

St Columba's College

King Harry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 4AW

Date of inspection by Westminster Diocese: 10 -11 October 2018



Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

A. Classroom religious education is outstanding

- The school offers a well-considered, relevant and dynamic curriculum across all key stages, based on and mapped to the *Religious Education Curriculum Directory*.
- Pupils are religiously literate and can articulate their knowledge and understanding of religion in a meaningful and purposeful way.
- Pupils make excellent progress as they move through the school and their attainment in religious education is as good, and in some areas, better than core subjects.
- The cohesion between members of the religious education department is a key strength and is evident in the planning of schemes of work, delivery of its content to pupils and sharing of ideas.
- Pupils' attitudes to religious education are exemplary and pupils demonstrate a thirst for learning.
- Typicality of teaching is never less than good, and in many cases, outstanding.
- Leaders have a clear vision for further improvement in religious education and structures continue to be embedded to ensure high quality teaching and the monitoring of pupils' progress.
- Leaders of religious education have made a concerted effort to model excellent practice. They ensure systems are developed to enable all staff to have a deep understanding and appreciation of the centrality of religious education.
- Religious education is delivered with the highest expectations and staff have high aspirations for all pupils.
- Governors are knowledgeable about the progress pupils make throughout the school and challenge leaders to ensure the highest expectations.

B. The Catholic life of the school is outstanding

- The school now meets the requirement of the Bishops' Conference for pupils to receive 10% curriculum time for religious education and 5% at Key Stage 5.
- The Catholic life of the school permeates every aspect of the school and is seen distinctly in the values and spiritual conduct of pupils and staff which strongly reflects the charism of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart.
- Pupils at all key stages speak passionately about their involvement in the liturgical life of the school.
- Relationships between pupils and staff are exemplary and there is a clear culture that embodies the Columban motto of *Cor ad cor loquitur* (*Heart speaking to heart*).
- The school encourages strong links with parents, the Brothers of the Sacred Heart and local parishes to develop their experiences of being part of a universal Church.
- The school has embedded a focus on the '3 C's' (courtesy, compassion and courage). These are woven intrinsically into the fabric of the school and are not only quoted but practised in all areas of school life.
- Prayer and worship are central to the life of the school and the pupils are offered a diverse range of opportunities to organise and participate in engaging and creative experiences of Catholic tradition.
- Pupils demonstrate a readiness to be of service to society, responding to the needs of the community at large.
- The school is a place of great religious diversity, characterised by tolerance and mutual respect.

A. Classroom Religious Education

What has improved since the last inspection?

The curriculum across the school has been reviewed and now meets the requirements of the *Religious Education Curriculum Directory (RECD)*. The Prep School has introduced a programme entitled, '*Art, Spirituality and Religion: A Window to God*,' which complements their core weekly teaching and supports staff who are less confident teaching Religious Education (RE). It encourages pupils to explore aspects of the curriculum directory through imagery, the teachings of André Coindre (the founder of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart) and specific bible stories. In Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, the curriculum has been rewritten and is mapped to meet the requirements of the RECD. It is challenging, vibrant and dynamic and has an emphasis on extended writing skills to support the increased demands of GCSE.

The Prep School continues to develop moderation processes with stronger links to the deanery and diocese.

The content of classroom religious education is outstanding

In the Prep School, the core RE scheme is enhanced exceptionally well by the newly developed '*Art, Spirituality and Religion: A Window to God*' programme. In lessons observed, it was clear that all staff felt confident developing discussions with the pupils and making strong links to scripture. Pupils are fully engaged in this programme and, in an interview with a group of Prep pupils, they spoke animatedly about the various paintings they had discussed and compared their responses between the various year groups. A Prep 3 pupil, talking about the programme, said, 'I am still really good at RE even though I am not religious.' This programme complements the core scheme and both are planned and evaluated by all staff and reviewed each half term by the religious education coordinator and the academic deputy headteacher.

In Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, pupils described religious education lessons as a 'perfect balance between fun and learning.' The RE department have worked tirelessly to develop a scheme of work which is rigorous, relevant and explicitly mapped to the 4 strands in the RECD. This scheme prepares the pupils well for GCSE and beyond. Pupils think ethically and theologically and are clearly religiously literate. Core RE lessons observed were inspiring and challenged the pupils to consider concepts which are new to their experience. The 'Pastoral Programme' is taught with discreet religious education content and is planned and marked by teachers in the RE department.

