

CHAPTER 4

What difference has being in a Catholic school made to us?

Reflections from pupils

Parents and teachers are very clear about the importance of a Catholic school. However, listening to the views of children and young people is equally important. An adult perspective can sometimes be very different. Head teachers know that the pupil voice is critical to a happy and successful learning environment. I am grateful to pupils from St Anselm's Primary School in Harrow, St Gregory's Sixth Form in Bath and St Mary's Catholic School in Bishop's Stortford for their willingness to take part in these interviews.

Primary school voices – St Anselm's pupil chaplains

Why do you think your families chose St Anselm's for you?

Kya: I think it has to be respect for our religion and to learn as much as we can about it. You are allowed to speak your mind and think for yourself. You also learn to respect other people and their ideas even if you don't always agree, you can still show them respect.

India: I agree and we need to know as much as we can and we do learn a lot here. When I was younger I was not very confident. I am getting much better now. Being a pupil chaplain has helped me a lot.

Niamh: It is also about trying to understand the world. It's God's world and there are so many difficult questions.

Eve: I agree with Niamh but I still have so many things I'm wondering about and that's OK because when you wonder it helps you to work things out.

Aiden: My family wanted me to come here because it is a very good school, the best!

How has this school helped you to develop?

Christopher: Being here has helped me to deal with challenge and to be more forgiving and merciful towards others. When you get someone in your



school who needs help because of their work or behaviour you learn how to help one another. Now I know that if you invite them to play with you and share your friends with them, then they change and become better people. I know if you ask people why they are doing stupid or bad things, then it helps to understand and deal with it or just get over it!

Eve: What I like is this is a place where you can be you and that's OK.

Niamh: Yes, I agree but it also helps us to develop our personalities and find our gifts. Respecting people is very important in our school because we believe that we are all one family and families try to love each other as brothers and sisters.

Tasha: We are trying to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. I enjoy helping the other children learn about the Wednesday Word. This helps us to find happiness. I know that because that's how I feel. I



know Jesus is always there beside me and it makes me very joyful and happy.

Sheremy: I find it difficult sometimes to understand the questions in RE because they are very difficult. Now that I have been chosen as a pupil chaplain I feel more confident to ask and talk about these things. When you do, you find lots of people have the same questions and that is good.

Kya: I agree with Sheremy. In St Anselm's you are encouraged to open up and say what you actually feel. I have come out of my shell and we all have



really. You know Jesus is a good listener, you can feel him listening to your heart.

India: I like being challenged and you are here. It will help us next year in secondary school because we will be used to saying what we think and joining in debates because we are learning how to do that here. I also like it when we teach the younger children about their faith and I would like to take more assemblies.

How do you think St Anselm's is preparing you to understand some of the big issues and challenges in society today?

Christopher: I think this is very important. We have asked our MP to come to St Anselm's because there are lots of things we need to talk to him about. We

are really pleased that he is going to come. But we have also written a letter to tell the Prime Minister what we think and make some suggestions as to how we need to make things better.

Aiden: I am in Year 5 but that should not make any difference. We are all responsible for what happens to the children in our country. I think it is terrible that there are millions of children living in poverty right here.

Niamh: We have to stop being selfish and put ourselves in their shoes.

Tasha: It helps to tell people what is going on and encourage them to help change things. I am more confident now and we are all able to help each other do something.

St Anselm's letter to the Prime Minister

Dear Prime Minister,

We are all pupil chaplains in Year 5 and 6 and we would like to share some of our ideas about what is happening in the country today because it makes us feel very sad. We have learnt two very shocking facts. The first is that there are 3.7 million children living in really bad poverty in the UK. The other fact is that we thought we were one of the richest countries in the world. On the one hand that is good. So why are there so many food banks and people with no homes to live in? Why are there so many buildings that could be homes for refugees and homeless people standing empty?

We are learning that all these big questions are not easy to understand but we feel that it is not good enough for us to say nothing about it.

Prime Minister, could you please tell us why we are still fighting in wars? Violence solves nothing and everyone knows that here. We know people in this country are afraid but we also know that the media does not help by always showing the same terrible pictures over and over again. We feel there is too much greed and leaders who want to dominate and have power over others that they have no right to.

