Section 99 of *Evangelium Vitae*

As originally written and translated into seven modern languages, Bl. Pope John Paul II’s “special word to women who have had an abortion” in section 99 of *Evangelium Vitae* offered these immensely consoling words:

*The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is now living in the Lord.*

When this section was translated into Latin, it was changed to the following:

*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.*

At least until 2010, the Vatican website—15 years after promulgation—presented the modern language versions (MLV) in all modern languages. Only by taking the additional step of clicking a link from the first page of the MLV, to read the encyclical as one page, could one find the Latin-conforming version (LCV), which had been published in the AAS in 1997.

The USCCB published a 4th edition of *The Gospel of Life* in 2008 that contains the MLV sentence. Not surprisingly, diocesan Project Rachel Ministry educational and promotional materials refer almost exclusively to the MLV.

While the Latin-conforming version is doctrinally more accurate—as we cannot know with certainty the fate of these children—the pastoral implications of the revision are highly significant.

The two main questions which nearly every mother brings to post-abortion counseling are: *Is my child safe?* and *Can God ever forgive me?* They dread eternal damnation and eternal separation from this child. After the mother tells her story, and acknowledges the gravity of her sin with sincere remorse, it is vital to her emotional and mental health that she reclaim her motherhood of the lost child. Nearly all women instinctively know the child’s sex, and they are encouraged to name their baby so he or she becomes a unique person, still living though not on earth, someone with whom they can have a loving relationship. Mothers live in the hope that they may one day be reunited with their child. The bond that was broken by the abortion can be restored. Many mothers find it terribly difficult to believe that God can forgive them and they need also to know that their child has forgiven them so that, in turn, they can begin to forgive themselves. Without
the peace that comes from knowing one is forgiven by God and by the injured party, mothers may find it difficult to make progress in their spiritual lives.

This one sentence—nothing is definitively lost, you are able to ask forgiveness of your child, who is now living in the Lord—reveals to mothers the extent of God’s merciful love, it fills them with gratitude to God and the hope that can sustain them in their spiritual journey.

Today, the Vatican website posts only the LCV. The earliest usage of the revised language by the Holy See occurred in note 98 of a statement by the International Theological Commission, “The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Without Being Baptised,” which was approved by Pope Benedict in January 2007. The document marshals abundant, compelling reasons why one might reasonably believe that aborted children are saved and with God, notwithstanding the absence of Sacramental Baptism. Note 98 states that it is notable that the editio typica changed the original MLV text because “living in the Lord” was “susceptible to faulty interpretation.”

In time, the misunderstandings created by the differing texts will disappear. But for now, women who relied on the promises contained in the MLV in the course of pastoral care and spiritual healing, can react very strongly to the implicit retraction of these promises.

Rather than citing the MLV text alone, it would probably be most helpful to refer to the CCC—

§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.* [citation omitted]

and the resources in the Order of Christian Funerals Part II “Funeral Rites for Children,” in which each prayer, including the Funeral Mass for a dead child, offers options for a child who died before receiving baptism.