



# GUIDANCE NOTES FOR PARISH PRIESTS ON ADMISSION TO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

JULY 2011 (FOR ADMISSIONS IN SEPTEMBER 2012)

## ADMISSIONS TO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: THE PLACE OF THE PRIESTS' REFERENCE

Responsibility for the admission of pupils to Catholic maintained schools rests with the governing body of each school. The governing body determines and publishes an admissions policy each year, which is included in the school prospectus. Where there are more applications than places available, the policy must state how the places are to be allocated. **Parents should be urged strongly to read the relevant admissions policies carefully.** They will vary from school to school, and from year to year.

The bishops expect all Catholic schools to give first priority to Catholic applicants. Catholic schools exist to assist parents in handing on the Catholic faith to their children. So where there are insufficient places in an area for all Catholics, governing bodies may decide to give priority to children from practising Catholic families. Where schools do so, they are recommended to use, as evidence of practice, the common diocesan priests' reference.

The purpose of the priests' reference is to give all priests a framework in which they can essentially let Catholic schools know:

- whether that applicant is from a practising Catholic family.

It is then for the governing body of the school to apply its own admission criteria to determine which pupils to admit.

Where a school is over-subscribed with Catholic applicants, all of whom have provided evidence of Catholic practice, the governing body will apply other criteria such as proximity to the school, or whether there is an older sister or brother attending the school at the same time. These factors are likely to be crucial in deciding how places are to be allocated. These points will be explained in detail in the school prospectus.

## WHY HAVE A COMMON FORM?

A common Priest's Reference Form and procedure for using it means that both priests and applicants only have to become familiar with one set of documents. This is especially helpful for priests and for parents applying to many Catholic schools. People can get used to the common form and how it works in a way which is impossible if every school uses a different form. It means schools will not have to waste their resources 're-inventing the wheel'. It means that copies can be available in parishes, and that, in time, explanatory notes for parents can be produced in different languages. The form is not part of the Application for Admissions and does not belong to the school; it is a Diocesan form to assist the Governors by confirming applicants' status as "practising Catholics". **The use of the Diocesan Priest's Reference Form means that the process of deciding the Catholicity of applicants for a school place is removed from the jurisdiction of the Local Authorities, the Schools Adjudicator and the Code of Admissions.** If a school chooses **NOT** to use the Diocesan Form, it puts itself outside the protection referred to above and leaves itself open to challenges from any of the above.

It is worth restating here that the Diocesan Priest's Reference Form is only to be used

where the school is oversubscribed with Catholic applicants and, consequently, the “higher test” of practice is needed in order that the school can operate its Admissions Criteria.

### HOW IT WORKS

1. Parents fill in the two pages marked **PART A: YOUR SELF-ASSESSMENT** following carefully the notes given to them. (They also fill in their own details at the top of the page marked **PART B. PRIEST’S REFERENCE**). They will fill in more than one **Part B** if they are applying to more than one Catholic school.
2. Parents give both **Part A** and **Part B** of the form to the appropriate priest (see below). If you are the appropriate priest, you complete **Part B** and return it directly to the school. You may need to fill in extra copies of **Part B** if the parents are applying to more than one school. You **keep** Part A for reference if you wish to, but **it must not be supplied to the school** because it contains information which should not relate to the school’s admission criteria.

### WHICH PRIEST SHOULD COMPLETE THE FORM?

The reference should be given by **the appropriate priest**, who is normally either:

- The applicant’s own Parish Priest (i.e. the Parish Priest of the Parish in which the applicant’s family **live**); or
- the Parish Priest of the Parish where the applicant worships regularly (if different).

If the applicant worships at a church which does not have a Parish Priest, then the priest who is the equivalent of a Parish Priest is the appropriate priest (e.g. Administrator, Ethnic Chaplain etc.). If the priest giving the reference is not one of the priests described above, an explanation of the reason why should be given.

