DENOMINATIONAL INSPECTION REPORT

incorporating Section 48 and Canonical Inspection under Canon 806 on behalf of the Archbishop of Southwark

URN 118778

St Thomas' RC Primary School

South Park

Sevenoaks

TN13 1EH

Inspection date:	**1st December 2021**
Chair of Governors:	**Catherine Ingram**
Academy Principal:	**Geraldine Leahy**
Inspectors:	**Hilary Blake**
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EDUCATION COMMISSION
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Key for inspection grades			
Grade 1	Outstanding	Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 2	Good	Grade 4	Inadequate

FULL REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

St Thomas' Catholic Primary School has Academy Status and is part of the Kent Catholic School's Partnership. It is in the Tunbridge Wells Deanery of the Archdiocese of Southwark. The majority of families are members of and attend the parishes of St Thomas of Canterbury, Sevenoaks and St John the Baptist, Westerham. The school is smaller than average and serves pupils both from the local area and from much further afield.

The majority of pupils are White British, but an above average proportion are from other ethnic heritages, which has increased since the previous inspection. 30% of the pupils speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils who are baptised Catholics is 87%. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is much lower than normally found. The proportions of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilites (SEND)is below average. The school is open to pupils age 3-11 years, with its own integral Nursery.

The average weekly proportion of curriculum time given to Religious Education is 10% in all key stages. The school provides and manages wrap–around care with breakfast and after school clubs for up to 30 children. The school meets and exceeds the government's floor standards which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FOR PARENTS AND PUPILS

St Thomas' is an outstanding Catholic school because:

- The Catholic Life and Ethos is at the heart of this school. There is a tangible 'family' feel. Various members of the school community, including the children, spoke warmly of their experience during lockdown; home learning was consistent, augmented with Zoom calls to ensure continuity of pastoral care and a real sense of community. Daily contact included a family friendly act of worship. Families were invited to set up their own prayer focus at home, mirroring the children's experience of liturgy in school. Those in school maintained a sense of belonging with their peers by joining together with them for worship online.
- The teaching of Religious Education is mostly outstanding. The best lessons feature skilful questioning which enables pupils to push their thinking and understanding to higher levels, drawing on and making links with prior learning. Most teachers have a high level of confidence because of their subject expertise. Their ability to plan using a range of teaching methods, including music, art and kinaesthetic play, effectively captivates the curiosity of the pupils. Consequently, pupils enjoy their lessons and their behaviour for learning is mostly strong. Almost all pupils are inspired to learn and they make expected progress, including those with SEND.
- Achievement and effort are celebrated through immediate verbal feedback and praise. Further recognition is provided through the vibrant displays throughout the school and through the Friday Celebration Assemblies which highlight good work and pupils' response to the current 'Virtues to Live By focus'. The quality of pupils' oral responses observed on this visit, during lessons and in discussions, was mostly outstanding. Pupils' written responses do not consistently capture the level of understanding expressed orally.
- Praying together is part of the daily experience for all pupils and staff. Collective worship has a clear purpose, message and direction. The themes chosen for worship, including the school's chosen focus on virtues, reflect a deep understanding of the Church's mission. Key staff have an excellent understanding of the Church's liturgical year, seasons and feasts as reflected in the high-quality displays throughout the school.
- Every class takes pride in their prayer focus area. These are 'dressed' to complement the liturgical season and support their topic learning in Religious Education. Most include personal prayers written by the pupils.
- The Prayer Chaplains (recruited from Year 6) are involved in planning and developing collective worship, ably supported by the subject leader. This inspirational group of pupils encapsulate everything that is distinctive about this school in terms of their religious literacy, sincere commitment and their enthusiasm to share their love of their faith. They meet with the Religious Education leader each week to develop their practice, explore resources, plan and prepare to share liturgies with pupils throughout the school.

The opportunity to participate in whole school masses would be appreciated by all and would benefit all pupils. Pupils expressed this in a recent survey.

WHAT DOES THE SCHOOL NEED TO DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER

- Teachers should ensure all pupils are involved consistently in evaluating how well they are achieving in relation to the learning objective for each lesson.

- Extend and develop the good practice seen in Year 6 to include all pupils in planning and participating in ministries such as welcoming, processing the offertory, writing bidding prayers for the mass and planning and sharing liturgies at class and key stage levels.

- Realise the plan to join 'Mini Vinnies' in order to provide further opportunities for pupil to be involved in a national charity.

