

## THE SOWER – JANUARY 2005

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### Book & Resource Reviews

#### **Angels in Primary Schools: A comparative review of teaching materials**

Here I am reviewing two primary school RE programmes, which must inevitably include teaching on angels because they are so very present in Scripture and Church teaching.

The two programmes examined here are:

***The Image of God Series, K-6***, Image of God Inc., Brooklyn Center, Mn. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991-1994).

***The Alive-O Programme, Books 1-8***, Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics, (Dublin: Veritas, 1996-2004).

#### **The Image of God Series**

Here one finds a programme which properly presents an adequate account of angels, without exaggerating or minimising their position. The *Image of God* series starts with Pre-School and Kindergarten, and continues through Grades 1 to 6. For each year there are separate books for pupils and teachers. The teaching on angels starts in Pre-School and progresses through to Grade 6. At each stage the content and methodology are well adapted to the learning capabilities of the pupils.

Is it unwise to treat 'angels' as real beings in a modern Catholic RE programme? Are angels as cute, but about as real, as Santa Claus? Are angels simply part of an outmoded cosmology of superstition well past its sell-by date? While some teachers and theologians might answer 'yes' to these questions, the Catholic Church, as we have seen, believes otherwise. The Church believes in passing on the richness of past expressions of the Faith as well as seeking new ones. Prayers such as the Creed and the Gloria date back to the earliest centuries of Christianity; they are timelessly valid and valuable – so is the teaching on angels, and guardian angels in particular.

#### ***The Guardian angel prayer***

In this programme the rich heritage of the Church's language is included. Guardian Angels are introduced in Pre-School, and the parents are involved in teaching the traditional Prayer to the Guardian Angel. Children are taught why God gave each person a Guardian Angel, and how the Angel can help them. By Grade 1 they know that God created the angels, and that an angel has a mind and a will, but no body. The lessons on angels progress right through to Grade 6, by which time they have been given the Church's basic teaching on the creation, nature and service of angels.

#### ***Scripture***

Accounts of angels in Scripture are well covered. In Pre-School and Kindergarten they learn of the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary at the Annunciation, and of angels appearing to Joseph in a dream, to shepherds of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem,

and to the women outside the empty tomb on Easter morning. These angelic visitations are repeated during Grades 1 through 6, with additional accounts of angels from Scripture: Michael the Archangel, an angel staying Abraham's hand from sacrificing his son Isaac, an angel telling Joseph in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, Jacob's dream with angels going up and down the ladder to heaven, and Jacob's struggles with the angel of God.

### ***Demons and the devil***

*Image of God* does not side-step teaching on Satan and devils. The approach is simple and straightforward, in no way scary, but not compromising the basic teachings of the Church. In Grade 1 the children are taught about Lucifer and the unfaithful angels who disobeyed God, fell from grace, and became Satan and the devils. Through Grades 2 to 5 there is progressive teaching on the rebellion of the unfaithful angels and the heavenly battle, the devil's temptation of our First Parents in the Garden, and the ensuing effects of Original Sin for the whole human race. The temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness is well covered in Grades 3 through 5.

### ***Illustrations***

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words, especially for children. Angels do not have bodies, but in their appearances as recorded in Scripture they normally took on human form. This indicates that an angel is a personal being, not just the manifestation of some impersonal force. *Image of God* makes excellent use of illustrations to reinforce the teaching on angels. Pre-School and Kindergarten children see simple traditional pictures of happy angels with wings and white robes. In Grade 1 there are cut-outs to colour-in and make into angels for the Christmas crib and the empty tomb. Pictures of angels in later Grades are more mature, many taken from old paintings or stained glass windows. Pictures of devils are avoided, apart from one dramatic picture of the temptation of Jesus by Satan on a mountain top.

Children love angels when they know what they are and have a concrete image to stimulate their imagination. Young children love to dress up as angels. They love colouring-in angel pictures, and making angels from cut-outs for the Christmas Crib or to perch on top of the Christmas tree. It should be easy to teach about angels at primary school level, like pushing an open door. However, without teaching on angels, children can not distinguish them from the fictional characters of elves, pixies and fairies.

