



## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEW EVANGELISATION: A CASE STUDY OF CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL PARENTS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

---

Researcher: Dr Ann Casson, 11 September 2014

Commissioned by the Department for Evangelisation and Catechesis,  
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

### RESEARCH FOCUS

The focus of this report is baptised Catholic parents who have chosen to send their child to a Catholic primary school in England and Wales. The study involved a selection of Catholic parents from six Catholic primary schools in the five Catholic provinces of England and Wales. **It provides a snapshot of the beliefs and attitudes of a small sample of Catholic parents.**

### SAMPLE GROUP

Thirty-nine parents participated in an in depth face-to-face interview and a further one hundred and seven completed a short qualitative questionnaire. The participants were aged between 24 and 54 years, with the majority being between 35 - 44 years old; 85% were female and 15 % male. All were volunteers, so responses are representative only of parents within the Catholic primary school who wished to contribute to the research. The parents were selected by invitation. An invitation to participate in the research study was sent to parents through each of the participating Catholic primary school's usual mailing system, newsletter, emails, or individual letter. A member of staff in each school collated responses and organised an interview timetable convenient to both researcher and parents. Less formal interviews were also conducted with priests, head teachers, and pastoral workers connected to the Catholic primary schools. The limitations of this case study must be acknowledged. **It is not possible to draw general conclusions from such a small sample.** However, the data is of great value as it raises many questions with regard to the challenges and opportunities for the work of the New Evangelisation.

### TIMEFRAME

Piloting of the interview format and questionnaires was done in Autumn 2013 with the bulk of the interviewing completed in the first half of 2014. The raw data was analysed during the summer months, with publication scheduled for 5 November 2014, at a Symposium organised by the Department for Evangelisation and Catechesis.

### ANONYMITY

All participants were given a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity; this was an important factor in the participants' open and honest sharing of opinions and stories. For this reason, no details are provided that could identify either the Catholic schools or participants; throughout this report, no quotations from participants are referenced. The Catholic Primary schools and participants have been anonymised and any details that may lead to identification have been removed.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do Catholic parents in England and Wales currently express their Catholic Faith?
- Why do these Catholic parents seek a Catholic primary school education for their children?
- Why do many Catholic primary school parents attend or not attend weekly Sunday Mass?
- In what ways would these Catholic parents wish to grow in faith and re-connect with parish life?

### FINDINGS

The findings in the research paper are set out in five sections: Catholic Faith, Catholic primary school, Sunday Mass, Catholic parish community and religious literacy. It is hoped that a cross section of practitioners working in support of local evangelisation, family, parish and school outreach, and pastoral ministry will be able to use the material in support of their ministry and outreach.

The following provides some highlights of initial analysis of the data.

## CATHOLIC FAITH

### What's attracting people to take a fresh look at the Catholic Faith?

- **Belief in God:** A belief in God was expressed as the most important aspect of their Catholic Faith. Associations included: God of love, a protector, life after death, the unknown.
- **Resonance with basic Gospel values:** Catholic values were expressed in terms of caring for others. Jesus was most likely to be referred to in terms of moral behaviour. *"[Being Catholic] means following Jesus' basic teachings about not putting yourself first, the vulnerable are most important."* *"A Catholic is someone who should be there for one another, be good to your neighbour, because that is what it is all about."* (Quotes - from the case study participants.)
- **Offers identity:** The Catholic Faith offers people an identity. *"...my faith is part of who I am: it defines my personality and sets me apart from other people"* and *"...it is part of my life. With God my life is better."*
- **Support:** Recognition that it is a source of support and strength, especially during difficult life experiences. *"Daily life can be very difficult and I have had times when I have felt beaten, [faith is] a constant resource of strength."*
- **Comfort,** especially through prayer: *"You get that answer, it is a nice feeling, it is a nice kind of sense of feeling."*
- **A Free Gift:** Believed to be a gift to be shared: Catholic parents who participated in the research were sharing their Catholic Faith, with friends, with their children and with other relatives. *"...you got to really believe, Nan, because you have to have something to believe in."*
- **Important for their children:** Teaching their children to pray was important for many of the Catholic parents. *"It means I do pray a lot through my life, being a Catholic I feel like I am never alone, there is always someone you can turn to, and I would like my children to follow my footsteps."*
- **Being different and belonging:** Especially in relation to reception of the Sacraments. *"The sacraments are the most important thing for me... they make you stand out."*

### Key re-engagement / 'attraction' moments

- **Sacramental preparation:** This is often the first reconnection with the Catholic Faith that parents have made since attending church as a child. It is a key moment of reconnection with young Catholic adults.