Overall Effectiveness

How effective the school is in providing Catholic Education.	1

Catholic Life	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic Life of the school.	1
The quality of provision for the Catholic Life of the school.	1
How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for the Catholic Life of the school.	1

Religious Education	1
How well pupils achieve and enjoy their learning in Religious Education.	1
The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in Religious Education.	1
How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for Religious Education.	1

Collective Worship	1
How well pupils respond to and participate in the schools' Collective Worship.	1
The quality of provision for Collective Worship.	2
How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for Collective Worship.	1

CATHOLIC LIFE

1

The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic Life of the school is outstanding.

- St Thomas' is an inclusive and outward looking community in which all pupils value and are encouraged to actively participate in the Catholic life and mission of the school. In Key Stage 2 particularly, the pupils take a leading role in those activities which promote the school's Catholic life and mission both within school and in the wider community

- Members of the School Council, the Prayer Chaplains and the House Captains are proactive, contributing in a planned and systematic way to reviewing and developing the Catholic Life of their school, for example in evaluating the Behaviour Policy to ensure it reflects the school ethos and gospel values. Prayer Chaplains reveal a sincere commitment and strong desire to serve the school and local community.

- Through a variety of initiatives, the children support charitable causes at local, national and international level.

- Local community projects include a crafting afternoon dedicated to making cards and decorations for the residents of nearby care homes. This is particularly significant as restrictions due to the pandemic prevent the usual school links and visits at this time.

- The School Council and House Captains take responsibility for decisions on fund raising initiatives including cake sales, directing funds to charities of their choice. Recently they organised a 'Dress Up' day in aid of Children in Need.

- The whole school has worked together to support the CAFOD 'Eyes of the World' campaign, raising funds through a school-wide 'green day'. Following their research on climate change, recycling and pollution, the children wrote to their local member of Parliament who plans to visit the school to respond to the children's concerns. In prayer and liturgy meetings the children explore and share their understanding of these issues.

- Pupils respect themselves and each other as members of God's family. They are proud of their school and take pride in the physical environment, creating themed displays to raise environmental awareness and initiating a litter picking rota, raising funds to finance resources for the same. The pupil's work describes their understanding of, for example, the Virtues to Live By; the lives of the House Saints and the call of 'Laudato Si', relating it to COP26 and Fratelli Tutti.

- There is evidence that the children's experience of and involvement in the Catholic Life of their school influences and strengthens their engagement with the parishes, where they are keen to serve at Masses and contribute to the work of sacristan.

The quality of provision of the Catholic Life of the school is outstanding

- Building positive relationships and an inclusive community based on the gospel values is at the heart of this school and is articulated clearly by children, senior staff, clergy, parents and governors alike. St Thomas' is a welcoming community.

- The Mission Statement is highly visible, present and prominent in every area of the school. It is the first statement any visitor sees as they enter the school: Learning in the Light of Christ. Pupils display a good awareness and understanding of the school's mission statement evidenced by their positive behaviour, conduct and attitudes which reflect the Catholic character of the school.

- The Virtues to Live by programme serves to make explicit and focus each child on the school's values, imprinting a code for life. By Year 6, pupils display a sincere commitment to living out their faith which they articulate confidently and sincerely. One parent commented positively: 'the virtues are ingrained in the school and are carried through at home'.

- Prayer is woven throughout the school day. Pupils know the traditional prayers of the Church and, in the Reception Class, children are beginning to sign as they sing their prayers. The actions used support their understanding of the language of prayer.

- School leaders have established positive relationships with the local parishes, supporting the sacramental preparation programme for First Holy Communion and cementing that special partnership between parish, parents and school.

- Links with the main feeder parish are a positive feature of the school, strengthened by the weekly visits of the assistant priest who spends time in all classes and with staff, contributing to teaching and learning as well as staff development.

- The weekly newsletter includes the special topic prayers and reflections which serve to connect the children's experience in school with the home environment.

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for the Catholic Life of the school is outstanding:

- The Academy Principal and the leadership team convey a sense of welcome, evident even at a challenging time for the school as it responds to the impact of the pandemic. The Academy Principal meets and greets pupils and their families at the start and end of the school day; everyone is known by name and is extended a positive and personal welcome.

- Children were observed arriving early for breakfast club, being greeted and greeting their carers warmly; children feel safe and secure in the school environment. The breakfast club benefits working parents and pupils alike.

- Positive relationships are a key feature of the school. Governors spoke with great pride of the school's ethos and the commitment shown during periods of remote learning to engage and communicate with all those at home. Through their online learning, prayer and worship programme, leaders showed support for families not just at the academic level but at an emotional and social level. Governors said: '(St Thomas') is a family. Everyone feels loved and respected and involved. Every teacher knows every child, so they feel included'. They spoke of the practice of reconciliation when arguments occur and stated that there are rarely issues with bullying. The pupils perceive the school to be inclusive: 'In St Thomas' we are nice to everyone, not just our friends'.

