

MORE IN SORROW

'No true catechist can lawfully, on his own initiative, make a selection of what he considers important in the deposit of faith as opposed to what he considers unimportant, so as to teach the one and reject the other'.

(*'Catechesi Tradendae'* n.30)

The following is an examination of 'Here I Am' a religious education programme approved for use in primary schools.

SERIOUS DEFICIENCIES

One would expect a religious programme, officially approved for use in Catholic primary schools, to contain all the basic Truths of the Creed clearly expressed, with no important omissions or ambiguities. Also, as class teachers in primary schools are not specialists in religious instruction, it needs to give straightforward guidance on what is to be taught. *Here I Am* (HIA) fails in these important areas.

To illustrate the doubtful or inadequate treatment of basic doctrines I decided to take one point I felt the authors failed to present in accordance with Catholic tradition, and show the consequences of this failure on the other important doctrines, on the children's appreciation of the Catholic faith and, therefore, on their capacity to live good Catholic lives. The doctrine I have chosen to examine is 'The Fall' and its consequence, 'Original Sin'. Catholic teaching has always been quite definite on this important point and it is beautifully expressed in *The Credo of the People of God* (CPG) proclaimed by Pope Paul VI in 1968. *'We believe that in Adam all have sinned. From this it follows that on account of the original offence committed by him human nature, which is common to all men, is reduced to that condition in which it must suffer the consequences of that fall'.* In HIA, the Fall is not dealt with specifically at all, and Original Sin is explained like this: *'The doctrine of original sin is one way in which Christians have described the conflict we experience between good and evil. Jesus experienced this conflict, in his own life. His passion, death and resurrection triumphed over evil and set people free from the power of evil'.* (Vol.1, page 178)

CONSEQUENCES OF FLAWED TEACHING.

If Original Sin is not fully and correctly taught, other doctrines are lost too. For example: The Immaculate Conception of Our Lady cannot be taught if we are all immaculately conceived. Sanctifying Grace, lost by Original Sin and given in Baptism, loses its meaning. HIA dismisses it as: *Grace - God's gift of life, of love and friendship. This understanding permeates the entire programme.* (All volumes, page 32). Several teachings are claimed to *permeate the entire programme.* It seems to mean that they are nowhere specifically taught. Baptism cannot be taught as freeing us from Original Sin by allowing Grace - a share of God's own Life - to enter our souls and join us to Christ's Mystical Body. So HIA explains it as merely an initiation, and compares it to other initiations in these words: *Through Baptism/Confirmation people are welcomed into the Christian Church.* (All volumes, page 12) Compare this, which fails to mention sin at all, with the Church's true teaching:

'We believe in one baptism instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Baptism is also to be given to infants, who cannot as yet be guilty of any personal sin, in order that, though born deprived of supernatural grace, they may be reborn of water and the Holy Spirit to divine life in Christ Jesus'.

GLOSSED OVER

The Divinity of Christ - perhaps most significantly of all - is glossed over and consistently played down in HIA. The General Catechetical Directory (GCD) issued from Rome in 1971 to guide Catholic teachers of religion insists, in Section 53, that it should be put before the children *daily.* But, if there was no Fall and no Original Sin to set a gulf between Almighty God and mankind, there is no need for a Being who is both God and Man to bridge that gulf. So 'Here I Am' wants Jesus to be presented to the children as a very nice human being, as shown by this extract from the Teachers' Information Section (which makes up the first 64 pages of each volume): *In speaking of Jesus to children in Nursery Reception, One and Two, we present him as a grown-up friend, strong and protective. He is someone to whom they can look up, admire, imitate, trust, and upon whom they can rely always. He shows us what God is like. This image of Jesus as friend is developed and deepened in Three and Four. He is a friend who cares for, helps, forgives and shares.*

He invites each one to friendship with himself, to follow in his way, to love as he loves, and to be the same kind of friend as he is. Children can begin to understand Jesus is more than 'just a friend'. He is God's best gift. He is the perfect picture of God. He shows what God is like. Jesus is the Sacrament of God. He is leader, servant of all, the one God promised, the foundation of the Church, the builder of bridges between God and people, between individuals and groups. He shows God's way. He leads people to love even their enemies; to be like his Father. (All volumes, page 30).

On page 59, Jesus is described as a *human person*, and although on page 7 He is described as *both God who speaks and the man who most perfectly responds*, the overwhelming impression given is that he is less than God. This is reinforced by the admonition not to tell the children about Jesus' miracles. (See Notes for Teachers, page 224, vol.1 and other places).

Jesus' Resurrection is invariably described as *God gave him new life* (page 195 vol.1. and other places) and the Ascension, repeatedly, as: *The event described as the Ascension is so called because the texts tell us that Jesus is 'carried up' to heaven, 'lifted up', and that a cloud took him from their sight. This picture language expresses the truth that Jesus is no longer visible on earth. He is exalted, glorified, and enjoys the intimacy of life with his Father. (Vol.1 page 200 and other places)* This teaching is not compatible with that expressed in the Creeds. For example:

'After he had been buried he rose from the dead of his own power, lifting us by his resurrection to that sharing in the divine life which is grace. He ascended into heaven whence he will come again to judge the living and the dead'. (CPG)

REVELATION - OR IS IT?

Catholics believe that when God became Man he revealed all the Truths about Himself, and ourselves that are necessary for Salvation. When he was arraigned before Pilate, Jesus said *'For this was I born and for this came into the World, that I should give testimony to the Truth'*. (Jn. 18 v.37). We believe these Truths are now taught by the Catholic Church.

