

Dear Y13 Parents

Re: Letters from parents to students in their final year

Would you be prepared to write a letter of encouragement to your child, which only they would read, as part of their retreat? As you know, the final year is often a time of uncertainty and anxiety for these students, as they face the prospect of leaving school and as they worry whether they will make the grade, both literally and metaphorically. Your letter would be an important source of affirmation for them.

Their year group retreat is a key formal occasion when they focus on leaving. We ask them to consider the theme of 'vocation', inviting them to look beyond the immediate timescale of their exams and results to consider the sort of person they really want to become, the sort of person they are called by God to become. That was the simple question put to all students by Pope Benedict XVI when he visited this country in 2010.

I know from discussions with parents when I was a tutor, and more recently from discussions on parents' retreats, that this is a question which resonates with you as parents. In addition to your concerns about the exam results, university offers, job prospects and overall 'success' of your children, there is a more fundamental concern for the way your children are developing, their happiness, their personality, their character, their behaviour, their roundedness, their faith.

The letter I am inviting you to write would not be one of guidance or aspiration. It is not a letter telling them what you want them to achieve in their exams, their careers, their lives. This letter is not a way of 'winning the argument' if you happen to be at loggerheads with your child, or of explaining why you took certain decisions affecting them. It needs you to step back from any immediate agenda, and to reflect on what you value in them, of how you love them. I realise this is far from simple to write, particularly as the teenage years can be a time when communication is not easy.

Please do not feel that this has to be some sort of definitive letter for all time, your one chance to express perfectly your love for your child. I would see it more as a helping hand, an encouragement and affirmation at a time when they are often questioning and doubting themselves. The fact that the school is asking you to write this letter should make it easier for your child to receive. They will not be asking themselves why you are suddenly giving them a personal letter out of the blue. All the students on the retreat will be getting a letter at the same time. The context of the retreat will also help them to receive and benefit from the letter.

I realise that there are a number of risks in this request. Even if we ensure that every student has a letter to read, there is still the risk that the letter causes distress, either because it is unfortunately expressed or because it is awkwardly interpreted. On balance I feel that the benefits outweigh the risks. Our experience from the last few retreats has been overwhelmingly positive. Having spoken with many of you before, I am aware that many would welcome this opportunity. Indeed some of you will have already been involved in this process with an older child. Some have questioned whether such a letter is necessary, as you are so often telling your children that you love them. I do think, however, that a written expression of this provides something for your son or daughter to keep, cherish and return to.

Some of you have asked how many letters should be written and whether individual or joint letters are better. Clearly family circumstances will vary, but I have noticed that students have been particularly glad to receive both maternal and paternal perspectives, so please feel free to send more than one letter, where this is possible.

At a practical level, there is the logistical challenge of collecting in more than 100 letters by the time of the retreat. Could I ask that you get your letter to me by Monday 24 February, either by post or by e-mail? I will happily print off e-mails into sealed envelopes. If, on reflection, you decide that there is no-one in the family who could undertake such a letter, please could you also let me know also by 24 February? That would then give me time to ask the Housemaster or Housemistress to step into the breach and to put together their thoughts on your child. I'm sure, of course, that you realise that a family letter would have more impact.

Could I make one further request? This sort of exercise is probably not helped if the students hear about it beforehand and have time to speculate and anticipate. It is better if they receive their letters fresh and new, within the context of a whole day's retreat. So could you please resist the temptation to discuss this with your child?

Finally, I include below a few questions for you to use as appropriate. Some of you may well ask me to read your letter before your child receives it, to check that it is along the right lines. Please let me know if you would like me to do this.

With best wishes

Ambrose Henley OSB

Guidance

- What are the personal qualities you admire in your child?
- What are the talents you value in your child?
- What are the strengths you recognise in your child?
- How have you seen them develop these over the years?
- How have you seen your child using their gifts to help others?
- How would you describe your love for your child?

Timescale

- **Monday 24 February 2024 - Either parental letter sent to Fr Ambrose or invitation declined**