**Whatever Happened to Limbo?**

Irish Mothers Reflect on the Fate of the Unbaptised Infant

A Report compiled with the assistance of the Irish Countrywomen’s Association



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**Introduction**

Children growing up in the Ireland of the 1950s will have a clear remembrance of a metaphysical space or place known as Limbo. For Catholics, though not Irish Protestants, this formed part of a spiritual cosmos which viewed Heaven and Hell as opposite poles, with Purgatory and Limbo occupying rather vaguely defined intermediate positions. Fast forward to the present day and hardly any of those born in the new millennium will have the slightest notion of what Limbo was (or is), other than as a colloquial expression for being in some indeterminate mood or situation, as for example in the feeling of being ‘in limbo’. A belief in Purgatory has also gone into decline, though some residual consciousness of a place of purgation, prior to entry into Heaven, seems to have persisted. Beliefs in Heaven and Hell, by contrast, remain widespread, even in post-Catholic Ireland.

**What was Limbo?**

But Limbo appears to have disappeared off the spiritual map, which on the face of it is quite puzzling. So, what was Limbo? The green *Catechism*, in which generations of schoolchildren were schooled and which carried the imprimatur of the then Archbishop of Dublin, Joannes Carolus, dated 1951, contains the essential elements of belief.[[1]](#footnote-1) The chain of concepts ran from the Fall of Adam and Eve, and hence Original Sin, and from there to Baptism and, in certain unfortunate circumstances, to Limbo.

The first parents of the human race were Adam and Eve. Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Paradise and for this act of disobedience not only Adam and Eve but all subsequent humanity was punished. Here are the pertinent excerpts from the *Catechism*, the format being first the question, followed by the answer.

Q. 56: Have we the children of Adam, suffered because of his sin?

Because of Adam’s sin, we were born without sanctifying grace, our intellect is darkened, our will is weakened, our passions incline us to evil, and we are subject to suffering and death.

Q. 57: How do we call the state in which we are born because of the sin of Adam?

The state in which we are born because of the sin of Adam is called the state of original sin.

Q. 58: Why is original sin so called?’

Original sin is so called because it comes down to us through our origin, or descent from Adam, the head of the human race.

The next phase in the argument involves the sacrament of baptism as the gateway into the Catholic community, and ultimately into Heaven.

Q. 344: Is Baptism necessary for salvation?

Baptism is necessary for salvation, because our Divine Lord has said: *Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (John iii, 5)*.

This gives rise to a terrible dilemma. Because original sin is stamped on the souls of all, including still-births and the newly-born, these souls cannot enter heaven if they have failed to receive the sacrament of baptism, which is the only means to eternal salvation.[[2]](#footnote-2) This perplexed both theologians and parents, and explains the rush to have infants baptised as early as possible.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Origin of the Idea of Limbo**

The term Limbo does not appear in the Bible or the New Testament and it seems the concept was developed over time by Christians to handle two problems: one was the fate of those who led just lives and who died before Christ came on earth to redeem humankind; the other was the fate of unbaptised babies in the event of death. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, published in 1967, saw the second as the prime issue. ‘The word [Limbo] in our times refers to the place or state of infants dying without the Sacrament of Baptism who suffer the pain of loss but not the pain of sense.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Theological discussions of life after death for unbaptised infants go back at least as far as St. Augustine and the early fifth century A.D.

In Ireland understandings of Limbo were handed down by parents, schoolteachers, priests and nuns, drawing on the teachings of the Catholic Church (see later). As we shall see also, what might seem at first sight like the preoccupations of theologians and clergy had huge implications for people’s lives. Thus for those who believed in Limbo it affected not only how they fared in the next life but their experiences and actions in this world as well.

This preliminary study, conducted in association with the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, seeks to recover some of the varied understandings of Limbo and goes on to show how these beliefs shaped people’s lives, sometimes edging them with great sadness.

**The Approach**

This study is based on the recollections of 26 mothers, 23 of them members of the ICA. These were elicited using a questionnaire distributed by the ICA in the spring of 2017 (see appendix). Many of the questions were open-ended so that respondents might elaborate as they saw fit. Many did so, revealing a deep vein of knowledge and insight. In a small number of cases follow-up communication by phone or by e-mail was arranged. This allowed a more detailed exploration of some of the themes. Each respondent was guaranteed anonymity. There was no attempt to produce a representative sample, as this lay beyond the resources of the project.

The internal evidence suggests that the voices represented here extend to a broad cross-section of older Irish women. The diversity of responses, in part conditioned by generational status, is what might be expected. The incidental information on fertility captures the fertility transition evident in Irish society in the later twentieth century. The average number of children per mother was 4.1 for the sample as a whole; for those born in the 1960s the average was two children. This finding of a sharp decline in marital fertility, which mirrors (though not exactly) the larger population, is reassuring. It is a tribute to the women who responded that virtually all of the questions were answered.

The respondents were widely scattered across Ireland, and all four provinces are represented. The sample size is too small to engage in any kind of regional analysis, thus the results are presented at an aggregate level or given in individual detail. There may well be regional differences to the pace of change, there may be urban-rural differences, and there may be variation by socio-economic status. If so, teasing out such differences must await a larger study. As compared to large-scale, computer-assisted social surveys, however, there is the advantage that each questionnaire could be read as a fully-integrated document. The semi-structured nature of the questionnaire also allows for a flow of remembrances that could not easily find its way into a more rigid survey format.

