

Background Information on our Online Assemblies for the Return to School/Beginning of Academic Year 2020-2021

These prayer/assembly resources are for use with students as they return to school. They provide material for face-to-face assemblies for each of the six year-groups in your school. What is below is an outline of some important considerations as you plan for these assemblies.

Included in this pack is also a short service for use with staffs. This might be used at the start of your first staff gathering. An additional resource for Boards of Management is also provided.

Introduction:

1. Your RE teachers will be a vital support for you in managing this piece, particularly in terms of accessing other material that will make more sense in your context.
2. Personalise the material to your own context; use the prayers that are at the heart of your school's life. Make reference to your school's rich history and tradition. Speak to our CEIST values. Talk about the founder of your school. Weave your school's vision and mission into the assemblies.
3. Prayer is at the heart of the life of a Catholic school. While these assemblies might be understood as prayer services, they are open to all students to participate at the level and in the way that they themselves wish. You can adapt it according to your own cohort of students. You can also adapt the material in terms of the time you have for planning.
4. These services/assemblies are face-to-face. The physicality of the prayer services is important. What we did during lockdown was online and remote. It's important that the quality of these services feels and looks different. There is something to be celebrated in that. We are all together now, at last, when before we were apart.
5. There is an understandable informality to these assemblies! Particularly for the junior part of the school. This informality is important in terms of normalising prayer and making it relevant to the way students live their lives. We approach God always as one approaches a good friend. This informality is reflected not only in the tone of the gatherings but also in terms of the content. In addition, where appropriate, scripture readings have been adapted. (Where such adaptations have been made, they've been marked with an *)
6. Each assembly piece is designed to take about 45 minutes. It's substantial because each recognises this time of transitioning back to school life as significant. Obviously, you can shorten the assemblies by removing sections of them as you wish. Equally, you may add

to them and interact with them as you introduce various aspects of your school. However, it would be helpful to retain the Scripture reading, some of the music and the prayers.

7. In terms of the 'physicality' of each assembly, this might be managed in three ways:
 - a. The people together: there is some interaction and/or some movement/gestures within each of the assemblies. This is important to have but also needs to be managed in terms of social distancing. Adapt as you see fit.
 - b. The symbols that we use: words alone are never enough to capture complex emotions. For this reason, we use symbols to help unpack what we're feeling and what we're hoping. Adapt these symbols according to your own realities and your own sense of your students.
 - c. The physical space: it would be important to have a sense that the space in which these assemblies are happening is sacred. The ground our students stand on is holy ground; made holy because it holds them and us up, but also made holy by the history of your school, the generations of sacred stories woven into the fabric of your school's life. Catholic schools are sacred and holy places. To develop that sense of the sacred at the heart of the school's life, and for the specific purpose of these (and other) assemblies obviously takes a bit of time and preparation. The creation of a focal point, that should include things like a candle and a bible is important in this context.
8. Where possible, we would advise to avoid the use of PowerPoint or similar presentation style tools. Students will have had a lot of learning via devices and online programmes so it would be good to have something more immediate for them for these assemblies. There are some suggestions around video material but these are light in tone and provide important opportunities for a different kind of reflection.
9. Any music suggestions are just that; they're provided to supplement what you/your RE team have. They are in the form here of YouTube clips; just watch to make sure the clip starts at the music and not the ad. You don't need to use the video; it's just the music you need.
10. Personalise it also in terms of your own tone, obviously. Speak as you would normally speak – what's here is only a broad template to give you some ideas. The key messages you are probably seeking to share with students; you are really valued by us, we care, we believe in you, have courage, be hope-filled, don't be afraid. These are the values that are also at the heart of your school's vision of education as a CEIST school in the particular tradition in which your school was founded, so it's obviously good to name that as well.
11. Many of these values are reflected in the material provided by the NCCA for use with students returning to school after the lockdown. See <https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/wellbeing> The Wellbeing themes in the NCCA resource (Sense of safety, calming, self and community efficacy, social connectedness and hope). It would be helpful, therefore, if you are intending to use these resources from the NCCA that links be made between your assemblies and this material. Suggestions for how you might do this are provided here for your own ease of use. Making links to this material from the NCCA is entirely optional.

12. For Catholic schools, we present to students a vision of wellbeing that includes turning to God for help and for courage. It is in God, we find rest; it is in God, we find our home; it is in God we learn to love and support others. And ultimately, it is God who is our hope.
13. If any one of the year groups is very large, consider two or even three such gatherings, to allow for adequate social distancing, perhaps in terms of class groups. Smaller groups might also lead to a richer experience. Logistics around multiple assemblies within a year group are, however, another important consideration.
14. Each assembly presumes the Year Head and RE for that year group as well as key personnel (Deputy Principal(s)/Class Tutors/HSCL/Guidance will be available to assist. In a number of the assemblies, assistance is also required from sixth year students. These students might be members of your school's student leadership team. They could also be members of the school's pastoral/faith support team. The possibilities are yours.

Suggested themes:

The specific themes for each year group are set out below and speak, we hope, to the developmental stage (including in terms of faith) that your students are at. However, you may wish to mix these assemblies up, using material from one year for another year. The suggested themes are:

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| <i>a. First Year: You are welcome</i> | <i>e. Fifth Year: Going forward together in faith</i> |
| <i>b. Second Year: #take2 - A Fresh start</i> | <i>f. Sixth year: Gratitude; taking nothing for granted, appreciating the little things, moving forward in joy.</i> |
| <i>c. Third Year: Stronger together</i> | |
| <i>d. Transition Year: Thinking of others</i> | |

Follow up:

Many students have displayed remarkable resilience and adaptability over the last six months. For others, it has taken a big toll on them. And the experience of others has been somewhere in the middle. These assemblies are an important opportunity to remind all students – regardless of their experiences during lockdown – that there are supports within the school community (and outside it) available to them. The schools Pastoral Care Team/Student Support Team will have an important role to play in coordinating these supports. It's good to remind students that this team exists and also that all their teachers are there for them should they wish to speak to someone about any concerns they may have.