

Catholic Diocese of Northampton



INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION`

(Under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005)

ST THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

St Mary's Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, MK3 5DT

DfE School No: 826 3369

URN: 110476

Headteacher: Mr Robert O'Malley
Chair of Governors: Mr Simon Navin

Reporting Inspector: Mrs Marion Betts

Date of Inspection: 1st April 2014

Date and grade of previous inspection: May 2009. Grade 1

The School is in the Trusteeship of the Diocese and in partnership with
Milton Keynes Local Authority

Information about the school

St Thomas Aquinas school is a larger than average school for pupils aged 4 to 11 years. There are 291 pupils on roll, 96% of whom are baptised Catholics. 58% of the teachers and 76% of the support staff are Catholic. The majority of pupils come from the parish of St Thomas Aquinas and All Saints, Bletchley with others coming from the surrounding area. Pupils come from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is below the national average. Around a fifth of pupils speak English as an additional language.

Key grades for inspection

1. Outstanding 2. Good 3. Requires Improvement 4. Unsatisfactory

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic school

Grade 1

St Thomas Aquinas School is an outstanding Catholic school. The committed leadership of the headteacher is instrumental in very effectively maintaining the school's Catholic identity, inspiring and empowering staff to fully fulfil their role and in powerfully fostering pupils' growing awareness of their Catholic faith and their understanding of how to live this out each day. Prayer, worship and sacramental celebration have a strong central role in school. Pupils say "God is present around us here". The pupils' spiritual and moral development is outstanding and this is reflected in pupils' excellent behaviour and very positive attitudes. The Catholic ethos is tangible around school with many vibrant and attractive Catholic and religious education displays. Relationships are very good. The care demonstrated by all for each other as individuals created by God fully reflects the school's mission statement. Pupils make very good progress in religious education throughout their school life.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

Grade 1

The school has not remained complacent since the last inspection but has continued to further develop its Catholic life and religious education. The areas for improvement highlighted in the previous inspection have been fully addressed with the school using visitors and visits to places of worship to enhance the teaching and learning about other religions. For example, an invited lady spoke about different aspects of Sikhism and pupils have visited a synagogue.

The school's self-evaluation is derived from rigorous monitoring by the headteacher and RE co-ordinator who thereby gain a very good overall view of the school's strengths and development needs. The inspector concurred with the judgements made by the school. Appropriate improvement actions are fed into the whole school development plan, the progress of which is regularly reviewed by staff and governors.

The headteacher, leadership team and governors plan strategically in order to continue to promote their vision for the school's Catholic life and RE to the whole of the school community. Staff, pupils and parents appreciate the values and ethos of the school and fully participate in its spiritual and pastoral dimensions. All members of staff are committed to providing high quality religious education and are willing to improve their skills through training. Governors also have attended diocesan training events.

The governors are dedicated to promoting and sustaining high quality Catholic education. The appointment of an executive headteacher to St Thomas Aquinas and another Catholic school in the parish has been identified as the most effective way forward to achieve their vision for Catholic education locally. Throughout this process governors have sought the views of all stakeholders, including the staff of the two schools and answered concerns and fears by individual discussions. Their strong commitment to this vision will ensure the school continues to develop even further.

What the school needs to do to improve further

- monitor the impact of the Catholic life of the school and RE teaching and learning by using the ideas and opinions of the pupils
- give more pupils responsibility for developing their own spiritual lives by providing opportunities for them to prepare and plan their own class acts of worship.

Outcomes for pupils

Grade 1

The extent to which pupils benefit from the school's Catholic life is outstanding. They understand the mission statement and strive to achieve it in all areas of their school life. Pupils are very proud of their school and show a strong concern for the well-being of others. They express their own views with confidence and mention 'not judging others' and 'forgiveness' as expected school values. Pupils willingly undertake responsibilities and are encouraged to act on their own initiative and ideas. For example the pupil chaplaincy team promoted fund-raising for a skills centre in Zambia by demonstrating the skills necessary to the people there. Pupils' compassion for others is evidenced in many activities such as the reception children selling their paintings. Pupils' achievements are recognised and valued. Pupils praise the friendly, caring attitude of the teachers who listen to them and help solve any problems. The school provides a wide variety of clubs and other enrichment opportunities which are highly valued by pupils.

Worship and prayer make an outstanding impact on pupils' spiritual and moral development. All pupils respond very well to worship, meditations and the prayer life of the school. They participate respectfully and with ease. Worship inspires pupils to think deeply and to give heartfelt responses. Pupils create their own prayers and are aware of the various purposes of prayer. They use the courtyard well for quiet reflection. Pupils' high quality singing enhances their worship. They appreciate listening to or presenting pupil-led assemblies. Pupils have a good understanding of the liturgical year and enjoy experiencing its traditions. Some attend Friday Mass in the parish along with school staff. The pupil chaplaincy team have recently prepared their own acts of worship for the community but, as yet, this learning experience has not been offered to other pupils.