- The leadership team is not complacent but regularly reviews and seeks ways to innovate and improve the Catholic Life and the children's experience. This includes introducing the Virtues to Live By programme and the plans to extend pupil involvement in liturgy planning and leadership.

- The school's approach to Catholic Life and Ethos is truly designed to permeate the way in which every member of the community lives their life, not something that is reserved for Church or Religious Education lessons. The impact of this intent is clearly successful as evidenced by the conduct of the children inspectors met during the inspection. Almost all pupils, relative to their age and capacity, are religiously literate and engaged learners. They use their knowledge, understanding and skills effectively to reflect spiritually and to relate their learning to their everyday life.

- Pastoral care is a strength of the school. Governors highlighted the Academy Principal's daily live streams during lockdown, when families were encouraged to remain online if help or support were needed. Prayer Chaplains are united in their acknowledgement and appreciation of the school's ethos: 'We have a really caring ethos and we play with younger ones and try to involve them'; 'People are caring and you can go to a grown-up who will help you'.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

1

How well pupils achieve and enjoy their learning in Religious Education is outstanding

- All pupils show interest and enthusiasm for their Religious Education lessons and make good progress from their starting points.

- Pupils demonstrate a high level of religious literacy; even the youngest children know that Jesus is 'the Light of the World'.

- Pupils enjoy their Religious Education lessons: 'I really enjoy Religious Education lessons because I always learn something new about Jesus'; 'I really like it when we looked in our Bibles to find new things'. They acknowledge an appropriate degree of challenge, saying 'sometimes it does take some thinking'.

- Pupil's behaviour for learning is mostly good and sometimes outstanding. Teaching support assistants help some pupils to refocus and contribute to the lessons at their level. Without exception, pupils are eager and enthusiastic to respond to questions and confident to offer their views. Their good listening skills are evidenced by their thoughtful answers. Pupils can draw on their prior learning to interpret and make links in lessons; for example, in a lesson on the Annunciation pupils commented: '…she is her cousin, ….that's John the Baptist' and made links to the Hail Mary.

The quality of teaching and assessment in Religious Education is outstanding

- Throughout the school, teachers plan varied, innovative and creative activities designed to excite and engage the children in their learning. The distinctive nature of Religious Education lessons is often flagged by starting with reflective music and lighting of the candle to symbolise that Jesus is with us. This links to the mission statement: 'Learning in the Light of Christ'.

- In the best lessons, activities arouse pupils' curiosity and sustain their attention. Immediate verbal feedback is positive and motivating. Through probing questioning pupils are suitably challenged to extend their thinking and make connections, often referring back to prior learning.

- Teachers ensure there is a strong emphasis on establishing new vocabulary to support the pupils in developing their religious literacy. The youngest pupils can talk about why they identify crib figures as Mary and Joseph.

- Most teachers display a very good level of subject knowledge and expertise which translates into confident and adaptive teaching. While oral feedback is immediate and affirmative, marking in pupils' workbooks is often of a light touch. The good

practice, seen in some books, of challenging pupils through formative questioning and forward marking should be extended.

- Developing the practice of pupil self-assessment, seen in some books, will further enable pupils to take ownership of their learning and a greater investment in setting and achieving their targets. In lessons where learning objectives and success criteria are made explicit, pupils are supported in realistic self-assessment.

- The use of Learning Partners to discuss and share ideas is mostly effective, particularly so when used in lessons as a short and focussed strategy.

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for Religious Education is outstanding

- Leaders and governors ensure that the Religious Education curriculum meets the requirements of the Bishops' Conference and that at least 10% of curriculum time is allocated to the teaching of Religious Education in each key stage.

- Religious Education is suitably resourced in terms of teaching materials, staff professional development and budgets, in line with other core subjects.

- The school uses the diocesan approved 'Come and See' scheme for Religious Education and Journey in Love together with TenTen resources to support the teaching of Relationship, and Sex Education. Leaders consulted fully with parents on the adoption and teaching content of the new requirements for RSE.

- Governors feel very involved with the school and are aware of the development steps identified for Religious Education which include integrating further cross-curricular links between this core subject and the whole curriculum. Governors meet with school and academy leaders to review attainment and progress in Religious Education and are confident in their understanding of what is required.

- The subject leader monitors performance through a combination of lesson observations, work scrutiny and talking to children. Written work is moderated in school and at academy and deanery level. The subject leader has cascaded training in the use of the new assessment framework and evidence shows that the attainment of the majority of pupils in Religious Education is at least at the expected level, with more pupils exceeding this judgement than working towards it in both key stages.

