



St Mary's Catholic Primary School

URN: 149059

Catholic Schools Inspectorate report on behalf of the Bishop of Hexham & Newcastle

04 March 2026 – 05 March 2026

Summary of key findings

Overall effectiveness

The overall quality of Catholic education provided by the school

Catholic life and mission (p.3)

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission

Religious education (p.5)

The quality of curriculum religious education RE

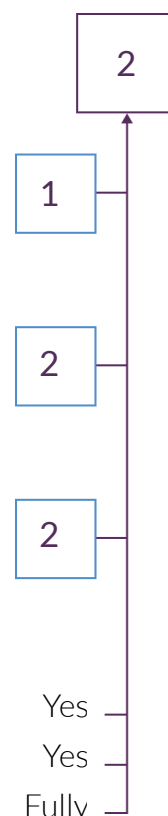
Collective worship (p.7)

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school

The school is fully compliant with the general norms for religious education laid down by the Bishops' Conference

The school is fully compliant with any additional requirements of the diocesan bishop

The school has responded to the areas for improvement from the last inspection



What the school does well

- The headteacher exemplifies servant leadership, demonstrated through her compassionate interactions and unwavering support for pupils, staff, parents and the wider school community.
- Pupils demonstrate deep respect for one another, showing particular care and sensitivity towards the most vulnerable in the school community.
- The religious education subject leader has been instrumental in driving rapid improvement in the subject, raising expectations and enriching the overall learning experience for pupils.
- Pupils demonstrate strong engagement and deep reverence in all aspects of prayer and liturgical celebrations.

What the school needs to improve

- Strengthen pupils' ability to make clear and consistent connections between their charitable actions, Catholic social teaching and the theological principles that underpin these works.
- Increase opportunities for creative expression in religious education so that pupils can explore ideas more deeply and strengthen their understanding of the subject.
- Increase opportunities for spontaneous prayer, both within lessons and across the wider school day, to deepen pupils' personal engagement with prayer.

Catholic life and mission

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission.

Catholic life and mission key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

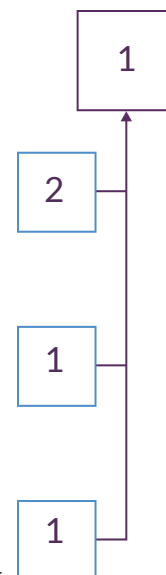
The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic life and mission of the school

Provision

The quality of provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school



St Mary's Catholic Primary School is a warm, joyful, calm and purposeful place. The Catholic identity of the school is immediately evident on entry, with familiar religious artefacts making it clear that this is a Catholic community. Pupils are extremely proud of their school and speak with confidence and knowledge. They feel secure, with one pupil stating, 'I always feel safe in school and know that I will be looked after.' Pupils are unwaveringly polite and courteous. They consistently show deep respect for their own and their peers' personal dignity, recognising that they are made in the image of God. They know the school mission statement well, with one older pupil explaining, 'Each and every one of us has a calling from God, and we need to use this to help our friends and families.' Pupils are beginning to relate this to the teachings of Jesus and how they respond in their daily lives; however, this is inconsistent across year groups. Pupils are knowledgeable about their mission but are not yet able to make clear connections between their charitable works, Catholic social teaching and the theological principles that underpin these actions. Pupil leaders promote Catholic social teaching through litter picks, supporting Cafod, food bank collections and other charitable initiatives.

The mission statement, 'Called by God,' is known, owned and lived by all because pupils, parents, staff and governors were fully involved in its recent review. Under the inspirational guidance of school leaders, all staff contribute wholeheartedly to the Catholic life and mission of St Mary's. As a result, there is a deeply embedded sense of welcome that is highly valued by parents, who comment that staff, 'model a respectful, joyful and prayerful community and work for the formation of the children.' Another parent shared that the school is,

‘unapologetically Catholic but in an inclusive, welcoming way,’ reflecting the strong sense of belonging experienced by all. This is clearly evident in the relationships, respect and hospitality shared across the school community. There is a powerful and tangible sense of family because of the excellent pastoral provision for pupils and families, with parents reporting a, ‘very strong ethos of caring and respect.’ The physical environment reflects the Catholic character and ethos of the school, providing a special place in which pupils can grow both academically and spiritually. St Mary’s has a carefully planned programme for relationships, sex and health education which meets all statutory and diocesan requirements and is firmly rooted in the teachings of the Church.

