

Catholic Diocese of Northampton



INSPECTION REPORT OF DENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

ST BERNARD'S PREPARATORY SCHOOL

Hawtrey Close, Slough SL1 1TB

Head Teacher:	Mr N Cheesman
Chair of Governors:	Mr S Patterson
Reporting Inspector	Mrs M Shinkwin
Associate Inspector	Mr M Holdsworth
Date of inspection:	21 June 2019
Date report issued:	19 September 2019
Date of previous inspection:	March 2014

Information about the school

St Bernard's Catholic Preparatory school is a co-educational, independent school for children aged 2 ½ -11 years situated in its own compact grounds in the multi-cultural community of Slough. Of the 261 children currently on roll, 10.7% are Catholic while approximately 45% of staff teaching RE is Catholic. From 1945 until 2019, the Bernardine Sisters owned St. Bernard's but this year has seen the transfer of ownership to the Benedictines at St. Benedict's College in Ealing, whose head and other governors now sit on the board of St Bernard's. In a reciprocal arrangement, the head and other governors of St Bernard's have joined the board of St Benedict's.

Key Grades for Inspection

1: Outstanding

2: Good

3: Requires Improvement

4: Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of this Catholic School

Grade 1

St Bernard's Preparatory is an outstanding Catholic school in every respect. The pupils radiate the joy and confidence which emanate from learning in an environment where each one feels welcomed and valued. The mission statement which they created is at the heart of their motivation to love, work and pray. The headmaster with his dedicated and talented staff ensure that all three elements are fully realised. Academic standards are excellent in all subjects including RE. Children achieve most impressive results because the expectations of teachers, of parents and of themselves are extremely high for every pupil, whatever their starting point, so success becomes the norm. Presentation of work is impeccable across the key stages since children regard their RE books as precious, their 'holy book'. St Bernard's is a multi-faith community which is seen as a blessing in this Catholic school. Children delight in drawing parallels between the practices and beliefs of their traditions and explaining the differences, which deepens their knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith but also of their own.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement.

Grade 1

The school has an excellent capacity for sustained improvement and has identified several areas for progress. Since the last inspection in 2014 which highlighted the need for outstanding classroom practice to be shared and modelled so that all teaching is at the level of the best, weekly meetings with the RE Leader, frequent lesson observations by all RE teaching staff and regular assessments of resources, styles and practices have ensured that all teaching is now outstanding. Support is in place for new or less confident teachers so that they soon have the necessary skills. The range of religious education books continues to be broadened in consultation with the RE Link advisor.

St Bernard's ensures that the community moves forward to improve on areas which are already outstanding through a process of regular, systematic evaluation and aspiration. Minutes of meetings and decisions are evidenced in the documentation, particularly in RE departmental planning and in the School Improvement Plan. There is an openness to opinions and suggestions from colleagues and from pupils which permeates the attitudes in the school, observed in lessons and interviews with staff, parents and governors. Pupil, parent and staff questionnaires monitor responses to new initiatives, informing the leadership's planning and direction.

The vision of the headteacher, shared by his leadership team and transmitted through the staff to pupils and parents, is being lived out by the daily interactions, the love for each other and the love for God. The centrality of faith and the values which cascade from this are apparent in the Catholic life, the religious education and the collective worship of the community. A prayer or chaplaincy room for staff and pupils is a cherished dream which could further enhance the opportunities for spiritual development.

What the school should do to improve further

- To explore whether some SEND pupils would benefit from more differentiated work on some topics.
- To ensure that all pupils respond to 'next step' suggestions at the end of a piece of work before starting the next.
- To encourage Faith Ambassadors to present to governors