Pupil achievement in religious education is outstanding

In the Prep School, the tracking of RE shows the sustained progress of all pupils from Reception to Year 6. This is monitored carefully by the RE coordinator and the academic and pastoral deputy headteachers. Evidence from book scrutinies show an increasing level of subject knowledge as the pupils move through the school. Pupils achieve well due to high expectations from teachers and well planned lessons. The school is beginning to use the national levels of attainment increasingly accurately to track pupils throughout each year group. Moderation at school and deanery levels confirms teacher judgements and the school has recognised that this needs to be shared more effectively at diocesan level to ensure an increasingly accurate understanding of assessment across the staff.

In the Senior School, attainment and progress at GCSE and A level is outstanding, on a par and often exceeding other core subjects. Those pupils who transferred from the Prep School are tracked towards GCSE and it is evident to see the excellent progress they had made.

Stretch and challenge are a focus for the whole school. The most challenging lessons observed were clearly designed to meet the needs of all learners. Pupils at Key Stage 4 said, 'Our teachers are

inspirational and build our confidence.' The RE department is a strength of the Senior School. In an interview with KS5 students, one said, 'The RE department are truly dedicated, enthusiastic and a most caring department and they have very high standards and want us to excel.' Careful monitoring and observation of lessons by the RE department ensure consistency in the planning and delivery of RE. Differentiation is apparent across all year groups, including KS5. Although the take up of Religious Studies at A level is high, the RE department is aware that it cannot become complacent and needs to keep promoting the subject. In the Senior School, pupils are confident in articulating key philosophical and ethical concepts irrespective of their own religions. Across the school, pupils are confident users of religious vocabulary and illustrate excellent knowledge and understanding, appropriate to their age and ability.

The quality of teaching is good

All lessons observed were at least good, and in many cases, outstanding. In the most effective lessons observed, staff used prior learning and open ended, challenging questions to develop and extend the pupils. Impact was greatest in lessons where pupils were given time to reflect on and discuss their learning without being overly teacher directed. This was particularly evident in a Year 10 lesson where pupils were discussing the topic 'Human life is sacred' and they were given time to engage with one another, supported by the teacher who challenged them in their thought processes. Pupils respected each other's points of view and debated the topic knowledgeably. In a core Year 12 RE lesson on 'justice and the law,' the teacher built on previous GCSE knowledge and delved into philosophical concepts that enabled the pupils to build on their compassion and supported them in discussing their knowledge of political theory. They were allowed time to think about their responses, which were always thoughtful and considered. Higher order questioning is used throughout the school, but more significantly in the Senior School, to stretch pupils' knowledge and understanding and extend their ability to reflect on the deeper significance of religious belief and practice.

In the Prep School, teachers still need to develop an increasingly creative and engaging approach to teaching which allows pupils to become more independent, for example, by using independent research to develop their inferential skills. The pupils are overly teacher directed and are not given enough time to collaborate with one another.

In the Senior School, the quality of teaching in both core and exam classes is challenging and engaging. Teachers have a deep understanding of the centrality of RE to life itself and so the lessons provide them with an impressive grounding in knowledge and encouragement to consider how they are called to a life of discipleship.

The effectiveness of leadership and management in promoting religious education is outstanding

Leaders are very clear about their areas of strength and those areas they need to develop and these are articulated in the school's self-evaluation.

In the Prep School, the head of RE is relatively new to post and is engaging well with the deanery and the diocese to ensure that moderation practices become increasingly more effective and that they are secure in their judgements of attainment. Pupils speak highly of the programme 'Art, Spirituality and Religion: A Window to God,' and were able to discuss how much they enjoy it. The programme, which complements their core scheme, clearly supports their religious literacy, helping them to make links to Catholic teaching and to relate religious practice to their own place in society. In the Senior School, the RE department have been ambitious in creating a culture of rigorous academic challenge and their excellent exam results are reflective of this. Numerous initiatives ensure that the pupils are eager to achieve beyond their expected grades. There is a culture of

scholarship where pupils are very eager to exceed the targets set for them. 'The Extravaganza', aimed at high achieving pupils, has been well considered and is making an impact on attainment and progress at GCSE. The RE Ambassador programme supports pupils who are less confident. A pupil in Year 11 has devised and delivered a peer taught unit to support pupils in Year 10. The head of RE has an excellent understanding of the strengths and areas for development of the department and has created a culture of high expectation and collaboration amongst the staff. This was further evidenced in a pupil discussion, where a pupil said, 'The RE department is always supportive and there are always opportunities for us.'

What should the school do to develop further in classroom religious education?

- Ensure moderation across the Prep School is rigorous and is discussed and shared more effectively at deanery and diocesan level.
- Ensure a focus on effective teaching strategies remain a priority in the Prep School by giving pupils every opportunity to show their potential in the subject.
- Ensure feedback to pupils across the school in lessons and in books is consistent and pupils are able to articulate their progress, particularly in the Prep School.