The preliminary question in the survey sought to get a sense of the age of the respondent because attitude and behaviour are likely to have varied as between generations. The age breakdown was as follows: two were born in the 1930s, nine in the 1940s, eleven in the 1950s and three in the 1960s, or twenty five in all. (One respondent did not include her decade of birth.) This is a good spread and, with the exception of those born in the 1960s, it is clear that we are dealing with generations of women socialised into beliefs in Limbo and who experienced traditional understandings of Catholic teaching on the subject.

**Sources of belief in Limbo**

A belief in Limbo had to come from somewhere outside of the self, as it was not a state that could be directly observed or experienced. The sources of belief in Limbo, as revealed by this survey, were quite varied and most respondents mentioned more than one source. Hardly surprisingly, priests and nuns featured. So also did teachers, some of whom may have been nuns as well as teachers, as the institutional context is of a denominationally-controlled schooling system and, in our case, exclusively female respondents. Teachers in fact were the most frequently cited sources. What is perhaps surprising is that fathers as well as mothers played a role in propagating a belief in Limbo (see Table 1), while no one recalled reading about Limbo in a publication, religious or otherwise. Friends were not a source either, with one exception, perhaps suggesting that religious beliefs were not something young people discussed with each other in those times.

**Table 1. Sources of Belief in Limbo**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Source | Number of mentions | Proportion (%) |
|  |  |  |
| Mother | 10 | 20.8 |
| Father | 8 | 16.7 |
| Friend | 1 | 2.1 |
| Teacher | 14 | 29.2 |
| Priest | 8 | 16.7 |
| Nun | 6 | 12.5 |
| Publication | 0 | 0.0 |
| Other | 1 | 2.1 |
| TOTAL | 48 | 100 |

The fulcrum of religious life in Catholic communities was the local church. So a homily, either at Mass or among sodalities such as the Children of Mary, might be an occasion for handing on beliefs in Limbo. This is indeed what we find. A clear majority of the mothers had been present when the subject of Limbo was taught in church, that is, 15 out of the 26 respondents. Most of those born in the 1930s and the 1940s had heard such sermons but so had two of the three mothers who had been born in the 1960s.

A more detailed survey might establish the frequency of sermons of this nature relative to other beliefs (Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, the Virgin Mary, sexual purity and so forth) and whether they were delivered in the context of the usual Sunday sermon or found expression on special occasions such as the parish mission or at sermons or retreats at convent chapels linked to girls’ schools.

**What kind of Place was Limbo?**

Images of Limbo entered the imagination of young women but seemingly took different forms. It is not possible to do justice to the range of views and emphases, short of reproducing all of the responses, but the following are representative impressions. A mother who was born in the late 1940s visualised Limbo as ‘some dark place, never to see the sight of God. I imagined it like a cave, not to see any light again.’ Another respondent from the same era wrote as follows: ‘I didn’t think about it much. Perhaps visualised some sort of a dark corridor with strangely-shaped “people” – tiny creatures – waiting.’ The implication may be of waiting for admission to Heaven and this expectation is mentioned in a number of the responses.

Some did not share this expectation, however. One writes: Limbo was ‘A dark area where unbaptised babies went. They would not ever get to heaven.’ A mother from County Cork, and one of the younger respondents (born in the early 1960s) viewed Limbo as ‘A not so nice place where you were stuck forever because you had original sin! Scary place as a child.’ This echoes the opinion of another mother, also born in the 1960s, who saw Limbo as a ‘No Man’s Land.’ She goes on to say that those who went there were ‘locked out of Heaven and had nowhere to go.’ She places Limbo in a celestial setting, located ‘between Heaven and Purgatory’, adding that it was a lonely place. A response from County Meath that reflects Church teachings at the time ran as follows: ‘Asked my mother what limbo was, as a child. Explained by my Mother that babies couldn’t go to church or be buried at the cemetery, if not baptised. As they still had original sin.’ The theme of burial grounds for unbaptised babies is one we will return to.

Most respondents recalled Limbo as a state or place of varying degrees of darkness.

Other observations included: ‘Darkness. No pain or punishment but the loss of God’; ‘a dark, lonely place of waiting’; ‘not a very nice place’; ‘a place where one never saw God’. Another elaborated: ‘I think it was a place where lost souls floated around indefinitely, no pain, no feelings, just an aimless existence, neither a good nor a bad place, the main point was that they were lost souls going nowhere with no escape route, unlike purgatory where there was hope that at some time they might be released. However, it was always instilled in us that these lost souls were blameless.’

But not all viewed Limbo as ‘lost souls’ of one kind or another, though admittedly the following are minority viewpoints. A County Donegal woman who would no longer consider herself a practising Catholic mentions: ‘I don’t recall thinking too long and hard about the subject to be honest! But it wouldn’t have been a negative place to my young mind.’ The childhood recollection of another mother was of a ‘lovely peaceful place but lonely’. A more detailed account was furnished by a mother who was born in the 1940s: ‘Limbo was a place where babies and people who had died without their sins forgiven went to before they were clean enough to enter heaven. A happy enough place! We spent our childhood at All Souls Night in and out of the church praying for the relatives who had died, to send them from Limbo and help them enter Heaven. All the Parish did this! Saying 1 Our Father, 10 Hail Marys and 1 Glory be to the Father each.

You spoke to no-one while doing this. It was always very dark, you could only barely make out the other hundred people doing the same. But it was a ritual I liked doing. I felt I was helping the relatives who had died. It made a connection with them.’