Catholic Life

Grade 1

The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic life of St Bernard's is outstanding. The pupils have composed their own mission statement "We follow God's footsteps through our love, work and prayer", which children even from Early Years can recite and explain. Pupils write about the significance to them of the mission statement at the beginning of the school year. When asked the meaning and purpose of a mission statement, a Year 6 boy replied "It is a moral target I set myself every day". Faith Ambassadors from Years 1-6 help to lead chaplaincy sessions and are responsible for organising a liturgy for the whole school each term. They are producing a new school prayer book embracing the multi-faith community which St Bernard's is. Year 6 altar servers assume the training of the new Year 5 recruits and they talk to Year 2 about their role. Eco council and school council representatives have proposed recycling and environmental improvements. Years 5 and 6 pupils speak so passionately about their educational and spiritual experiences that they impress adults by their maturity and courtesy, as is borne out by the Parents' Questionnaire responses. Older 'buddies' provide role models to the younger children of caring protection so that the love which exists between the children is strengthened and perpetuated. Each child feels valued, secure and confident, able to forgive and be forgiven. St Bernard's community brings together children, staff and parents from a wide variety of faiths and cultures. All are made welcome and are proud to discuss their traditions. Pupils in EYFS and KS1 study other faiths through religious festivals and visiting speakers, including parents. Pupils from Years 2-6 study a world faith for the entire year so that they have a knowledge and deeper understanding of connections. They visit places of worship including the Reading Hebrew Synagogue, and the Hindu Temple, besides Holy Family Catholic Church. Pupils from Year 3-5 attend the annual retreat to The Bernardine Monastery at Stroud. Every class has a prayer partner from the monasteries at Stroud and Hyning which involves writing to and praying for each other every term. The school's emphasis on its contribution to the common good both within the school and the wider community is exemplary. The pupils raise funds for CAFOD and the Beacon school in Kenya but are also very supportive of such local needs as the Alexander Devine children's hospice, foodbanks and the Slough homeless. The Eco Council members have led groups clearing rubbish in the local area and pupils participate in carol singing, in musical and prayerful reflection at Holy Family Church for the congregation there and in the 'Bags of Prayers' initiative for building relationships with the local Catholic school. They understand that they are living out their mission statement of following in God's footsteps by sharing their gifts with and for the benefit of other people.

The quality of provision for the Catholic life of the school is excellent. The mission statement is displayed in every class and throughout the school and is prominent in RE exercise books. Children understand that their actions and behaviour stem from the mission statement they composed and can explain the relevance. Displays in passages, classrooms and the hall are constant reminders of the school's identity which is manifest in the pastoral care for all members of the community. One mother who had been diagnosed with cancer spoke movingly of the care given not only to her daughter and to herself but to her husband also. Staff participate in every aspect of the spiritual life of St Bernard's, contributing to retreats, charitable events, extra-curricular activities and the sharing of their faith. Staff induction is thorough and sensitively organised; no new member teaches a class until confident in his or her ability. Mental wellbeing of staff is a priority, while a weekly mindfulness club provides opportunities for emotional support. They attend INSET sessions and training in Come and See organised by NORES which is supplemented by weekly meetings and reinforcement at school; they pray before meetings and participate in chaplaincy sessions with the pupils. They promote high standards of behaviour and are themselves praiseworthy role models. PSHE allows for the discussion of personal issues and situations and the RSE programme, introduced this year after rigorous consultation with governors, delivers well-planned teaching supportive of the different faiths represented yet teaching clearly Catholic beliefs.

Leaders and governors are highly effective in promoting the Catholic life of the school and ensure that the centrality of the school's mission is supported in practical terms by a budget at least on a par with other core subjects. RE is rigorously monitored through regular book scrutiny, moderation, lesson observation and tracking and the RE Leader attends all NORES meetings to keep abreast of new developments which are then cascaded to staff. She also meets regularly with the Slough Primary Partnership Schools and with the RE Link governor who gratefully receives high quality resources and pupil assessment samples which are used throughout the diocese. Comprehensive guidance is given to new staff so that their understanding of the Catholic identity of the school is secure. Parents are informed termly of the content of the curriculum. In this way, the school ensures a high degree of parental support and enthusiasm for what their children are learning. One father wrote "It's a privilege to send our children to St Bernard's. We particularly like them coming home and saying prayers they learned at school". The RE leader provides a termly report to governors and is challenged annually as to progress on targets. Governors are actively involved in the completion of the self-evaluation form and in the planning and implementation of the RE and RSE curriculum through which they promote, alongside the school leaders, the Catholic mission of the school and the Bishop's vision for the diocese.

Religious Education

Grade 1

The standard of pupil achievement and enjoyment of their learning in religious education is outstanding. From their earliest years, children are encouraged to challenge themselves to think more deeply, find other solutions. Even the youngest pupil could recite the Lord's Prayer. The tracking records are evidence of the excellent progress made by pupils, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. Work is differentiated where appropriate and teaching assistants support where necessary. RE exercise books show clear progression through the key stages and the 'next steps' marking strategies is clearly effective. Most pupils respond to and benefit from a teacher's written suggestion at the end of a piece of work before embarking on the next. The handwriting and presentation are truly exceptional. The pupils obviously take great pride in their RE books. They are stimulated by a wide variety of teaching tasks to develop a range of skills. Their concentration in class is excellent as is their response to questions and enthusiasm to acquire and share knowledge. Pupils defer to each other when the situation arises and take pains to ensure that they should not seem boastful nor insensitive to another's failure. Behaviour is outstanding; instructions are attended to and obeyed. Significant learning takes place in every lesson.