B. The Catholic life of the school

What has improved since the last inspection?

Pupils across the school now receive their weekly entitlement of 10% and 5% at Key Stage 5. The 'Pastoral Programme' supports this entitlement with explicit religious education sessions, planned and marked by specialist RE teachers.

The place of religious education as the core of the curriculum

is outstanding

Religious education is firmly at the core of all aspects of education throughout the school. In a discussion with pupils, one said, 'I am a different person from when I started here - I am a Columban.' The charism of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart contributes to religious education in its widest sense as one pupil commented, 'The Brothers are our founders and they are our moral compass.' Religious education receives 10% curriculum time at Key Stages Stage 1 to 4 and 5% at KS5. Core RE is a strength, with one pupil commenting, 'Core RE is relevant.' Funding for RE is given the same importance as other core subjects. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about RE in the school and have said: 'The Catholic education taught at the school is actively put into practice and is evident from the children in Reception to Senior Management' and 'We are happy with the way the school embraces and welcomes other religions and cultural backgrounds and how it teaches the boys to understand, be interested in, and appreciate other religions.' In discussions with pupils, they have said: 'RE is for everyone' and 'They teach us the value of RE as a life skill for the future.' Senior leaders are fully committed to ensuring religious education is central in the school, and this vision is shared by the governing body.

The experience of Catholic worship – prayer and liturgy – for the whole school community

is outstanding

The school excels in ensuring daily opportunities for pupils and staff to pray daily in registration time and at the beginning of lessons. These are linked to the liturgical year, school focus of the week and global issues and initiatives. For example, on one of the inspection days, all prayer that was observed focused on careers and work, the school's focus for the week, with reflections on Joseph the Worker and on issues relating to mental health as it was 'World Mental Health Day.' House Masses are celebrated throughout the year. All pupils are able to participate in the celebration of Mass through readings, ushering, altar serving, leading the singing and music. Pupils' engagement in the Mass which took place during the inspection, was reverent and respectful. The school is sensitive to the need to provide opportunities for prayer to pupils from other faiths and traditions. The sacrament of Reconciliation is offered during Advent and Lent and pupils from across the school avail of this. Clergy from the neighbouring parish assist with this. Staff from across the school have attended a whole school retreat. Pupils know and recite a range of prayers, many related to the charism of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart.

In the Prep School, the boys were able to lead the school in prayer during the hymn practice. All pupils took part enthusiastically and the hymn lyrics were explored and made relevant to their daily practice of faith. The Lower Prep assembly explored the theme of Harvest and pupils were able to share their prayers and poems reflectively. They listen attentively and ask interesting questions. They participate eagerly in collective worship and now need to take increasing ownership of this.

The Ministry team are a dedicated group of staff from across the school and governing body who ensure a vibrant approach to embedding opportunities for spirituality and sharing ideas for prayer and worship across the school.

The contribution to the Common Good – service and social justice –**is outstanding**

The school has an inspirational understanding of the call to serve. Programmes have been developed that ensure each pupil is valued within the community - so much so that the Senior School has introduced a specific staff role for the development of student formation. Discussion with pupils at all key stages showed their understanding of a range of opportunities for the Common Good. Examples of the call to justice and service throughout the school include charitable work offered at the local 'Open door and the Catholic Worker farm,' the Poppy Appeal, Catholic Children's Society and international 'Icon of Hope' charity. There has been an ongoing commitment to support the Brothers' school in Zambia (Robert Shitima school) and pupils spoke eagerly of the whole community project to send one of the pupils from Zambia to university. Pupils are also actively engaged in supporting the less fortunate through initiatives such as the 1000 hours service, local foodbanks and various locally sponsored events such as the St Alban's half marathon.

Pupils in the Prep School were able to say why they raised money for charity as part of the Church's social teachings and said, 'At our school it is not about the winning but more about helping others.' The school has embedded a culture of the '3 C's' (courtesy, compassion, courage) which help to support and develop the contribution to the Common Good.

In the Senior School, pupils are rewarded on a termly basis for their contribution to the school's 'S.H.A.P.E. Programme', an activities and enrichment programme, which incorporates service and the Common Good. The school actively promotes Service (S) in a number of ways, notably the Service Fayre at the beginning of the year, which is a celebration of all the many charitable and service activities that the pupils can participate in. Many of these are student led. Pupils also receive ties for their contribution to College life and service. Pupils representing the St Stephen's Guild are also given ties for their service to ministry in the church. Pupils are actively engaged in a vast number of charitable events, supporting organisations locally, nationally and internationally. The Brothers of the Sacred Heart actively encourage the Coindre Bursary scheme for pupils with little or no financial means to be educated at the school.

