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CATHOLIC
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EDUCATION SPECIAL REPORT



Can a secular school have a 'religious-type' ethos?

Theo Hobson asks 'Britain's strictest headteacher' Katharine Birbalsingh why her methods resonate today

Katharine Birbalsingh, also known as "Britain's strictest headteacher", is not shy of media attention. On the very day that I talk to her there is a story about her in the paper. She has said that parents should supplement their children's schools by doing a bit of teaching in the evening, even if it's just asking them about what they've done that day at school. It reflects her view that people should take control of their own lives, not expect "the system" to deliver. At Michaela Community School, the free school that she runs in Wembley, personal responsibility and respect for authority are drummed into children with an alacrity that alarms most liberals involved in education. The last time she was in the news it was for saying that the concept of original sin was very relevant to the teaching of children – of which more in a moment.

She was raised a Baptist, but drifted away as a teenager, and remains an agnostic. She jokes that her Jamaican-born mother is the sort of born-again zealot who sings and dances about Jesus on street corners. In her early teaching career she worked in faith schools, both C of E and Catholic, as well as secular ones. Dismayed by the lack of discipline in the average state school, she keenly backed the "free schools" movement launched by Michael Gove

in 2011: their freedom from local authority control allowed for traditional teaching methods and a greater focus on the moral formation of pupils. When she launched Michaela in 2014, she made exceptional use of such freedom. She must have known she was in for a fight or two, I suggest. "Yes, my views do tend to annoy people – to a lot of people, they seem to come from the dark ages. So I knew what I was getting into."

Michaela's ethos is clearly "strict", but how is that underpinned by shared values? Is there a belief system similar to that at a faith school? "There is a strong overlap, yes. When people from a religious background visit, they tend to find they are at peace with what we offer, when we show them around. For example, they like the silence in the corridors, which many liberal types might say is oppressive." She is referring to the rule forbidding pupils to speak as they walk between lessons. "My head of science is a Hindu – he says it's the most Hindu school he's ever seen."

It sounds stricter than most faith schools, I suggest. "Yes, I have a Catholic friend who says that here at Michaela we get the human nature bit really right, but don't do the grace bit. But I would say that the opposite is possible as well – some faith schools can get the grace bit right but might not get the human nature bit right. In our day, even Christians can lose

their way and lose sight of how to properly raise children. I think Christians are more likely to be immune to the general degradation of our moral values than others, but it can affect everyone." Such comments probably make her sound like some sort of Dickensian dragon. But in person she is funny, thoughtful and relaxed, with an air of urban cool. So her conservatism feels surprising – one wonders for a moment if she ramps up her rhetoric to shock the liberals and get attention.

When she was setting up the school, was she influenced by some of the faith schools she had seen? Did she want to create a secular version of that? "Yes, I wanted to have the sort of ethos I had seen in certain faith schools, especially Catholic schools, and of course it was quite hard replicating that in a secular context. It's much easier when you have Jesus Christ to point to – you can say this is what Jesus did in this story, you should be like Jesus and so on – it's like what happens at church, there's a ritual basis. When you do that in a secular way you're not able to point to an objective authority, and so you're having to create an objectivity that the children can look to. We manage to do that but it's harder.

"We talk about 'the Michaela way', as if it's a form of religion, and 'being Michaela' – we talk about the school as if it's an entity outside of ourselves – 'the school

would not approve of that' – as if it's godlike force. It can feel a bit weird, but it works. And you can't expect most headteachers to do that. So yes, I'm recreating a religious-style institution in a secular way. And it often feels like an uphill battle, compared to a faith school. We argue with the parents all the time, and our ethos is often not upheld at home."

Presumably upholding this ethos takes a lot of consensus from the staff? "That's right: when someone comes for an interview, I'm very clear that they might not like it here – for example, would they be happy to give a child a detention for not having brought a pen to the lesson? There's no room for people not buying into our values – and that extends beyond teachers, to care-takers and so on. They have to agree with our values, of personal responsibility, duty, respect."

Are many of the staff religious believers, I wonder. "No, a few are, but most are not – but they do believe in the school." And they support her when her remarks are reported in the press? "Yes, they thought it was ridiculous that so many people were shocked by the original sin remarks."

Last autumn, she caused a stir when she said that children had original sin, and good schools should be mindful of the fact instead of pretending that they were naturally good. "I was just saying that children need to be moulded into being better human beings because human nature is flawed. I was amazed that such an opinion could be deemed offensive."

