

The Spiritual State of Unbaptized Infants

[This essay was prompted by the recent repose of an unbaptized infant from a family connected to our local church.]

Without doubt infants and small children hold a special place in God's plan of salvation. Our Lord declares, "Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:3-5). Likewise in another place, "[T]hey also brought infants to Him that He might touch them...Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God'" (Luke 18:15, 16).

Infants and small children are innately receptive of the things of God, that is, His spiritual dominion. These little children are humble. They do not yet resist the things of God in pride and self-will. They believe in God according to His Word, like drinking milk from their mother's breasts (cf. 1 Pet. 2:1-3; Heb. 5:13-14), without rational argument to the contrary.

Thus the Psalmist says, "The law of the Lord is blameless, converting souls; the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making children (lit., *babies*) wise" (Ps. 18:8). Saint Paul corroborates addressing his spiritual son Timothy: "But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood (lit., *from infancy*) you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:14-15).

John the Baptist while yet in the womb of his mother Elizabeth "leapt with joy" upon the greeting of the Virgin Mary newly pregnant with Christ Jesus (Luke 1:39-45).

Our Lord answered His enemies with these words from the Psalm: "From the mouths of babes and nursing infants You prepared praise" (Matt. 21:16; Ps. 8:3). King David acknowledged that his newly departed seven-day-old son, one day shy of his circumcision, was in fact alive with God awaiting the resurrection (2 Kgm. 12:22-23; cf. 2 Macc. 7:29). The Church designates the infant boys slain by Herod the Great to be the Holy Innocents, martyrs for Christ (Matt. 2:16-18). Saint John Chrysostom comments on their deaths: "'But what kind of sin had these children,' it may be said, 'that they should do it away?...[W]hat sort of sins did they by their sufferings put away?' Didst thou not hear me say, that though there were no sins, there is a recompense of rewards hereafter for them that suffer ill here?" (*Homily 9.3 On the Gospel of St. Matthew*).

From an Orthodox perspective, understanding the spiritual state of infants becomes crucial when confronted with their bodily deaths, especially if the children are not yet baptized. Physical death is the result of sin, and all persons conceived and born into this fallen, mortal flesh corrupted by sin inevitably die. Baptism, as our Lord says, is that "new birth" one must have to be freed from the mortality of the sinful flesh (John 3:5-8).

We know that physical, bodily death is the result of the spiritual death of sin, that is, the death of the soul. Saint Symeon the New Theologian explains: "In soul Adam died immediately, as soon as he had tasted (cf. Gen. 3:1-8); and later, after nine hundred and thirty years, he died also in body. For, as the death of the body is separation from it of the soul, so the death of the soul is the separation from it of the Holy Spirit" (*The First-Created Man*, Homily 1). The Apostle Paul writes, "Just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, *because of which* (or, *whereas*) all sinned" (Rom. 5:12; italics, literal translation). Thus the vicious cycle of mortality: because of sin, man dies, and because he dies, he sins, now enslaved to the fear of death.

Job declared to his friends the brevity of life. “For mortal man born of woman is short-lived and full of wrath. He falls like a flower that blooms, and like a shadow, he does not continue. Have You not taken account of him and brought him to judgment before You? For who shall be pure from uncleanness? No one. Even if his life is but one day upon the earth, his months are numbered by You. You appointed a time for him, and he cannot exceed it” (Job 14:1-5).

Newborn infants inherit the sin of mortality, that is, they suffer death due to the corruption of the flesh. “This, then, is the old man whom we have received as a seed of evil from our ancestors as we came into existence” (Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, II.7; cf. Eph. 2:1-3; 4:22-24; Gen. 6:11-12; 8:21). Furthermore, this inherited mortality like a disease inevitably leads to sinful actions and habits later in one’s life. King David writes: “For behold, I was conceived in transgressions, and in sins my mother craved me” (literal translation¹); and, “Sinners are alienated from the womb; from birth they are led astray” (Ps. 50:7; 57:4).

The fact that infants die is proof of the mortality of life for all and thus the need to seek out and trust in the will of God who alone can give deliverance from this cycle of mortality and sinfulness.

The Apostle writes elsewhere: “God [sent] His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (i.e., flesh that is subject to death), on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4). “[Christ] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and

¹ *Craved* (Gk., *kissaoō*), used in Classical Greek for pregnant women craving unusual foods; the Hebrew *yacham* refers to animals *conceiving during their rut, or in heat*. This means the natural conception of human beings is tainted with sinful passion, and explains why the sinless Son of God, Jesus Christ, was conceived of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, that is, without corrupting passion (see Matt. 1:20-23; Luke 1:26-38; Gal. 4:3-5). This truth is expressed in the common hymn to the Theotokos: “without defilement (or, corruption) you gave birth to God the Word.”

rose again...[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:15, 21).

