

CALLED BY NAME

Archdiocesan Guide for Religious Education with Autistic Pupils (Ages 5–11)

"So God created humankind in his image." Genesis 1:27

"Let the little children come to me." Luke 18:16



THE ARCHDIOCESE
of BIRMINGHAM

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Foreword

At the recent Mass in Rome to celebrate the proclamation of St John Henry Newman as Doctor of the Universal Church, Pope Leo reflected that ‘from a Christian perspective, education helps everyone become saints.’ In these words, the Holy Father was echoing the sentiments of Pope Benedict XVI when addressing young people during his visit to the United Kingdom in 2010 - ‘what God wants most of all for each one of you is that you should become holy.’

St John Henry Newman reminds us that God has created each one of us to do Him a definite service and our lives express the mystery of God’s calling through the variety of gifts He has given to us. Education is one such gift that allows us to fulfil our calling from God. Our desire to learn encourages us to grow and helps us to understand the gift of our humanity and how we relate to one another.

As we know, every person is a unique creation of God and we are each called by name. As such our lives reflect the diverse nature of our humanity in which His love thrives. As we seek to deepen our faith and respond generously to God’s call through learning and encounter, we recognise that how we learn about God and encounter Him in the world around us will not be the same for every person.

It is with this in mind that I am deeply grateful to Deacon Mark Paine for highlighting the Church’s important work of helping our young people with complex needs and who may need additional support, together with those adults working with them. I am also very grateful for these carefully prepared and practical resources which I hope and pray will enable and encourage those who use them to grow more deeply in their faith and in their relationship with God.

**✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham**

Mark Paine is a deacon of the Archdiocese of Birmingham. He has 28 years’ experience in primary education, with a particular interest in Special Educational Needs. The father of two Autistic children, he was diagnosed as Autistic himself in his late forties. Since he was a student, he has had a passion for radical inclusion in the Church and ensuring that the Gospel and the Sacraments are available to all, regardless of difference.



VISION & PURPOSE

In recent years, the number of pupils in our mainstream Catholic primary schools identified with complex needs relating to the Autistic Spectrum has increased considerably. Many of our schools are accommodating the needs of pupils who previously may have been in some form of specialist provision. The following is intended to help staff in mainstream primary schools provide for the spiritual development of these pupils.

This programme weaves tactile, visual and embodied experiences into every lesson, inviting every child—whether speaking in words, symbols or gestures—into the heart of God’s story. It centres on radical belonging, echoing Francis of Assisi’s open arms, and honours each pupil as a unique reflection of God.

Who is it for?

The guide has been written primarily for staff in mainstream schools to support their teaching of RE. It can also be used in parishes, particularly with pupils who attend specialist settings, and therefore may not have access to Catholic RE.

It is intended to provide those who have no experience or specialist knowledge of Autism and related neurological differences with practical advice, along with the theological and doctrinal basis for this.

Whilst ***Called By Name*** uses the age bands and key stage terminology of the National Curriculum, it is essential that teaching and learning are planned and delivered with regard to a learner's capacity, not necessarily their chronological age.

There are glossary of terms and recommended further reading at the end of this resource.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

EACH PERSON IS UNIQUE

Adaptive catechesis must recognise that 'When you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism' (Stephen Shore).

START WITH THE INDIVIDUAL

Welcome 'one learner at a time,' learning about their gifts, interests, needs, and communication style. Tailor the teaching to the learner, not the learner to the teaching.

THE GOAL IS FULL PARTICIPATION

The aim is not simply knowledge acquisition but meaningful engagement and belonging in the faith community.

A LEARNER'S CAPACITY IS FOR A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST

The purpose is not to judge their intellectual knowledge of God.

THE PERSON WE ARE WALKING WITH IS ALREADY IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST

It is our responsibility to recognise and nurture this.

PRINCIPLES OF BEST PRACTICE



for SEND in RE



CONSISTENT STRUCTURE:

Use clear routines, timetables with visuals or symbols, and countdowns to transitions to reduce anxiety.

MULTI-SENSORY ENGAGEMENT:

Combine hands-on materials (clay, beads), music, rhythm and movement with visual supports (picture cards, symbol boards).

SIMPLIFIED, CONCRETE LANGUAGE:

Introduce one new concept at a time. Use short sentences, key-word displays and literal explanations before moving to metaphor.