When she articulated her view, was she conscious of drawing on her Christian background? "Well, not really – when I say "Merry Christmas" I'm not drawing on my own Christian upbringing, it's just part of our culture. Our whole culture has values that were influenced by Christianity, and I



"I'm recreating a religious-style institution in a secular way. And it often feels like an uphill battle, compared to a faith school. We are arguing with the parents all the time, and our ethos is often not upheld at home"

was picking up on one aspect of that – like 'love your neighbour as yourself' – but I was talking about a less fashionable aspect."

Does she feel part of a wider educational movement, is there a

kinship with other free schools?

"This particular style is still very rare, but traditional teaching has become more established – teachers leading from the front, as opposed to child-centred learning

– and there has been a rise in better behaviour, linked to the rise of free schools and academies. But we go further than most, in terms of pushing personal responsibility, having a coherent philosophy

of how children should behave. We are not simply pragmatic – saying that good behaviour gets good results – we have a more holistic approach, a sense of what is right and wrong."

Does she see herself as a sort of evangelist for this form of education? She pauses for a moment. "That's not quite how I see it, but I do think this approach reflects a more profound understanding of what it is to be human. So maybe I am a sort of evangelist for it. I certainly like it when these ideas spread, when other headteachers do similar things." There is a surprising frankness to her manner: none of the politician-like circumspection with which many education leaders speak.

Finally, I wonder what she thinks, as a non-believer, about faith schools: is she glad that they are part of the state system? Again she pauses, seeming to think freshly on the matter. "I think in theory I'd be happy with all state schools being secular, and religion being a matter for the home – I don't really like the idea of segregating children by religion. In fact, even here we've had to guard against that. To begin with, we found that all the different religious and ethnic groups were eating lunch separately, partly because of different dietary habits around meat-eating. So we moved to vegetarian food, to ensure that people were mixing with each other – we insist that lunch is a time to socialise, we call it 'family lunch'.

"But on the wider question of faith schools, I suppose that in the real world they do a necessary thing: offering a more traditional form of education, for families who want that. If a family with conservative values came to ask my advice, I'd probably recommend they try a Catholic school – but they still might not find what they're looking for there." **CH**

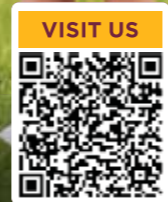
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The unique challenge of a Catholic education

Gertrude Clarke meets Paul Stubbings, head of the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in London

Before I meet Paul Stubbings, head of the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in west London, I read a preview of the latest Ofsted inspection report. It's an encomium: "Pupils grow and flourish in every way here," it says. "They are extremely proud to be part of this strong and caring school community. Leaders and staff have very high expectations for all pupils. They work together to help pupils develop into well-rounded individuals who love learning and achieve highly." There's lots more of the same.

Paul Stubbings himself is modest about his achievement. "Being head of Cardinal Vaughan is like being manager of Manchester United," he says. "There's institutional momentum. The point is

not to go downhill, but to keep pushing."

What gives him pride is that the pupils at Cardinal Vaughan are happy to return to school. Post-Covid, they were, he says, "delighted to be back". These pupils were the first generation who were deprived of school because of the pandemic. "I'm a professional educator," he says. "And it's axiomatic that the children help educate each other."

Paul Stubbings is a tall, direct and friendly man, which must help for a head of a school with over a thousand pupils. He came to the school as a teacher in his twenties; by 30 he had become a Catholic. "The Vaughan made me a Catholic," he says.

We meet after the Epiphany, when normally the school goes

to Mass at the parish church in Kensington; this year Covid meant it happened at school. He's fortunate in having a diocesan priest as chaplain who comes once a week and a rota of 15 diocesan priests who say Mass. There's the option of confession every week: from an average class of 30, seven to 10 pupils might go. It's a real feat.

Right now, the job of Catholic educators is uniquely challenging. "Young people never change," he says. "But there's a generational change. This current crew are more ethically principled than they were 20 years ago. They're seekers after truth, but not necessarily in the right places. They're looking at the world, at racism. They are idealistic, but they have a rarified self-referential idealism. Our job as Catholic educators is to nudge them towards the truth. Our job is to afford a sense of balance and context."

Why are so many young people hostile to the Church? I ask. "It's advanced quizzicalism on their part," he says. "Christianity is rapidly becoming residual. Secularism is much better at explain-

ing its principles – the Church isn't. You could say we're St Paul at Corinth now."