We are a "Rights and Responsibilities School" and proud to be called by this name. However, we are first and foremost a Catholic school where we learn

to put ourselves in the shoes of others, to forgive, to share and then there is plenty for everyone.

Please would you do something about advertising? There is far too much pressure on people to buy things they don't want. Especially at Christmastime. What happens? People get all this stuff which they don't need and it just gets stashed under the bed and forgotten. We need much more advertising about looking after each other. The only adverts on TV should be for charities and helping each other. We need to change public attitudes so that everyone is less selfish.

Thank you for reading our letter and we hope you will write back and tell us how we can help you to make our country the best it can be because that is what we are all trying to do. Did you know that Catherine of Siena said, "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire"? When you are on TV next can you tell everyone that? That is what we at St Anselm's are learning to do.

Thank you for reading our letter and we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

*Eve, Niamh, India, Christopher, Aiden,
Tasha and Sheremy*

Reflections from St Gregory's Sixth Form, Bath

The following interviews took place in a coeducational sixth form made up of students from St Gregory's College, Bath. What is interesting about this sixth form is that it draws students who come from a wide range of schools as well as from St Gregory's itself.

Do you feel your Catholic education has prepared you for adult life?



Katie: I think it's encouraged me to think more about others, my place in the world, and be a more active steward of God's creation. I like the values and the ethos of the school. The fact that everyone has mutual respect for everyone, that's what I really like.

The standard is high and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. For me,

the basis of RE is really important as I think the concept of respect for different cultures is invaluable. But I think my experience of RE, especially at GCSE, consists of learning a textbook, which seems to devalue the point slightly, but I still think the basis of RE is really, really important. I think our school is very aware of building a Catholic education as we have regular Masses which are respectful and it gives people who don't have the opportunity to go to Mass outside of school the chance to experience that within school.



Josiah: I think it has prepared me well for adult life. It's taught me to be tolerant of different people and their beliefs and shown me how I can integrate Catholic beliefs and Christianity into how I act in daily life because, although we are a Catholic school, and we are taught the pure Catholic messages, it also teaches

us how we should act out those messages in our life. Simply put, being kind to other people and being helpful and treating people with respect. So hopefully, although I may not be preaching to people about being Catholic, I hope that just through the way I've learned to act in the environment I've been in, I would be able to be a successful Catholic in my adult life.

I feel it's been very beneficial to me to be educated in a Catholic school. Coming from a Catholic family it's great to feel at one with the process of school like going to Mass and having holy days of obligation, that's a benefit for me. Also, mixing with other people who aren't necessarily Catholics and different religions has also been very interesting and hopefully it has allowed me to be able to openly express my faith, given that we're in a Catholic environment and I don't feel awkward about being a Christian because that is the reason for advertising being a Catholic school. So being a Catholic here doesn't make me feel different. I feel at home and I can tell other people about being a Catholic. There are many

students who aren't from a Catholic or Christian background or British and who have parents from different races. Being able to discuss issues with very diverse people and understand their way of thinking is important. Some of my immediate friends are atheists. So being able to debate issues while in a Catholic environment has been good because I can confidently say, I'm a Catholic. So being able to discuss my faith with them and listen to their viewpoints has been very beneficial to me and I think it's enabled me to understand how to develop relationships within a diverse society.



Alexandria: Yes, I feel that Catholic education has given me a good sense of morals and how to deal with difficult situations in an orderly and correct manner, as well as keeping yourself spiritually aware. Catholic

schools are stricter than most. Its rules are made on logical and faith decisions which is better because people don't misbehave as much and they learn more. Also, all the spiritual guidance you're given at school which gives you the correct morals and it kind of prepares you for life better because you know more and you know how to deal with things correctly. RE's important because it gives you an insight into other religions and understanding as well as looking into your own and giving explanations for your customs and traditions. I also think I have had a good spiritual education as I've had opportunities to become a

Eucharistic Minister and unique experiences like meeting Bishop Declan through the school by participating in events like Westonbirt Arboretum walk.



Mariya: I agree. It's taught me good morals and helped me to distinguish between right and wrong, based on what the Church teaches. I think it's better to be educated in a Catholic school because students are much better behaved and there's more discipline and the teachers seem to really care about helping students to improve.

Emily, what do you think?



Emily: I feel that I'm more open-minded and I'm able to accept people of all backgrounds because we're growing up in quite a diverse community and my education's taught me to respect other religions as well as other people who don't have religion.