### PART A OF THE FORM

Some parents may need help in filling in Part A of the Form. Priests are urged **NOT** to give this assistance where necessary themselves (because of possible difficulties at Appeals), but should direct parents to someone independent of the process of Admissions. This will be particularly important to make sure that no parents are disadvantaged because, for example, their use of the English language is poor. Priests should make themselves familiar with the Guidance Notes for Parents so that they can offer this help where necessary.

The information given in **Part A** of the form is designed to give you a good, all round picture of the family’s pattern of practice and pastoral circumstances, so that you are able to fill in **Part B** of the Form consistently. You must see a copy of the child’s Baptismal Certificate. Once you have given the reference, Part A has served its immediate purpose. However, many priests have expressed the view that the information on Part A is very useful to them in providing for the on-going pastoral care of their parishioners, especially when it comes from those who are not well known to the priest. You are also recommended to keep **Part A** until the year’s admission round is over – it may be useful to refresh your memory in the case of an appeal. Once **Part A** has served these purposes,

it should be destroyed. **It may not be used for any other purposes or passed to a third party.**

## **PART B OF THE FORM**

The parents will come to you with **Part A**, and as many copies of **Part B** as they need. They will ask you to fill in your section of **Part B**. You should first assure yourself that you are the appropriate priest to do so (see above). If you are not that person's parish priest and they do not worship at your church, you are not the appropriate priest and you should point them towards their parish priest for guidance.

It is recommended that you meet parents to discuss their circumstances before filling in **Part B**. This will be especially useful in cases which may not be straightforward. This meeting should allow you to have an honest discussion about the family's practice, their pastoral circumstances, and the Church's requirements of practice.

At the end of this discussion, you should be able to fill in **Part B** and, in most cases, the family should concur with your assessment. You are urged to share your decision with the family to avoid problems or Appeals later.

Please fill in Part B in INK. For the **Yes / No** questions, please score heavily through the answer which does not apply AND ring the answer which does apply. This reduces the room for error or subsequent amendment of the form. If you make a mistake, please DO NOT make a correction, but fill in another copy of **Part B**.

**Questions 1 and 2: *The parents are / child is known to me.*** These straightforward questions simply verify the basis upon which you are giving the answers to the subsequent questions. It follows that it is not possible for you to answer "**Yes**" to question 3 if the answer to both of these questions is "**No**".

**Question 3: *The child is a member of a practising Catholic family.*** This is the most important question from the school's point of view. Schools rely on all priests answering this question honestly and consistently. **Annexe 1** below sets out how priests are asked to apply this test for the purpose of school admission. It is important, for the sake of consistency, that all priests follow this guidance. Please read carefully the notes about dispensations and discretion.

Priests may, in exceptional circumstances, send a separate letter to the school in support of a baptised child from a non-practising, non-dispensed family where there are compelling reasons for the child being accorded priority in the category for non-practising but baptised Catholics.

**Declaration.** Please sign and date the form and write your name clearly in the spaces provided. Please use the *crimp* parish seal **over your signature** in order to prevent attempts at forgery.

## **Particular Issues**

**New Parish Priests.** New parish priests may need to liaise with their predecessor, where this is possible. Some priests find it useful to set aside a specific time, where the previous parish priest can be present to meet parents along with the new parish priests. Any assistant priests should be consulted, and in some cases it may be necessary to involve other senior members of the parish community (e.g. member of the Parish Council, Catechist).

**Claimed Practice not Substantiated.** Some priests find it particularly difficult when parents insist that they practise, but this is not substantiated by the priest's own observation. In such cases it must be made clear that the onus is on the parents to satisfy the priest's own mind that this is the case. The parents may call upon evidence from other sources (e.g. priest of another parish which they visit regularly), but you should not sign the reference unless you are satisfied about the evidence presented to you.

#### **Further Information or Guidance**

For further information regarding the Priest's Reference Form, or any general questions about Admissions, please contact the Diocesan Education Office at Cathedral House, Ingrave Road, Brentwood, Essex. CM15 8AT.

E-mail [MgrGeorgeStokes@dioceseofbrentwood.org](mailto:MgrGeorgeStokes@dioceseofbrentwood.org) Telephone 01277 265284.

