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THE UNBORN CHILD

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The unborn or partially born infants are suitable subjects for Baptism because a human foetus is informed by a rational soul at the first moment of conception, and hence is capable of attaining regeneration through Baptism. In the case of a miscarriage, even if it happens very early, the embryo should be baptized because it has an immortal soul.

Canon 747. Abortive foetuses, no matter at what stage of pregnancy they are born, shall be baptized absolutely if they are certainly alive and conditionally if life is doubtful.¹

The following quotation gives the practical way of baptizing a foetus:

If the embryo can be recognized, take it in your fingers, break the membranes, and dip it under the water and lift it out again while you pronounce the words of Baptism. In case you cannot recognize the embryo at all, pour water on the blood clot in the miscarriage, and pronounce the words of Baptism. In either case, you would confer the Baptism conditionally.²

The difficult cases of abnormal birth are treated in some of the Canons of the Code of Canon Law. It might be well to quote the Canons so as to make this explanation clearer.

Canon 746. 1. No child shall be baptized in the womb if there is a probable hope that it may be born alive and then baptized.³

* Reprinted by courtesy of the Catholic Hospital Association, from an address delivered at the Convention.

The validity of Baptism requires that the water come in contact with the child, therefore, it is clear that it cannot be performed on a foetus which is not viable unless the membranes have ruptured of themselves. To rupture the membranes deliberately in such case would obviously be direct abortion which of course is never justifiable. It should be understood that no one can bring about the death of the child or endanger the life of the mother in order to baptize the child. If the child is viable the membranes may be ruptured and Baptism performed by using an aseptic syringe filled with boiled water or a weak antiseptic solution (a solution of 2 to 3 per cent would not render the Baptism invalid). If the uterine Baptism is performed it should be repeated conditionally after the child is born.⁴

Canon 746. 5. A foetus baptized in the womb shall be again baptized conditionally after birth.⁵

Other difficult cases are also given a solution in the following canons:

Canon 746. 2. If the head of the child is born and there is danger of death, it shall be baptized on the head; nor shall it be again baptized conditionally if it is born alive.⁶

3. If another member is born first and there is the same danger, the child shall be baptized on that member; but if the child is then born alive, it shall be baptized again conditionally.

Canon 748. All monstrous and remarkable foetuses shall be baptized at least conditionally; if there is doubt as to whether there is more than one human being in the birth, one shall be baptized absolutely and the others conditionally.

Canon 746. 4. If a mother dies during pregnancy the foetus shall be extracted by those whose duty it is and, if it is certainly alive, it shall be baptized absolutely; if there is doubt as to whether it is alive, it shall be baptized conditionally.⁷

In this last case it is ordinarily agreed that there is no obligation of performing the operation before the sixteenth week of pregnancy, and it is evident that before the operation is performed there must be certainty of the mother's death. For such operation the consent of the husband should be had, and if he refuses it may not be done. However, he should be made to understand that if the operation is performed, it will procure for the child an eternity of happiness. "The faithful," says the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, "will not take it amiss that the body of the deceased mother be operated upon to administer Baptism, thus to save the eternal and perchance the temporal life of the child, when they call to mind that our Saviour permitted His Sacred Side to be opened with a lance for our salvation."

To conclude we may say that for an infant the only personal condition required for the valid reception of the Sacrament is that he be alive. But if we cannot discern whether or not he is alive, Baptism should be given because

if there is probability of life there is also a possibility of salvation by the reception of the Sacrament. However, since there is doubt, out of respect for the Sacrament, it should be administered conditionally. As for the extent of a probable continuation of life in a foetus when death is apparent, it is impossible to verify, but we know that the only sure signs of death are decomposition and putrefaction. Consequently, we should baptize the child conditionally if those signs have not appeared.⁸

How many souls by this means might be raised to Heaven who otherwise must remain forever deprived of the sight of God.

REFERENCES

1. Canon 747, quoted by Rev. A. Bonnar, O.F.M., *The Catholic Doctor*, p. 94.
2. Rev. Bowdern, S.J., *op. cit.*, p. 11.
3. Canon 746, par. 1, quoted by Bonnar, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
4. Rev. Bonnar, *op. cit.*, pp. 95, 96.
5. Canon 746, par. 5, quoted by Rev. Bonnar, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
6. "If the head of the child is born," this should be understood, I think, of the complete birth of the head. If the head is completely born and the child is then baptized before complete delivery, the Baptism is not to be repeated after birth.
Reverend A. Bonnar, O.F.M., *The Catholic Doctor*.
7. Canons 746, par. 3 and 4, and Canon 748, quoted by Rev. Bonnar, *op. cit.*, pp. 94 and 95.
8. Rev. Ferreres, S.J., *op. cit.*, p. 22.