COMMUNICATION ACCESS:

Offer augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) tools: PECS, symbol boards, Makaton signs, communication apps.

EMOTIONAL AND SENSORY REGULATION:

Build in “calm corners” with soft lighting, sensory toys and noise-reducing headphones. Teach simple breathing or grounding exercises.

COLLABORATIVE PLANNING:

Involve families, therapists and teaching assistants in co-creating IEP goals and adapting materials.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

for Inclusive RE



PRESUME COMPETENCE:

See each pupil as able to encounter God in their own way; speech is not the sole measure of understanding.

START WITH THE INDIVIDUAL

Learn their gifts, sensory profile, interests, and communication style.

PRIORITISE BELONGING

Integrate pupils into the whole worshipping community.

KEEP IT CONCRETE AND SENSORY

Use visuals, tactile resources, song, gesture, and story.

REDUCE SENSORY BARRIERS

Light, sound, transitions adapted to needs.

HONOUR COMMUNICATION DIVERSITY

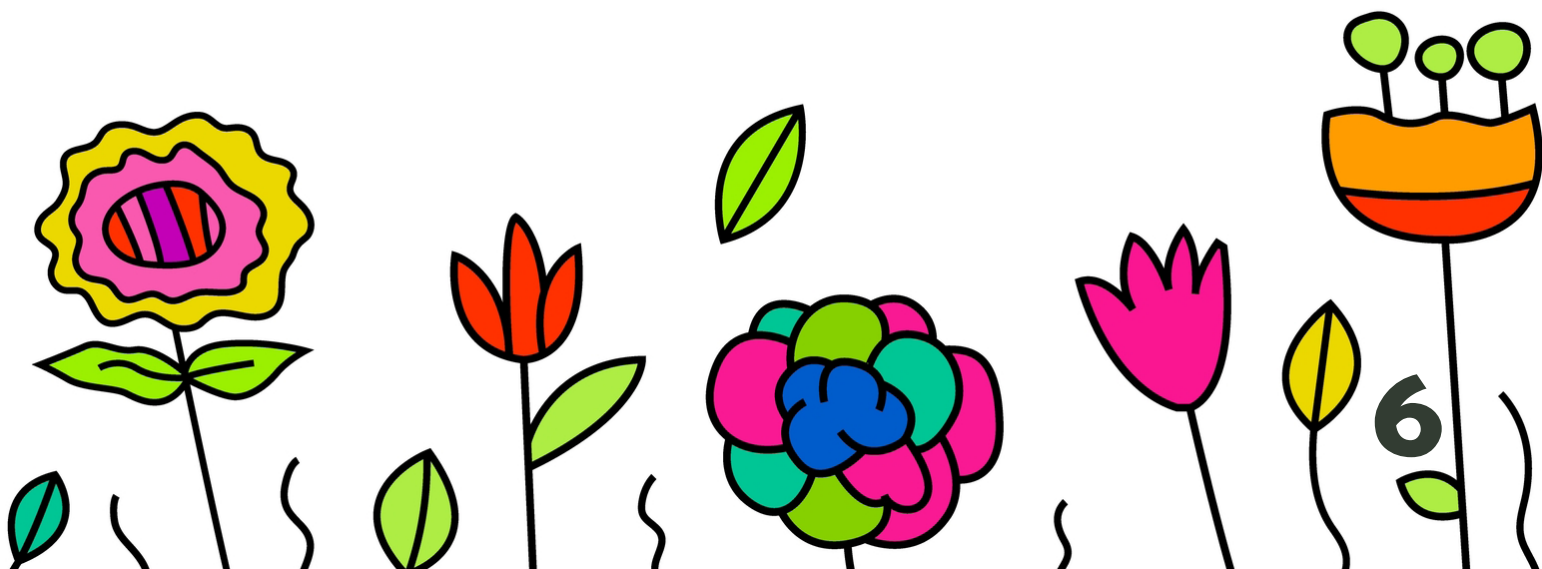
Accept all forms of communication; give time to respond.

PARTNER WITH FAMILIES

Plan and review together.

FOCUS ON GROWTH, NOT PERFORMANCE

Celebrate signs of discipleship in any form.



Sensory and regulation

SENSORY AUDIT:

Check lighting, echo, temperature, smells, and seating. Offer ear defenders, fidgets, and movement breaks.