Indeed the power and purpose of Baptism is participation in both the saving death of Christ and His subsequent resurrection from the dead. "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life...Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey its lusts" (Rom. 6:4, 11-12). Every human being born in this mortal flesh needs this deliverance of Christ given in Holy Baptism. We must be "born again of water and the Spirit," as our Lord says (John 3:5-7). The grace of Baptism breaks the cycle of mortality in which sinners are trapped apart from Christ Jesus.

The relationship of sin and death pertaining to the spiritual state of newborn infants, that is, whether or not they can have blessed communion with God apart from Baptism, is the key issue. Saint Cyprian of Carthage puts it in the negative: "If, in the case of the greatest sinners and those sinning much against God, when afterward they believe, the remission of their sins is granted and no one is prevented from baptism and grace, how much more should an infant not be prohibited, who, *recently born, has not sinned at all, except that, born carnally according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the first death* from the first nativity (birth). He (the infant) approaches more easily from this very fact to receive the remission of sins *because those which are remitted are not his own sins, but the sins of another*" (*To Fidus* [253 A.D.]; italics mine).

This same teaching was affirmed as standard in the Church a century and a half after St. Cyprian in a council in Carthage (418-419). Canon 121: "It has pleased the Council to decree that whosoever denies the little ones newly born from the wombs of their mothers when they are being baptized, or asserts that they are baptized for the remission of sins, but that they have inherited no original sin from Adam obliging them

to be purified in the bath of renewal (whence it follows that in these persons the form of baptism for the remission of sins is not true, but is to be regarded as factitious), let him be anathema; for no other meaning ought to be attached to what the Apostle has said, that is, 'Sin entered the world through one human being' (Rom. 5:12), and thus it passed over into all human beings; wherefore all of them have sinned, than that which the catholic Church diffused and spread abroad everywhere has understood those words to mean. For it is on account of this Canon of the faith that even the little ones too, *who are as yet incapable of committing any sin of their own to render them guilty of any offense*, are truly baptized for the remission of sins, in order that what sin *they inherited from the primordial birth* may be purified in them through the process of renewal" (italics mine).

Here an important distinction is made between the inherited sin of mortality and personal sin rendering a person guilty of wrong. Both require purification, but both do not merit the same condemnation.

Saint Gregory the Theologian states: "Others are not in a position to receive [the gift of Baptism], perhaps on account of infancy, or some perfectly involuntary circumstance through which they are prevented from receiving it, even if they wish...[they] will be neither glorified nor punished by the righteous Judge, *as unsealed and yet not wicked, but persons who have suffered rather than done wrong*. For not everyone who is not bad enough to be punished is good enough to be honored; just as not everyone who is not good enough to be honored is bad enough to be punished" (*Oration 40.23 [On Baptism]*; italics mine).

Crucially, the death of infants is not a punishment for their personal, willful, or habitual sin. The law speaks of this kind of death: "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; each shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deut. 24:16; cf. Ez. 18:4). The difference is between dying (being enslaved to mortality) and being put to death. Infants may die because of the effects of the primal

sin, but they are not being put to death by God as punishment for specific sins; infants do not die because they are guilty of a death sentence from God.²

As is the case with our Lord Jesus who truly died a bodily death in His mortal flesh, physical death is not necessarily a result of personal spiritual death. Jesus did not die on the Cross because He sinned. Rather, He assumed our mortal nature which is subject to death in order to destroy the power of death by His indestructible life (see Heb. 2:14-15; 4:15-16; 5:7-9; 7:16, 26-28).

So also there is hope for infants who die a bodily death but are not yet dead spiritually because they have not yet rejected God or His will in favor of their own. “[A]s regards this question of the infants: we may say that the enjoyment of that future life does indeed belong of right to the human being (made in the image of God), but that, seeing the plague of ignorance has seized almost all now living in the flesh...The innocent babe has no such plague before its soul’s eyes obscuring its measure of light, and so it continues to exist in that natural life; it does not need the soundness which comes from purgation, because it never admitted the plague into its soul at all” (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Infants’ Early Deaths*).