### Challenges

- **Formation:** Parents' limited faith vocabulary and formation
- **Misunderstanding:** Some perceived that before seeking to be prepared for a sacrament you needed to have enough money for the celebration.
- **Timing:** They never found the right time to ask for baptism.
- **Faith presumption:** "...a non-Catholic mother (married to a baptised Catholic) stated that most people presumed she was Catholic and had never asked her about her faith."

***"...my faith is part of who I am: it defines my personality and sets me apart from other people."***

## CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

### What's attracting people to take a fresh look at the Catholic Faith?

- **Teaching of the Catholic Faith:** Seventy five per cent of Catholic parents who contributed to the questionnaire maintained the reason for their choice of the primary school was that the school taught the Catholic Faith. For some Catholic parents it was the role of the Catholic school to teach their children the Catholic Faith.
- **Academic reputation:** *"The reason is because [this school] is the best in the borough [for] my son, the best school, the best education."*
- **Good values:** *"I want [my daughters] to be good girls."*
- **Pastoral care:** Catholic parents assumed that a Catholic primary school would provide excellent pastoral care: The school was seen as a source of comfort and religious guidance. *"It is not just education but the caring, the looking after the whole child."*
- **Location:** The family home was near the school.
- **School fosters belonging:** This was a concept that was emphasised by all the Catholic parents interviewed - that the Catholic primary school was a Catholic community to which they had a strong sense of belonging.
- **No proselytisation:** The Catholic primary schools were seen to have a relaxed and 'fun' approach to the teaching of the Catholic Faith, as it was not 'forced upon' the children.
- **Appeal of Catholic people:** All the Catholic parents spoke highly of the Catholic staff and greatly appreciated the presence of the pastoral worker and / or priest in school or at the school gate.
- **Being known by name:** Parents maintained that the parish priest 'knew' everyone's name, this 'knowing of names' was emphasised by many parents. They felt that the staff and priests 'knew' them and their children.
- **Catholic ethos:** Many Catholic parents in this research sample maintained that the prime reason for the choice of a Catholic school was the Catholic nature of the primary school. The Catholic ethos was created not only through a teaching of the Catholic Faith, but also through experiences of Catholic practices and encounters with 'Catholic people'.
- **Part of the parents' religious identity:** Catholic parents wanted their children to experience a Catholic upbringing similar to their own. *"I myself went to Catholic primary school had a wonderful memory a wonderful time there and I suppose it is important to me that I encourage a faith for the children that would be as a Catholic."*
- **Appreciated school Masses:** The frequently attended Masses organised by the Catholic primary school are, for some Catholic parents, their only experience of a Catholic Mass.

### Key re-engagement / 'attraction' moments

- **Celebration of Mass in schools for children and parents:** The celebration of Mass in the Catholic primary school could be seen as a means of encouraging re-connection to the Catholic Faith tradition.
- **Pastoral Worker in situ:** Some of the Catholic primary schools had a parent liaison officer or a pastoral worker, and for Catholic parents, these people formed a link between the Catholic school and the Catholic parish. *"... she [the pastoral worker] is like an ambassador for the church."*
- **Creating threshold spaces:** Offering parent and family-centred events and courses were appreciated – e.g. parenting skills, arts and crafts days, volunteering, attending assemblies.

### Challenges

- **School rather than parish Mass:** The frequently attended Masses organised by the Catholic primary school are, for some Catholic parents, their only experience of a Catholic Mass. This was apparent when Catholic parents were asked to describe what they liked about attending Mass.

## MASS

### What's attracting people to take a fresh look at the Catholic Faith?

None of the Catholic parents shared that they no longer attended Mass at all; the parents did not perceive themselves as 'church leavers'. All Catholic parents who contributed to this research had attended Mass in the last year.