This is a vivid picture of popular Catholic pietism, as it related to communion with the dead and the plight of souls in the ‘other world’. It is in accord with a long-standing Christian belief in a community of the living and the dead, a belief found in many religions. Time-wise it relates either to the end of the 1940s or the early 1950s (as the respondent’s decade of birth was the 1940s). As an aside, it may be there is a merging of images of Purgatory and Limbo here. She concludes by saying: ‘But I don’t believe the innocent babies go to Limbo or anywhere else. I believe my granddaughter who was miscarried is with my mother happy and content – wherever they are.’

Another expressed a positive assessment of Limbo, though with the qualification that she hadn’t given the different manifestations of the ‘other world’ much thought. There is also possibly a strain of scepticism (taking the totality of her responses into account). Here is what she had to say:

‘I thought it was a place of happiness. I never thought too deeply on these places, “heaven, hell, purgatory, limbo”. I could never figure the whole thing out so I just went along with it. My parents were Catholic and practised as was laid down. .. The previous generation, my granny, thought all these departments were up in space and wondered did the astronauts see any sign of Heaven.’

Clearly Limbo meant different things to different people, though there is little doubt that most viewed it as an undesirable place or state of being. There is an impression also from the various testimonies, irrespective of the standpoint adopted, that the characteristics of Limbo were only weakly sketched by those who felt a responsibility for passing on these beliefs. The contrast with traditional Catholic teaching on Hell, for instance, is marked. There was nothing vague or shadowy about the terrors of Hell.[[5]](#footnote-5) A majority of the respondents saw Limbo as an intermediate state: ‘a place where children were in until they went to heaven.’ Some however did not take Heaven to be the ultimate destination, and so entertained the frightening prospect that there was no escape for all of eternity.

**The Timing of Baptism**

In view of the potential danger of one’s child ending up in Limbo and facing the prospect of distress of one kind or another, there was an admirable emphasis on having the infant baptised as soon as practicable. This was all the more important in periods of high infant mortality, as was the case in most parts of Europe until after World War II. Thus the communal experience of child mortality and popular understanding of religious duties served to reinforce each other in favour of early baptism. This was Church orthodoxy but was it translated into practice? So far as we know, it was, and with remarkable rigour. What little research there is points unequivocally in the direction of a practice of early baptism, at least down to the 1960s.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Baptism was normally administered by the parish priest or his curate but in the event of danger of death parents and other lay persons could perform the ceremony. One mother speaks of ‘my dear little angel who died ten minutes after birth. The baby was baptised by a lovely nurse after birth.’ This, incidentally, is the only instance in the survey where a reference is made to baptism by a lay person, though we know that Catholic nurses and other medical practitioners were instructed in how to respond to a spiritual as well as a medical emergency. One retired hospital consultant told me that on the labour ward there was always a bottle of holy water to hand, should the occasion arise.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This survey presents some information on parental behaviour in relation to the timing of baptism, though it should be noted that most of these births were occurring from the 1970s onwards when notions of Limbo were undergoing change. As is apparent from Table 2, most of the first-born children (76%) were baptised within a month of birth; in a minority of cases (24%) the interval between birth and baptism was more than one month. The number of cases is twenty five; one return did not contain information on the point. Thus traditional baptismal practices were undergoing change but not yet to the extent apparent nowadays. The pattern for the last-born child shows a shift over time towards late baptism. The two mothers, for instance, who had had their first child baptised within three days delayed baptism for the final child by more than a week in one instance and by more than a month in the other. What this tells us is that behaviour within the *same* family in relation to baptism could change by birth order and over time.

The shift to longer birth-baptism intervals had important implications of a gender-specific kind, some of which are not immediately apparent. It meant that the mothers could attend the baptism ceremony, something that was not possible under the traditional regime of almost immediate baptism.

In another sign of the changing times, all of the births were in hospitals or nursing homes: the era of home births had passed, though this had been commonplace in rural districts as late as the 1940s. (The oldest *child* mentioned in the survey was born in 1960.) Virtually all of the baptism ceremonies were performed at the baptistry in the church, as prescribed by ecclesiastical law. Only two of the first-born babies were baptised in hospital, and two also among the last-born babies. We may surmise that these were cases of serious illness. There may also have been concerns about the health implications of conveying a sickly infant to and from the mother’s parish church.

**Table 2. The interval between birth and baptism**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Within 3 days | 4 to 7 days | 8 to 31 days | Greater than 31 days |
|  | % | % | % | % |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| First-born | 8 | 20 | 48 | 24 |
| Last-born | 0 | 8 | 56 | 36 |

**‘Churching’ of the Mother**

This brings us to a controversial area relating to the rituals surrounding childbirth and one on which there are divided opinions. This was the practice of ‘churching’ the mother after birth and before she could be permitted to participate fully in the sacrament of the Mass. The modern version is described as ‘a blessing given by the Church to mothers after recovery from childbirth.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Not all of the mothers in our survey experienced ‘churching’. Less than one-third reported they had undergone the ceremony after the birth of their first child. This was seven of the mothers, and six in the case of last-births. A mother who was born in the 1930s was churched after the birth of her first child in 1963, but the birth of her seventh and last child in 1977 was followed by a ‘blessing’ rather than the traditional ceremony.

One of the respondents, while still a schoolgirl, happened to observe a ceremony in her convent chapel that she took to be a case of churching. The observations are intriguing, because they suggest a consciousness of churching among some schoolchildren circa 1960 and also because it is not clear if this really was a case in point. Could nuns for instance administer a form of churching?