I think it's very good because I feel that I can get the support I need because the teachers are more concerned about the students' well-being and their education rather than just facts and figures. Most schools I know in the area are more focused on facts and figures and here it's just a friendlier atmosphere.

I think the standard of education is very high here. It's not forced either. The teachers encourage each individual student to reach their next target or go to the next level and I think mainly it's through the teachers. Also some of the beliefs of Catholics are instilled in the atmosphere and it makes you want to work hard to get the grades you need.

How good do you think your Religious Education has been?

Katie: Within the school I think we're encouraged to think about the importance of sticking to well-guided morals and this helped growing up as I'm more aware of, for example, the fact that a lie is a lie. Even telling a white lie is going against God's will, and I think this triggers a feeling of guilt which I perhaps wouldn't have experienced if I wasn't taught about the importance of morals.

Mariya: I agree with Katie especially now with the refugee crisis and terrorism. I think it's important that kids are taught about other religions and to respect them and not to stereotype. We take moral issues seriously. I find that Catholic schools take issues like bullying a lot more seriously and this is one of the things that helps everyone to feel like they're part of the school and part of the community. We're taught that everyone should be treated equally and that you should love others as you love yourself. We learn to stand up for what we believe in which helps us to stand up for ourselves and others if we think that they've been treated unfairly. One thing that has really helped me was going to Flame 2 because it was a great experience and there was so much energy in the stadium and there were people like Cardinal Tagle and Matt Redman. Friends went from other schools as well.

Josiah: I think RE's very important because in the lower school we learned about the different religions and how to understand them because often before you learn about something like Islam or Hinduism you have a stereotypical image of what it might involve. However, actually learning more in-depth allows you to understand different religions and be more tolerant of them. When we started GCSE we focused more on Catholicism and Christianity and this was equally beneficial. There are many rituals, concepts which I have been putting into practice for many years of my life without fully understanding them. So, through studying Catholicism in RE, I learned to actually understand my own faith in more depth.

Emily: As a subject I think it's very good, especially with the society we're living in because it teaches you about certain religions and their beliefs. We learn about Christians and the different Christian beliefs within certain areas. It also helps some people determine what their religion is, so to speak. Some people feel like their parents are forcing them because they are Catholic. When they come to RE they're really interested in finding out why they are Catholic. This helps them to make an informed choice about what they really believe. Some end up seeing that they don't believe anything. That's just where they are. But it helps them to be a better person in the future, so they finally know who they are. We go on lots of retreats. In Year 8 we went to Ammerdown and we were able to do meditation there and painting rocks. We were also taught how to find peace and respect for each other.

What has had the greatest impact on you as a member of the school community, and why?

Katie: The greatest impact on me has been when I went on the Borneo trip in the summer and that was absolutely amazing, it was literally the best experience of my life. We did do a community project and we were helping build a church and so it was relevant! It was so good and it was getting to see the different ways that people worshipped and it just had a massive impact on me because they were so dedicated and amazing with what they had, which is so little compared to what I have. I think that has had the most impact on me.

Josiah: I'd have to say it's the encouragement of my teachers to see me achieve my best because they've always been encouraging and pushed me to achieve more and more as I've gone through the school. There hasn't really been a point when I've thought that they didn't believe in me. Just having that encouragement has helped me to achieve a lot. I'm very proud of what I've achieved and I think lots of that is due to the encouragement I've received and how kind my teachers have been to me. The relationship I've had with my teachers has been great.

What about prayer?

Alexandria: Throughout my education I've been encouraged to pray deeply and meaningfully. Lower years are encouraged to pray through song and rhymes which always reminded me to pray in thanks as well as in need like in times of emergency.

Josiah: Yes, I think from Year 7 we were always taught to say grace before we go to lunch and they

do that in a very accessible manner. I remember saying grace to the tune of the *Addams Family*, which I won't repeat now, but it got everyone involved and everyone was happy to pray, even if they weren't necessarily Christian. Then as you move through the school the prayers have become more sophisticated and often they give you the choice to just pray for what you want and it's not as enforced but it is encouraged to do that. Through Masses it's good to have that time of reflection to be able to think about the Gospels.

