



Is
this
RE,
Miss?

Janet Marshall, Education Officer at The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham (Anglican), considers how the topic of pilgrimage and the experience of Christian places of worship can engage children and young people in the new millennium.

Cool holiness!

Every teacher knows that the best form of evaluation comes from the students themselves! They tell it how it is and we just love that here! We want them to stop and just be. We try to offer activities that help them do that.

'It's special, it just is... it's tranquil and in yer face, miss... it's cool', was a comment made by a fourteen year old student recently when asked about how she felt sitting in the Shrine. Minutes later another student commented, 'It's dead spooky and I'm not into things like this... I don't like all the gold... but can I light a candle?' Another whispered, 'I've never ever been as quiet as this before, it's lovely.'

This is spiritual development in action and many teachers say, 'I wish Ofsted was here today to hear all this!' It is also important that students are aware that all prayers left at the Shrine will be prayed for each night at six o'clock.

The Shrine is first and foremost a living place of prayer, so people are tremendously important too. We offer the option of meeting and quizzing a Sister or a Priest as part of most programmes. With the help of technology, role-play and interviews we also offer opportunities for them to find out about what the place, pilgrimage and faith means to real life pilgrims. We aim to offer some 'classroom' time during every visit so that preparatory activities and discussions set the scene before

It's cool!

Pilgrimage to Walsingham: an 'in yer face holy sort of place'



they actually 'hit' the Shrine, Abbey grounds, Orthodox or Methodist churches.

The Shrine is unique. It is very different to most town and village churches so this undoubtedly has an impact. We also offer to incorporate visits to the local Anglican, Methodist and Russian Orthodox churches, in order to compare and contrast styles of worship and church layouts. During every visit to the Shrine youngsters are invited to look and experience; to 'blitz' their thoughts, opinions and feelings both verbally and on paper through creative English; to soak up the silence and always – if they want to – to light a candle.

I feel that only by analysing their own feelings and reactions to what they see and experience can they then start to look at what it all means for Christian believers and pilgrims. There is also so much to see, touch, smell and taste – we have a Saxon well which still blesses us with an abundance of fresh spring water! If desired, students can take part in our daily Sprinkling at the Well service at 2:30pm.

The youngsters have a lot to say and to question so it is important that we offer a forum for this to take place

Youth Pilgrimage

Sometimes adults give the impression that young people are not interested in religion any more. But that is not my experience at Walsingham. August 2003 witnessed our annual Youth Pilgrimage entitled *Get a Life* – the quest for holiness. This experience is open to young people aged 11 and over from parishes, schools and youth clubs all over Britain. In fact we welcomed over 500 pilgrim campers to Walsingham in 2003.

The Shrine, built between 1931-37 is not a large building so we now have to worship in a Big Top. We offer a daily Mass with upbeat, new and inspirational music and dance. There is plenty of scope for the youngsters to 'own' and be involved in each service. Technology (eg computer graphics, big screens and cameras) helps us to make every liturgy a truly memorable experience. Worshipping alongside hundreds of other young people is also a great encouragement to those who come from parishes where there may be only a few in their age group.

Unchurched youngsters

A number of the youngsters who take part in the youth pilgrimage are not familiar with 'going to church'. Although many attend after school or youth clubs back home being involved in a lively act of Christian worship is often something very new. It's great to see them enjoying it all and responding in their own time and their own way in the variety of liturgies we present to them – a great favourite is the one that runs from Eight Till Late. There are also debates, discussion groups and workshops. The youngsters have a lot to say and to question so it is important that we offer a forum for this to take place. There are always opportunities for one-to-one and small group conversations led by leaders, nuns or priests.





Clergy, youth leaders and teachers see the pilgrimage as a 'catalyst' which is capable of inspiring and motivating youngsters to develop their interest in worship, keep asking questions about the Christian faith and become involved in their church community when they return home.

Back in medieval times Walsingham was a place renowned for life-changing experiences and miraculous answers to prayers and yes, we do still get those kinds of things taking place from time to time – there are some wonderful stories that many pilgrims have to tell. More often though, my team of teachers and I see this place affecting children and young people in so many small ways as they respond, reflect, pray and gain on many levels from their school visits and pilgrimages. I recently worked in a school with a group of Year 6 pupils and one boy said, 'Oh, I remember going there when I was in Year 2... I lit a candle and said a prayer!' When something is special it is remembered and one never knows what seeds may be sown. We feel enormously privileged to be able to share all this with all who step through our doors.

Walsingham fact file

Walsingham (about an hour's drive from Norwich and recently voted Britain's most spiritual place) is often described as 'off the beaten track' but nevertheless manages to welcome around 45,000 pilgrim visitors a year. The village has been welcoming pilgrims since medieval times so we are not doing anything new! Now, seven years on, we welcome around 6,000 youngsters a year on school visits from Key Stage 1 upwards plus a further 1,000 a year who come on organised children's and youth pilgrimages with their parishes.

Back in 1996 the Shrine rose to the challenge presented by examination boards for GCSE/A level Religious Education/ Religious Studies who had put pilgrimage on the syllabus. We suggested that students find out more by visiting Walsingham.

School groups are offered a menu of day or residential programmes ranging from RE/Christianity/pilgrimage days, Tudor and Victorian experiences and cross curricular options incorporating coastal Geography, History, English and RE. All are QCA/Agreed Syllabus linked. I am tremendously indebted to the many teachers who were the first to 'brave' the Shrine in the early days because it is thanks to them, with their ideas, suggestions, criticisms and requests, that our visits have developed and come to life. It must also be said that the children themselves have also had a major part to play in this process.

Each spring, Walsingham hosts a pilgrimage for children aged 5–11 years – lots of exciting worship, activity workshops and

a party night. Each summer there is a youth pilgrimage aimed at the 11+ age range. In the winter there is a pilgrimage for families. In fact, all 250 beds provided by Walsingham's accommodation department are available all year round.

To find out more about educational visits to the Shrine and pilgrimages for children, young people contact:

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