

Aquinas College

URN: 130514

Catholic Schools Inspectorate report on behalf of the Bishop of Shrewsbury

03–04 October 2024

Summary of key findings

Overall effectiveness

The overall quality of Catholic education provided by the college

Catholic life and mission (p.3)

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

1

Religious education (p.5)

The quality of curriculum religious education

1

Collective worship (p.7)

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

1

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

Yes

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

Yes

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

N/A

1

Compliance statement

- The college is fully compliant with the norms for religious education as laid out by the Bishops' Conference.
The college is also fully compliant with additional norms expected by the local Bishop.
- As this is the college's first inspection of this kind , there are therefore no areas for improvement from a previous inspection.

What the college does well

- The college's Catholic mission is known and lived and permeates all aspects of college life.
- Students are given the tools for moral, spiritual and intellectual growth.
- The college gives students the opportunities to 'be more' and to improve the lives of others.
- There is a strong culture of continuous improvement of religious education across the whole college based on rigorous self-evaluation.
- The college provides an extensive range of opportunities for students to experience prayer and liturgy.

What the college needs to improve

- Review the structure for delivering core religious education lessons so that opportunities for all students to receive the best teaching is maximised.
- Develop the capacity of student leaders to evaluate prayer and worship.

Catholic life and mission

How faithfully the college 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

Student outcomes

The extent to which students contribute to and benefit from the Catholic life and mission of the college

1

Provision

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

1

Leadership

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

1

1

The college's distinct mission permeates all aspects of college life. Students understand it, embrace it fully and appreciate its specific relevance to the lives they lead. St. Oscar Romero's 'Aspire not to have more but to be more', in particular, acts as an inspiration for students to reflect on their actions, interactions and ambitions. As a result of a truly embedded mission, Aquinas college is an inclusive, happy and harmonious community where students feel they are known and valued. As one student who had a troubled time at high school comments, 'now I feel safe and valued.' This is a college where staff and students grow together and thrive. Students from non-faith backgrounds also recognise the power of the college's mission. As one student comments, 'it has helped me to grow as a person.' As a consequence of such an empowering vision, students are inspired to give back to others, to 'be more'. This is evident in student leadership and participation in local, national and global charities such as the Cafod youth leadership programme and a project supporting children in a village school in India. The Youth St Vincent De Paul (SVP) group exemplifies well the commitment students have to lead on activities linked to charity and social justice.

Staff fully embrace the mission of the college and consistently model the values that lie behind it. Through regular revisiting of the mission, staff have a clear understanding of what it means to work here. They support and inspire each other and go the extra mile to ensure that all students are truly valued – in fact, 'loved' is the word one teacher uses to describe this collective endeavour. Staff readily talk about restorative justice, forgiveness and second chances for students who fall below the high expectations set by the college. This creates a community at ease with itself, joyful and welcoming: a community where Christ is truly at the centre of all that college does. Rich displays and iconography are visual reminders of this core message. The

beautiful chapel, well-used and respected by the community, complements this vision. Chaplaincy provision is imaginative and provides carefully considered opportunities for students to develop morally and spiritually. As one student from a non-faith background says, 'I am not religious but I am now open to new ideas.' An annual cultural day celebrates the presence of students and staff from various cultures and traditions, highlighting the highly inclusive nature of the college.

The principal communicates a clear and inspiring vision of how the mission of Aquinas College is the driving force behind every aspect of college improvement. This vision is shared by all staff who use a common language to express what they are striving to achieve. As one member of staff reflects, 'the college hasn't got a mission, the mission has got a college'. All policies and systems have been adapted to ensure that the college's Catholic values are at the foreground. For example, the college has an innovative tutorial system in which all students, over a period of time, experience time to reflect, plan and pray. With a blend of scripture-led assemblies and one-to-one support from tutors, students are guided along the path to 'be more'. This is exemplary practice. Parent surveys show how much they value this beyond-the-ordinary level of pastoral care. Through video links, leaders also share with parents the life and journey students have embarked on, recognising them as the first educators of their children. Through a half-termly governors sub-committee specifically looking at mission, governors have an effective tool to monitor and evaluate the ethos of the college.

Religious education

The quality of curriculum religious education

Religious education key judgement grade

Student outcomes

How well students achieve and enjoy their learning in religious education

1

Provision

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

2

Leadership

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

1

1

Students enjoy religious education and value highly its contribution to their critical thinking and their understanding of the world they live in. For example, one student comments, 'Although I am not religious, it helps me understand better those who do believe.' Students are actively involved in lessons and engage fully in often thought-provoking discussions. They reflect critically, are able to link new learning to prior learning, and express their thoughts with the appropriate specialist vocabulary. Students value the safe space teachers provide for differing views to be expressed and enjoy the mutually respectful atmosphere this creates. In the best lessons observed, teachers related the topic to real-life situations and use their theological expertise and probing questions to take the thinking to a higher level. In A level theology, students respond with enthusiasm, confident to challenge others' views using sophisticated language. Excellent progress in lessons is matched in their written work which shows well-developed critical thinking. Outcomes in A level theology examination results are good and are on an upward trend. Teachers in other subjects often link their teaching to the core values of the college which helps students understand the inter-connectedness of all their learning.