Emily: In RE lessons sometimes we're taken to the chapel. I do have to say, sometimes the chaplain did give us sweets at the end because we were so good. They taught us how to do meditation and how we should pray and respect others when they're praying, because in assembly sometimes some people are praying and others aren't but we've learned to respect that other people are praying silently.

Do you think your schooling has helped to prepare you for the many moral and justice issues in society?

Emily: I think a lot of my morals have come from school because in PSHE [Personal, Social and Health Education] lessons we talk about what you should do and what not to do in certain situations and I think it's helped me focus on my education more and stay away from certain things, such as drugs and drink, and more dangerous situations that are coming about more and more in society. Drugs and alcohol are increasing in youths but I think because we've been more aware of what we're told, and the implications it has, it's better for us.

Josiah: I guess it comes back to the RE GCSE again because within that we learned about issues such as abortion and contraception and euthanasia and really understanding and being able to empathise with the issues. We had class debates which increased my awareness of how other people think and allowed me to empathise with them and also develop my own opinion further as opposed to just agreeing with it because I know that's what I should either agree or disagree with. Knowing the reasons behind it and being able to reason with other people's viewpoints has really helped me develop my understanding and hopefully, when faced with moral issues in later life, I will be able to implement some of the things I've learned and be more understanding and empathetic with other people.

I feel that through being here I've been able to identify injustice a lot more than I would have been able to before. Through looking at these issues in subjects like geography, we recognise the disparity between the high-income and the low-income areas, as well as the north-south divide of the globe. So learning about these issues has enabled me to understand that they're wrong. We can do something about them and hopefully in my later life I'll be able to challenge effectively and be part of the change. If I see someone doing something which isn't right, I will have the confidence to challenge the injustice.

Alexandria: In all schools there are obviously groups of friends and they don't always get along and turning the other cheek or sometimes just protecting a friend is the best thing. Sometimes teachers give you support for trying to do the right thing which is the best thing possible. It's helped me gain confidence.

When I first started this school I had a very bad stutter and through my friends, the chapel, through teachers, I lost my stutter and I now have confidence and I think I could stand up to anyone if they were doing something that was an injustice.

How do you feel about church?

Alexandria: Being here has helped because we have regular Masses at school. We're given reminders about things that we should do and it has brought me closer to the Church rather than drawing me away from it. I see how it can be part of my everyday life and it's like a reminder that everything I do is in the eyes of God. Having access to the chapel has helped me a great deal.

It has given me a place where I can go where there's people I can trust and everyone gets along and it's an opportunity where I can express myself and no one will judge me but also it's peaceful. The most important thing is, God is there. I always feel his presence in the chapel and it's a place where I can go when I just need to be alone or I need to speak with people. It has definitely given me more courage and I feel more comfortable around other people now.

Josiah: I agree with the others. As I previously mentioned, RE has allowed me to understand many of the concepts and rituals and the way things were set up and helped me to understand my faith in more depth. Through what I've been taught in school and being in an environment where I am able to practise. Going to holy days of obligation wasn't something I'd done previously, although I think my father did. Whereas being at school that means I was able to attend those days too and understand their significance.



View from the Hodgson brothers

Two brothers, Dominic, aged ten, and John, aged sixteen, attend Catholic schools in Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire.

Dominic will follow his brother John into the same comprehensive school, St Mary's, in the autumn. The boys clearly enjoy being at their schools and are doing well. However, they raise some really challenging issues for both schools and parents.

Dominic, how do you feel about being in St Joseph's?

Dominic: I like the fact that we all try to live the same beliefs and values. Our mission statement – "To live, love and learn in a caring Christian community" – helps us all stay focused and aiming for the same thing.

I am surprised you started with your school mission statement.

Dominic: We all do that because it is what we are about and what we believe. It is a leveller in a way. We all stick to it, well most of us do. A few people

think they are clever or cool and say they don't, but I think that's because of what's going on outside school really. People my age are seeing and playing with stuff way beyond their ages and it has a bad impact on their lives and the way they think. They can't handle it really.

John: Technology is impacting in a much greater way than most adults realise. Dominic's age group are exposed to things that people my age would never have been and that's just five years ago. Take a phone. Parents buy phones that have web access for their children, because they are cheaper than ones that don't. What they don't think enough about is what their children will do with these phones. The peer pressure is considerable and most parents never check up anyway. I would honestly say that my life experience was nearer my parents' experience when I was Dominic's age than his is now. They are just light years apart and it is getting more so every year.