‘I recollect attending day secondary school, Middleton, Co Cork 1959-1964. One day, possibly in 1960, the cleaning lady, Mrs O’Reilly, had another baby, maybe her fifth child. She was back cleaning up after us quite soon after the birth. I remember one day visiting the Convent chapel before we left for the train and saw Mrs O’Reilly in there with her baby and one of the nuns praying over her and giving them both a blessing. One of my wiser friends said she was being ‘churched’. That’s my only brush with the activity.’

How mothers experienced churching is an important consideration. There is a an eloquence to many of the testimonies but it may be helpful before reading on to recall the two questions that were posed in the survey.[[9]](#footnote-9) First, were you churched after the birth? If so, how did you feel about this at the time? This is the response of a mother who gave birth for the first time in 1969: ‘Very strange it was the first time. I’d heard of churching, my mother took me to the Church, we sat in the back seats. A priest came out to church me, this had to be done before I could enter the Church for mass or sacraments.’ This is a good summary of the practice, and there is an implication that she was ‘churched’ on more than one occasion.

Other responses indicate a depth of emotion, bordering on anger, towards this Church practice. These are the words and feelings of three of the women: [I felt] ‘terrible, easily known priests didn’t have babies’; ‘Angry, as it was only the woman (not the man)’; ‘Upset. Made me feel it was sinful to have created new life’.

But one mother whose first child was born in 1976 simply responded to the question on how she felt after being ‘churched’: ‘Good’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Another of an earlier generation, who had her first child in 1960, said she felt ‘OK’.

Some women who were not ‘churched’, and hence typically younger, held particularly strong views on the subject. According to one, she was ‘very annoyed that there was churching of women only.’ Another mother – her first child was born in 1981 – had more wide-ranging criticisms. She recalls: ‘when I read somewhere about this practice I was truly horrified. It laid the ground stone for regarding sex, reproduction and women [as] unclean. It quite put males on a different upward level.’

Some were simply dismissive of the notion of churching. ‘I had heard about it but thought it was ridiculous.’[[11]](#footnote-11) However, the modern replacement for ‘churching’, that of offering a thanksgiving blessing by a priest after birth, drew a favourable response from three of the mothers. So a distinction was being drawn between a traditional practice which some at least saw as misogynistic and a more modern adaptation.

An attempt at summarising these varied responses might run as follows. A minority of the women who had been churched found it acceptable and perhaps even a positive experience. But most found it objectionable, at least in retrospect and probably at the time. (There is always the danger that current attitudes are being projected backwards to an earlier period in time, though some of the criticisms are so forthright that they suggest long-standing feelings on the subject.) Moreover, some women who had not been churched went out of their way to pour scorn on the very idea of the practice. Some who had may have found the process humiliating. There are certainly flashes of resentment along gender lines at a ceremony that was perceived as discriminating against women. Though the survey was not designed to explore the issue in any detail, it seems unlikely that the view expressed above by one of the respondents, linking churching to repressive clerical attitudes towards sex and reproduction, was or is an isolated opinion.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**The Burial of Unbaptised Babies**

The Irish countryside contains many reminders of how unbaptised babies were disposed of in the past. The Irish-language term, *cillín*, refers to patches of ground where unbaptised babies, and sometimes suicides and strangers whose baptismal status was unknown, were interred. [[13]](#footnote-13) Pregnant women who died before giving birth might also be excluded from consecrated ground. Some parishes had more than one cillín, so there may well have been thousands of these sites dotted across the island at one time or other. Many have softened into the landscape with the passage of time and their very existence is now forgotten but on the Dingle peninsula, for instance, the outlines of cillíní are still visible to the eye and locally-knowledgeable people can point out locations in other parts of Ireland.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The practice of excluding unbaptised babies from Catholic cemeteries goes deep in time, probably to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the aftermath of the Counter-Reformation. The unbaptised were not part of the Christian community, by virtue of not having had the stain of Original Sin expunged from their souls. As a consequence, they were deemed unfit to share consecrated ground with baptised Catholics. A compromise in some localities was to designate an obscure part of the cemetery as a burial ground for unbaptised babies In Middleton, County Cork, for instance, it is related that there was a ‘communal area for babies in a corner of the cemetery – with no names’.[[15]](#footnote-15) These infants were typically stillbirths or neo-natal deaths.

The survey sought to get some sense of how recent the exclusionary practices might be. It sought also to garner some impressions of popular and clerical attitudes towards the interment of the non-baptised. It is worth bearing in mind that we are drawing our information from mothers who gave birth in the second half of the twentieth century. So perhaps the really surprising finding to emerge from Table 3 is that only a minority of infant corpses may have been placed in the family grave (the presumption being that these were unbaptised babies). At least that is the impression conveyed by these respondents in relation to their own localities. The quantitative estimates presented in the table should not be given too much credence – the sample is small, the relevant question (Q. 6) was phrased in general terms, a few did not answer, and a quarter of respondents were not acquainted with their local parochial burial protocols – but what information there is points in the direction of practices that discriminated against unbaptised babies, not just in earlier times but into the second half of the twentieth century. Of the five who mentioned that stillbirths and early infant deaths were totally excluded from sacred ground, one mother was born in the 1930s, two in the 1940s and two in the 1950s. There is an age gradient to the responses as younger mothers either had no direct personal experience – a consequence of declining neo-natal mortality – or burial practices had been liberalised locally.

