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## The Church needs you! A school chaplain on why you should consider becoming one

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*Harry Rawcliffe is school chaplain at The Champion School, Hornchurch, in Brentwood Diocese.*

'Sir, what do you do?', a Year 8 student asked me as I stood on the playground in the first month of my new job. I had to pause and consider the question – not just because I had not yet had my morning coffee!

I offered something boiler-plate along the lines of 'I help the school to live out our faith.' True, I suppose. Yet insufficient!

In my two years here I have only become more convinced of the vital role of a dedicated chaplain in Catholic secondary schools. No job description can quite capture the role. You are a source of pastoral support and counsel for staff and students. You are a networker and catalyst for energy and initiatives already present in the school and the wider community – charity initiatives, social justice projects, wellbeing and spiritual development opportunities. You walk with individuals up the mountain of God – leading them to, and facilitating, moments of encounter in the Sacraments or on retreat.

But more fundamentally, a school chaplain is themselves. You bring your own joy, style and personal touch to the role. For some, this means using musical or artistic gifts and talents. For others, it means helping out in PE and with sports teams. For me, it is neither of those examples! Whatever it is, a school chaplain brings themselves to the role, as they are. Young people can smell 'inauthenticity' from a mile away. When they are accompanied by people who are simply being themselves, young people feel able to be themselves too.

I find my own prayer life to be the one thing that can give me the grace I need to do my job well – because in prayer we remember who God is, and who we truly are.

What are some essential skills to be a school chaplain? Know that you are loved by God and that you are a pilgrim on the journey of life. Be the sort of person who finds joy and life in building relationships with those you are walking with on the pilgrim way (see also: *The Road to Emmaus*). Have a heart for sharing the love of God you have come to

know. Be able to laugh at yourself and don't be afraid to make a fool of yourself – sadly no photographic evidence exists of me on 'sponge a teacher' day, but many of our students can attest that I took my fair share of blows!

The school chaplain is a joyful witness of the resurrection in their community. There is a dearth of hope in the present young generation, which we need to have an answer for (we do, and his name is Jesus!) This doesn't necessarily mean you spend every moment in school talking about Jesus. There are plenty of opportunities for that, such as assemblies and liturgies, but there is also a lot of time simply journeying through the ups and downs of everyday life. As a wise Jesuit priest and former Headteacher once advised me, 'Spend time with them talking about the things that don't matter. Then they will come to you to talk about the things that do matter.'

Being a school chaplain has been the greatest joy and privilege of my life so far. So much of the role is discreet, gentle, personal and – to use one of Pope Francis' favourite words – tender. That might not be captured easily in productivity targets or exam data. But it resonates with Elijah's encounter with God, in the gentle breeze.

I would absolutely encourage anyone who thinks they might have a heart for school chaplaincy to explore it, perhaps by finding time to shadow a chaplain already in post. The Church needs you!

*To find out more about becoming a school chaplain, please contact your diocese (<https://catholiceducation.org.uk/about-us/contact-a-diocese>).*

*Harry Rawcliffe is on the far left in the picture above, taken during events to mark World Youth Day, in Portugal, 2023.*

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