I ask about the other aspect of pupils' lives: the internet and social media. "When we were growing up there was one moral universe," he says. "Everyone knew the boundaries, some people crossed them. Now there are two." And the characteristic



Paul Stubbings

of the online moral universe is "hyper-personalism". All young people, he thinks, are "dual nationals", belonging to the normal world of family and school, and of the hyper-personalised internet.

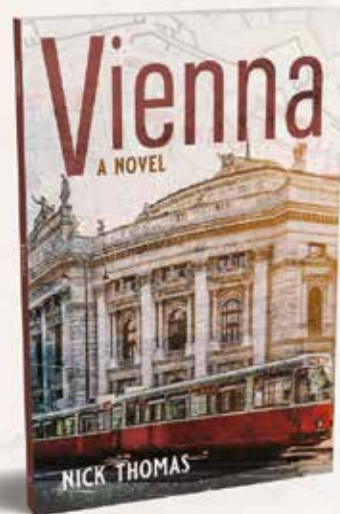
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◀ inhabit two moral universes. It's tiring to negotiate both."

The tension between values in a family and parish and on-line mores is evident in sexual behaviour. "When I was brought up, you'd never think of asking a girl for a nude photo," he says. "In that other, online moral universe, you can. The job of a Catholic educator is to posit eternal values to a constantly changing world. But you have to meet young people where they are, rather than where they should be."

Of the Vaughan's 1,029 pupils, 385 are in sixth form, of whom 120 are girls. He insists that in upper school, the Vaughan is not a boys' school that takes girls, but a mixed school: "The girls are not isolated and beleaguered." He thinks boys and girls are good for each other. "Boys as an educational gender have a tendency to be overconfident; girls tend not to trust their own resources. The sexes knock off each others' rough edges." Inevitably, there are some intense relationships. "They are young men and women together, learning to be adults; mistakes will be made."

The problems were evident last year when a website, Everyone's Invited, allowed girls to share their bad experiences of boys' schools, including sexual aggression and objectification. Stubbings has thought hard about the issue. "Kids must know that when these things happen, it's dealt with. An environment has to exist where pupils trust the adults to do the right thing."

One aspect of the school that Ofsted inspectors praised was that in cases of bullying, pupils knew whom to go to. "There's a specifically Catholic aspect to this. We need to take an holistic view of the whole person in their dignity, and show why the Church is teaching what it is. Then we encourage them to test

the hypotheses in open debate."

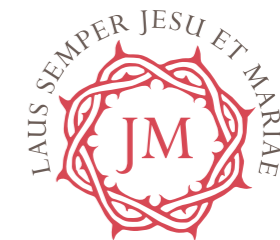
The Vaughan has a proper curriculum for relationships and sex. "There's been a tendency to take the question of sex education in an atomised way – either excessively scientific or excessively religious. What use is that to two semi-drunk teenagers in a clinch with a mobile phone in the room? There's no point in preaching the virtues of chastity at them – it has to be holistic. We can't hide behind a Catholic ethos to dodge the hard questions, like

“There's been a tendency to take the question of sex education in an atomised way – either excessively scientific or excessively religious. What use is that to two semi-drunk teenagers in a clinch with a mobile phone in the room? There's no point in preaching the virtues of chastity at them – it has to be holistic

homosexuality. Some kids see the Church as being in contortions of its own making – which detracts from its dignity."

What distinguishes Stubbings's approach is his clear sense of what the school is for. He's unfazed that some pupils who apply to the school are iffy Catholics. "A school place isn't a reward for good Catholics." He works with the pupils he's got. "The degree to which we are successful is the degree to which we present the truth of the living God and they experience a relationship with the living God." Which is what Catholic education is about. **CH**

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We cannot hope to achieve an end without knowing what the end is. An archer will not hit the bullseye – except by fluke – unless he can see the target. Do we have a clear idea of the end of Catholic education?

For St Thomas Aquinas, an end has a double character: it is the last thing achieved in execution, but the first in the order of intention. The end as conceived by the mind directs the first vertical step of a person climbing Mount Everest. The curriculum and pastoral system of a school will inevitably be informed by the view taken of the end, or aim, of education. What sort of person do we want to see leave our schools? It would be difficult to improve on the formulation given by Pius XI in his encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*: “The true Christian, product of Christian education, is the supernatural man who thinks, judges and acts constantly and consistently in accordance with right reason illumined by the supernatural light of the example and teaching of Christ.”

