



Spirituality at the School Gate

Diane Jackson, a recent graduate of the Masters in Applied Spirituality at Waterford TU and the Spirituality Institute for Research and Education (SpIRE), explores the ordinary places in which we encounter God. Her book *Spirituality at the School Gate* was published in 2020.

Most of us need little introduction to the school gate. We all have an experience of it. We might have memories of skipping out to meet a parent or grandparent, full of news of the day's highs and lows in the classroom. Some of us are now the parents or grandparents, spending a good portion of our day negotiating parking in stressful conditions in order to drop off or collect children at the school gate.

In the context of my research, I described School Gate Spirituality as how mothers of Christian faith experience, express and practice their spirituality in the specific, everyday location of their children's school gate. I sought to discover if this could be a site for meaningful human and divine encounters. Most of us, if we're



honest, think of the school gate as just one of those necessary but less rewarding parenting tasks. As a 'stay at home' mum who wished to fulfil God's loving purpose in my everyday life, I began to adjust my view of the school gate when I realised just how much of my day, over a long period of years, I was spending there. I began to see how my encounters with other mums at the school gate were in some cases leading to deepening, supportive relationships and that this too was work for God's kingdom here on earth: quiet, compassionate and holy work that largely goes unnoticed, but over time has great value.

The sacred does not merely belong in church, during times of private or



corporate prayer or to those dressed in clerical collars and robes. There is divine possibility everywhere we inhabit, and the space we take up in life is the space we bless, whether it is in an office, at a supermarket checkout till, in a classroom, a nursing home or at a school gate. Encounter with others is how we express our faith. It is where the compassion of God, bestowed with grace upon us, can be shared with those we meet in our daily lives. Encounter was central to Jesus in his earthly ministry, and as an itinerant preacher he often taught his disciples more about the kingdom of God through his interactions with those he met on his journeys than by his sermons.

In her book *The Tenderness of God*, which looks at the lives of Francis of Assisi and his collaborator Clare, Gillian T.W. Ahlgren says, 'When done in the conscious presence of the love of God, encounter creates sacred space in the human community. Encounter moves us from observers of life to collaborators with God, in the building up of the human community, the creation of a common home.'

With my personal experience of this kind of sacred encounter as my starting point, I interviewed four other mothers of faith about their experiences at their school gates and uncovered many stories of encounters of compassion.

Stories of love and care for others were manifold: turning up a bit early so that they were available to chat to someone who had recently been bereaved, offers of practical help with lifts and food for another mother who was seriously ill, a simple follow-up enquiry of how that tricky situation with a child was progressing. The use of group and personal texting was almost unanimously viewed as a useful tool for communication and showing care for others.

God can and does use us in our encounters in everyday life, and if you are someone who is regularly standing outside a school gate, you may find how God can show up in that mundane but holy place. From personal experience I promise that it will bring enrichment to both your own spiritual life and the lives of those around you. ❤️