The partnership with parents, school and parish, and collaboration as an integral part of the diocese through its relationship with the diocesan Bishop and those acting on his behalf**is outstanding**

The school continues to build key links to local schools and the Diocese of Westminster. The Prep School recently hosted a deanery moderation session for local schools and is committed to strengthening these links. Leaders in religious education work closely with diocesan advisors and implement recommended improvements in the best interests of the school. The school's intrinsic links to the Brothers of the Sacred Heart is woven into the fabric of the school and this is a key feature of the success of the school. There was an overwhelmingly positive response from parents to the parental questionnaire and they are clearly very supportive of religious education and the Catholic life of the school. The school utilises the support from parents and uses their expertise to enhance religious education throughout the school. Parents from the Jewish and Muslim faiths have been invited into school to share their faith and practice. Visits to the local Catholic parish are encouraged and the school is increasingly engaged with the Diocese of Westminster, for example, attending The Good Shepherd and Good Samaritan Masses. The school recognises that while a range of opportunities exist, they aim to further develop and embed approaches to service and public benefit in the local Catholic community within the life of the school.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in promoting the Catholic life of the school**is outstanding**

The school's mission in promoting and realising Gospel values in an environment of academic endeavour and personal discipline expresses the school's understanding of itself as a Catholic school. Leaders have been visionary in developing strategies to ensure the charism of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart continues well into the future. The Coindre Leadership Programme taken on by eight members of staff, show dedication and commitment to continuing the charism of the school well into the future. The school's recruitment process has been thoroughly explored and there are excellent systems in place to ensure staff are appointed knowing how central the school's mission is to the success of the school. Governors take an active role in the schools as overseers of the charism. They share in the strategic leadership of the school, challenge leaders effectively and support the school with enthusiasm in strategic matters. They know the school very well and are involved in all aspects of life at the school.

What should the school do to develop further the Catholic life of the school?

- Encourage pupils in the Prep School to take increasing ownership of planning and preparing child led collective worship.
- Maintain the Coindre Leadership Programme as a way of ensuring the successful continuation of the charism of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart.

Information about this school

- The school is a 4-18 Catholic boys Independent school in the locality of St Albans
- The proportion of pupils who are baptised Catholic is 37% in the Prep School and 36% in the Senior School
- The proportion of pupils who are from other Christian denominations is 37% in the Prep School and 44% in the Senior School, and from other faiths is 13% in the Prep School and 9 % in the Senior School. The remaining pupils are from families who have not declared a faith.
- The percentage of Catholic teachers in the school is 46%.
- The number of teachers with a Catholic qualification is 10%
- There are 25 pupils in the Prep school and 98 pupils in the Senior School with special educational needs or disabilities of whom 4 have statements of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)/ Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP).
- The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is in line with the national average.
- The number of pupils speaking English as an Additional Language is well below average.

Department for Education Number	919-6136
Unique Reference Number	117638
Local Authority area	Hertfordshire

Type of school	Independent
School category	Through school
Age range of pupils	4-18
Gender of pupils	Male
Number of pupils on roll	825
The appropriate authority	The College Trustees
Chair	Mrs Jackie Harrison
Headteacher	Mr David Buxton
Telephone number	01727 855185
Website	www.stcolumbascollege.org
Email address	collegeadmin@stcolumbascollege.org
Date of previous inspection	December 2013
Grades from previous inspection:	
Classroom religious education	Very good
The Catholic life of the school	Very good

Information about this inspection

This inspection was carried out (i) under the requirements of the Canon 806 and (ii) in accordance with the Framework for Diocesan Inspections 2015 approved by the Archbishop of Westminster.

- The inspectors would like to thank the governors, headteacher, staff, pupils and parents for their co-operation over the conduct of the inspection.
- During the inspection 34 lessons or part lessons were observed.
- The inspectors attended 3 assemblies and a number of acts of worship.
- Meetings were held with school staff, pupils and governors.
- Other evidence was gathered from contacts with parents through a questionnaire, scrutiny of a sample of pupils' work, observation of pupils in and out of lessons and examination of school documents.

Inspection Grades

- Outstanding
- Good
- Requires improvement
- Causing concern

Inspection Team

The inspectors are appointed by the Archbishop.

Mrs Monica McCarthy and Mrs Angela Podmore	Lead Inspectors
Miss Anne Moloney	Associate Inspector
Mrs Bernadette O'Hanlon	Associate Inspector
Ms Katherine Sheridan	Associate Inspector

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