



Archdiocese of Birmingham

INSPECTION REPORT

ST THOMAS MORE CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL BIRMINGHAM

Inspection dates 27th–28th September 2010
Reporting Inspector Rev Michael Dolman

Inspection carried out under Section 48 of the Education Act 2005

Type of School	Voluntary Aided
Age range of pupils	4-11 years
Number on roll	313
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governors	Mr Stephen Henry
School address	Horse Shoes Lane Sheldon Birmingham B26 3HU
Telephone number	0121 743 3289
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Date of previous inspection	February 2007
DFE School Number	330/3349
Unique Reference Number	103441

Headteacher Sister Susan Collins

Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one Diocesan Inspector. The inspector visited 3 full religious education (RE) lessons to observe teaching and learning, students' behaviour. He held meetings with the parish priest, governors, staff, and groups of pupils. He observed the school's work, including Mass and looked at a range of evidence, including key documentation such as the school's development plan, monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning in RE, and pupils' work.

Information about the school

St Thomas More is a large Catholic primary school that serves the parish of St Thomas More, Sheldon, and the Yardley area of Birmingham. There are 313 pupils on roll of whom 94% are baptised Catholic. The large majority of pupils come from White British backgrounds and there are a wide range of minority ethnic groups such as Irish, White and Black Caribbean and Travellers of Irish heritage. A small minority of the pupils speak English as an additional language (4.8%) and the proportion of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average (14.4%). The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is 10.7%, which is lower than the national average.

Overall effectiveness of the school as a Catholic school

St Thomas More is an outstanding Catholic school where staff and pupils strive to reflect upon and live out their school mission in the daily circumstances of school life. Pupils appreciate the distinctive Catholic nature of their school and play their part in contributing to its development. They are willing to take on various responsibilities in the school and are generous in contributing to charitable causes. The high quality of provision made for RE means that pupils make excellent progress through both key stages and achieve standards that are generally above average. They enjoy their learning and are very well motivated in lessons. Pupils are able to reflect upon what they learn to discover the implications this has for their own personal life of faith and the way they live their lives. Children understand the importance of prayer and they are able to participate confidently in the various opportunities for collective worship.

The quality of teaching and purposeful learning in RE is always at least good or better with many lessons showing outstanding features. The RE curriculum is very effectively planned and organised to meet the needs of different groups of learners; there are excellent cross curricular links being developed and various visits that further enrich the curriculum. Careful staffing means that RE is taught to pupils in each year group separately. The school makes excellent provision for collective worship which is of a high quality and encourages pupils to take an active role in the planning and leading of assemblies and times of prayer.

The school's capacity for sustained improvement in its Catholic life is outstanding. It has been successful in making great progress against the areas identified for improvement at the last inspection. The leadership carries out effective monitoring and evaluation of its Catholic life and religious education which has led to the sustained improvement of outcomes for pupils. The school is united and motivated in its mission and all members of the community are committed to further improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Develop planning so that children can make connections between different areas of learning in RE and understand how it fits in to the overarching narrative of our Catholic faith.

How good outcomes are for individuals and groups of pupils

The school's baseline assessment shows that pupils have limited knowledge and experience of the Catholic faith when they begin at the school. Pupils, including those with learning needs, make excellent progress in their learning through both key stages and they achieve attainment that is generally above average. In Key Stage 1 pupils know the difference between the Old and New Testaments and they are able to re-tell stories from each of these. They are able to reflect upon the message that they contain, for example, that in the story about Abraham and his son Isaac, where Abraham has to learn how to place his trust in the Lord. They can describe some of the saints and appreciate their good example. They know that Jesus died for our sins and that he rose again to a new life. They recognise some of the basic features of the sacrament of baptism and of the Church's liturgical year. In Key Stage 2 pupils have a broader knowledge of Scripture and they are able to analyse and reflect upon this deeply in the light of their own life of faith. They have a mature and more integrated appreciation of their Catholic faith and this is well articulated in a *letter to a non-believer*, where pupils give an account of their Catholic faith. They have a good understanding of Jesus and his identity within the Trinity and a clear sense of his divinity evidenced in Scripture. As pupils look towards their Confirmation they recognise the importance of the Sacraments in sustaining our Catholic life of faith and they are able to use artwork as a means of deepening their understanding in RE.

