. #79) It concludes with a fervent appeal to “give serious theological and liturgical grounds for hope that unbaptized infants who die will be saved and enjoy the Beatific Vision.” (para. #102)

- Overlooked amidst all the wrangling in Washington D.C., and with a hat tip to **Pink Floyd** fans from 1973, China quietly sent Chang’e 4 to the **far (or dark) side of the moon**. The tricky landing entailed losing contact for a time with the Probe, truly uncharted territory. Still, the photos sure look pretty much the same as the near side!
- I invite **women** of the parish to join in prayer and fellowship on **Saturday, January 19** for a **Morning of Recollection** led by UST Catholic Studies professor Dr. Liz Kelly. Information is in the bulletin. I also invite men of the parish to consider joining **That Man Is You!** Meetings resume Saturday, January 26.
- Representatives from thirty countries convened a century ago on January 18, 1919 to settle issues following the end of World War I. Though the U.S. Senate voted against joining the **League of Nations** (to the chagrin of President Woodrow Wilson), a new era of international cooperation had been born.
- Today’s bulletin insert names all for whom donations were made to our **Christmas Flowers** and decorations fund. Thank you. I also offer my **profound gratitude** for your extremely generous end of year stewardship.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel

Rector