## Annexe 1: Definition of Practising Catholic for the Purpose of School Admission

### General Principles

The common priests' reference form is based on the following principles.

- There should be a single, objective, test for Catholicity, which is either met or not met for each person.
- Schools should not attempt to place applicants in a 'rank order' based on an arbitrary assessment of each applicant's relative Catholicity.
- The single test should be whether the applicant child comes from a practising Catholic family.
- It is for a priest to make the judgment whether a child comes from a practising Catholic family. (please see the footnotes on Page 6 re dispensation)
- Information given to the priest should be broad enough to allow him to build up a complete picture of the family and its circumstances in order to exercise that judgment.
- In order to ensure transparency of the process, the information passed on to the school is only that which they require to apply their admission criteria.

Some respondents suggested the form should allow distinction between different levels of practice (regular, occasional, etc). However, almost all schools whose admission criteria conform to the above criteria only make a single distinction between practising and non-practising Catholics. Unless that were to change, such an extra distinction would have no meaning.

For the purposes of admission to school, the definition to be applied by all priests is set out in this guidance. It is important that all priests apply this definition so that schools can rely on the consistency of references received from different priests.

The definition of 'practising Catholic' set out in this guidance is for the purposes of admission to Catholic schools only and for no other purpose. There may be many theological arguments about what constitutes a 'practising Catholic' and other definitions could be put forward. However, for the purposes of school admissions, the important factors are that any test:

- (a) does not impose a higher requirement than the Church itself imposes;
- (b) is capable of being applied consistently by many different priests; and
- (c) is susceptible to proof by reasonable evidence based on observation.

The customary test for admission to a Catholic school has been based upon Mass attendance, as this is capable of being observed objectively, with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Therefore, **for the purposes of this priests' reference form, a person is a practising Catholic if they observe the Church's precept of attending Mass on Sundays and holidays of obligation** (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 2041 - 2042).

The precise nature of this obligation is set out in the Church's canon law. For members of the Latin Church, the relevant canons are canons 1246 – 1248 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*. For members of Eastern Catholic churches the equivalent canon is canon

881 of the 1990 *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*. In applying these canons, it is important to note the following:

- children under seven are not bound by these canons;<sup>1</sup>
- for numerous reasons, occasional non-attendance may not constitute a breach of the obligation: canon law provides for a range of particular circumstances which excuse or mitigate the obligation.<sup>2</sup>

Priests cannot be expected to be able to recall whether or not each parishioner has attended Mass on every single Sunday or holiday of obligation, nor can they always be expected to know whether or not, on a particular occasion, a person is lawfully excused from doing so. On the other hand, it is also clear that fortnightly or monthly attendance does not constitute the practice required by the canons.

For those reasons, priests are advised that, if, by their own observation or other evidence, they can ascertain that a person has an established pattern of attending Mass most Sundays, **and** the practice claimed by that person is not less than is required by the Church, that person should be regarded as a practising Catholic for the purposes of this priests' reference.

### **Length of Practice**

Priests cannot judge whether a person's pattern of attendance at Mass corresponds to that required by the Church unless it has continued for a substantial period of time. Priests should enquire very carefully into the circumstances where the pattern of practice has not continued over several years. **A person is certainly not to be regarded as a practising Catholic if that practice has started recently solely in order to fulfil the requirements of entry into a Catholic school.**

### **Practising Catholic Family**

For the purposes of this priests' reference form, a family is normally to be regarded as a practising Catholic family where at least one parent is a practising Catholic and is doing his or her best to hand on the faith to his or her children. This fits with the mission of Catholic schools to assist parents in that task. It is therefore reasonable for that parent to expect the Church to assist him or her in doing so. Sometimes, unusually, a different pattern of practice may be judged by the priest to be equivalent. Examples might be where a grandparent or other relative supplements for the lack of practice of the parents, or where an older child practises despite the lack of practice of the parents. These children, too, deserve the support of the Church in their efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> CJC, c.11; CCEO, c.1490. It is therefore not permissible to attempt to measure the practise of a child below the age of seven, rather than that of the parents.

