Fantasy Schooling: imagining *Laudato Si’* in practice

**Please feel free to share, add your own ideas to, adapt as is suitable, and use your own imagination with total freedom in relation to this! It would be especially good to have a version suited for inner city schools with smaller amounts of land available and fewer spaces for greening.**

*Report on the Winner of the 2030 National* Laudato Si’ *School Award: is this school in YOUR diocese?*

The St Francis of Assisi *Laudato Si’* Centre, across the road from the Parish Church, combines St Cuthbert’s Catholic Primary School, St Herbert’s Catholic High School and the Sr Dorothy Stang Parish Hub.

The first thing that strikes you about the Schools are how attractive they look. Everywhere is completely free of litter or graffiti. The older buildings are unexciting, but well maintained, and enlivened with murals painted by the students, often on religious or nature themes. New school buildings and the areas around the buildings have been designed in collaboration with the School Councils’, and are notably sensitive to the need to fit in with their surroundings, while adding both homeliness and imagination with their curved lines, natural surfaces and use of plants, trees and water features, including ‘green roofs’. Then you see the people: children, adolescents and adults are all moving about the place without rushing - smiling, looking around, making eye contact, noticing their surroundings, and listening - there are no electronic sounds and not a single earplug in sight! Immediately you know there is something special about this place. How did it come about?

The first step in the schools’ engaging seriously with *Laudato Si’* was to establish School Councils in each school so that the pupils could be fully involved in ideas for change. The Chaplaincy was already at the heart of the two Schools, with a dedicated prayer room and close links with the Parish Church. The Chaplaincy team threw themselves into supporting the new *Laudato Si’* initiatives, hosting prayer groups to support the initiatives and including prayers of thanksgiving and praise for Creation in the regular school liturgies. St Herbert’s pupils were asked to help prepare the Parish Liturgy, including creation themes both for the Season of Creation and for two Sundays in Lent each year. Grace was reintroduced at all the school meals, including a mention of all those involved in producing the meal. Once the vegetable garden was established, an annual blessing of the crops was introduced, as well as a Harvest Festival.

The RE, Science and Geography departments had already engaged thoroughly with relevant issues in their own curricula - for example, the Theology of Creation was a fundamental topic at all levels of RE. Now they began to undertake interdisciplinary projects too, at first among themselves, then gradually engaging with other departments. For example, RE and Geography combined on a project with Year 12 looking at the questions of justice and the impact of climate change across the world, and then asked help from the Art department to illustrate their findings. The English and Languages departments began regularly to explore writing about the natural world, while the Music department created, and even helped to compose, a portfolio of music suitable for liturgies on the theme of Creation. The Maths department came into its own supporting and monitoring a wide range of practical projects, from costing the results of the energy saving campaign to planning the composting of waste food to working out seed orders for the garden.

The organic vegetable garden was one of the first practical initiatives, suggested by both School Councils and also by the Parish Council at more or less the same time. Volunteers from the Parish were offered a piece of school land to start the garden, which was planned using permaculture principles. Each class now spends one afternoon a week working during the growing season (and holiday clubs and volunteering continue the work across the summer). Many of the vegetables are used in the Schools’ canteens, while the rest is shared through the Parish Centre Food Club.

Main meals for the schools are ordinarily plant-based, though it is possible to choose dairy and chicken options, except on Fridays, which are fast days. Fish and red meat and puddings are offered as an option only on feast days and for special celebrations (the grace on such days includes a grateful acknowledgement of the life of the animals that are being eaten). Wherever possible other food is locally sourced, organic and seasonal. Pupils also assist in preparing the food, learning a variety of recipes to ensure that their home-grown food is as delicious as possible. A fair pricing scheme and other initiatives have meant that very few pupils now choose to bring their own food. One of the Junior School Council initiatives was to get pupils to agree to stop buying crisps and instead provide home-made crisps for everyone twice a week. Pupils volunteer at the Food Club, which provides cheap good-quality hot meals as well as unused food from supermarkets or given by local people, including gluts of home-grown vegetables.

The initial energy audit was carried out by an expert in conjunction with the final year Business Studies students, who went on themselves to apply for the relevant grants, and help select the companies which did the necessary work. Energy needs are now met in part by new buildings being designed on the ‘Passivhaus’ principles to be as energy efficient as possible, and also by solar panels on the school roof, combined with a heat pump and some ground-source heating. Major improvements to insulation and energy-efficient lighting have also helped here. Any electricity which needs to be bought from the grid comes from reliable ‘green energy’ sources. There is talk of collaborating with local organisations to create a Community Energy supply making use of waste heat from a local factory. Another initiative, initiated by the Junior School Council after a talk about astronomy, was ‘St Francis’ Dark Skies’, which has dramatically reduced the light pollution around the Centre. As a result, one of the art students won a prize with her photos of the night sky.