Dominic, how does your being in a Catholic school help you as a person?

Dominic: I like the fact that we are challenged to do our best. The teachers will give you things to make you think and although they help they push you to work it out for yourself. I am glad the work is hard otherwise it would be boring. In our school you will always be challenged to go higher. It can be difficult for some children, but we help them and I like that. Sometimes I am asked to work with children who are struggling and I think that is important. They also help me too with things I can't do. I like the fact that we are a community with the same ambitions and values which bind us together.

What do you think, John?

John: I agree. The two schools are very similar. Our mission statement is “A Catholic community dedicated to achieving excellence for all” and I think that is true. We receive a well-rounded education with a strong emphasis on Christian beliefs and moral values. This comes through in all our subjects. We are a socially diverse community though not so culturally so. That is a shame really because you don’t mix with many people who reflect the broader society we live in. But you can’t change the mix of the area really.

How well do you think you are being prepared for the next stage in your life?

Dominic: I will be sad to leave because I have been here since I was two years old in preschool. I am excited about going to my next school because I feel ready for the challenge.

John: I want to stay on in the sixth form. I think it has been pretty good so far. You are encouraged to think for yourself and most teachers are happy to be challenged by their students. It can be difficult for some teachers in a Catholic school when ethical issues come up and students start debating them because I think some teachers may feel that they are not sure what they can say from a Catholic perspective especially if the student really knows their theology or more than they do on the topic. I am really grateful that my education has not just been grades-driven. Some of my friends in other schools clearly suffer from this. Nothing else matters but getting the best grades so the school looks good in the league tables. It is not like that in St Mary’s.

We are expected to be the very best we can be, but there is more to life than just exam results. That is what I mean by a rounded education which is what you need today. Things are changing so fast.

To what extent do you think your Religious Education has helped you?

Dominic: At the moment we are learning about being a sacramental people. At first it is hard, but I think it really means seeing how God is working through me, like when I stand up for a friend who is having difficulty. It is about seeing how the sacraments are stepping stones, a bit like targets to aim for really. They help us to follow the right path all your life.

John: I really enjoy it and want to do A level Religious Studies. I think it is important because it gives you a way of making sense of life and engaging with the questions so many people have today. It sets your learning in a context and helps to consolidate everything. We are encouraged to ask questions and think for ourselves which is important especially if you go to university where you will meet people with different views. I feel I will be able to handle that. Going back to the social media and the internet I think this is having a big impact on the way we learn. We can find out just about anything but what we need to know is how to make sense of it and if it is really true. That is where our school is very good. We are not empty minds to be filled up. We need to be taught how to deal with so much information that it can get really confusing. I am looking forward to the sixth form because you have more freedom to learn on your own.

Clearly you both enjoy and appreciate your schools. Is there anything that you think would improve them further?

Dominic: I wish we could do something about what parents let their children see and play with. There are so many violent video games that are way above the age limit of our school and so many pupils are playing them because they put pressure on their parents and they give in. I would like to see the school helping parents to stop this. It would help them to be better in school too. I am also on our chaplaincy team and that is great, but it would be even better if we could do more things besides raising money, which we are really good at.






John: We are an outstanding school so this is difficult. One thing I would like is to see more of the governors. I know they come into school but it would be good if we knew them all and discussed things together. I know this is not easy to arrange, but we could learn a lot from each other.

Would you send your children to a Catholic school?

Dominic: Yes, because they are the best!

John: I agree if the Catholic school was the best in the area. I can see the difference between our school and other schools through my friends.

POINTS FOR FAMILY DISCUSSION

-  **What do you think about what the children from St Anselm’s said?**
-  **The Hodgson brothers raise some important points about the exposure of young people today and the media. Do you feel this could be better controlled within the family?**
-  **How did you feel about the responses from the sixth-form students?**
-  **How do the responses from all the children reflect your experiences at school?**
-  **Have the responses from any of the pupils challenged you as parents? If so, how?**

**Reflection**

We leave this place, Lord,
inspired by your Word,
challenged by your example,
empowered by your Spirit.
Give us the strength to be people
who inspire others with your Word,
challenge others with your example
and empower others with your Spirit.
Amen. (Mo Baldwin/CAFOD)