**Table 3. Disposing of the corpses of the unbaptised infants**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number of responses | Proportion of responses |
| Family grave | 7 | 30.4% |
| Other part of the cemetery | 4 | 17.4% |
| Outside of the cemetery | 5 | 21.7% |
| Unsure/do not know | 7 | 30.4% |
|  | 23 | 100% |

These were the practices, at least in some localities. It is now time to consider how these practices were experienced. The testimony of one of the mothers is like a cry from the heart. It is worth documenting at length.

‘I was born in 1948 in my grandparents’ house on a Sunday morning [and] was baptised the following Sunday in Church. I was the eldest of ten children. But in 1954 I had a sister born named Marian (as it was Marian year in Ireland). She was born on a Saturday but died the next day. As was customary then my Dad had to take her little body late at night well after dark to an old graveyard and on the perimeter of the graveyard my Dad had to bury her with no grave markings (an unknown grave). But at the time he made a little cross shape tied together with twine, made from two sticks and stuck them in the ground. Every year my Dad used to take me to Marian’s grave to say a little prayer.

He used to say she was a little “angel in Limbo”. All because she hadn’t been baptised. That old Churchyard has been tidied up and over the last ten to fifteen years the local priest says a mass/prayers once a year. Many people go along and some of us have placed little crosses/markers where our little angels have been buried back in the ’50s....’

This tallies with another account from a mother who was born in the 1950s: ‘they were buried outside the cemetery, maybe in a ditch.’ A ‘modern’ mother, born in County Monaghan in the 1960s (her first child born in 1999), mentions in the case of her mother that she lost a child soon after birth. The remains were buried soon after in the family grave but the family did not attend the burial. In further correspondence she kindly outlined some further circumstances. Her father got a little coffin and set off for the hospital. He and her uncle buried the infant, in what must have been a lonely funeral at the family grave. In Ireland funerals are usually large gatherings of family, kin, neighbours and friends – an occasion of sociability and communal solidarity. The difference on this occasion underlines the abnormality of these kinds of furtive burials. Nor was there any religious ceremony at the graveside. It was ‘a private thing’, she says, and it wasn’t spoken about much. ‘My mother’s baby was carried to full-term even though it was known that the baby had died approx six weeks before its due date.’ She continues:

‘Our neighbours would have known she was pregnant but no one would speak about her loss. It was such a private matter at that time and the only conversation she would have had would have been with my Dad, the nurses and doctor. My mother never seen the baby and the nuns in the nursing home told her that it was for the best. The baby was deformed-looking. My mother accepted this. We were told about the death at the time and that Dad was going to bury the baby.’

Despite or perhaps because of the sense of grief and loss, Limbo was not far from their thoughts:

‘We were aware even though we were young at the time that the baby was gone to Limbo. ... The nurses were nuns and my mother said they were very kind and looked after the mothers very well. The baby boy was never named. We don’t really talk to my mother about it as we know it would be sad to remind her about that time. My mother and mothers of my friends who had lost babies would have the same experience.

Our baby brother would have been born in the late 60s or early 70s. I am not sure of the date. I went to a mission where all unbaptised babies were remembered and you could name the baby. I told my mother about the special remembrance I attended and she was delighted. I put my own name on the baby and participated in the prayers and candlelit procession. In Cavan hospital every year they have a mass for unbaptised babies and they are remembered. It’s such a lovely way to remember those babies who didn’t make it and are now acknowledged. My mother is in her 90th year and is a very resilient lady.’

It’s all there, is it not? We notice the silences, the awkwardness, perhaps a touch of shame, the pain of grieving, the emotional imprint on the next generation, and the efforts of the Catholic Church in more recent times to address the deep sadness affecting parents and the wider family. The willingness of the Church and the priesthood to soften what some saw as the harsh teaching on Limbo must also have been helpful.

**The Fading of Limbo**

For generations of Irish Catholic mothers the pain and the joy of giving birth was closely associated with infant mortality and fear of Limbo. Adherents of Irish Protestant denominations, it may be noted, entertained no such apprehensions as these faiths did not include a belief in Limbo.[[16]](#footnote-16) Within Catholic Ireland the existence of cillíní and the exclusion of unbaptised babies from sacred ground pointed to fear-dominated connections between birth, baptism and the world beyond the grave. Limbo was the spectre that haunted motherhood and birth-giving. (There were of course other concerns of a more material kind common to all mothers going through child-bearing and birth-giving.) Yet few subscribe to notions of Limbo nowadays and the days of early or immediate baptism are largely gone.

So when did these once all-pervasive beliefs regarding unbaptised infants give way to different conceptions of the afterlife? The survey results suggest considerable vagueness on the timing of the transition, and quite a few added that they were unsure. This in itself is significant as it suggests that the fading of Limbo was a largely unremarked process within Irish society. There was no watershed moment, as with the acceptance of same-sex marriage (to take a recent example), but rather a progressive and barely perceptible decay of a once powerfully-held belief.

Turning to the responses, one specified the early 1960s as the time when the shift in understanding came about. But this was a lone view. Three saw the late 1960s as the vital moment, while three others mentioned the 1960s without indicating a sub-period within the decade. Thus one-quarter of the respondents were of the opinion that the 1960s was the era of change. Two of these mentioned Vatican II as the source of changed beliefs. However, four others felt it was the 1970s, which is not inconsistent with a delayed response to Vatican II. The 1970s was favoured by four, the 1980s by three, and remarkably the 1990s by as many as six respondents. One set her store by the 2000s and one was of the view that Limbo had not yet faded from public consciousness. A few had no opinion.