The problem of waste disposal, which had become massive, was tackled first by surveying what was being thrown away and asking everyone - teaching staff, support staff, kitchen staff and pupils - to review whether they needed to use the throwaway stuff in the first place. This process reduced waste by 40%. The remaining waste was analysed to see what could be reused and what could be recycled. Where recycling was not possible, the groups of people concerned met to discuss alternative ways of solving the problem - e.g. committing themselves to avoid buying drinks in complex packaging, or switching to using simple pencils (unpainted without rubbers attached) rather than biros. Staff and pupils were invited to take a ‘no-plastic pledge’, committing themselves not to buy anything made of or wrapped in plastic if this could possibly be avoided. The new garden compost system has used some cardboard, and a new project is investigating the creation of briquettes from waste paper and card to power the hot water.

The biggest waste disposal issue, about which no one talks, is human biological waste. The High School Council raised this question, which led to the purchase of compost loos. More ambitious students realised that something more exciting could be possible, and a current joint project between the Chemistry, Biology, and Art, Design & Technology Departments, in conjunction with the local Council, has nearly completed proposals for a local sewage system which will use reed beds to purify waste from the Church, Parish Hub and two Schools. This combines saving a vast amount of energy and water with providing nutritious material for growing (saving precious phosphate resources) and preventing pollution of the waterways and seas. This innovative project could provide a blueprint for a revolution in sewage management.

School uniforms are made of strong organic materials, sewn to very high standards, and designed (in conjunction with the School Councils) not to ‘go out of fashion’. They are also available in a kit to make yourself. Most pupils buy their uniforms second- (third- or fourth-) hand in the Waste Not Want Not Shop in the Parish Hub. This Shop also allows local people to pass on unwanted clothes, furniture and other goods which are made available cheaply or free. An interdisciplinary Year 11 Project, The Cost of Fast Fashion, was included in an exhibition in the City Art Gallery. The High School also held a public ‘Second-Hand Fashion Show’ and raised £1,000 for Children in Need.

The Geography Department organised a survey across the two schools to find out how people travelled to school and then designed an integrated Transport System, which included safe walkways and walking companions on popular routes, staff agreeing to travel by both school and public buses with the pupils and car-sharing where essential. This was then discussed with the School Councils and PTA, appropriately modified, and put into practice. The Schools are so popular now that it has now become feasible (though a little controversial) to make the ability to travel to school sustainably one of the criteria for entry). Pupils have also themselves organised several days where they have requested drivers outside the school to switch off idling engines. The Chemistry Department have been monitoring the air quality outside the school which is now 50% cleaner than two years ago. Staff and parents both note that the pupils who walk to school are calmer when they arrive both at school and at home than they were when they travelled by car.

Forest School activities are enjoyed throughout the Centre, from the mud-play sessions which are a favourite with the Pre-School Club to the tree-felling qualifications taken by some of the senior pupils. The Schools are blessed with a small area of woodland, but have also made links with the Woodland Trust for regular field trips to one of their reserves.

In collaboration with local volunteers and the County Wildlife Trust, pupils have developed wildflower areas and planted trees (with a Woodland Trust grant) both around the school and in the local area. These areas are now regularly used by the High School during biology lessons to teach botany and ecology; in the Junior School all sorts of classes have outings to this area - French, English, Art and Music have all found inspiration among the trees and flowers. The new Junior Bird Club has recorded 57 species in the school grounds. The Junior School are currently preparing a wildflower identification trail, with illustrated information notices, in the school grounds and on a popular local walk.

The combined Art, Design and Technology Centre is at the centre of the lives of the two Schools. Well equipped and always busy, it is known as ‘Local Circle’. The name reflects its philosophy: everything that is made should be part of a circular and local economy. Students are expected to know where their materials come from and where they will end up, and to design and make things that are useful, beautiful, durable and easy to repair and disassemble, and ultimately biodegradable or at worst fully and locally recyclable. The focus is on things that can be used locally, and examples are everywhere, such as the cleaning brushes taken home, the chairs used in the Kindergarten, a beautiful set of candlesticks for the Church and a games table for the Social Hub. The ADT Centre is closely linked with the Home Skills Centre, where all the students learn to cook, with an emphasis on how to prepare seasonal and home-grown food from scratch, to sew, and to do basic household repairs.