The headteacher provides authentic witness to the faith and is a true servant leader. Under her excellent leadership, she empowers her team to grow and develop. Leaders are highly ambitious for the school’s continuous development and unwavering in their commitment to the Catholic life and mission of the school and the families they serve. Governors share this ambition; their energy and strong desire for the school to be the best it can be is evident, and they are committed to the professional development of all staff. Bespoke support for staff, both new and experienced, enables them to flourish, with one member of staff stating, ‘I know that any time I need help, I can ask and it will be addressed. I couldn’t ask for more’. Pupils’ views are listened to and acted upon; for example, a pupil’s observation about the absence of a female house patron led to this being immediately addressed. Leaders’ self-evaluation is accurate in recognising areas for development, and strategies have been put in place that are already having a positive impact on the school.

Religious education

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission.

Religious education key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

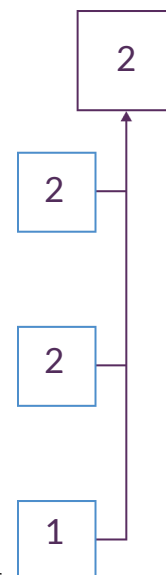
How well pupils achieve and enjoy their learning in religious education

Provision

The quality of teaching, learning, and assessment in religious education

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for religious education



It is clear that pupils have a strong sense of pride in their religious education work. They view their books as special and take great care to ensure their work is of a high standard and well presented. During lessons, behaviour is consistently good, with pupils keen to participate and demonstrating a clear desire to improve their learning. Progress through the curriculum is evident in pupils' books across the year. Pupils are able to sustain focus for extended periods, and their books show a high quantity of written work; however, they do not have sufficient opportunities to record their learning in more creative or individualised ways. Recall and consolidation questions are a key feature of lessons, enabling pupils to retain core knowledge over time. However, when asked how they could improve their work, pupils tend to focus on spellings or presentation rather than on deepening their religious knowledge and skills, indicating that they have an underdeveloped understanding of how to improve the quality of their learning in religious education. Pupils are generally able to articulate subject-specific vocabulary; for example, when discussing sin, Year 1 pupils were competent in discussing and considering the implications of their actions.

There is a clear commitment to enabling pupils to achieve well in religious education; teachers recognise its importance both as an academic subject and as a means through which pupils develop morally and spiritually. Through the school's approach to implementing the *Religious Education Curriculum Directory*, teachers are developing greater confidence in their subject knowledge and in delivering the curriculum effectively. Highly effective teaching and learning were evident in most year groups; for example, pupils in Year 6 were highly engaged in drama

activities while exploring Jesus' message of unity. A strong celebration of success was also evident in Year 5, where staff were eager to share the high-quality, religious based artwork that pupils had created, and pupils responded with enthusiasm and excitement. However, this level of creativity is not consistently embedded across the whole school. Highly effective adaptation and inclusion were evident throughout, ensuring the curriculum is accessible to all. Staff in Reception class tailor the curriculum to individual needs, including the use of outdoor spaces, ensuring that all pupils, including those with specific challenges, are supported to achieve their God-given potential.

Leaders and governors are unwavering in their desire for all pupils to achieve their very best in religious education. They are strongly committed to implementing the new curriculum throughout the school as soon as possible, with the subject leader contributing to the writing of the new diocesan resource. Religious education has equal parity with other core subjects in terms of funding and time allocation. The newly appointed subject leader is enthusiastic and committed to her role and, alongside the headteacher, has a clear vision for the subject. She works closely with senior leaders to realise this vision and is generous in sharing her expertise with colleagues, particularly those new to Catholic schools. The religious education curriculum is designed to ensure that all pupils are fully included, irrespective of their needs or disadvantages, with leaders thoughtfully organising the physical environment and learning spaces to enable personalised and individualised learning. Staff are well supported by senior leaders in their training needs, drawing on in-house expertise through personalised coaching as well as opportunities provided by the diocese and the Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust. The school provides regular internal opportunities for the moderation and standardisation of pupils' work. Governors show a keen interest in the development of religious education as a subject, with one stating that, 'No one is left behind.'

Collective worship

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school.