QUIET SPACES:

Provide a clearly marked calm area with minimal stimuli and a regulation kit.

PREDICTABLE TRANSITIONS:

Use visual schedules and countdowns to move between activities.

Relationship and behaviour

CO-REGULATION FIRST:

A calm adult helps a child become calm. Prioritise safety and connection over correction.

FUNCTION OVER FORM:

Behaviours communicate needs; adjust the environment before adding demands.

SHORT, STRENGTH BASED SESSIONS:

20-30 minutes may be optimal; end on success.

Adaptations for Non-Verbal Learners

OFFER CORE VOCABULARY BOARDS FOR EACH THEME:

(e.g., "God," "love," "welcome," season names).

USE PARTNER SYMBOLS:

Peer-buddy holds two symbols for child to choose from when responding.

INTEREST-LED ENGAGEMENT:

Provide "yes/no" gesture cards, eye-gaze boards or switch-activated audio affirmations.

KEY STAGE 1 (Ages 5-7)

Core Learning Outcomes

KNOW THAT GOD CREATED EACH OF US AND DELIGHTS IN OUR DIFFERENCES.

HEAR HOW JESUS WELCOMED CHILDREN AND LEARN THAT WE BELONG TO GOD'S FAMILY.

EXPRESS THANKS IN WORD, GESTURE OR SYMBOL AT SIMPLE LITURGIES.

Unit 1: “God Made Me - I Am Wonderful”

Scripture Focus: “So God created humankind in his image.” (Genesis 1:27)

Doctrinal Anchor: Dignity of the human person (CCC 1700–1701)

ACTIVITIES:

- Shape-and-paint self-portraits on large paper.
- Play “I Am Special” sensory treasure hunt (textures, scents).
- Create “I Can” boards listing abilities using symbols or photographs.

Unit 2: “Jesus Welcomes Every Child”

Scripture Focus: “Let the little children come to me.” (Luke 18:15–17)

Liturgical Link: God’s universal call to holiness (Lumen Gentium 39)

ACTIVITIES:

- Role-play a welcome procession with Makaton signs for “welcome,” “friend,” “love.”
- Use tactile story stones painted with key images (child, Jesus, heart).
- Construct a “Welcome Quilt” patchwork: each child decorates a square to add to a class display.

Unit 3: “Thanking God Together”

Scripture Focus: “Whatever you did for one of the least... you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

