

My self-reflection on my placement, engaging humanities.

Lilly Mae Hughes Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2025

St. John Rigby College's ethos, "*Roots to Grow, Wings to Fly*," encapsulates not only the environment it fosters for its students but also the transformative experience I underwent during my chaplaincy placement. What I expect to be a role focused on formal religious practice quickly revealed itself to be a deeply pastoral and inclusive vocation. Chaplaincy, I came to learn, is less about religious conversion or instruction and more about building presence, trust, and hope. This reflective report will evaluate the personal and professional skills I developed through my chaplaincy placement, working alongside Martin the school chaplain and other related activities, including managing a well-being event and attending a leadership assessment centre. It will also consider the challenges I encountered and how these experiences shaped my aspirations and understanding of faith in a modern context.

Before beginning this placement, I had a limited understanding of chaplaincy. My expectation was that I would be involved in structured religious practices, perhaps delivering prayers, or assisting with masses in a formal setting. However, my very first day challenged this view. I was invited to attend a memorial mass for a student that had recently passed away. The mass was led by a chaplain from a school in Bootle, and our conversation after had a powerful impact on me. We talked not only about the logistics of chaplaincy but about the spiritual crisis in contemporary society. We discussed how religion is often dismissed, particularly by younger generations, and reflected on modern saints such as Carlo Acutis, the patron saint of the internet, whose story is a testament to faith's enduring relevance. From that moment, I realised chaplaincy is deeply pastoral. It is not limited to those with religious belief. Chaplains support students from all backgrounds and beliefs through listening, guiding, and simply being present. I saw this clearly as I observed Martin's, casual yet intentional interactions with students. Sometimes, a passing 'hello' turned into a conversation about mental health, or academic stress. This approach revealed how small moments often carry the most meaning.

*"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ."* – Galatians 6:2

Perhaps the most transformational aspect of the placement was understanding the significance of trust and relationship building in chaplaincy. The chapels open door policy, both literally and figuratively, enabled students to stop by informally, fostering an environment of approachability. Despite its position next to a cold entrance, the chapel remained a space of warmth and welcome, and over time, I developed personal relationships with students who began to greet me in the corridor or drop in for a chat. I also took part in peer support sessions, including creating goody bags for eating disorder awareness week. In this, I helped students prepare fidget rings and write encouraging quotes. These shared tasks provided opportunities for deeper conversations, helping students see me as a friendly and consistent presence. Later, I joined a Values for Living class, which broadened my understanding of how mindfulness, global awareness, and liturgical teaching are woven into everyday college life. This trust building extended beyond social engagement into pastoral care. On one occasion, I played a supportive role in helping a student reconsider his decision to drop out. This conversation, though unofficial, was underpinned by empathy, attentiveness, and reassurance. Essential chaplaincy tools.

*“Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” – 1 John 3:18*

One of the most thought provoking elements of my placement was witnessing how chaplaincy strives to keep faith alive in a secular and diverse setting. Through conversation with visiting chaplains and observing college activities, I saw how religious figures such as Saint Carlo Acutis can bridge the gap between tradition and the modern world. His story, including verified miracles, is convincing in an era shaped by digital technology. Yet, these stories are often overshadowed, which reinforces the importance of chaplains, as storytellers and facilitators of relevance.

During my time on placement, I was invited to a meeting with the Archdiocese of Liverpool along with all the chaplains in the borough. I met various chaplains from different schools and backgrounds, and it was inspiring to see a collective dedication to engaging young people, regardless of their religious conviction. I realised that faith, when approached openly, has the power to unite diverse communities. I also attended a cathedral mass commemorating the 72<sup>nd</sup> miracle of St Bernadette of Lourdes. The presence of the family involved and the doctor who verified the miracle made this an incredibly moving experience. I brought my

father along to share the wonder, which made the event both personal and spiritually enriching.

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” – Romans 12:2*

My placement helped clarify that chaplaincy is as much about emotional intelligence as it is about theological knowledge. I saw first-hand during a planning day for Values for Living, Chaplaincy, and A-Level religious studies. I was struck by how much structure underpins effective teaching, planning lessons in line with schemes of work, aligning content with Catholic Social Teaching, and tailoring material to student needs. Seeing the teams' enthusiasm and experience helped ease my fears about the heavy responsibility of teaching. Eventually, I was able to contribute ideas, such as writing prayers or burdens on seeded paper to be planted, symbolising transformation and healing. This idea was well received and might even be implemented in future projects.

Another proud moment was organising a whole college well-being chaplaincy event. I created posters, involved students from different clubs, and collected handwritten positive quotes to be given out alongside free hot chocolate. This event for me was a true blend of project management, creativity, and pastoral care, and it reinforced my passion for chaplaincy. My placement also included cleaning the chapel, an act that sounds mundane but became a meditative practice. Sorting through hundreds of candles became a symbolic gesture of renewal and stewardship. Similarly, a day trip with the college to a monastery to learn iconography with nuns reminded me of the power of visual faith and contemplative silence. Drawing my own orthodox icon helped me reflect on the sacred in new ways.

*“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the lord not for human masters.” – Colossians 3.23*

In addition to my placement, I participated in the Grad Core assessment day at the Etihad Stadium with university. The event simulated a job interview and assessment centre, requiring me to deliver a presentation on leadership and take part in group problem solving tasks. This significantly pushed me out of my comfort zone and challenged my

communication and leadership skills. I learned the value of clear articulation, time management, and the ability to collaborate under pressure.

Whilst this experience appears irrelevant to chaplaincy, it reinforced key traits that are vital in ministry: public speaking, confidence, and adaptability. Reflecting on this day, and achieving the highest graded feedback, I now feel more prepared for future professional responsibilities. It also allowed me to see how my chaplaincy experience had already helped build many of the skills workplace values. There was also an opportunity for me to visit a careers fair within university, but unfortunately, I was unwell at the time, and therefore missed this.

*“For the spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.” – 2 Timothy 1:7*

Martin has been a guiding light on my journey, offering wisdom, kindness, and unwavering support. He has taught me valuable lessons, both spiritual and personal, whilst always making space for friendship. His presence has deeply influenced my growth, and I’m truly grateful for his constant encouragement. My time at St John Rigby College was transformative. I began with a limited view of chaplaincy and left with a deeper, more holistic understanding of its purpose. The ethos *“Roots to grow, wings to fly”* became more than a slogan, it reflected my own development. Through witnessing and participating in acts of compassion, creativity, and faith, I found both grounding and aspiration. This experience has shaped my desire to continue working in pastoral roles, perhaps within education or faith based settings. I have learned that a chaplain’s strength lies not in the volume of their words, but in the steadiness of their presence. Whether by handing out hot chocolate, joining a student support group, or offering a quiet space in the chapel, chaplaincy touches lives in quiet but profound ways.

*“But those who hope in the lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.” Isaiah 40:31*

#### Bibliography:

*The Holy Bible*, 1989. *New International Version*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Fr. Billy Swan (2024). *Carlo Acutis, the First Millennial Saint - Word on Fire*. [online] Word on Fire. Available at: <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/carlo-acutis-the-first-millennial-saint/>.