Teaching in A level theology is a strength of the department. The core team of religious education specialists shows high levels of subject knowledge and commitment to their subject. They are skilled in deepening students' thinking by using a variety of techniques. Lessons often begin with a 'hook': an engaging stimulus to spark interest. In many cases this is a picture. In a lesson on the concept of 'beauty', the teacher played a cello. The curriculum for core religious education is carefully planned and regularly reviewed. Resources are developed collaboratively and aim to ensure that all students receive the same opportunities across all lessons. Whilst it is recognised that the religious education team works hard to support the fifty plus non-specialist teachers of religious education, there is not always a parity of experience across all classes. For example,

where teaching was grounded in solid theological knowledge, students made greater gains in understanding. However, it is recognised that this model of delivery affirms the college's belief that the teaching of religious education is a core responsibility of all staff. In order to be outstanding in this judgement area, leaders should explore new ways to guarantee that all students receive the best provision.

The leadership of religious education is outstanding. The curriculum leader for religious education has a passionate vision for this subject which is shared across the whole team. Curriculum plans are faithful to the draft Key Stage 5 *Religious Education Directory* and show imaginative ways in which to ensure materials are responsive to the needs of students from faith and non-faith backgrounds. For example, following the recent flare up conflicts in the Middle East, the department created an additional lesson in core religious education on Abraham and spent time in the chapel to reflect on the conflict. With the support of the lay chaplain, students then wrote letters of peace. The eight religious education specialists work as a team and support the large number of non-specialist teachers in their planning and delivery. Reviews of learning and examination results are timely and rigorous and they exemplify the team's commitment to self evaluation. The use of student surveys are highly developed and feed effectively into this review process. Unsurprisingly, leaders are very clear in their next steps for improvement. Governors are well-informed and are actively involved in the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of religious education in the college.

Collective worship

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

Collective worship key judgement grade

Student outcomes

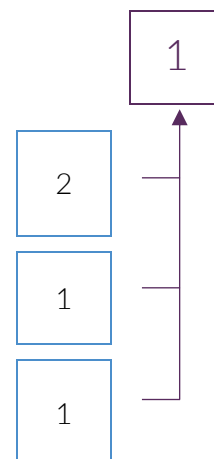
How well students participate in and respond to the college's collective worship

Provision

The quality of collective worship provided by the college

Leadership

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



Students respond well to the opportunities for prayer and liturgy provided by the college. All students in Year 12 experience an induction to the chapel where they have space to reflect on different forms of prayer including the different components of the celebration of the Eucharist. As a consequence they show a deep reverence for the religious liturgies they experience. One student from the Muslim faith comments on how welcome she is made to feel in such services. Students work collaboratively with their tutors who are starting to build students' confidence in taking more leadership in this area. The welcoming chapel provides a space of spiritual calm which students value. Students can access an annual residential retreat and those that do speak positively of its impact. One student writes after a recent retreat, 'I found that it was a major life-lesson. It has taught me that it is okay to sometimes feel lost but there is always hope that you will find your way.' Whilst students are increasingly active in leadership of charity and social justice activities, leadership by students of prayer and liturgy is in its infancy. However, inspectors are confident that improvements in this specific area were already planned.

Prayer and liturgy are central to the life of the college. Assemblies, even if their purpose is to share information, are shaped by prayer and scripture. The college provides a wide variety of experiences of prayer and liturgy including regular celebrations of the Eucharist. There are weekly opportunities for Eucharistic Adoration and morning prayer (three times a week). In addition, there are monthly 'Theme Weeks' centred around gospel values which offer further opportunities for spiritual and moral development. Staff, too, experience a weekly briefing in which different departments lead a staff prayer. The lay chaplain and senior leaders are inspiring role models in the way they lead prayer across the school. The offer to students is rich and covers a wide range of creative experiences. The college also responds spontaneously to changing world events with prayer. Students who have suffered bereavement have been taken to the

chapel by the lay chaplain for comfort and prayer. The college is blessed with regular contact with local priests which has helped to forge strong links with parishes. Partnership with parents is another significant strength of the college in the way they are invited into the prayer life of the college. Parents, in a recent survey, recorded that they appreciated this.

The lay chaplain offers a compelling vision for chaplaincy in the college. In a short space of time, she has made a positive impact on the whole community: staff, students and parents alike. Leaders and governors have ensured there is a clear focus on ensuring that students experience a wide variety of liturgical experiences including the regular celebration of the Eucharist. Mass is celebrated at key moments in the liturgical year: sometimes for students; sometimes for staff; sometimes for all. In whole college Masses, all students are invited and all respond by attending. This helps create the sense of belonging palpable across the college. Through a weekly cycle of 'mini-mission' meetings, leaders have an accurate insight into the spiritual needs of students and staff. In addition, through a half-termly governors' mission and ethos sub-committee meeting, all governors receive timely reports on the impact of decisions which they can then evaluate. They have acted judiciously to ensure that funding for prayer and liturgy is as generous as can be.

Information about the college

Full name of college	Aquinas College
College unique reference number (URN)	130514
College DfE Number (LAESTAB)	3568603
Full postal address of the college	Aquinas College, Nangreave Road, Stockport, SK2 6TH
College phone number	001614833237
Principal	Danny Pearson
Chair of governors	Tom McGee
School Website	https://www.aquinas.ac.uk
Trusteeship	Diocesan
Multi-academy trust or company (if applicable)	N/A
Phase	Tertiary
Type of college	Catholic Sixth Form College
Admissions policy	Non-selective
Age-range of pupils	16-19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Date of last denominational inspection	No record
Previous denominational inspection grade	No record

The inspection team

Martin Reynolds	Lead
Carol Gregson	Team
Simon Duggan	Team

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