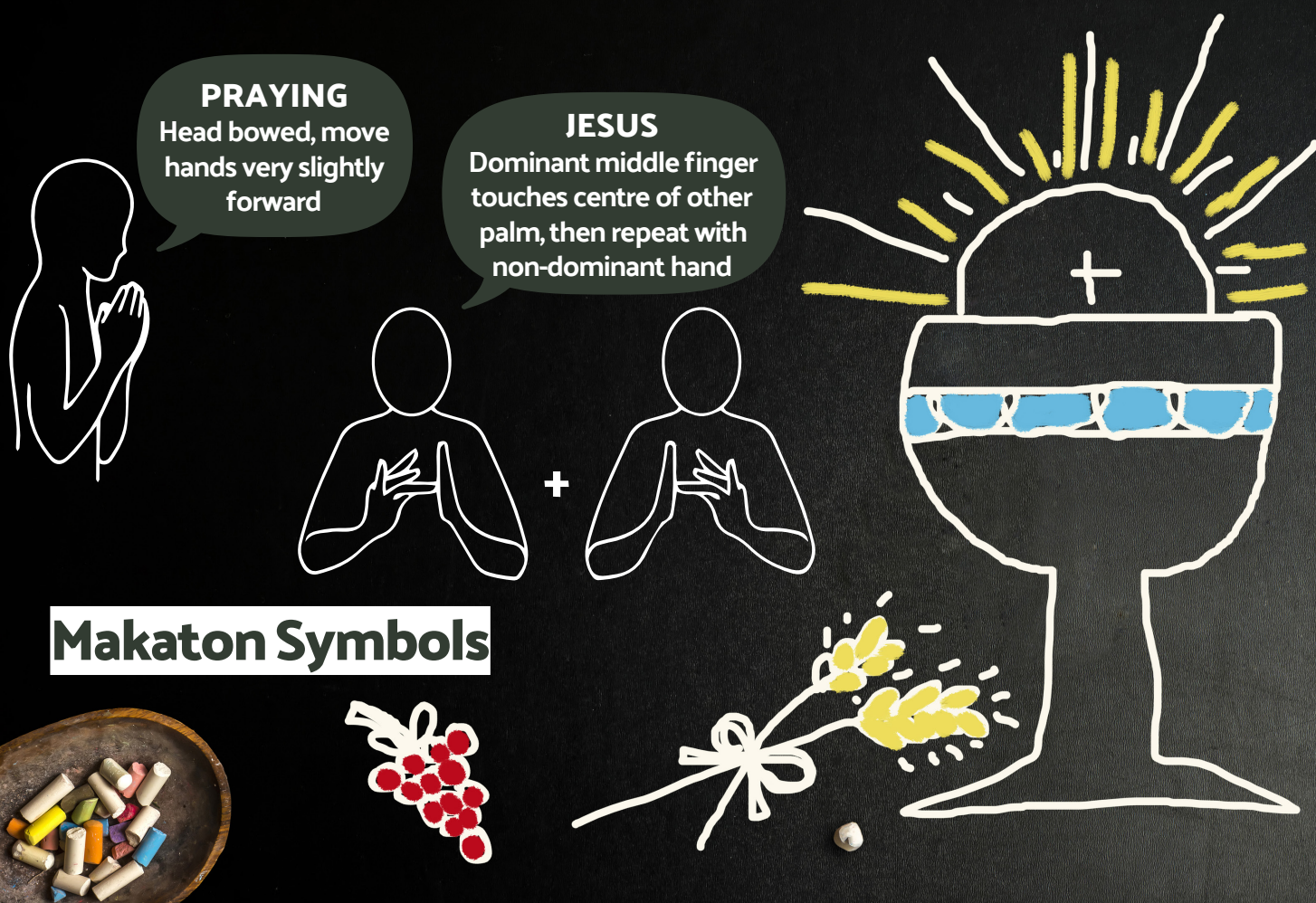
Doctrinal Anchor: Corporal works of mercy (CCC 2447–2449)

ACTIVITIES:

- Sensory blessing basket: fruits, grains and scented herbs to pass around and touch.
- Simple thank-you gestures: thumbs-up, nods or picture cards.
- Visual prayer board: children place a token under “thanksgiving” pictures each week.

ASSESSMENT & MILESTONES (KS2)

SKILL AREA	EMERGING	DEVELOPING	SECURE
Knowledge	Names Creator and Jesus	Describes simple actions of welcome	Links feelings of belonging to Church
Communication	Uses one or two symbols or words	Chooses gestures or AAC to respond	Initiates a symbol-supported prayer
Engagement	Joins in small parts of activities	Participates with support	Leads part of liturgical action
Social Interaction	Watches peers	Shares materials with prompts	Offers help or a sign of welcome



KEY STAGE 2 (Ages 7–11)

Core Learning Outcomes

DEEPEN AWARENESS OF THE TRINITY AS COMMUNITY AND DIVERSITY IN UNITY.

EXPLORE THE LITURGICAL YEAR THROUGH SYMBOLS, MUSIC AND MOVEMENT.

LIVE THE CORPORAL WORKS OF MERCY IN SCHOOL AND HOME CONTEXTS.

Unit 1: “One Body, Many Parts”

Scripture Focus: “We are many members, one body in Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12–27)

Doctrinal Anchor: Church as Communion (CCC 784–786)

ACTIVITIES:

- Puzzle-piece craft: each child decorates a piece representing their gifts; assemble into a class body.
- Sensory sound-bath: use chimes to symbolise different members contributing in harmony.
- Reflective circle: each shares (verbally or via a symbol) one way they help the community.

Unit 2: “Walking Through the Church Year”

Scripture Focus: “Behold, I make all things new.” (Revelation 21:5)

Liturgical Link: Advent wreath multisensory blessing, Lent tactile path of ashes, vibrant Easter fabrics

ACTIVITIES:

- Create a movable Church-year calendar with Velcro symbols for each season.
- Song and simple dance for key seasons (e.g., Advent “Light a Candle,” Easter “Alleluia!”).
- Sensory action prayer: short, guided meditation with scented oils or textured cloth.