Collective worship key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

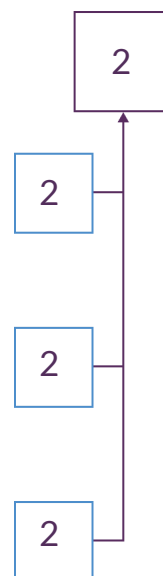
How well pupils participate in and respond to the school's collective worship

Provision

The quality of collective worship provided by the school

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for collective worship



As prayer and liturgy are placed at the heart of St Mary's, all pupils take a full and active part in these celebrations, participating with the reverence that each occasion demands. During a whole-school gathering in the hall, pupils sang the hymn enthusiastically under the skilful leadership of the Year 3 teacher, and later prayed together in reflective silence. When asked, pupils expressed how much they value prayer and liturgy, stating that, 'It helps us through our daily lives. It gives us the way of how we can change as people.' The school has developed the role of prayer leaders, pupils who take on ministries by supporting the leading of prayer at various times across the week. Other pupils lead celebrations of the word in classes with confidence, appreciating the opportunity to pray and reflect. However, opportunities for pupils to plan more creative worship sessions are not consistent across the school. These ministries, along with others such as reading scripture in school or at weekday Mass in the parish church, are welcomed by pupils as opportunities to grow in confidence. Pupils have developed an understanding of the range of prayers associated with the liturgical seasons and the impact these have on their daily lives.

There is a clearly defined pattern of prayer and liturgy at St Mary's, which reflects the rhythm of the liturgical year. The centrality of prayer is evident in the way prayers are said each day and across the week. Staff ensure that pupils have regular opportunities to reflect on their learning in a prayerful way, particularly those in the older years. Staff are committed to enabling pupils to know and understand the structure and rhythm of prayer, supported by professional development and high-quality resources that build their confidence and knowledge. Staff are increasingly confident in introducing a wider variety of prayer practices,

including some creative approaches that are beginning to enhance pupils' experiences and deepen their reflection on the impact of prayer in their lives. All classes have sacred spaces that are maintained with reverence, and the effective use of the school hall and regular visits to the church further enhance pupils' understanding. However, there is a lack of dedicated spaces, both inside and outside the school building, for pupils to engage in spontaneous prayer. Parents are regularly invited to join the school community in worship, with one parent welcoming the fact that, 'We are treated as the first educators of our children and are supported in improving their faith-life.'

Leaders and governors possess a clear understanding of the centrality of prayer and liturgy. The headteacher's leadership of prayer and liturgy is honest and heartfelt, with one child expressing that her prayer leading 'is like a wave that washes my worries away.' The yearly plan is comprehensive, covering the liturgical seasons, holy days, celebrations linked to St Mary, and regular opportunities for pupils and staff to attend Mass. The plan also identifies clear opportunities to strengthen liturgical links with families and the local community, such as through the sharing of Advent resources. Time and financial resources are allocated appropriately to support this provision, including the commissioning of a stunning crucifix for the hall, created by a school governor. Leaders provide strong support for staff, enabling them to develop confidence and deliver an effective, structured approach to prayer and liturgy. The strategy leaders have developed for the pupil prayer leaders has been measured and timely, informed by thorough evidence gathering and evaluation, and has ensured that these leaders have the skills and expertise to support their peers in worship. Monitoring the quality of prayer and liturgy, and involving pupils in evaluating their experiences, enables leaders and governors to identify next steps for development with accuracy and clarity.

Information about the school

Full name of school	St Mary's Catholic Primary School
School unique reference number (URN)	149059
School DfE Number (LAESTAB)	9133470
Full postal address of the school	Central Avenue, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, DL5 5NP
School phone number	01325 300339
Headteacher or Head of School	Mrs Emily Milward
Chair of Governors	Father Anthony Cornforth
School Website	stmarysna.bhcet.org.uk
Trusteeship	Diocesan
Multi-academy trust or company (if applicable)	Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust
Phase	Primary
Type of school	Academy
Admissions policy	Non Selective
Age-range of pupils	4 - 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Date of last denominational inspection	07 March 2019
Previous denominational inspection grade	Good

The Inspection Team

Paul Craig Lead

Thomas Gillingham

Key to grade judgements

Grade	England	Wales
1	Outstanding	Excellent
2	Good	Good
3	Requires improvement	Adequate and requires improvement
4	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory and in need of urgent improvement