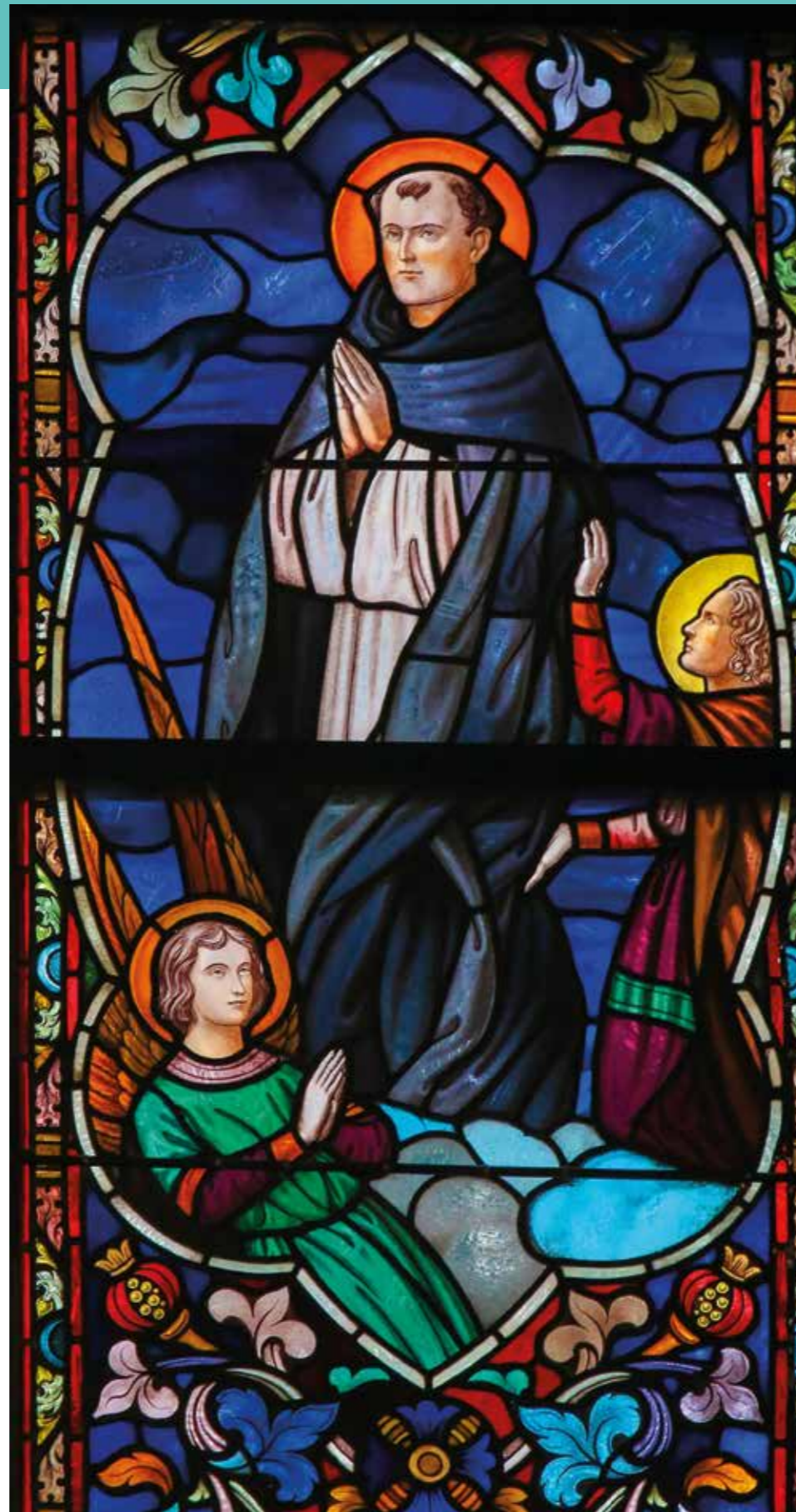
In his *De Veritate*, St Thomas, standing on the shoulders of St Augustine, asks whether one person can teach another and be rightly called a teacher. His answer has nothing to do with the idea that teaching is putting knowledge into a pupil as one would place shopping into a basket. It is the pupil’s own natural light of reason that does the heavy lifting in learning. The teacher simply uses external signs such as words and visual aids to encourage this process. “It happens in the acquisition of knowledge that the one teaching leads another to a knowledge of the unknown in the same way as the learner would lead himself to the knowledge of an unknown

by a process of discovery.” St Thomas derives from Aristotle the insight that teaching, medicine and farming are auxiliary or assisting arts. Farmers do not create the principle of growth of their plants; they simply assist the natural processes of fertility and nutrition.

