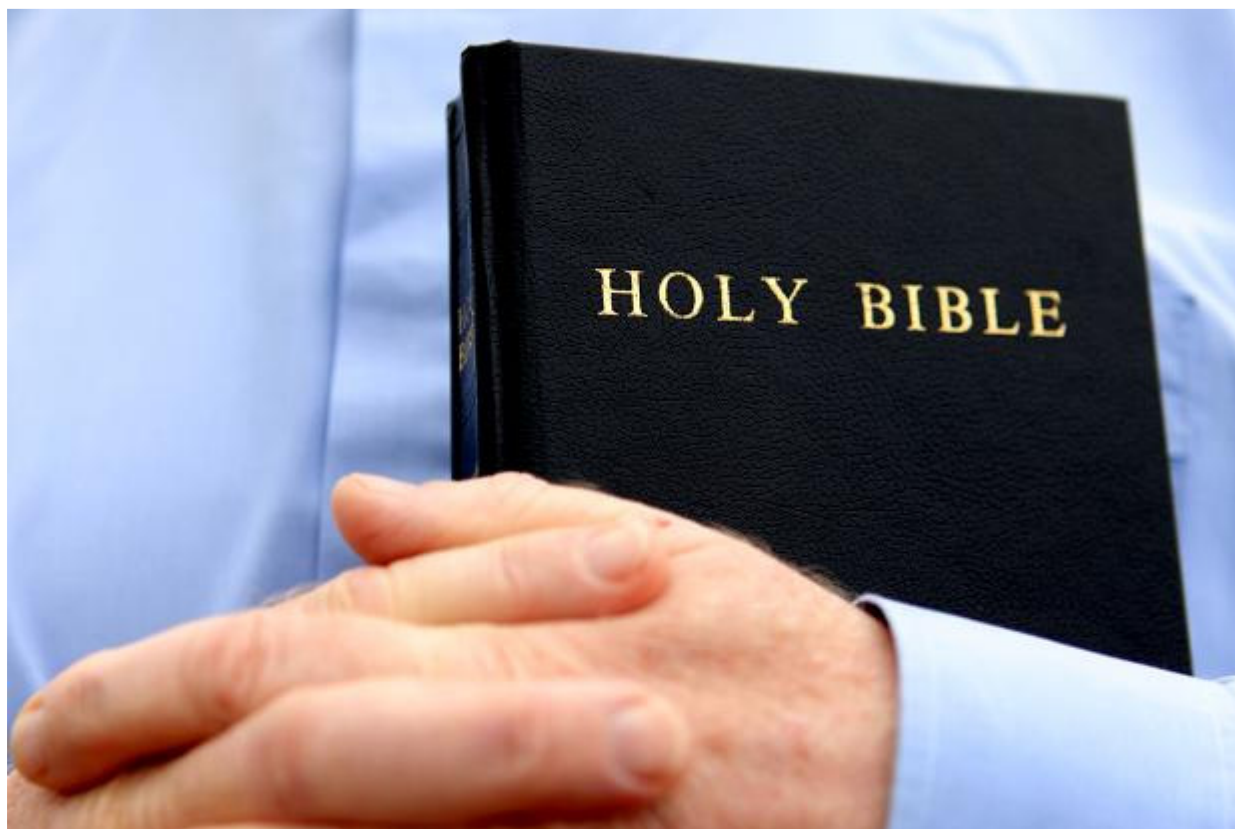


THE  TIMES

# Catholic schools vow to keep the faith when selecting pupils



The Catholic Church says it will not turn away Catholic children James Glossop for The Times

**Joanna Sugden**

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Roman Catholic schools have pledged to defend their right to select pupils on the basis of faith after secularists and teaching unions welcomed moves by the Church of England to limit the practice of selecting on religious grounds.

The Catholic Education Service, which represents about a third of the faith schools in England, said it would “robustly fight” any attempts to introduce quotas for non-Catholic pupils.

Dr Oona Stannard, their chief executive, dismissed calls by the Church of England’s board of education to end the bias towards religious children as “nonsense”. “I don’t foresee a time where our bishops would want to turn away Catholic children in favour of other children because that isn’t at the heart of what our schools are about,” Dr Stannard told *The Times*.

This week, the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Rev John Pritchard — who is also the new chairman of the Church of England’s board of education — said that the proportion of pupils given places because of their faith should be cut to only 10 per cent in order to make Church schools more inclusive. Half of the Church’s 4,600 state-maintained schools select pupils on the basis of faith and most produce excellent results, making them extremely popular.

But Bishop Pritchard said that schools needed to “get back to their core purpose” of providing an education for the whole community, particularly the disadvantaged, even if that had a detrimental impact on standards.

His comments were welcomed by anti-religion groups and religious leaders opposed to faith schools as a positive step to “end discrimination”.

But Dr Stannard said that the Catholic Church would resist a similar move in its schools because it would damage relations with its congregations.

She said: “It wouldn’t be conducive to good relationships and good harmony if Catholic families who have contributed significantly [to church life] were to find they watch others take up places that they have much wanted.”

Dr Stannard denied that there were “significant numbers who are being duplicitous” in order to secure a place in a highly ranked Catholic school.

“I’m a realist. I know that our schools are so very good that very many people are anxious to get into them and that means that they can be oversubscribed,” she said.

“It’s very hard to worship and to be faithful and, by and large, the people who are in our congregations, who are worshipping, are doing it faithfully. They may be at different stages of that faith journey, but it’s not a significant problem in our community.”

Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in West London, one of the most popular Catholic secondaries in the country, is locked in a battle with the diocese of Westminster after bishops accused it of elitism. The Schools Adjudicator ruled that the school’s admissions code “inappropriately give[s] priority according to the applicant’s, or his parents’, involvement in church-related activities”.

Other faith groups responded to the moves by the Church of England with concern. The Association of Muslim Schools said that the Church of England was being led by a secularist agenda that could put pressure on other faith schools.

Ibrahim Hewitt, its spokesman, said: “The Church of England should be setting a lead and not bending to what is very much a secularist agenda to try to get rid of faith schools.”

School admission rules are also being rewritten by ministers to make it simpler for parents to challenge a decision not to award their child a place at the school they want. Ministers believe that the code for school admissions, which is legally binding, is unnecessarily long and difficult for parents to navigate. A source on the Education Select Committee told *The Times* that entry to faith schools was a “large part” of the review.

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