

COLUMBAN SCHOOLS COMPETITION 2026

WRITING – 2nd Place Article

‘Becoming a refugee is never a choice. But how we respond is’

by A. (18) St David's Catholic College, Cardiff

Student A. says: “I’m honoured to have taken part in a competition that emphasises such an important issue. Becoming a refugee is never a choice, and in my entry I hoped to share the importance of how empathy and solidarity guide the way we respond.”

Becoming a refugee is never a choice. No one wakes up and decides to leave everything they know behind. No one dreams of becoming a refugee in an unknown country where all feels strange. But when any hope of a future is disappearing, leaving is the only choice to survive. I am aware of this, as my family and I experienced it first-hand. I was twelve years old when I moved to the UK. I did not want to leave my country. I was forced to flee due to the violence from the gangs in El Salvador that made every day feel unsafe. You could feel violence in the air; it was not something you only see on the news. As a result, we learned to stay quiet, walk faster and avoid eye contact. Entire neighbourhoods were controlled by gangs, people disappeared, and children were influenced to join by being threatened if they refused.

I left everything that was once familiar to me. My family, my friends, the streets that watched me grow and a sense of belonging without even trying. I remember seeing my mother packing the little we could carry. At that age, I had to understand that the place I called 'home' was becoming unsafe. I did not speak English. Suddenly, I abandoned the language that once allowed me to express myself freely. I was surrounded by voices I could not understand and unfamiliar faces. There were times I felt invisible and like I didn't belong anywhere. My voice became smaller, and staying quiet was easier. In that silence, it became clear to me how much I had left in my country.

Although my story is personal, unfortunately, it is common for many people to experience it. In 2025, the UN Refugee Agency stated that 117 million people were forced to leave their home country because of persecution, war, violence or conflicts. Behind that number are stories like mine, where families leave because they have no other choice. Refugees are not people who happily plan their journey; they are people who fear returning to an unsafe country and are entitled to protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

While becoming a refugee is not a choice, how we respond is. Catholic Social Teaching teaches us different principles, such as dignity. All human beings have dignity, for each person is made in the image and likeness of God. Dignity does not depend on someone's nationality, language or qualifications, and it does not disappear when a person becomes a refugee. Arriving in a new country made me feel lost. But every act of compassion from people made me feel seen. I realised that how we respond is a choice. Those who patiently helped me learn English, those who included me even when I struggled to understand, and those who welcomed me made a foreign place feel like home again. All their actions restored my confidence and reminded me of my worth.

There is also the principle of solidarity, recognising that we belong to each other. Solidarity requires us to see each other as brothers and sisters rather than strangers. The preferential option for the poor reminds us that God's love is universal, and the common good teaches that the gifts of creation belong to everyone and no one should be excluded from them.

Over time, I learned English, I made friends and adapted to a new country. Even though it was different, I still hold onto my own culture. Now carry two worlds within me: the warmth and the roots of El Salvador and the opportunities and safety of the UK. My story is no longer about leaving; it is about starting a new life. Although El Salvador has undergone positive change, I have integrated into this country. Integration isn't instantaneous. It requires effort from the person arriving and the welcoming community receiving them. When this works, it strengthens society.

Looking back at this experience, I've learned that my story carries a meaningful message to others. Becoming a refugee was not my choice. I did not choose violence, nor fear, nor to struggle with a new language. But people around me chose how they responded. Some chose kindness. Some chose patience. Some chose to see my potential rather than my difference. As a society, we face that same choice every day. We can respond with empathy, respect and compassion. Each small act of understanding can restore a part of humanity.

I never chose to become a refugee. But I choose how to respond, by studying hard, helping others and using my voice to remind people that we are not problems to be solved but we are people with stories, dreams and dignity. The journey from El Salvador to the UK has taught me that hope is stronger than fear and that the response to suffering is always love.

Quote:

"At St David's Catholic College, we're incredibly proud of this learner. She shows courage and compassion in the way she engages with the world, and her writing reflects the values we hope to nurture in all our learners — a commitment to the common good, a care for others, and a strong personal sense of what is right. It's inspiring to see a young person use her voice with such integrity"

Julie Maldoom, St David's College