## **The Alive-O Programme**

The *Alive-O Programme* covers eight years of primary school: Junior and Senior Infants (equivalent to Pre-School and Kindergarten), through Classes 1-6. For each year there is an attractive Pupils' Book and a large detailed Teachers' Book, with a lot of information for teachers, plus daily lesson plans for pupils. Here one finds a programme which follows a more typical contemporary reticence, confusion and inadequate treatment either of obedient angels or those who rebelled against God.

### ***Guardian angel prayer***

*Alive-O* does not teach either teachers or pupils what an angel actually is. Children are not taught that each has personal Guardian Angel. A Prayer to the Guardian Angel appears in one Teachers' lesson plan in 4<sup>th</sup> Class, but without adequate explanation about Guardian Angels. *Alive-O's* Guardian Angel prayer is satisfactory in itself, but it is different from, and no improvement over, the traditional prayer, thereby creating an unnecessary separation between children and parents/grandparents. This undermines catechesis in the home where older members use the traditional form of the prayer. Guardian Angels feature nowhere in

the Pupils' Books, apart from inclusion of *Alive-O's* prayer at the back of the last three Books.

### **Scripture**

Interestingly, several of the Scripture passages that are used in the programme include the mention of an angel, such as in the appearance of an angel to the women at the empty tomb on Easter morning, the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel, and the appearance of angels to shepherds at the Nativity. Also included are the appearance of an angel in a dream to Joseph, and Jacob's dream of a ladder reaching to heaven. The visitation to Abraham and Sarah at Mamre is also featured. The problem here is that although the angels cannot be removed from the Scripture passage because they are so integral to the different narratives, no significant teaching takes place with regard to this element of revelation.

### **Nativity Plays**

Junior and Senior Infants have Nativity Plays, in which angels appear briefly with a song and a few lines of dialogue. The 1<sup>st</sup> Class Nativity Play gives the angels a bigger role, but they act like clowns, saying it's nice to have a change from the same Gloria song every year, so instead they sing to the sheep, "Baa, baa, baa, I've lost my Ma-ma, maa, maa". In an age where even the most basic Christian stories are not well known, to lose the opportunity of presenting them in a straightforward way is to lose an important catechetical opportunity.

### **Demons and the devil**

*Alive-O's* instructions to teachers in Classes 1-6 note that children may have questions about the 'devil' and may be frightened because of what they have seen on television and in films. However, having made a case for correct teaching on the devil, *Alive-O* does not follow through; there is no teaching on the devil, neither for teachers nor children. Is 'the devil' just a *symbol* for evil in the world or a real spiritual being, a fallen angel who can really lead astray?

In 5<sup>th</sup> Class a "Garden Story" tells of 'the snake' tempting the man and woman to disobey God. The 'snake' is identified, not as the devil, but as 'that snaky voice that's always ready to slither its way into our minds, coaxing us to make wrong choices', which harmonises with the view that 'the devil' is simply a symbol for evil. The implicit lessons learnt by the children reduce cosmic spiritual realities to human imaginings and reduce thereby a sense of God as almighty, as creator, or as Lord of providence. It is far more frightening to leave children with a sense of evil but without a defined source of it other than themselves and inner voices, and without a sense of God as infinitely more powerful than all the evil and hurt that they see and experience around them.

### **Illustrations**

The *Alive-O* Pupils' Books are generously illustrated with attractive full-colour pictures, but angels are conspicuous by their absence. Six Annunciation pictures show Mary, but in place of the Angel Gabriel there is a star-spangled beam of light. Joseph's angelic visit in a dream is also pictured as a beam of light. Several pictures of the women at the empty tomb and of the Nativity show no angels. Only in the last Book do the children see pictures they would recognise as angels: the Rublev icon in which three angel-like figures symbolise the Trinity, and Jacob's dream, showing faint angelic figures, but which the accompanying text describes as 'messengers', not 'angels'. Despite the inevitable mention of angels in the Scripture passages, angels, like demons are not shown bodily, the way of showing reality to children.