The lunchtime Blessed John Bradburne Bee-Keeping Club began when one of the local parishioners asked if he could keep a spare hive in the grounds. Soon there were four hives on two locations, and many of the pupils were involved, with help from the local Bee-Keepers Society; it was particularly noticeable how the more troubled youngsters responded to the calm environment needed to keep the bees at ease - after two years not a single pupil had been stung. The large quantities of honey was sold to raise money for the Schools’ partner schools in Malawi, and the candles which the art class made from the wax, were designed and used for the Easter liturgies. An unexpected spin-off was that one pupil chose to research John Bradburne’s life for a history project and ended up setting up a fundraising and letter-writing link with the leprosy centre in Zimbabwe to which John dedicated his life.

A Year 11 Water Project, initiated as a joint venture by Chemistry and Geography led to a survey of water use in the Schools and resulted in a 30% saving in water waste and bills, through a combination of installing water butts for the gardens, a consciousness-raising campaign about not leaving taps running, and a spin-off project helping the Kitchen Staff learn better water saving practices.

With all this activity, how come no one seems in a terrible rush? The Schools have taken seriously the idea that time belongs to God, and that if we do what we ought to do, without hurrying or panicking, he will bring good out of their efforts. If people are too busy, they simply do fewer things, rather than the same number of things badly. Pupils choose fewer subjects, teachers are more selective about topics to teach, brave decisions are made about abandoning unhelpful administrative tasks. There is an unwritten rule that anxiety about exam grades must never drive anyone’s choices. Above all, because both students and staff are encouraged to wean themselves away from time-wasting use of IT and social media (phones are banned during school hours), no time is wasted, or anxiety created, in that way. Computers are not used at all in school until Year 5 - by which time almost all the pupils already know how to use them better than the teachers anyway! An enormous amount of time is saved because nobody tries to multi-task, so that tasks are done properly, without mistakes, the first time around. Or maybe people just have time to savour the gift of their daily lives because Providence provides it!

The Vocations Centre (n.b not ‘Careers Advice’) focuses on challenging students with the question: ‘How will you find joy in using your gifts to serve others?’. The result is reflected in the choices they have made, with many going on to work in farming and gardening, catering, healthcare and teaching, as well as a significant number of vocations to priesthood and the religious life. Most of these jobs are plentifully available, so unemployment among past pupils is rare. Those who go into more conventionally ‘ambitious’ jobs such as business, banking or law tend to be innovative, for example developing ‘green’ business ideas or innovative local banks.

Students who go on to University tend to keep in touch with the High School and the Chaplaincy Department, and many of them reported that they felt isolated in continuing to practise their faith in this new context. In response, the Chaplaincy team developed links with three Universities popular among students where there was a strong Catholic Chaplaincy, and worked with past pupils to develop Community Houses to be shared by like-minded students in rented accommodation near each of these Universities. These are now passed on down the generations.

Volunteering has become a big element in the culture of the two Schools, particularly through the Parish Hub. Students are able to volunteer to help cook and serve in the Cafe, serve in the Waste Not Want Not Shop, staff the library, and assist with the pre-school and retired social clubs. They often provide music and entertainments at social events. Again, there are unexpected spin-offs: pupils from less happy homes have found a sanctuary during long holidays in volunteering at the Hub; those less confident at Maths have found their mental arithmetic skills dramatically increased by serving in the shop; friendships across the generations have provided a range of opportunities for learning, building confidence and even finding job opportunities. The flourishing Junior SVP has established a gardening wing, which provided strength, energy and company for older (often lonely) gardeners, and in turn offers the youngsters with a fund of experience from which to learn.

The increased involvement with the Parish and local community through volunteering led naturally to invitations to parishioners to join in the many celebrations that are part of the Schools’ new life, for example, marking religious feast days, the harvest, or the achievement of specific projects, or national events.

Staff who have worked at the Schools for many years (and now teachers tend to be reluctant to move away) have noticed many changes: the school not only looks much better, but results have improved, and most important of all, students are happier and kinder. There is a measurable reduction in bullying, while absenteeism, drug or alcohol abuse, and exclusions have almost disappeared. The Whole Health Centre has been able to shift its energies from counselling to supporting well-being, and has benefited from being able to prescribe a wide range of accessible activities to pupils who would benefit.

One long-serving member of staff summed up the changes concisely: ‘The School is a more peaceful, more beautiful, kinder and happier place’.