

# **‘Catholic Schools: a family in Christ – our future together’**

28<sup>th</sup> & 29<sup>th</sup> April 2026

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## **Introduction**

Thank you for gathering today to celebrate and reflect on the future of Catholic education in the schools across the archdiocese. We are blest with our 221 Catholic schools educating about 85,000 children and our staff who promote and support the learning of our students to develop the fullness of their gifts as well as help them to learn about the saving message of Jesus Christ who invites them to love him, be with him and follow him. Each child, each young person is at the heart of our educational mission, each has one opportunity. Canon Law reminds us, ‘Education must pay regard to the formation of the whole person, so that all may attain their eternal destiny and at the same time promote the common good of society.’ (Canon 795).

At the same time, we face many challenges: a declining birth rate, less financial support of schools, ageing properties, in some cases

diminishing support from local authorities, competition from other schools, and parental choice about which schools to choose. Within the Catholic sector, there are many children who are not supported at home in their faith, there is less recruitment into teaching and leadership, and it is more difficult to find foundation governors.

The present context means that we need to move from independence to greater interdependence and build together our future as a family of schools in Christ. I support the proposal to build the academy framework as a means of protecting our schools for the future to ensure that we can continue to offer excellent Catholic education to the future generations. This has been my experience in the Diocese of Nottingham and then the Diocese of Westminster. It is the preferred model of other dioceses in England who are moving to a few large CMATs. I believe we are better together, working together to serve the mission, having greater support for staff and keeping control of our educational system for the future generations of Catholic children and others. Together we are a constellation of stars offering hope in our Archdiocese.

## **Our Mission**

Celebrating 60 years since the document *Gravissimum educationis* on the extreme importance and relevance of education in human life, Pope Leo reflects on Catholic education in his Apostolic Letter

‘Drawing New Maps of Hope’. He uses an image from cosmology to understand the educational mission of our schools and colleges. He writes ‘Since its origins, the Gospel has generated “educational constellations” (DNMH 1.2). He continues, ‘I speak of a “constellation”, because the world of Catholic education is a living and pluralistic network: parish schools and colleges, universities and institutes of higher education, professional training centres, movements, digital platforms, service-learning initiatives and school, university and cultural pastoral programmes. Each “star” has its own brightness, but together they chart a course. Where in the past there was rivalry, now we ask the institutions to converge: unity is our most prophetic strength.’ (DNMH 8.1) We can think of our network of schools as part of the educational constellation of stars which shine out across the Archdiocese and are connected by relationships of commitment, faith and hope in Christ. Christ is at the heart of this constellation and constantly renews and refreshes all that we do. We are a family in Christ, part of the Body of Christ, witnessing to Christ and have relationships together united in Christ. This will never be an easy task but one in which the seed of the gospel is planted and will in time bear fruit. Of course, in any family, there will be good and loving relationships, poor and damaged ones, better and worse, but together we are stronger than when we are alone.

Since becoming your Archbishop, I have had the opportunity to visit a number of schools – some primary, high schools, and a sixth form

college as well as celebrate with schools at the Cathedral. Each visit has been a joy and an opportunity to celebrate the mission of Catholic education in the Archdiocese. I have met bewildered reception children who wonder who I am, keen primary pupils who wrote messages of thanks and prayers, the committed school ambassadors for mission at secondary level, heard choirs and piano recitals, blessed a garden of remembrance as well as listened to stories of projects of social action. There are many reasons for thanksgiving, for joy and for hope.

As Heads and Chairs of Governing Bodies I ask you to thank all you staff for their work. Everyone is important, cleaners ensure the building is smart and gives glory to God, teachers inspire learning, leadership which seeks to provide the best opportunity for the students and the staff. Educators and all staff, from the Head to those in the kitchen, all play a part in helping the child to arrive at the fullness of Christian life. I always visit the school kitchen and thank the staff who must keep the children happy with their meals. Sports can be an important area from which students develop focus, discipline and teamwork. Music and drama similarly develop the potentials of students for as part of their whole formation. Catholic education is summed up in the words of Pope Leo, 'Educating is an act of hope and a passion that is renewed because it manifests the promise we see in the future of humanity (DMOH 32.) I know that you want to see

the next generation flourish and be fulfilled, finding ways to use their God-given gifts to the full.

Catholic education has a special mission for the poorest and the most fragile families in society in the same way that Jesus reached out to the sick, the poor and those most in need. It was for this reason that the Catholic bishops, after the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850, continued the work of the Vicars Apostolic and decided that the priority of the mission was the provision of Catholic education and the building of schools before churches. Recently I celebrated 175 years of Notre Dame education in Liverpool. It was very interesting to read that one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools wrote of the newly founded school within two months of the Sisters' arrival and educating six hundred children gathered in a basic school at St Nicholas, that a revolution had been effected 'It is a special character of institutions conducted by teachers of this class, that the intellectual work they accomplish, however valuable and effective, is uniformly accompanied by a more precious moral and religious triumph, of which they alone seemed to possess the secret.' The inspector recognises the 'moral and religious triumph' of Catholic education. As you well know, Catholic education transforms the whole person – intellect, moral, artistic, physical and spiritual.