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions and it is possible there may have been variations in the process of change as between different parishes and dioceses. But there may be a simpler explanation for the lack of unanimity. The framing of the question – when did the old belief in Limbo fade out in your area? – was perhaps too loose. Shifts in religious beliefs take place over time and, one presumes, at an uneven rate within a given community. A host of social variables might be at play, including differences in age, gender, education, socio-economic status, and much else besides. Moreover, as with birth control nowadays, different priests and nuns might hold differing interpretations as to what is morally correct. So a respondent might understand the question in terms of when many but not all people in the parochial community embraced a revised set of beliefs and expectations or when the notion of Limbo was finally laid to rest in the locality. Each belonged to a different temporal phase. We cannot be sure. Still, the impression remains that fading out is an appropriate image as the shadow cast by Limbo silently receded from the lives of the people.

It is perhaps appropriate that the decline of a vaguely-delineated nether world, such as Limbo, should itself be subject to an uncertain, extended and barely perceptible demise. Of one thing, though, we can be fairly sure. It is that belief in Limbo and the associated fears for the eternal welfare of the unbaptised infant persisted into the 1960s, and in the hearts and minds of some parents for much longer.

**Why the decline of belief in Limbo?**

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Now we come to the heart of the matter. Why were deeply-rooted beliefs in the existence of Limbo, once held and acted upon, simply neglected or discarded in the later twentieth century? A preliminary point may be made. Tracing change in religious beliefs is a notoriously elusive enterprise, as is identifying the determinants of change. The responses in the survey fall into two broad categories. Only one expressed no view, but of those who did, a clear majority (three-quarters) placed the emphasis on changing beliefs and values on the part of the laity. The remaining quarter saw changes emanating from the teaching authority of the Catholic Church – in other words the clerical hierarchy – as the source of change. To simplify a little, the explanatory sketches run in terms of Priests or People.

The People were viewed in the survey as responding to a variety of influences, located mainly at the societal level. Several mention the importance of education in coming to new ways of thinking about Limbo. The result according to one respondent was that ‘more people [were] less accepting of Church/Catholic myths’. Linked to education but not only to education was a more questioning attitude. As one mother put it: ‘Young people became more educated and began to question stuff that did not make sense to them. They were no longer afraid of the “fire and brimstone” that our previous generations were afraid to question.’ Another felt that people could not believe that the unborn baby could have sin on its soul.

What was viewed as the inherent cruelty of Limbo was picked up, unprompted, by three respondents. ‘People think Limbo is a ... cruel place and don’t think that children go there. They believe in a more merciful God and that children will go to Heaven directly.’ The related comments were: ‘People became more educated and realised that people cannot suffer in a manner like [as] is described in Hell’; and ‘People began to think it was too cruel to have innocent babies going there [Limbo].’ In a somewhat similar vein, a mother added pithily: ‘Because people didn’t buy it anymore’ while another, from County Tipperary, felt the radio and television presenter, Gay Byrne played a role in liberalising attitudes. She also drew attention to the declining authority of priests in Irish society. Finally, a few respondents mentioned more vaguely ‘change in society’ as the reason for the decline in belief in Limbo without indicating what they regarded as the vital influences.

Then there is the minority who saw change as endogenous, that is, as coming from within the Catholic Church itself. By the beginning of the 1970s, according to one such response, ‘there was a new way of baptism where the priest welcomed the Mam, Dad, baby and other members of the family at the door of the Church [and] the priest blessed the whole family.’ According to another mother: ‘it must have been something to do with a change of focus within the catholic church – possibly combined with more hospital births and lower mortality rates.’

Not wholly surprisingly, Vatican II and the reforms it introduced is mentioned as a well-spring of renewal. ‘Before Vatican II people had to adhere to strict regulations in the Church. After Vatican II Rules were relaxed.’ There is an edge of criticism from another mother: ‘Church changed its attitude, and not before time.’ The most elaborate explanation of the evolution of Church teaching, and not necessarily approving of the direction of change, came from a mother in County Dublin. It also helpfully outlines some of the theological considerations.

‘As you know, Limbo was never a defined dogma of the Catholic Church but was a theological consequence of the dogma of Original Sin and the necessity of Baptism. There is no doubt it was a heart-breaking conclusion for any involved in such a death. But the teaching said that the child would remain in a state of perfect happiness in Limbo, a place Jesus visited between His death and His resurrection. ..

After Vatican II, when churchmen decided it was to be a NICE Church, the very idea that a child born dead or a child dying before baptism did not go straight to heaven was seen as UNACCEPTABLE. Limbo was downgraded from a THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION to a THEORY.’ (Capitals in the original.)