Pupils know how they can access support and help at any time. They know the school leaders support and promote chaplaincy. All staff contribute effectively to the well-being of pupils. The pupils' chaplaincy team are involved in planning and leading liturgy. The parish priest is a member of the team and offers parents and staff pastoral support if needed. He makes a significant contribution to the sacramental life of the school and initiated an opportunity for individual confessions following the Reconciliation service.

Pupils are gaining religious literacy at a very good rate throughout the school. Their standard of work is high and reaches at least national expectations, with many pupils exceeding this level. Pupils willingly tackle challenging activities. They enjoy their religious education lessons especially when given practical tasks, for example using pastels to portray Jesus carrying his cross. Pupils are fully engaged during lessons. Their books are very well presented and demonstrate a range of interesting written tasks. Pupils' responses in lessons and RE books show evidence of their growing depth and maturity of thought and opinions. One example was an older pupil's response to how people might feel as they venerate the cross, saying they are "sad because of the weight of our sins that Jesus carried for us".

Leaders and managers

Grade 1

The leadership of the school's Catholic life is outstanding. A clear, powerful vision is effectively demonstrated by the richness of pupils' experiences; through the high quality education provided and by the strong encouragement given to pupils to fully commit to following the faith. Governors are dedicated to maintaining the school's Catholic identity. They are very supportive and regularly review the work of the school. The school environment very effectively promotes the Catholic ethos of care and celebration. The school is a welcoming inclusive community where all members are respected and valued. The school works in partnership with parents who responded extremely positively to the inspection questionnaire. Parents mentioned the caring family atmosphere of the school and the high quality of teaching. They feel very welcome and are regularly invited to school services. The school has very strong links with the church through the close involvement of the parish priest and parishioners.

The religious education co-ordinator is extremely well supported by the school leadership. This ensures RE has a very high profile. All aspects of religious education teaching and learning are monitored rigorously and a clear direction for improvement has been set. Pupils are assessed regularly and the levels of attainment are broken into sublevels so that pupil progress can be tracked in more detail. Moderation of pupil assessments is undertaken within school and through collaboration with the local Catholic partnership. The RE governor regularly receives reports concerning the RE curriculum, monitoring and pupil achievement data. The religious education co-ordinator frequently leads training and provides firm support and guidance to the staff encouraging them to improve their skills. Two teachers have just completed the CCRS course (Catholic Certificate of Religious Studies). The budget provided is generous and in line with that given to other core subjects. Religious education is very well resourced.

Provision

Grade 1

Worship and prayer are central in the school's life. Pupils' liturgical formation is extremely well planned to ensure the widest possible experiences of the richness of the Catholic tradition of prayer and worship. For example the learning about the Stations of the Cross is reinforced by a weekly voluntary journey of the Stations around the school grounds. Another prayer activity is Rosary club. The weekly meditations often take place in the outside prayer areas. The worship observed used visual presentation, artefacts and song very effectively to link with the chosen theme. During a meditation pupils made themselves a bracelet of coloured beads, each colour linking to learning about prayer for different purposes. Very attractive classroom prayer tables provide a focus for worship. Chaplaincy provision offers effective spiritual and pastoral support to staff and children. Pupils attend Mass regularly.

The quality of religious education lessons overall is outstanding. The best teaching employs creative planning and delivery, lively pace, open and challenging questioning, talking partners and differentiated outcomes to motivate and interest pupils, inspiring them to work with enthusiasm and independence. Differentiated tasks are appropriately planned as evidenced by work for an older pupil recently arrived in Britain, which was individually designed through the careful choice of language, pictures and artefacts to portray the Good Friday events. Teachers demonstrate sound subject knowledge and are supported by skilled assistants. Marking is thorough with appropriate praise and constructive feedback that effectively enable pupils to improve or extend their learning.

The quality of the religious education curriculum is outstanding. 10% of curriculum time is used for religious education following the "Come and See" programme with additional material linked to saints. Scripture was linked very well to the learning. Tasks often have creative and dynamic links with other curriculum subjects for example Art, Drama, Music, ICT, and Literacy. Pupils are encouraged to become aware of the demands of religious

commitment and hence the curriculum contributes very well to pupils' spiritual and moral development. Good use is made of the extra resources for RE learning available such as the parish priest and the Easter workshop at the local Baptist church. Very attractive religious education displays around school give added value to this core subject.

The inspector wishes to thank the headteacher, staff and children for their very warm welcome and for contributing to her very enjoyable and interesting visit.