The Church, the Guardian of Revelation. We believe all that is contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down, and which the Church proposes for our belief as being divinely revealed either through a solemn declaration or by the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium. (CPG) But - if you don't accept the Divinity of Christ and, therefore the authority of his Church, you have to fall back on your own experiences and the experiences of others. This is exactly what HIA does, and it appropriates the Catholic word Revelation - and then changes its meaning as the following quotation illustrates: *Why is Revelation fundamental to the Programme? Our experiences speak to us. The words we hear, the relationships and events of our lives each have their own message. Indeed, the world around us often seems to communicate too. The new growth of spring, or derelict and neglected buildings 'say something'. Even if we do not always listen, or if the message can hardly be put into words, we can recognise that this happens. Christians believe that listening to what their lives and experiences tell them has deep significance because it is there that God speaks. For Christians, God is always speaking. God calls people and communicates to and with them. (All volumes, page 54).* This is why HIA consists of thirty-six secular topics to be explored by the teacher first (*ideally do this with your colleagues* it states) and then explored with the children in stories, poems, and readings from the Bible and non-Christian *sacred* writings! Pope John Paul II specifically warned against the dangers inherent in this method of Catechesis in his address to the Bishops of England and Wales in April 1992 during their Ad Limina visit. In catechesis, making use of the pupils' experience as a point of departure cannot be set in opposition to the handing on of the Church's doctrinal tradition.

Doctrines not adequately covered by the experiential methods of teaching used in HIA, include the Attributes of Almighty God which are given scant attention. He is presented as *Creator, Father, Mother...* in the overview and in the text. Our immortal souls made in the image of God with intelligence and freewill, fit us to be his companions here and in the next life but the word 'soul' is not even used to the children: *Body/soul Language is not used in topics but children will meet the words in hymns and prayers. (All volumes, page 32).* Redemption - the Truth that Jesus' death redeemed mankind from the slavery of sin (GCD Section 54) - is taught as: *Redemption for each person is daily accepting and using the power given by Jesus to face evil in life and oneself without fear. (HIA, all volumes, page 61).*

The Catholic Church is not shown as the One True Church, instituted by Christ and now existing on earth as his living body with His authority. In fact, the word Catholic is hardly used at all whilst prayers and readings from Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Mohammedanism, Sikhism, African tribal rites, and Zoroastrianism are presented alongside Catholic prayers and the Bible, from top infants onwards. Also: *Where there are children of other faiths in the class, they will be invited to share prayers from their traditions.* (all volumes, page 25). The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is not presented as perpetuating the Sacrifice of Calvary. The Mass is called the Eucharist and described as a meal. There is no link with Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary. The Real Presence of Our Divine Lord in the Blessed Sacrament is not taught fully enough for children who will make their First Holy Communion during these years: *In the Aramaic language, which Jesus spoke, body equals living presence, and blood equals life, so Jesus was saying: This is my living presence. This is myself. It is me. In the celebration of the Eucharist, Jesus is present: in the priest who celebrates; in the people who gather together; in the Scriptures that are read; especially he is present in the Eucharistic elements.* (volume 1, and in the other volumes, page 168). In the topic Journeys (volume 2), the children are told about visiting a Church where they must not run about or be noisy as people want to pray. They are not told that Jesus is present there, nor is the word tabernacle ever used. Prayer is mentioned, but as we were told by Chris. Malone, one of the Programmes authors, when she gave a Primary Schools' Workshop on HIA at its launch at the Bradford Education Conference: *'prayer is a natural response to life, and to what life is offering a child.'*

In the same context, we were told to light a candle, play music and introduce the child to Mantras. (This is in defiance of the 1989 Vatican Document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which warns against prayer techniques that are not inspired by the Gospel and that reject time-honoured devotions of the Church.)

LACKING IN CATHOLIC CONTENT

Why is *Here I Am* so lacking in Catholic content? One reason must be because the people who compiled it include some who no longer accept Catholic Teaching. The names of over forty people are listed as helpers in its production and many of them make no secret of the sad fact that they no longer accept the Church's teaching on important doctrines. They could not be expected to produce a sound Catholic programme. This explains why beliefs are introduced by the non-committal *Christians believe...* rather than the more appropriate 'We, as Catholics believe ...' Also, at Bradford again, Chris. Malone stated categorically that 'children are not capable of abstract thought until fifteen - if then.' If she really believes this, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, then of course she won't attempt to teach primary school children the spiritual Truths fundamental to the faith. Another reason is this: *Criteria for HIA. An R.E. programme must include objectives/learning intentions which take into account the religious and educational needs of our children: those from supportive Catholic homes; those for whom the school may be their first and perhaps only experience of church; those from other Christian traditions; and those from other faith backgrounds.* (All volumes, page 5)

The Holy Father specifically warned against an approach which is designed to please everyone, but which achieves nothing: *'This is not to imply that pupils who do not share the Catholic profession of faith cannot have a place in your schools. Their parents send them to these schools knowing the religious ethos to which they will be exposed and confident that the integrity of their children's consciences will be respected. This respect, however, should not alter the fundamental nature of the school's Catholic identity'*. (Ad Limina address, April 1992.) Why, then, have the Bishops approved HIA? Unfortunately, we live in the age of the expert and the Bishops have obviously taken advice from those they trusted. I hope this review, and others, might persuade them to think again before it is too late.

Meanwhile, what can we do? We can insist that *Here I Am* is withdrawn and replaced by a new programme, written by different people, and which is, most importantly, based on The Catechism of the Catholic Church.