One person “is said to teach another because the teacher proposes to another by the means of symbols the discursive process he himself goes through by natural reason, and thus the natural reason of the pupil comes to a cognition of the unknown through the aid of what is proposed to him with the aid of instruments.”

Commenting on the words of Our Lord, “Do not be called teachers, because you have one teacher, Christ”, St Thomas underlines the secondary role of a teacher in learning: the primary factor is the light of human reason instilled in the pupil by God Himself: “We are forbidden to call a man a teacher in a way that attributes to him the principal part of teaching, which belongs to God.”

This reductionist view of knowledge as something that can be dropped into the mind of a pupil in the end commodifies and trivialises the purpose of education. What do modern educators make of Aristotle’s understanding of knowledge as a state of soul? Learning is something that produces an interior change in a person, a change that is permanent or, at least, abiding. What is truly important in life are the changes we produce within ourselves rather than the acquisition of external goods, which produce no inner modification of our being. What place do the three intellectual virtues of wisdom, understanding and knowledge have in modern education? For Aristotle and St



A stained glass depiction of St Thomas Aquinas in St Rumbold's Cathedral, Mechelen, Belgium

What St Thomas Aquinas can teach the teacher

Dominic Sullivan on how the saint’s rational Aristotelian outlook can help children better understand religion

Thomas, humans are rational animals. The healthy development of a human being and the promotion of human flourishing involve the perfecting of our intellectual powers, to the extent of our natural ability, rather than just the random acquisition of bits of knowledge. Most people today seem to have a purely utilitarian view of education: we study to pass examinations that in some vaguely understood way will help us enter the workplace. Little thought seems to be given to the intrinsic value of what is studied or how it contributes to a flourishing and happy life.

St Thomas defines the good of humans on the natural level as “the perfection of reason in the cognition of the truth and the control of the lower appetites according to the rule of reason”. Aristotle had already noted that his contemporaries were divided about whether it is the intellect or character that should be chiefly kept in view in educating. Here we see St Thomas achieve a synthesis and subordination. A child grows in knowledge and understanding of the surrounding world. The mind becomes conformed to the reality it encounters rather than creates. For example, to understand the point of behaving justly a child has to develop the intellectual understanding of a universal human nature and the ontological equality of all human beings. How the child responds to this

reality is the other crucial aspect of education: the conforming of the appetites and affectivity to this reality through a growing interior understanding of objective reality and through the guidance and training given by parents and teachers. Aristotle sees the essence of this training of affectivity as upbringing from

“Most people today seem to have a purely utilitarian view of education: we study to pass examinations that in some vaguely understood way will help us enter the workplace. Little thought seems to be given to the intrinsic value of what is studied or how it contributes to a flourishing and happy life.”

earliest youth to feel pleasure in what is objectively good and pain in what is bad.

Teaching morality involves more than just a course in ethics. Our ends and values reflect the sort of person we have become. For St Thomas it is precisely the gradual acquiring of the moral virtues of justice, fortitude and temperance that ensures the cor-

rect ends of human action, with prudence allowing us to choose and execute the means that will lead to those ends. These virtues are acquired by habituation and experience as much as by explicit instruction.

The ethical system of Aristotle and St Thomas is one of love and desire. The notion of “ought”, so problematic in modern philosophy, has only a secondary role. Even St Thomas’s conception of law as an “ordinance of reason for the common good promulgated by one who has care of the community” highlights the law as a thing of the mind rather than the will, which is why an unjust law is no law at all. A voluntaristic presentation of morality, in which certain actions are bad simply because God forbids them, far from convincing, will repel the mind of a young person. I know from my own experience that using St Thomas’s treatment of the human good, virtues and psychology provides a satisfying and convincing way of developing pupils’ inner understanding of the moral life.

