



**Down and Connor
Catholic Schools' Support Service**

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Citation delivered at the Spirit of Catholic Education Awards Ceremony

At St Marys University College, Belfast

On Wednesday 24th January 2024

St Mary's Primary School, Aughlisnafin

Recipient of the Spirit of Catholic Education Award 2024

I am delighted today to be able to present the Spirit of Catholic Education award to St Mary's Primary School for the second year running. St Mary's is a school which places Catholic ethos and faith development at the centre of school life. The principal and governors are committed to leading a Catholic school which welcomes children and families from all faiths and none while proudly proclaiming its Catholic identity.

The school staff and governors regularly reflect on how well the Catholic ethos is being promoted and made visible in the daily life of the school. In June 2023 using the Framework for Self-Reflection document, the school decided to focus on the area of Social Justice and Respect for the Environment. They utilised the indicators to determine their progress in this area of Catholic ethos and based on the outcome of this reflection they decided to embark on a project which would further enhance their pupils' prayerful respect for God's creation. The school had already engaged in many projects aimed at increasing the pupils' awareness of recycling, sustainable products, energy reduction and water conservation, but based on the outcome of this reflection, the school decided to focus on developing a sensory garden and outdoor sacred space in an area of the school grounds which had fallen into disrepair. This project involved the entire school community with students, staff past and present, governors, parents, grandparents and the wider parish community all coming together to create a place where children would not only develop their ecological awareness but also their ecological spirituality.

Throughout this process they reflected on Pope Francis' words in Laudato Si when he spoke about the "cry of the earth". St Mary's school community recognised an opportunity to enable pupils to answer Pope Francis' call to action, when he stated that we should be "living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork". By becoming involved in this project the pupils were caring for the wildlife and plant life in their new garden and transforming this once neglected space into a place of learning and enjoyment.

However, they also wanted this space to become a place of prayer and reflection. They wanted it to be a sanctuary where the children and their family members could find a sense of peace and tranquillity and simply spend time communing with nature and experiencing God's presence in this beautiful place. At every step in this journey the parish community were involved and informed of the progress and could see this wonderful initiative come to fruition.

The principal also saw an opportunity to encourage the praying of the rosary in this sacred space. The pupils were provided with rosary beads and rosary cards explaining how to say the rosary by the Cantenian Rosary Group. Thanks also to the generosity of the previous principal, a statue of Our Lady now takes pride of place in this garden and provides a focus for those who come there to pray the rosary. The school community are delighted with their new sacred space and should take great pride in their achievement and the investment they have made in providing this precious garden which will support the faith development of generations to come.

2024 is a special year for St Mary's as it marks the 190th anniversary of Catholic Education provision in Aughlisnafin. How fitting that St Mary's Primary School should receive the 2024 Spirit of Education award today showing that Catholic education is continuing to thrive in the area and serve the people of Aughlisnafin 190 years after the opening of the original school.

I now invite the representatives of St Mary's Primary School, Aughlisnafin to come forward to receive the 2024 Spirit of Catholic Education award.

Mrs Sinead Beare, School Support Advisor