- **Spiritual benefit:** The reasons the parents attended included a desire to provide for their children's spiritual needs, and for their own spiritual well-being.
- **Response to a personal invitation:** From the organisers of the sacramental preparation programme. It is significant to observe the positive response from parents to a personal invitation to Mass.
- **Sacramental preparation time:** The sacramental preparation time of First Holy Communion was a key moment when Catholic parents said they would attend Mass more frequently.
- **Children's liturgy:** The provision of excellent children's liturgy was cited as the reason to attend Mass with their children: *"I take the children every weekend, the children's liturgy is offered for the children, which is great; it explains the Gospel in their own words."*
- **Homilies:** The parents appreciated the priests' homilies, in particular, when they were humorous or relevant to their everyday life.
- **Good feelings:** *"...when I go to church the difference from when I have gone in and come out I feel very refreshed and relieved...you just have a sense of good feeling and warmth."*
- **Singing:** Catholic parents also appreciated the opportunity to sing: *"I love the singing. I love the opportunity to stop, think, and pray, because I don't have much time at other times of the week."*

### Key re-engagement / 'attraction' moments

- **Sacramental preparation time:** The sacramental preparation time of First Holy Communion was a key moment when Catholic parents said they would attend Mass more frequently.
- **Child-centred activities:** Parents' descriptions of their experiences of Mass focussed on their child's spiritual needs. Involvement with the Faith was viewed through the lens of their child's faith needs.

### Challenges

- **Occasional goers:** The majority of Catholic parents who contributed to this research were occasional Mass goers.
- **Reasons for not getting there:** These included: lack of time, competing commitments whether paid employment or children's leisure activities, a lack of knowledge about Mass and a perception that regular Mass attendance was not part of Catholic identity for their generation.
- **Mass times:** It was frequently stated that the timing of Sunday Masses was not family-friendly, and that Mass times clashed with children's leisure activities on Sunday mornings. Evening Masses were seen as inconvenient for parents with young children; some parents suggested a more convenient time for Mass was late afternoon. Some assumed that Mass times were set to suit an older generation.
- **Bringing small children to Mass:** The other major concern for Catholic parents - previous experience of attending Mass with small children. Many parents maintained that other members of the congregation did not appreciate having young children at Mass. *"[it is] difficult as we have two little ones. When we get there it is usually ok, but one of us will have to walk out because x are crying or kicking...it is just hard."*

## PARISH

### What's attracting people to take a fresh look at the Catholic Faith?

- **Personal relationships:** A sense of belonging was nurtured through their relationship with the priest, pastoral worker and parish members. Connection was also fostered through close family being members of the parish – e.g. elderly parents.
- **Wider sense of belonging:** Expressed mainly through a sense of connection to Pope Francis. *“Pope Francis is doing a brilliant job.”*
- **Parish groups:** Some parents achieved a sense of belonging with the parish through engagement with a particular group of parishioners; some Catholic parents belonged to an African and Caribbean groups.
- **Activities:** The most common activity for Catholic parents to be involved in was children's liturgy.

### Key re-engagement / 'attraction' moments

- **Pastoral Worker:** This emerged as an important role for fostering relationships between the school and parish.
- **Improved communication:** The majority of Catholic parents wished to receive more information about the parish through the Catholic primary school newsletter or website.
- **Finding outlets for gifts and talents:** Some participants desired to take a more active part in parish activities with the majority seeking to be involved more in catechesis, family activities, and helping other people within the parish. *“I would like to be a bit more involved. I would like to be a reader in the church, just to show a bit more commitment, but I don't know how to go about it.”*

### Challenges

- **Belonging:** Many Catholic parents expressed a weak sense of belonging to the parish community and were more likely to go to the church nearest to the school.
- **Fellowship:** A common response was that the Catholic parents did not know people in the parish. *“I don't know the people who come to Mass. We don't stay at the end for tea or coffee. We have to get back.”*
- **Lack of communication:** There was a perceived lack of communication between occasional Mass goers and the parish community. Few Catholic parents were aware of the parish website.
- **Generation divide:** Many Catholic parents held the assumption that the Catholic parish was run by, and for an older generation who were regular Mass goers.
- **Engagement:** The majority of Catholic parents did not want to be more involved in the parish community; some argued they had no time to be involved in the local parish: *“I just go for mass. [I do not have] much time to be more involved. I have a full time job and work night shifts.”*