What has Aristotle to teach us about Catholic education? It is well known that grace presupposes and builds upon nature. With his immersion in Aristotelian philosophy, St Thomas was able to emphasise the rational foundations that underpin Revelation. Living in a society that impugns the Faith on almost every side, our pupils should be given every help to see the rational coherence of the teaching given by Our Lord to His Church and how the natural virtues find their full development in the life of supernatural grace. “I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” CH

Dominic Sullivan is Head of Classics at the London Oratory



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‘At Worth, there is a strong invitation to faith’

Under Stuart McPherson’s direction, Worth School is going from strength to strength. By William Cash

Since 2015, Stuart McPherson, an Australian former Eton housemaster, has been headmaster at Worth School. His tenure has been a great success. The school’s sixth-form facilities will shortly be transformed with the opening of the new Spencer Building, a £6.25 million state of the art educational facility. Funded by Michael Spencer and masterfully designed by architect Tim Ronalds, the building is due to open in February.

“We are totally full,” says McPherson as we sit in his study before a tour of the school. “We are as big as we want to be at the moment. We feel we are the right size.” With 640 pupils, Worth – originally created as a junior prep school for Downside until it became independent in 1957 – is

now considerably larger than its former parent school, which has around 370 pupils.

A significant factor behind this role reversal is the way that prospective parents select schools. Location is increasingly important. Parents want to be able to watch rugby and cricket matches, not just pack pupils off to North Yorkshire or Somerset for months and only see them on occasional exeat weekends.

“We are blessed with good geography. There is no question that our proximity to London and Gatwick is advantageous,” adds McPherson.

As Worth is half-boarding and half-day, it caters to those parents who still want the full boarding experience. The school was boys-only until 2008 and now has a flourishing coeducational ethos

with pupils enjoying the run of 500 acres in what used to be the Paddockhurst country house of Lord Cowdray. The school was originally bought in the 1930s by Downside Abbey when it became their junior school.

Worth’s Abbey itself is modern, being perhaps the finest example of Francis Pollen’s work. Seeing the new sixth-form centre, one is left in no doubt that pupils enjoy an unusual aesthetic.

The boys boarding house, St Bede’s, is set in woodland next to the school golf course. The building won the 2012 Sussex Heritage Trust Award in the large commercial category.

Ninety per cent of the school’s pupils are Christian, with a full 60 per cent being Catholic. “We assume that children coming into the school, whether Catholics or non-Catholics, need to be versed in what it means to be Catholic and be in a Catholic school.”

It is clear that Worth’s mission is more than just academic. It provides a spiritual education. “Some 40 per cent of our pupils don’t understand what it is to be in a Catholic school – what’s the offer? So we make sure they have a fully formed Catholic education.”

Many of Worth’s Catholic students come from overseas. They can no longer assume that children come to school well versed in the faith. “We have sort of flipped the model in a way,” says McPherson. “We haven’t got the old conveyor belt, where Catholic families send them to school already as Catholics. Those families are fewer and fewer. So the school has changed.

“The first and most important thing is that pupils feel a sense of belonging at the school – that there is a strong invitation to faith because we can’t impose those things in a way that we might have done in the Fifties. So it is

about what Pope John Paul II would have called a ‘preferential option for the young’. How do you create a culture which invites people to step towards their faith? That is what we were trying to do,” he says.

McPherson muses that the school culture is still very much derived from the Benedictine philosophy of its monastic roots. The pupils are encouraged to be tolerant and inclusive as well as to thrive in the liberal arts.

McPherson was sure to note that school Mass is not on Sunday but rather Wednesday. “Abbot Christopher recognised that on Sundays a certain percentage of the school was not here, so to have Sunday Mass as the principle Mass for the whole school no longer made sense. Twenty years ago it was Thursday, now we have shifted it to Wednesday. That is the whole school worship.”

The school also has a Mass on a Sunday night, which is “probably the latest in England” at 8pm for boarders. There is also Benediction.

“We try to say that we’ll keep our services to about 20 minutes. And at that point you can leave. But the second part is the preferential option. We offer different prayer experiences.”

Pupils are encouraged and prepared for confession, the Rosary, “light fever” (lighting a candle in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel), Christian meditation or just sitting in the Abbey Church and listening to music. “This idea of friendship in Christ that’s not forced on you is the way religion should be done.”

A picture of Pope Francis sits in McPherson’s study. He speaks highly of the Holy Father’s impact on Catholic education. “Because the Pope is a good communicator with the young, you can read this as the Golden Age of teaching,” says McPherson. **CH**



Worth School’s headmaster Stuart McPherson



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