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in Religious Education is exceptional. Lesson planning is thorough and linked to previous learning by challenging questions, to which the pupils respond with confident enthusiasm. Imagination and creativity, religious artefacts, music, video clips combine to provide stimulus and enjoyment. Teachers reward good understanding and encourage further reflection through the use of high-ordered and big questions. Pupils interact easily with their teachers, asking thoughtful questions, working quickly and purposefully on the varied tasks they are set. Concentration and motivation are sustained throughout the lessons which progress at a brisk pace, time limits for tasks being imposed and observed. Detailed knowledge of bible stories allows pupils to make links of their own accord as in a Year 5 lesson on the Beatitudes where the second Beatitude reminded the class of the parable of the Good Samaritan (for which pupils could give the bible reference) and the sixth brought comparisons with Gandhi. Expectations are high both on the part of the teachers and pupils. Lessons are delivered with energy and dynamism by skilled teachers who are passionate about their subject; consequently, learning and achievement are most impressive.

Leaders and governors, through regular monitoring and evaluation of the provision for Religious Education, ensure that it meets the requirements of the Bishops' Conference in every respect and in each key stage. At least 10% of teaching time is given to RE lessons and both the Come and See and Journey in Love diocesan programmes are followed for which teachers attend all the NORES training courses. Tracking is detailed and meticulous and alerts teachers quickly to causes for action, whether it be extra support or more challenge. The RE Link governor supports and monitors the RE Leader by performing regular book scrutiny and moderation and by reviewing resources. The RE leader is given dedicated time during the week to plan, observe, train and induct staff. She leads her department with passion and provides inspiration, wisdom, reassurance and a wealth of experience for her committed team. Her vision is clearly expressed and understood by every member; they appreciate her dedication which inspires them. She also attends all

NORES subject leader meetings and often provides resources and exemplars of work for RE Leaders from other schools.

Collective Worship

Grade 1

Collective worship at St Bernard's is outstanding. All pupils attend school Masses, liturgies and assemblies and participate fully in them. In the observed assembly, Year 3, without prompting from teachers or reference to notes, offered their "Special Places". The children acted scenes from the bible, presented slides showing Mecca, The Golden Temple and The Ganges, explaining the significance of each. The confidence and pride of the children as they talked of their faiths, and the interest, respect and absorbed attention of the school as they listened were extraordinarily impressive. Musicians accompanied the singing of the hymn in which the whole school joined enthusiastically and a Year 3 soloist sang with assurance. Further enquiry confirmed that such an excellent assembly was a regular occurrence. Class based acts of worship and opportunities for prayer are evident throughout the day and the Hail Mary is said after lunch. Pupils, both Catholic and non-Catholic, join staff at the voluntary 7.15am Lenten Masses said on Friday mornings in the chapel at St Bernard's Grammar School. They create and change prayer tables, in classes and passages, developing an awareness of the liturgical year. Faith Ambassadors lead well-attended chaplaincy sessions on Fridays and have organised a whole school liturgy celebrating the work of Sr Sonia from Mission Together. Year 6, during the annual Retreat in the Bernardine Monastery in Stroud, reflect on their year, their school career and their transition to secondary school.

The provision for collective worship at St Bernard's is of a very high standard. Assemblies, liturgies and prayers are at the heart of this community and every act of worship reflects the mission statement of following God's footsteps. Different forms of prayer are taught, such as lectio divina, meditation, chant and silence. Pupils are receptive to new spiritual experiences and gladly bring the practices of their own faiths to their classes and write prayers to share with their friends. Fr Kevin says a school Mass at the beginning and end of every term, on Feast Days and for special occasions such as the "Going Forth" Mass. He finds the passion and eagerness of both staff and pupils to contribute to the liturgies a great encouragement in an age when this is not the norm. He describes the school as 'full-on Christocentric', a place where "worship is a priority with no blurring of the edges". The school explores issues shared by all religions "through a Catholic lens, promoting tolerance and love of each other and gives wonderful witness to Asian families". Fr Kevin particularly praised the musical contribution to the school liturgies which is varied, rich and very popular with the children.

The headmaster embodies the spirit of care and understanding which permeates the school and leads his team of committed, dedicated staff to model for their pupils the mission statement of love, work and prayer. He and his senior team work very hard to achieve the impressive standards and ethos which are seen as the norm by the pupils but are much appreciated by parents. Governors support the headteacher in his vision and regularly attend Masses, assemblies and other liturgies. The RE Link governor makes herself available to offer advice to staff and especially the subject leader and chaplain for any aspect of collective worship. RE teachers attend all NORES training in collective worship but many say that the best ideas come from the children themselves. There is constant evaluation of the provision for worship by the senior team in their striving for improvement so that the children in their care may grow in the love and knowledge of God. As a parent wrote "The school's love for God is evident in how and what they teach our children".

The inspectors are very grateful to staff, pupils, governors and parents for the warm welcome and hospitality accorded to us during the inspection. Our visit was a most positive experience for us.