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY

- **Hunger for formation:** One area where many Catholic parents requested a greater support from the Catholic Church was ongoing formation in the Catholic Faith. A lack of knowledge and a desire for learning about the Catholic Faith was a factor in many of the discussions with Catholic parents. *“I would like a bit more education on it [the faith] so I can understand the things that my kids say, instead of me saying to my kids what is that.”*

### Key re-engagement / ‘attraction’ moments

- **Parents learning through child-centred formation:** The majority of Catholic parents were gaining knowledge, understanding, and experience of the Catholic Faith from their children, and from the Catholic primary school. A resource called *Wednesday Word* was positively highlighted, as well as family catechesis. *“I would say I learn most through my children as [what] they ask always seems to evoke from me discussions that I feel teaches me about my own beliefs and faith.”*
- **Intergenerational learning:** Catholic parents were experiencing and learning about the Catholic Faith from their grandparents, parents, and from their children and the Catholic primary school. For some Catholic parents, there was a clear line of transmission from older relatives to themselves. *“[I learn] from my mother-in-law, she is really highly religious and at the moment we are living with her.”*
- **Mass materials:** Many Catholic parents suggested that ‘what to do in Mass’ was one area that they would like to learn more about; they wanted to have a basic understanding of the structure and meaning of the liturgy.

### Challenges

- **Primary level knowledge and understanding:** The head teachers and the parish priests who contributed to this research claimed one reason for a low level of religious literacy among many Catholic parents was that the parents’ formation in the Catholic Faith was often “completed” when they finished primary school education. Many had no clear understanding of the Catholic Church’s teachings and practices today.
- **Approach too high brow:** In relation to formation offered: *“I have been to some scripture meetings but [he] has done them at university level, which for the general person is over the top. It needed to be made clearer. It needed to be more like, this is what we are doing and explained what you can get out of it.”*
- **Resources:** Struggle to find suitable resources that would engage the parents’ interest; too often resources assumed a level of general literacy and religious literacy that was not appropriate.

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEW EVANGELISATION: A CASE STUDY OF CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL PARENTS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research study aims to address the need to provide empirical research about opportunities to positively engage with Catholics who do not regularly attend Sunday Mass. The study builds on insights gained from the Bishops' Conference 'Crossing the Threshold' conferences (2011-2013), and the work of the national core group for ministry and outreach to non churchgoing Catholics<sup>1</sup>. Many baptised Catholics do not regularly attend Mass; however, they are involved in Catholic education, social action, and youth work. This research focusses on the area of evangelisation, faith and practice; in particular, the spiritual needs and interests of young Catholic parents of children in Catholic primary schools in England and Wales. This research will explore the Catholicity of Catholics parents; it will investigate what existing connections they value with the Catholic Church; and consider how the Catholic Church could strengthen its relationship with them, in encouraging the sharing of the gifts and talents that they bring to the Body of Christ. The chosen research method is a qualitative case study, a method, which generates rich data to complement and illuminate the narrative behind statistics. This method involves in-depth semi-structured interviews, and a self-completed survey of a selection of parents at Catholic primary schools. The report produced from the analysis of data outlines the findings and reflects on the implications for future practice and policy in the area of the Catholic Church's evangelistic outreach, pastoral ministry and mission. This in-depth qualitative research study of the religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices of parents in Catholic primary schools, aims to assist the work of the New Evangelisation; it aims to serve and benefit those who will shape the future of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Departments/Evangelisation-and-Catechesis/Crossing-the-Threshold-Non-Churchgoing-Catholics>

## NOTES

This research project was commissioned by the Department for Evangelisation and Catechesis and was coordinated by the Home Mission Desk, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.  
[www.cbcew.org.uk/home-mission](http://www.cbcew.org.uk/home-mission)

Catholic Trust for England and Wales, 39 Eccleston Square, London, SW1V 1BX.

© Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2014. A company limited by guarantee and registered in England and Wales.

Company No. 4734592 Registered Charity No. 1097482.