**From early to late baptism**

The winds of social change blew increasingly strongly through Irish society in the second half of the twentieth century. Rising living standards, increased access to secondary- and tertiary-level education, the widespread adoption of contraception, greater equality between the sexes and a decline in clerical vocations are just some of the manifestations of social change. If anything, the pace of change has been accelerating in the early twenty-first century with the recognition of divorce and same-sex marriage. Not all would agree that all of these revisions to traditional attitudes and practices – what might loosely be termed a process of secularisation – have been for the good. The diversity of responses in the survey suggests as much. And to put this in a wider context, in many respects what has been happening in Ireland is part and parcel of a wider European pattern of social and cultural change since the 1960s, or what some might term the increasing secularisation of society.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Within this context of change, one of the least remarked shifts within Irish society in the last fifty to sixty years has been the transition from early to late baptism. Yet it is one replete with emotional, social, theological and gender implications. The gradual and largely unremarked movement towards late baptism meant that the mother, who after all bears the burden of childbirth, can be present at the joyous moment of introducing the infant into her community of faith, an occasion enhanced by the presence of friends, relatives and loved ones. She is no longer excluded, in effect if not in formal terms, from the ceremony as in times past. The associated matter of churching, a source of resentment to some mothers, has been abolished and a different blessing ceremony substituted in its place. The rejection of Limbo in *popular* understanding of the fate of the unbaptised infant – the theological position is more open-ended[[18]](#footnote-18) – has also served to reduce the terrible anguish surrounding infant mortality. These and other implications emerge strongly from the voices within the survey.

Relaxing the belief in Limbo clearly mattered. ‘Younger parents today have a different outlook. They no longer believe that an unbaptised baby will go to hell.’ More pointedly, another mother observed: ‘Because the doctrine of Limbo is no longer believed within the modern Church ... there is no real hurry to baptise children nowadays.’ If so, this suggests that instruction in belief in Limbo, at a pastoral level, is no longer carried out and that even the possibility of the existence of Limbo has been quietly set aside.

The health and presence of the mother are also given prominence. ‘Parents, especially mothers, wish to be fit and healthy to attend [the] baptism of their child. Years ago children were baptised in their mother’s absence.’ Or, as another put it, baptism is delayed to allow the mother to recover after childbirth and allow both parents to participate in the festivities. One mother provided a spiritual rationale: ‘Parents need time to understand the sacrament’, while several raised concerns as to the depth of religious conviction in contemporary society: The ‘value of the sacrament has gone for most young people’, said one; ‘The new generation don’t believe’ reported another. One simply wrote ‘Lack of Faith’.

There is little doubt that the event of baptism has been enlarged into an occasion of celebration and festivity for the extended family, with the centre of gravity moving from the baptistry to the home: ‘Nowadays Baptism of a baby seems to be geared towards a party and celebration’, observed one mother ‘and the Sacrament is not thought about as much.’ Moreover, in view of the importance of migration and emigration, particularly from rural and small-town Ireland, there are undoubtedly dilemmas of timing and location for some families. One mother explains: ‘I would consider that parents nowadays would consider the convenience aspect of having their friends and families attend, rather than any consideration of the Church teachings.’ Another mother, while critical of the modern tendencies, largely agrees on the importance of the social. ‘Nowadays Baptisms are like Weddings, a big show. I don’t think it’s about the Sacrament of Baptism any more. It’s all about the show, dressing up, the party after, celebrating for the wrong reasons. It’s a pity.’

Implicit in many of the testimonies, one suspects, and finding explicit recognition expression in three of the accounts is an emphasis on improved infant mortality. In all three cases a modernisation-type argument is combined with an altered vision of Limbo and its terrors. Thus, according to the first of these, the retreat from early baptism has to do, firstly, with the superior health-care provided for babies nowadays – falling infant mortality – and secondly, a shift in religious consciousness (‘parents don’t fear or know about Limbo any more’). And another: ‘There is no pressure to bring forward the event as there is no fear of limbo, infant mortality is probably lower so the fear of something happening the baby may not be as great as previously.’ The remaining one of these responses runs along similar lines but with the addition of a value judgement: ‘Most likely it is to do with lower mortality rates and less fear of death in early infancy – combined with a healthy scepticism for the church!’

**Conclusion**

In some ancient maps the legend ‘here be monsters’ denoted the edges of the known world, only to be banished by advances in cartography. In somewhat analogous fashion, and under new theological and humanitarian understandings, Limbo has disappeared from lay people’s spiritual and mental maps. How the belief fares with pastors is less clear but there are no asides, from this survey at any rate, that teachings, either traditional or modern, are being perpetuated.[[19]](#footnote-19) To all intents and purposes, Limbo is a forgotten place; it is one of those worlds, to paraphrase Peter Laslett, that we have lost.

In this study, twenty six women have sketched a tapestry of many colours. The darker colours relate to fear of a child descending into an uncertain and possibly dismal state, that of Limbo. Many, though by no means all, took the arguments about the fate of unbaptised babies to constitute a cruel doctrine, and one not perhaps consistent with the notion of a benevolent God. The former practice of churching, which was associated with child birth, was recalled with little affection and with indignation by some older mothers. It is conceivable though that personal experiences, now some decades in the past, may have been re-worked in mind and heart under the influence of later movements towards gender equality, and perhaps conversations with younger generations of women. Other forms of social change might also contribute to a re-visioning of past experiences. Memories are not preserved in pristine form, as neuroscientists and practitioners of oral history alike remind us, but are continually re-made and reintegrated into larger memory patterns. This is not to deny the validity of these accounts but to insert a note of caution, particularly perhaps as to the timing of a sense of disenchantment with Church practices. Still, it is unlikely that the experience of having an infant excluded from burial in the family grave, or in some instances from the cemetery itself, can have been other than painful at the time of mourning such intimate loss. The raw emotion apparent in some of the testimonies eloquently bridges past and present.