The issue at hand is not the necessity of Baptism for infants. Baptism is necessary for all sinners according to the Lord’s instruction and command, and the Orthodox Church has always practiced the baptism of infants (as young as possible; see St. Cyprian’s letter *To Fidus*, above). The issue at hand is rather the possibility of deliverance

² This is a major point of theological difference between the Orthodox Faith and a non-Orthodox understanding of sin and death deriving primarily from the opinions of Bishop Augustine of Hippo (d. 430). Augustine was an Orthodox bishop who, because of his philosophical presuppositions, drew false conclusions to the problems of sin and death apart from and at variance with the common tradition of the Orthodox Fathers. His voluminous writings in Latin were adopted and followed in the Latin Western (European) parts of the Church as a primary source of its theological expression, not only in what became Roman Catholicism but also in Protestantism. Regarding sin and death, Augustine taught that Adam’s “guilt” worthy of condemnation was passed on to each subsequent human being, and that death is a just punishment for guilty sinners including newborn infants. See *The Ancestral Sin*, by John S. Romanides (Ridgewood, NJ, 1998, 2008); also, *Saint Augustin’s Anti-Pelagian Works*, First Series, Volume 5, of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI, reprinted June 1991).

from sin and death and the enjoyment of everlasting life in the presence of God for an infant who dies not yet baptized.

The Church has always admitted to eternal life catechumens seized and put to death for the name of Christ before their opportunity to be baptized in water. “[T]hose catechumens (lit., *instructed ones*) hold the upright faith and truth of the Church and advance to the warfare against the devil from the Divine Camp with the full and sincere knowledge of God the Father and of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Then they are not deprived of the Sacrament of baptism, nay rather, they are baptized with the most glorious and greatest baptism of blood, concerning which the Lord also said that He had another baptism to be baptized with (see Lk. 12:50)” (St. Cyprian of Carthage, *To Jubaian* [256 A.D.]; see also St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* III.10).

Saint Basil the Great, expounding the doctrine of Baptism from our Lord’s Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20), writes that Christ’s command to “make disciples” precedes the act of “baptizing them.” He concludes that a person must first prior to baptism become a “disciple...one who comes to the Lord for the purpose of following Him, that is, to hear His words, to believe in Him and obey Him as Master, King, Physician, and Teacher of truth, in the hope of gaining eternal life.” Again, “[I]nstruction is necessary before we are worthy to receive this most admirable Baptism” (*Concerning Baptism*, chapters 1, 2).

For infants born to believing, Orthodox parents, Orthodox prayers are said over and with the newborn that “the Cross of Your Only-begotten Son be signed in his heart and understanding, so that he may flee from the vanity of the world and from every evil snare of the Enemy, and may follow after Your commandments,” etc. In the “Prayers on the Fortieth Day (after Childbirth),” God is asked “to bless” the child, to “sanctify, enlighten, render him chaste, and endow him with good understanding,” all in preparation for Baptism in water, “that he may present himself unto Thee, the Creator of all men, and rear him well-pleasing unto Thee in all things.” The child is enrolled as a

catechumen, a person who readies himself to receive Baptism. This necessitates a living faith already in the unbaptized infant.

These prayers are not merely expressing wishful thinking on the part of Orthodox believers regarding their children. Rather, in accordance with the teaching of God for infants given His Word and promises within the living family of Christ (the New Covenant, the Church), these little children already experience a living relationship with God through faith and love prior to Baptism; see the Scriptures quoted at the beginning of this essay. Within the spiritual dominion of God called the Church, the faithful gathered around their Savior Jesus Christ in Holy Communion, there is comfort, peace, and life through the working of the Holy Spirit especially in the hearts of “the little ones.”

Outside of this Church and its influence promised by God’s indwelling uncertainty begins to grow. Inside there is nothing but hope. “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose...He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:28, 32).

We cannot begin to have the answers to all the questions of this life, among the most impactful and obscure: why infants and small children die. Saint Gregory of Nyssa states: “This is that achievement of a perfect Providence which I spoke of, namely, not only to heal evils that have been committed, but also to forestall them before they have been committed; and this, we suspect is the cause of the deaths of newborn infants” (ibid.; see also St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 9.3 On Matthew* above).

But we can know in faith and hope the spiritual state of unbaptized infants, that is, their living, blessed relationship with God. For those infants yet in the womb and newly born, and those still in the innocence of earthly life, surrounded already with the life-giving Word, the prayers of the saints, and the love of God-seeking parents, the light of Christ is kindled.