

This letter concerns the impending closure of St. Hilda's RC primary school in Whitby. The same letter has been sent to Bishop Draine and Kevin Duffy of the Catholic diocese, with an abridged version to be published in the Whitby Gazette.

As a newcomer to St Hilda's RC Parish in autumn 2019, I quickly observed the paradox of the parish (so welcoming and open) and the school's difficulty attracting pupils. This is particularly curious as in the rest of England places in Catholic schools are in high demand, by parents of various faiths and none, all aware of the advantages of a well-grounded Christian education for their children. The success of a school never depends on the number of Catholic children enrolled, but on the teaching imparted. If a school is failing, it is not the number of pupils that are the cause. Rather falling numbers are the direct consequence of a failing school. As a retired teacher, I am very aware of what makes or breaks a school and asking the wrong questions will never allow meaningful answers to be found.

The success of faith schools in rural Egton shows parental interest in the values of a Christian education for their children which, in turn, indicates what would be possible in Whitby, were there was no threat of imminent closure. The 18 children who have already moved to St Hedda's Egton demonstrate the parents' continued commitment to a Christian education and their willingness to go the extra miles for it. We owe it to our children to offer them the resource of faith and its values, which will hopefully give them the resilience to fall back on, especially in the challenges emerging from the pandemic.

Over the past year our attitudes and perceptions of what is important in life have changed as we have been forced to reconsider our values, concerning such issues as

- The importance of personal relationships, compassion, and the need to build strong, local networks.
- A commitment to caring for others, and the need for social awareness of the vulnerable,
- The transience of life and its inherent value and the need to give every community hope for the future.

It is these values and issues that a faith school addresses, drawing from its Christian roots, the very backbone of our British heritage. Yet, an ever greater number of people are left with few resources of Christian faith to fall back on in difficult times and the increasing mental health issues in our communities reflect this deficit. In the midst of a pandemic with all its traumas, this is not the time to be closing St. Hilda's.

With this prescient awareness, we saw the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of the local community and St Hilda's parishioners displayed at the only open consultation meeting, held at Caedmon just before lockdown. This was thwarted by the abruptness of lockdown and subsequently crippled the possibility of any further action. The 'virtual' consultations during this difficult time have failed to consider the changing circumstances caused by the pandemic, as outlined in the bullet points above.

The consultations which took place during lockdown were remote and failed in any way to engage with the deep community commitment witnessed a year ago. Furthermore, it continued to over-emphasize the financial dimension which, though challenging, could have been resolved. More importantly, the consultation failed to address the new and dynamic challenges which the current crisis demands. One area highlighted by the pandemic is the awareness of new priorities and has shown that money can be reallocated when the will is there. The present need for both local authority and diocese to support compensation for the lack of school education over the past year,

means that to close any school now is unhelpful. A more positive approach would be to re-structure the school to enable it to reach out to those who have been most disadvantaged by the pandemic and home schooling, using the small school with low class numbers to be highly effective. The Catholic Diocese would be offering a great service to the whole community, responding to the challenge set to us all by Pope Francis to live in solidarity (Let us Dream, p.110).

St Hilda of Whitby laid the foundations of Christian values in our town. The importance of the Abbey she founded is still a tangible reminder of her faith. Are we prepared to squander this heritage or give all children the richness of an education steeped in those values? Keeping St Hilda's RC open as the only faith school in Whitby, is a much-needed service to the local community, offering the people of our town an active link to their Christian heritage.

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