COLLECTIVE WORSHIP

1

How well pupils respond to and participate in the school's Collective Worship and Prayer Life is outstanding.

- Pupils in Key Stage 2 take the initiative in planning and leading liturgy. They have been supported in their role by the Religious Education leader who has provided resource packs from which the pupils plan their class liturgies. Pupils are familiar with different forms of worship and respond appropriately to moments of quiet reflection and stillness; they are able to offer personal prayers as well as joining in with the traditional prayers of the Church.

- In Upper Key Stage 2, pupils took the lead in planning and presenting their class liturgy. They created a prayer focus appropriate to the liturgical season and created an atmosphere of prayerfulness and reverence. They planned according to the established shape of the liturgy, needing only a little support from their teacher to draw out the message for 'Go Forth'.

- Prayer Chaplains are appointed in Year 6 at the start of the academic year. This is an inclusive ministry, open to pupils of other faiths. These pupils are particularly articulate in the expression of their faith and eager to give their time to planning and presenting liturgies and promoting the Catholic Life of the school.

- Pupils have a personal sense of mission. They have an understanding of the liturgical seasons and colours and choose scripture appropriate to the age and experience of the pupils involved. They are able to create an effective prayer focus.

- Pupils spoke of looking forward to assemblies and listening to what Jesus did. They enjoy liturgies prepared by their peers, viewing the experience as 'something new and fresh' and a chance to learn from each other by listening to spontaneous prayer. In the Foundation Stage, children learn to sing and sign the traditional prayers, with the actions serving to imprint the meaning of the words.

- The impact of living and working in a faith-filled and prayerful community is illustrated most effectively by the Prayer Chaplains. They spoke thoughtfully about their experience of prayer: 'If it is something that could help everyone, we can pray out loud, but we might want to just talk privately to God. Sometimes other people's prayers are better and help us to pray'.

The quality of provision for Collective Worship and Prayer Life is good.

- Collective Worship is central to the life of the school and is part of the daily experience for pupils and staff. Staff meetings and study days begin with prayer and staff are used to starting the day together in prayer and reflection.

- The school has a bank of appropriate resources including from CAFOD and TenTen and acts of worship are planned consistently following the Gather – Listen – Respond – Go Forth model. In this way, the shape of liturgy becomes familiar to the pupils and staff and supports everyone in developing high quality acts of worship. Staff have an excellent understanding of the liturgical year, the seasons and feast days.

- Classrooms are well resourced for creating a prayerful focus and atmosphere for liturgy; this could be further enhanced by gathering in a way for liturgy that is distinctive and different to the arrangements for class lessons, an outward sign that the act of worship changes the space and the participants.

- The Academy Principal leads effectively, providing a whole school act of worship to start the week. The Religious Education leader also plans and delivers key stage and whole school worship, reinforcing good practice and establishing a consistent approach for the children to follow as they develop their own practice. Extending the provision for pupils throughout the school to plan, lead and evaluate liturgies is identified by the leadership and the inspection teams as an important next step.

- Whole school Masses are cherished by the wider school community. The leadership team has made extra efforts to prepare the children to participate more fully again following the interruptions to their experience caused by the pandemic, for example by seating the older pupils next to the younger ones, to model behaviour and help them follow the Mass. Facilitating the contribution of all pupils in the various ministries will reinforce their learning in Religious Education while making the experience of Eucharist even more meaningful for all age groups. The assistant priest who visits the school each week spoke warmly of the parish-school links.

- In responses to the questionnaires, one parent states: 'The school offers the children plenty of opportunities to learn across the classes (from each other) through a variety of assemblies and activities, providing a caring and worshipful environment'.

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for Collective Worship and Prayer Life is outstanding

- Leaders are skilled in planning, leading and promoting high quality acts of worship appropriate to the Church's liturgical year. The professional development of staff in this aspect has been a priority. In addition to joint planning, professional dialogue and individual support is provided by the Religious Education leader. The school identifies and uses expert advisors, including the provision of guided meditations on Holy Week.

These initiatives, alongside the regular exposure to high quality experiences led by the Academy Principal and the curriculum leader, serve to increase staff confidence and develop the consistent good practice of all who plan and lead liturgies and enable their pupils to do the same.

- Particular support is offered to non-Catholic teachers to help them establish confidence in their practice.

- The Religious Education leader monitors and evaluates the pupils' experience of worship and feeds back to the leadership team and academy committee members twice yearly. This ensures a degree of challenge so that good practice continues to evolve and improve.