Unit 3: “Hands-On Mercy”

Scripture Focus: “Whatever you did for one of the least... you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Doctrinal Anchor: Corporal works of mercy (CCC 2447–2449)

ACTIVITIES:

- Pack simple care bags (socks, healthy snack, card) for a local shelter.
- Match symbol cards (feed hungry, visit sick) to real-life scenarios.
- Role-play helping tasks using clear scripts and visual prompts.

ASSESSMENT & MILESTONES (KS2)

SKILL AREA	EMERGING	DEVELOPING	SECURE
Knowledge	Identifies Trinity symbols	Explains simple liturgical signs	Links mercy actions to Gospel call
Communication	Indicates choices with symbols	Uses AAC to answer recall questions	Shares reflections with visual supports
Engagement	Observes rituals	Joins 1-2 steps of liturgy with prompts	Participates in multi-step celebrations
Service	Recognises need for helping	Joins in group mercy project	Initiates a simple outreach action

Scriptural Sequence & Doctrinal Reference Summary

Genesis 1:27 – Image of God in each person

Luke 18:15–17 – Jesus welcomes children

1 Thessalonians 5:18 – Call to thanksgiving

1 Corinthians 12:12–27 – Church as one body

Revelation 21:5 – God makes all things new

Matthew 25:40 – Corporal works of mercy

Catechism of the Catholic Church:

CCC 1700–1701 (Dignity of the human person)

CCC 2447–2449 (Works of mercy)

CCC 784–786 (Church as Communion)

Key Resources & Links

National Autistic Society

Practical tips for schools

www.autism.org.uk/schools

Makaton

Symbol-supported communication courses

<https://makaton.org>

Sense

Multi-sensory approaches to learning resources

www.sense.org.uk

Catholic Education Service

SEND and inclusion guidance

www.catholiceducation.org.uk/inclusion

Nurture UK

Emotion-focused, sensory-aware strategies for wellbeing

www.nurtureuk.org



GLOSSARY

Young Person Friendly

TERM

Sensory-Friendly
Explanations

CREATION

Everything God made,
including you.

CHURCH YEAR

The seasons and celebrations
that tell Jesus' story.

WELCOME

Saying "I'm glad you're here"
in words, signs or smiles.

TRINITY

Three persons in one God:
Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

MERCY

Loving and helping
those who need it.

GLOSSARY

Catechists



TERM

Meaning

- Sensory-Friendly Explanation

Dignity of the Human Person

Every person's value as made in God's image.

- Each pupil is a gift, no matter what.

Corporal Works of Mercy

Ways we help people's bodies and lives.

- Feeding, visiting, caring, and sharing.

Liturgical Year

The Church's calendar of feasts and seasons.

- Colours, symbols, and actions that tell God's story.

Inclusion

Welcoming all, with adaptations.

- Making sure no one is left out.

Co-regulation

Shared calm between adult and child.

- When a trusted adult helps you feel settled.

Sensory Audit

Review of space for sensory triggers.

- Checking light, sound, smell, and movement to reduce overwhelm.

Visual Schedule

Picture-based plan of events.

- Helps children know what's coming next in Mass or catechesis.

Regulation Kit

Tools to help calm and focus.

- Fidgets, ear defenders, water bottle, soft cloth, etc.

ACA

Adaptive Catechetical Approaches for Autism.

- Inclusive teaching methods tailored for autistic learners.

AAC

Augmentative and Alternative Communication.

- Tools that support communication beyond speech (e.g., devices, boards, gestures).

ASC/ASD

Autism Spectrum Condition/Disorder.

- "Condition" is preferred in UK pastoral contexts.

IEP

Individual Education Plan.

- A document outlining the pupil's needs, targets and areas to be developed.

PECS

Picture Exchange Communication System - used to support communication.

- Swapping pictures to ask for things or share ideas.

Neurodivergent

Describes people whose brains work differently (e.g. Autistic, ADHD).

- A term of dignity and community, not deficit.

This resource is offered as a pastoral and educational guide to support inclusive Religious Education for Autistic pupils and those with related needs.

It reflects current understanding, diocesan practice, and theological reflection within the Catholic tradition, but does not replace official Church teaching or individual discernment by families, catechists, or clergy.

Adaptations and examples are provided to assist in planning and accompaniment; they should be interpreted flexibly and adjusted to suit local contexts and individual pupils.

All efforts have been made to ensure theological accuracy and pastoral appropriateness. Feedback and ongoing dialogue are welcomed to improve future versions.

Mark Paine 2025