The sisters knew that education provided a means of change to transform the opportunities for young women for generations. They

wanted to provide high quality education for girls in a rapidly growing and industrialising city where girls in particular lacked access to the schooling that would equip them for the social, economic and moral challenges of the era. Today Catholic education continues that mission transforming the lives of girls and boys for the future.

Whilst the earliest schools met opposition and hostility because of the place of Catholics in the country, today our schools and colleges are called to be beacons of hope and to enter dialogue with others in society to humanise and witness to the values of a redeemed humanity in Christ as Church.

## **Who we are?**

In the Archdiocese of Liverpool, according to the 2024 Catholic Education Service figures, we educate 85,314 (CES 2024) children in 220 Catholic schools and colleges. This is much greater than the Mass-going population which is only about 29,000 and so is an important work of the Church in her mission to evangelise.

26.9% of students are eligible for FSM, and 26.7% reported as Ever 6; 14.6% SEN no statement, 2.6% SEN with statement or EHC plan. This is higher than in other dioceses.

In Liverpool there 2691 Catholic teaching staff, who are 54.8% of all teaching staff and 24.7% have CCRS (again the highest percentages in the country).

This profile shapes your experience and means that there are significant challenges for teaching and learning in many schools – the challenge of providing for children from challenging socio-economic backgrounds, many first languages, the increased demand of communicating the faith and developing Catholic life and mission when there is little support in faith from home.

Schools exist within a system of families, communities, localities, and dioceses. We can call this an ecosystem. The identity of the school is shaped by forces within its ecosystem as well as their place in the ecosystem of diocesan and religious schools. The challenges we face today are faced better together with a focus on the values of interdependence and solidarity.

Some families are strong in their faith, practice regularly and live their Catholic life as an integral part of daily living. Many families want a Catholic education but are often weak in faith and practice. Families are often fragmented which creates another challenge for staff teaching Catholic faith. The effects of COVID on the wellbeing and mental health of pupils are reported in every school. Staff and leadership can find themselves meeting parents whose narrative is

completely different from that of the school. The focus of the irate parent may be the good of the child, the focus for the head is the common good of all, especially the disadvantaged. There is a task of helping parents to understand the nature and identity of a Catholic school and the narrative out of which it is living. These conditions create more fragile conditions for the delivery of Catholic education and the need for support for staff, especially leaders and teachers, across the family.

Chaplains play an essential role in our schools in helping young people to pray and to discern as well as supporting staff. Catholic schools are very good at helping students and staff facing sickness or bereavement. Many priests visit the schools but find with diminishing numbers and increased age, this is harder to do. The demands of being a foundation governor increases for all.

## **A New Moment**

In celebrating all that we are as a network of Catholic education, today is a new moment when we are called to renew and build together for the new context. We cannot stand still.

We need to build together and reenergise our Catholic academy trusts by growing together with the whole family. Support is at the heart of this desire so that staff are supported together with strong leadership

to weather the future storms in education. This moment asks how we can do things better together for the good of all? The value of 'solidarity' from Catholic social teaching provides an answer. It is a firm determination to commit oneself to the good of our educational constellation of schools and a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the good of all and of each school, because we are all responsible for all (C.f. SRS 38).

We need to develop a wider missionary spirit for evangelisation which is also a challenge about how parishes, families and schools interact and transmit the faith together. We must not forget and build on the principle that parents are the first educators of their children in the faith. The school cannot be separated from its local context which shapes the minds and hearts of pupils, students and staff. Each student lives out of a narrative and then encounters the gospel narrative when they arrive in the Catholic school. We can help to broaden the heart and mind of the students by the Christian narrative and help each to know, in the words of St. John Henry Newman, that God has created each child for some definite service. We are called to help each student discover his or her purpose in life.

Catholic education contributes to the common good by helping students learn about their common home and the gift of creation, live justice and forgiveness, speak the truth and act with love. It develops each student and his or her gifts to find purpose and meaning in life.

He or she will then use their gifts for the common good of society. They will contribute, as schools contribute, to the set of relationships which enable people to flourish.

As we look across the educational mission in the Archdiocese, we see stars of excellence shining out. The mandate for Catholic education today is to draw new maps of hope in our troubled world. 'Each "star" has its own brightness, but together they chart a course. Our constellation is gathered here today. Today I ask schools to converge into our framework of academies. As Pope Leo said, 'unity is our most prophetic strength' (DNMH 8.1).

Archbishop John Sherrington