

The death of Ann Maguire: how to heal the wounds



The fatal stabbing of a teacher in front of her pupils at a school in Leeds dominated the headlines for the past week. Corpus Christi College has drawn on its Catholic roots in its immediate response to the tragedy. How can it use them to face the future?

Rarely these days does a teacher spend her entire career at a single school so that parents and even grandparents can swap memories of her with current pupils. Yet that was the case with Ann Maguire whose death after being attacked with a knife stunned the nation this week. After 40 years at Corpus Christi College in Leeds. She has been described as the school's mother, its cornerstone and the embodiment of all it stood for.

Mrs Maguire had joined the school as a student teacher. The children's writer Anthony McGowan, in a Tablet article in 2012 about his schooldays at Corpus Christi, remembered her in the early years, writing: "Miss Connors was as gentle as a lamb, and broke 100 schoolboy hearts when she became Mrs Maguire."

Ann Maguire taught Spanish and Religious Education and rose to become head of Year 11 for several years. She loved music, leading the choir and playing the guitar.

"She was vivacious, lively, full of fun. She was one of a core group of teachers who gave tremendous, powerful leadership to the school. She was utterly dedicated to teaching," said Mgr Philip Holroyd, who until eight months ago was priest of Blessed John Henry Newman parish which includes Corpus Christi.

On Monday morning at around 11.45, Mrs Maguire was giving a Spanish lesson when she was attacked, suffering multiple stab wounds. She was pronounced dead a short time later in hospital. As

news of the tragedy spread, people began to arrive to lay flowers at the school gates while on social media those who were taught by Ann Maguire spoke of a teacher they had respected and loved.

Corpus Christi is close to Halton Moor, an area dominated by a council estate that has experienced fluctuating fortunes. Initially built after slum clearances in the inner city, it has variously been described as a tough and a challenging area.

Anthony McGowan remembered it in the 1970s as huge and desolate and the school as “a pretty tough and forbidding place”. There is a consensus locally that today both the area and the school have greatly improved though an above average number of pupils are from poor backgrounds. A diocesan inspection report last year noted that 60 per cent of the 1,000 pupils are from the 10 most deprived wards in England. Like most Catholic schools, the Corpus Christi’s intake is socially mixed, drawing in pupils from more affluent areas further afield. But its core intake is local Irish Catholic families who have lived in the area for generations.

The college shares a campus with a Catholic primary school and Corpus Christi Church, which three years ago was incorporated in a parish with three local churches. There is no resident priest and the presbytery has been given to the Franciscan Sisters of the Renewal, a relatively new American order. The school’s Catholic roots have not only shaped the school and the community but will be vital in how it comes to terms with the events of this week and moves forward.

The commitment of the Catholic school’s staff and their sense of vocation was epitomised by Ann Maguire and is remembered by Eileen Fitzpatrick, who was director of schools in Leeds Diocese from 1995 to 2004.

“Ann Maguire was part of a movement from a challenging area who believed the children mattered as individuals. She was amazing. Hers was an example of how if you get it right you can spend a whole career in one place. Her career is very symbolic of the way the school runs itself. It does not just go out into the community, it brings the community right into it.”

People I spoke to struggled to find words to articulate the intensity of grief and loss at Mrs Maguire’s violent death. Eileen Fitzpatrick described it as “like a stake through the heart of the community”. Nevertheless the school was open on Tuesday, a decision Mrs Fitzpatrick said showed courage and confidence and would give the young people room and space to grieve.

Leeds Diocese has had no bishop for the last two years since the departure of Bishop Arthur Roche who left to take up a Vatican post. The apostolic administrator, Mgr John Wilson, spent much of Tuesday at the school concelebrating the regular morning Mass at Corpus Christi Church along with attended by at least 150 and then meeting staff and pupils.

“There is enormous shock and a deep sense of loss and grief,” Wilson told me.

The school’s Catholic ethos was evident in the immediate response to what happened on Monday. The school’s lay chaplain together with the pastoral support staff gave staff and pupils the chance to speak to someone, go to the chapel to pray and light candles, write notes in the books of condolence in the school and the church, said Mgr Wilson.

Also among those giving support were three Franciscan sisters, the diocesan Catholic society, Catholic Care, as well as the police and the local authority. Catholic Care sent a team of eight social workers that comprise its Crisis Response Team, set up last year after three successive tragedies at another Leeds school. The agency’s director, Carol Hill, said the team’s members were experienced in dealing with such issues as bereavement, attempted suicide and murder.

It is clear that in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, work is well under way at Corpus Christi to deal with its fallout. But what of the longer term?

The school could turn to the experience of another Catholic school which also suffered deep trauma – St George’s, Maida Vale, west London – to learn how to deal with the next stage. In 1995 its head teacher, Philip Lawrence, was stabbed to death outside the school in as he tried to protect one of his pupils. The attack was witnessed by a number of students and staff and the effect of the murder on the school was long-lasting; for several years it struggled to stay afloat. It was only when Lady (Marie) Stubbs took over as head teacher in 2001 that it embarked on the road to recovery. Lady Stubbs had achieved a remarkable turnaround when she led another Catholic school, Douay Martyrs in Ickenham, west London, and agreed to come out of retirement to become head at St George’s for 17 months.

Taking charge at the school, Lady Stubbs found that it was still steeped in the horror of what had happened five years earlier. Her strategy was first, with the help of the school chaplain, to draw on the

Catholic ambience of the school, marking the feasts in the liturgical calendar and helping the pupils to understand the Church's central teachings about love and redemption.

She describes a twin-track approach, offering counselling to those staff and pupils who still needed to "unpack" the trauma they had experienced but also helping the school to move on. She hoped that in the longer term this approach would also be adopted by Corpus Christi.

"Of course in the immediate shock and horror of a tragedy everyone's focus is on that. However, when trying to deal with trauma you have to try not to let it take over, let it destabilise and demoralise the school community so that children lose hope and their belief that life is a good thing. I am sure that Corpus Christi College will take this hard path courageously. They are in my prayers."

Lady Stubbs said another major challenge was dealing with the demands of the media, which had been overwhelming. She took personal charge of this, undertaking initiatives such as a programme of inspirational speakers that brought positive media attention to the school for the first time.

Those I spoke to who know Corpus Christi College well felt the school was strong enough to survive the tragedy and the media scrutiny that will continue for many months. Mgr Holroyd said it was unlikely that families would stop sending their children there.

"Most parents know the school well and understand that this is a bolt from the blue. I would be astonished if there were any long-term difficulties for the school," he said.

It will be a while before the school considers whether more stringent safety procedures might have prevented Maguire's death. Asked whether schools needed to employ measures such as airport-style security and CCTV cameras, Wilson, who in his previous post oversaw the diocese's schools, said: "The vast majority of schools never experience anything like this. We must not lose sight of the fact that schools are safe places. You are never going to entirely eliminate what happens by way of exception."