## **Conclusion**

The *Image of God series* shows how children can be introduced to the Church's teaching on angels and demons. The approach is straightforward and attractive, rooted in Scripture, and well adapted to the children's growing ability to comprehend as they progress through primary school.

The *Alive-O programme's* approach appears to be to teach as little as possible on the faithful angels, and nothing at all on fallen angels. It could hardly be fair to leave children in ignorance about the devil and his wiles, unaware of the daily spiritual battle in which they can call on God's greater power. True knowledge of the Church's teaching on angels would help protect the children from superstitions, occult practices and satanic cults. Neither could it be fair to withhold from children knowledge of the tremendous love of God in creating angels to protect and care for them, especially their own personal Guardian Angel.

**Éanna Johnson**

## ADDITIONAL NOTES RE TEACHING ON ANGELS AT PRIMARY LEVEL

### **Summary of the Teaching of the Church on Angels**

Below is a brief summary of Catholic Church teaching on angels, which is well presented in the *Image of God series*, but almost completely absent from the *Alive-O Programme*.

*The existence of purely spiritual created beings, usually called angels, is a truth of faith.*

*The angels are servants and messengers of God. They are personal and immortal creatures, with intelligence and will, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures.*

*Angels have been present since creation and throughout the history of salvation, announcing this salvation and serving the accomplishment of the divine plan.*

*Christ is the centre of the angelic world. They are his angels, and will be present at his return at the end of time to serve at his judgment. The whole life of the Church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of angels.*

*Beside each believer stands a guardian angel as protector & shepherd leading him/her to life.*

*Some of the angels, led by an angel called Satan or the 'devil', fell through radically and irrevocably rejecting God and his reign. The power of Satan is great, but not infinite; he cannot prevent the building up of God's reign.*

*Jesus Christ, only Son of God, appeared in order to destroy the works of the devil, the gravest of which was the seduction that led man to disobey God.*

(Ref. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 325-336, 391-395. *Credo of the People of God*, 8)

## Importance of Teaching on Angels

The existence of angels is not the most important in the hierarchy of truths of the faith, but it is nevertheless important. The Creed of Nicea is a statement of fundamental truths of the faith, and it professes belief in God, “maker of heaven and earth, of all there is, seen and unseen”. Pope Paul VI clarified that the ‘unseen’ creation includes, “pure spirits which are also called angels”. (*The Credo of the People of God*, 1968, Pope Paul VI, para.8).

The Fourth General Council of the Lateran, declared that God, “by his almighty power from the beginning of time made at once out of nothing both orders of creatures, the spiritual and the corporal, that is, the angelic and the earthly.....For the devil and the other demons were indeed created by God naturally good, but they became evil by their own doing. As for man, he sinned at the suggestion of the devil”. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes Lateran IV in its teaching on angels, and insists that the existence of purely spiritual created beings is a truth of faith (CCC 328).

Angels appear frequently in Sacred Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, and play significant roles at key events in the great story of creation, redemption, and the coming of the Kingdom of God here and hereafter.

Therefore it is very important that a Catholic RE programme should include correct teaching on angels, faithful and fallen. Absence of such teaching, as in the *Alive-O programme*, is a serious matter in itself.

There is also the issue of the integrity of the faith. If a catechetical programme has a significant deficiency in any one important truth of the faith, then the integrity of the faith has been breached, and credibility of the entire programme is compromised. This principle was stated clearly by Pope John Paul II in *Catechesi Tradendae*, On Catechesis in Our Time, 1979, para. 30, “*The person who becomes a disciple of Christ has the right to receive ‘the word of faith’ not in mutilated, falsified or diminished form but whole and entire, in all its rigor and vigour. Unfaithfulness on some point to the integrity of the message means a dangerous weakening of catechesis and putting at risk the results that Christ and the ecclesial community have a right to expect from it.*”