Pupils' contribution to and benefit from the Catholic life of the school is outstanding. Pupils are familiar with the school's mission and are able to discuss how it is lived out in their daily lives. They explain that because Christ is at the centre of St Thomas More school community you recognise that He is with you in everything you do and that He is present in those around you. The beautiful displays and attractive classrooms and corridors make a great contribution to the Catholic environment of the school. The excellent relationships that exist between all members of the school community reflect the love to which Christ calls us. Pupils make a great contribution to the Catholic life of the school through the school council, planning liturgical celebrations and assemblies, work as peer mediators, structured peer tutoring and making suggestions for the development of the school's Catholic life. As part of their preparation for Confirmation, Year 6 enjoys a variety of day visits and a residential retreat at Alton Castle. These visits enrich pupils' spiritual and moral development and help them understand their Catholic heritage. Children are able to discuss life issues in the light of their Catholic faith. They are proud to belong to their Catholic school community and their behaviour is excellent.

Pupils' response to collective worship is excellent. Children understand the importance of prayer and its central place in Catholic life. At class or whole school collective worship, they respond very well and make a significant contribution to its planning and delivery. During the Harvest Mass children participated with interest and enjoyment; the singing was beautiful and included the psalm, some harmonised settings, a variety of musical accompaniment and a good range of hymns that reflected well the theme of the Mass. The readers spoke clearly and with conviction. Throughout the celebration of the Mass children participated attentively, with reverence and respect. The Year 6 liturgy group makes a valuable contribution to planning school liturgy and is responsible for leading a voluntary prayer group at lunchtimes. Pupils are confident and sincere in their engagement with a variety of different prayer experiences including meditation and open prayer. Visits to different places of worship have helped them to understand why people of other faiths have different ways of praying. As they progress through the school their appreciation of prayer matures and they recognise the importance of this relationship with God in their lives. Overall, collective worship makes an outstanding contribution to pupils' spiritual and moral development.

How effective leaders and managers are in developing the Catholic life of the school

The headteacher provides strong leadership and together with the leadership team provides outstanding leadership and management of the school. The school mission is effectively shared with parents and at all levels of the school community; commitment to the mission is renewed during Mass at the beginning of each academic year. The school mission provides the foundation for all that the school aspires to and achieves. In-service education provides formal opportunities for staff and governors to reflect upon different aspects of school life and practice in the light of the school mission. The school's leadership also ensure that pupils and staff contribute to the evaluation of Catholic life in the school from their particular perspectives. The thorough systems of monitoring and evaluation that the school has established results in a school evaluation that is accurate and effective in planning for future improvement.

The RE co-ordinator is well supported by the headteacher and provides outstanding leadership and management of the subject; she makes a significant contribution to the Catholic life of the school. Monitoring and evaluation of the subject is well established and thorough, using a schedule of lesson observations, book trawls and planning scrutiny. There is effective response to the evaluation of findings: areas for development are monitored for improvement. The subject is well resourced and these are well organised and accessible for staff. Good practice and new ideas are shared with staff and new staff receive excellent guidance and are very well supported to ensure the quality of provision in RE. Initiatives from the Diocesan Department of RE are implemented through staff meetings and are used to improve provision in RE.

The governing body is very effective in its role, fulfilling both statutory and canonical responsibilities. Governors are totally committed to the school and its mission. They have excellent means of monitoring and evaluating the Catholic life of the school and the RE curriculum, particularly through the active involvement of the RE link governor. There is excellent formal and informal communication between the governing body and the school; reports are regularly presented to the governing body by the headteacher, RE co-ordinator and RE link governor. Governors offer good support to the school and are able to give effective challenge. They engage with parents informally and are aware of the views of various stakeholders.

