

A Life in the Day of a School Chaplain...

I arrive at school at 8.30am ish - sometimes earlier, and, occasionally, a little later. The school site is a big site; I park at the bottom end and walk up to the Main Building. I'm counting my steps at the minute to improve my fitness levels but this also offers me a great opportunity to meet pupils arriving, to say good morning and greet them with a smile. I'm usually very happy in the morning but sometimes it's hard 'to get the smile out' but I always try because something stuck in my mind from a course that I attended a few years ago. I am in a privileged position at that time of the morning. For some students, I may be the first person that they have met that day. And do I want to leave a positive impression, no impression or a negative impression?

That's why the smile is always worth it!

I make my way up to the staffroom, I love to grab a coffee and catch up with colleagues at the beginning of the day. The most important and best ministry and fellowship always occur around the table over a drink or a meal. That is reflected by Jesus in the Gospels.

My first official duty of the day is to join Year 14 for registration who have the privilege of registering in the lovely, comfortable Crush Hall which is an area of soft seating and flat screen T.V.s - Year 14 are always a great year group! They're beginning their journey into adulthood but they are still in need of plenty of nurturing and support (and they do love a bit of craic.)

After registration, I call into the school prayer room for 10 minutes to centre myself and connect with God - I always try to make time to do this and I find the days that I don't are often the days that get away from me and I don't enjoy as much. I try to get another opportunity to pray during the school day but it's not always guaranteed, so this moment is essential for a chaplain. How do I connect with God? Everyday is different - sometimes, I sit in silence, aware of God's presence; other times I might say a decade of the Rosary. Sometimes, I just reflect on the good things that have happened to me in my life. Just like anybody else, the quality of this encounter can be negatively impacted by busyness, my mood and what might be going on in my life. But, I try my best to make it a quality experience as I know God never changes and is always there waiting patiently for me.

After that, I try to get a bit of administration and planning done. (I'll admit that I'm not the best at this!) I prefer to be out and about, meeting people and being present for the school community - I just love the social interaction part of my job! However, I do my best. I think I'm full of great ideas for events and projects but I'm just not good at doing the research and planning needed to land them sometimes. If I did, I'd be the best school chaplain in the

world butI'm okay with being the second best! I should just go for it more often; we are too afraid of failure in this tick box world that we live in. I need to take a leaf out of the book of our very own R.S.C.J. Sister Sr. Philippine Duchesne. If you haven't heard of her, I'd advise you to do a bit of research, she was, and still is, an inspirational lady.

Another bell rings and it's time for break which is always great craic. I think I know the impression pupils have of the staffroom - staff sitting around talking about them all the time. This is definitely not what it is like! The banter at break time is good with some members of staff being picked on or teased about sport or something that they have or haven't done. I'm happy to take my turn being the person under fire, but I enjoy a good wind up too! It's all in good humour and there is a genuine high level of care and respect among our staff. It might be the same everywhere but I do believe the Sacred Heart Ethos of St. Catherine's has a big part to play for adults as well as the children.

After break, I usually meet some pupils in the chaplaincy. The Chaplaincy is a little sanctuary: a comfortable space with no whiteboards or desks; a place where pupils are comfortable to talk and feel listened to; a place where pupils can unwind play a game of Connect 4 and have a cup of Matthew's secret recipe hot chocolate and a treat from Matthew's Munchies tin. Pupils visit for many reasons. Maybe it's a Year 13 pupil planning a social outreach project or event. Maybe it's a Year 8 getting to know other pupils in their class a bit better. Or, maybe it's a Year 11 or 12 pupil struggling a bit with pressure. Or, maybe even a Year 9 that hasn't a care in the world and is chancing their arm to miss a lesson!

Everyone is welcome at The Croft Chaplaincy and I want all pupils and staff to know that.

Now, it's lunch time and I usually go down and help out with supervision in the canteen. I stated it earlier, and I'll say it again, as I have Jesus as my role model here: "The best ministry and pastoral care happens around the table at meal times." A lot of people that have never worked in ministry probably find this hard to comprehend but this has been my 20 years' experience of youth ministry. It's just a great time to meet the school community as they are usually a bit more relaxed, not rushing to and or from somewhere, and looking forward to some delicious, nutritious food to recharge their batteries. People are at their most open and relaxed at mealtimes but it's a good time to identify those that are feeling down and in need of a bit of support or encouragement. At this time I want to give a shout out to our canteen staff - they are so good and kind to the pupils and they love a bit of craic!

Then it's usually a rush back up to the main school building for Year 13 or 14 Living Faith. Living Faith is a Sacred Heart Education based enrichment programme for Sixth Form pupils. We usually have a weekly guest speaker. Some of the themes are faith-based while others have a lifestyle focus, but I think faith should permeate into every area of life - I guess that's why it's called Living Faith. The most entertaining speaker we have during the year is the local curate and the school clerical chaplain Fr. Thomas. He is great at getting a message across and is great fun too! He has the pupils in stitches for most of the session. He has a great way with him - I'm a little bit jealous - but we all admire him very much.

Some of the year 13s usually come over for a cup of tea and a slice of buttery toast after Living Faith. It's a great opportunity to evaluate the session and continue the discussion, especially if the speaker has covered a controversial theme. We encourage our pupils to be

open, accepting, broad-minded enough to form opinions based on facts, and to not always take a media-driven popular opinion. It is important to respect and be open to genuinely held alternative points of view.

On to my next order of business for the day! School is a very busy place and, for convenience, a lot of communication happens electronically and if it wasn't like this, a lot less would get done. I do a lot through email but, if possible, I try to go and meet with colleagues to discuss, organise and arrange activities, projects and events. I realise that my colleagues are very busy but I hope that in our face-to-face interactions they have received something good and positive, I know in my case that I have! I often think that support staff in schools and teachers, especially pastoral staff with pastoral responsibilities, are much better at being chaplains than me. To me this is true discipleship!

The day flies in at school and it's time for most of the pupils to go home - it's always hard to believe the time when the bell rings at 3.25pm. The number of pupils that now stay on after school seems to be increasing every year: there are many reasons why pupils stay on in school, including study, additional classes, clubs and societies or just a late bus. It's probably a good time for me to get a bit of admin done but, more often than not, I'm involved in a faith based after school club or helping out with football training. I love Gaelic football so I'm more than happy to help out and it's a great way to meet pupils I may not encounter. It's also a good time to meet and have a chat with staff - there is always plenty of craic and news from the cleaning staff.

Before I know it it's 5pm and it's time to go home to my family. I enjoy the car journey home, reflecting on all that I haven't got around to doing but more so reflecting on these key encounters with staff and pupils where I hope that I have made a difference in their lives. I love all the school community dearly, I hope as a chaplain that I can be of service and do them justice.