In most instances women were present at the baptism of their first-born child, and presumably for subsequent births. This was an advance on earlier practices when baptism as soon as possible was perceived by clergy and laity as an essential duty for Catholic parents. That the mother who brought the infant into the world might not be in attendance must have been regarded as a subsidiary matter then, though this is nuanced by remembering that a chosen god-mother participated in the ceremony. One might surmise that she assisted with the practical care of the infant on the day.

The shift to delayed baptism has opened the way to a much more elaborate ceremonial. Family, relatives and friends, well-dressed for the occasion, gather round the baptismal font in the local church and, more often than not, continue with the celebrations at a restaurant or at the parents’ home. The comparison with the austere practices of earlier times is marked. As a result, some feel the religious significance of the occasion, with baptism as the centrepiece, has been eroded or displaced. An alternative view might be that over time there has been a re-balancing of power between parents and priest, and more specifically between mother and priest. (One might surmise this has been without much clerical resistance at a parish level.) Families seem to have taken control of baptism, at least in terms of timing, determining who might attend, and stage-managing the celebration. In any case, without the effective abolition of Limbo in the minds of the people these contemporary developments would hardly have been possible. In the final analysis this shift in belief may have been more important than the steep fall in infant mortality evident during the second half of the twentieth century.

The survey was primarily concerned with belief in Limbo and its subsequent demise, as seen from the viewpoint of women. (A very different study that focused on men only might reveal different patterns.) Yet it is impossible to read through the body of testimonies as a whole without forming the impression that many Irish mothers suffered silently the intense pain of miscarriage, of stillbirth, or of infant deaths. This hidden suffering surfaces from time to time in the responses. For a variety of reasons, including long periods of exposure to pregnancy, many Irish mothers in the past must have experienced one or more of these life tragedies. In addition to the normal human experiences of suffering and loss, some may also have been burdened by feelings of guilt regarding the fate of unbaptised foetuses. It may be there is a field of work here for organisations such as the Irish Countrywomen’s Association in bringing this suppressed pain into the open and helping bring closure to those who have suffered loss in the course of pregnancy or childbirth.

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1. *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine: Approved by the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland* (Dublin, 1951).Italicisation of words or phrases is as in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A qualification is in order. Some who have not had original sin expunged from their souls by means of conventional baptism can be saved but only in special circumstances. They can be saved through martyrdom, known as Baptism of blood, or by perfect contrition, known as Baptism of desire. It is hard to see how stillbirths and infants who died before baptism might meet either of these two conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Catechism itself is rather vague on this. Question 99 introduces the notion of Limbo and the answer is: ‘After Christ’s death his soul *descended into hell*: this was not the hell of the damned, but a place or state of rest called limbo.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *New Catholic Encylopedia* (New York, 1967), p. 762. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One of the celebrated literary depictions of Hell is by the writer, James Joyce, in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London, 1973) but as many can testify these images of excruciating suffering were not confined to the pages of fiction. My own vivid recollection of the terrors of Hell came from a mission conducted by Redemptorist priests in County Tipperary towards the end of the 1950s. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Based on an examination of three Catholic baptism registers by the author in widely separated parts of Ireland. These are a parish in Belfast, a parish in North Tipperary and a parish on the Dingle peninsula in County Kerry. Unless these are highly unrepresentative, the records indicate that typically the date of birth and the date of baptism were within a day or a few days of each other in Catholic Ireland at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Conversation in August 2016, and again in August 2017, with a retired consultant who worked for many years at Portlaoise Hospital, in the Irish midlands. He mentions that sometimes, in the event of a stillbirth, the remains were placed secretly in the coffin of an adult corpse and disposed of in that way. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. New Advent…. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One respondent who was churched was puzzled by the second question and responded thus: ‘Not really sure what you mean by the question? I attended Church on a regular basis.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This may, however, be a reference to the new rite of thanksgiving for a safe birth (though the term ‘churching’ is used in the response.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Her first child was born in 1975 which gives a rough indication of the generation to which she belonged. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern* Ireland (Dublin, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Eileen M. Murphy, ‘Children’s Burial Grounds in Ireland (*Cilliní*) and Parental Emotions towards Infant Death’, *Irish Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 15, 2011, pp. 409-28; Aidan O’Sullivan *et al.*, *Early Medieval Ireland AD 400-1100: The Evidence from Archaeological Excavations* (Dublin, 2014), p. 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Corcha Dhuibhne: [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mentioned in one of the twenty-six testimonies. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In the nineteenth century there appears to have been a large gap between date of birth and date of baptism, and the interval widened further in the twentieth century. The evidence for this is the author’s examination of the baptismal records of a Church of Ireland parish in Dingle, County Kerry and a Presbyterian congregation at Clonmel, County Tipperary. For a larger sample of parishes see William Paul Gray, *A Social History of Illegitimacy in Ireland from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century* (Ph.D. thesis, Queen’s University, Belfast, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The notion of secularisation is itself contested. For some sociological reflections on secularisation see Steve Bruce, *God Save Ulster! The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 231-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Before Being Baptised*. See [www.vatican.va/roman\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\_documents/rc\_con\_cfaith\_doc\_20070419\_un-baptised-infants\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html) [consulted 20 June 2017]. This authoritative statement from the Vatican sets out the current theological understanding of Limbo whose existence has now been downgraded to that of a ‘hypothesis’. In other words it is is no longer an article of faith, if it ever was for some. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I have spoken to a small number of Irish Catholic priests about the ‘doctrine’ of Limbo. None expressed any belief in its existence; two seemed to regard it as a quaint notion from the past. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)