<sup>2</sup> The law itself mitigates its effects on those under 16 (18 in the Eastern Catholic churches): CJC, c.1323; CCEO, c.1413. Necessity or grave inconvenience can mitigate the effects of the canon: CJC, c.1323; CCEO, c.1414. These canons admit of substantial observance, that is to say that occasional non-observance does not constitute a violation: CJC, c.17-19; CCEO, c.1499-1501. See also Coriden, J.A., *An Introduction to Canon Law*, p.33, and Canon Law Digest VI, 684-5. In the Latin church, parish priests and equivalent, as well as ordinaries, have the power to dispense from the obligations of canons 1246 - 1248. As well as their own subjects, parish priests or equivalent may also dispense visitors and those with no fixed abode: CJC cc.1245, 91, 87.

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## Annex 2

### References to Canon Law

Can. 1246 §1 The Lord's Day, on which the paschal mystery is celebrated, is by apostolic tradition to be observed in the universal Church as the primary holyday of obligation. In the same way the following holydays are to be observed: the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Ascension of Christ, the feast of Mary the Mother of God, her Immaculate Conception, her Assumption, the feast of St Joseph, the feast of the Apostles SS Peter and Paul, and the feast of All Saints.

§2 However, the Episcopal Conference may, with the prior approval of the Apostolic See, suppress certain holydays of obligation or transfer them to a Sunday.

Can. 1247 On Sundays and other holydays of obligation, the faithful are obliged to assist at Mass. They are also to abstain from such work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, or the due relaxation of mind and body.

Can. 1248 §1 The obligation of assisting at Mass is satisfied wherever Mass is celebrated in a catholic rite either on a holyday itself or on the evening of the previous day.

§2 If it is impossible to assist at a Eucharistic celebration, either because no sacred minister is available or for some other grave reason, the faithful are strongly recommended to take part in the liturgy of the Word, if there be such in the parish church or some other sacred place, which is celebrated in accordance with the provisions laid down by the diocesan Bishop; or to spend an appropriate time in prayer, whether personally or as a family or, as occasion presents, in a group of families.

#### **Eastern Churches**

Can. 880-1 of the *Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches* Commentary:

- (1) The establishment, transfer and suppression of feast days and days of penance which are common to all Eastern Churches is the right of the Apostolic Roman See. The authority of each autonomous Church which is competent to establish particular law in this respect, can constitute, transfer and suppress feast days and days of penance for that Church, after having sought the opinion of other autonomous Churches, provided can. 40 §1 is observed, which imposes on these Churches the obligation to conserve and protect their own authentic heritage. How such laws are to be passed will have to be stipulated in the particular law of that Church.
- (2) The days of obligation are, in addition to all Sundays, the following feast days: Christmas Day, Epiphany, Ascension of Our Lord, Dormition of the B.V.M., SS. Peter and Paul. However, each Church may decide to suppress one of the feast days or transfer it to the following Sunday, after having received the approval of the Holy Roman See (can. 880).

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*Holydays Obligation*

(1) The obligation extends to participation in the divine liturgy on these days. However, the particular law of each Church could let the faithful satisfy the law by attending some part of the divine office. It is probably too late in history to recover the celebration of the beautiful texts of the Eastern office of hours, which incurred the fate of the office in the Latin Church, namely, that it was forced out because of the necessity to increase the number of divine liturgies celebrated for the faithful obliged to attend it. The Catholic faithful have now become used to receive holy communion every Sunday, which would also direct them away from the attendance at celebrations of the divine office. The ancient tradition, never to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy on any altar more than once in a day, was abandoned a long time ago.

There is no obligation to attend on obligatory days a prayer service in the absence of a priest for the Eucharistic liturgy, even when holy communion is distributed, conducted by one who is not a priest.

(2) The obligation may be satisfied by attendance from the evening of the vigil or eve until the end of the Sunday or feast day.

(5)...The faithful are obliged to abstain from those labours or business dealings which are an impediment to the worship of God, are an obstacle to experience the joy which is proper to the Lord's day, or to the proper relaxation of mind and body.