The school's leadership promotes excellent community cohesion. Pupils understand that they are all created in the image and likeness of God and that everyone is loved equally by God. This is manifest in the excellent relationships that exist between all members of the school community. All are included in the life of the school and when challenging behaviour does arise this is managed very well. The school Mass provides opportunity for parishioners and families to gather with children and staff, to celebrate Christ as "the centre of our school community". Pupils respond generously to those who are in need at home and abroad; they appreciate the Christian motivation for this, "Whatever you did to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me". The harvest Mass celebrated during the inspection emphasised our solidarity with the needy through the food parcels donated to the Fireside Centre and prayers offered to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Pupils have a good knowledge of other world religions and the beautiful displays around the school show their appreciation for these following visits to different places of worship including, the Islamic Experience Exhibition, a synagogue, Gurdwara and a Hindu Temple. The school community includes a small percentage of children from diverse cultural backgrounds: through assemblies and the *Global Dimension Week*, there are opportunities for personal experiences about faith and culture to be shared and celebrated with the whole school community. Pupils make a very good contribution to local community based activities and they benefit from the contacts that they make.

The quality of the school's work in providing Catholic education

The quality of effective teaching and purposeful learning in RE is almost always good or better with many of these lessons having outstanding features. This results from careful planning, tasks that are well matched to pupils' prior knowledge and ability together with clear lesson objectives and success criteria that are discussed with pupils. Teachers have good subject knowledge and use a

wide range of teaching styles and activities to engage different learners. Lessons are well paced and employ good quality resources, including ICT. There is good questioning and excellent support from teaching assistants who facilitate learning for different ability groups. Time for prayer and reflection allows children to link learning to their everyday life of faith. High expectations, pupil interest and enjoyment of the subject lead to lessons where children are well motivated and able to engage in sustained independent work. Marking is of a good quality and includes encouraging remarks as well as questions to develop further thinking. Self assessment forms a part of RE lessons and targets at the front of pupils' books provides a way for them to judge their progress in learning.

The school's assessment in RE is excellent. Systems for summative assessment are well embedded and analysis of this information allows planning to be adapted to pupils' needs. The school has a portfolio of pupils' moderated work and staff have regular opportunities to discuss these pieces of work so as to judge attainment against national standards. Staff are beginning to look at how these assessments can help to inform planning to access higher levels of thinking in RE.

The RE curriculum is very well organised and is very effective in meeting the needs and interest of pupils. The excellent planning means that there is full coverage of the curriculum strategy and class teacher annotation shows how individual lessons are tailored to meet the needs of individuals and groups of pupils within the school. Although the school has mixed age classes, RE is organised so that it can be taught to single age groups. Timetabling allows at least 10% for RE and there is reinforcement through the *Big Write* in literacy. The curriculum builds upon pupils' prior knowledge and offers good challenge to different abilities. New initiatives and resources are shared and incorporated into planning. During the academic year the curriculum is enriched by RE Inspire workshops where parents and pupils work together in a creative way on key aspects of learning, for example Year 5 pupils designed and made their own *Garden of Eden* which was then blessed during the harvest Mass. The next step in development of the curriculum would be to help pupils to make links between different areas of religious learning, for example the sacrifice of Isaac as foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. This would help them to begin to gain a coherent understanding of their Catholic faith. Sex and relationship education is based upon the diocesan scheme, *All that I am*, and is delivered with close communication with parents; children are encouraged to discuss their learning with parents at home. The sacramental preparation programme is largely school based and includes meetings with parents. The school plans to develop this programme with the help of the new parish priest. The curriculum makes provision for the study of world religions including regular links with two Muslim schools and visits to a variety of places of worship. Visits to places of Catholic significance such as St Chad's Cathedral, Oscott College and Alton Castle have a very positive impact upon pupils' understanding of their Catholic faith. There are excellent cross curricular links made with literacy, art, ICT and music.

Provision for collective worship is outstanding. Prayer is an important and regular feature in the life of the school, in the staff room and with pupils throughout the day. There is a good variety of prayer including meditation, reflection, spontaneous open prayer as well as traditional devotions like Benediction, the Rosary and Stations of the Cross. The school provides regular opportunities to celebrate Mass as a whole school and in class groups, both in the adjacent church and in school. These celebrations bring together members of the parish including parents and grandparents. Assemblies and other liturgies are always very well prepared, reflecting the liturgical season, feast or some aspect of the school's mission. All teaching staff take responsibility for leading whole school assemblies and pupils play a prominent role in these. The Year 6 members of the liturgy planning group make a good contribution to the planning of collective worship and also organise and lead a lunchtime prayer group. During Advent and Lent the school celebrates penitential services which include the sacrament of reconciliation. The prayer bags that were produced by the diocese together with the school's own prayer bags have made a very positive impact in bringing families together in prayer.