

## INTERVIEW WITH SEAN WHITTLE, VISITING RESEARCH FELLOW AT ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon*

*August 2021*



### EXCERPTS:

- “One of the impressive qualities of Gerald Grace is his charm and wit. He is also a person with a strong sense of mission: working as a researcher at the service of Catholic education... I distinctly remember Gerald politely but firmly speaking to a junior colleague about the need for gravitas and seriousness in relation to this work. This is important advice which we all need to take note of.”
- “I would encourage graduate students to emulate the approach of Gerald Grace – go into Catholic schools and find out what is going on. Keep the focus on high quality empirical analysis.”

#### **Could you briefly introduce yourself and explain what your work on Catholic education entails?**

I am a Visiting Research Fellow at St Mary's University (London) within Gerald Grace's Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education. I serve on the Editorial Board of ISCE. My main work within Catholic Education Studies is to be the secretary for the Network for Researchers in Catholic Education. As such I organize the annual conference and I have played a role in bringing the proceedings of these conferences to the attention of the wider research community.

#### **How and when did you first meet with Prof. Grace and how did you interact with him over the years?**

I first met Gerald in 2008, during the first year of my doctoral studies at the IOE-UCL, on the recommendation of my supervisor. Gerald was already the leading authority on Catholic education and my supervisor thought it would make good sense to sense to make him aware of what I was researching (the philosophy of Catholic education). Meeting Gerald was a pleasure: he was gracious and genuinely interested in what I as a fledgling researcher was aiming to do. I had arrived for the meeting armed with a plethora of questions. I had arrived for the meeting armed with a plethora of questions ready to pick the brains of this eminent thinker.

#### **Box 1: Interview Series**

**What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website?** The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

**Why a series of interviews?** Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

**What is the focus of this interview?** This interview is with Sean Whittle, Visiting Research Fellow at St Mary's University (Twickenham, London). The interview is part of a series in honor of Professor Gerald Grace's retirement from St Mary's University.

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We had an engaging conversation and one particular exchange became firmly entrenched in my mind. I had pointed out the need for far more conference events to bring researchers in Catholic education together. Gerald responded with a deep but sincere sense of exasperation. He was already working flat out and had no capacity for this sort of time consuming work! His polite but emphatic response was that I needed to quickly complete my doctoral studies and then start organizing these conference events! As a part-time doctoral student it took me a further five years before I was able to take my viva and pick up a post where I could start this work. I took Gerald's response very much to heart. I have now organised well over a dozen conference type events in aspects of Catholic Education. I have been lucky enough to have Gerald Grace as a keynote speaker at many of these. Since the CRDCE moved to St Mary's I have taken advantage of opportunities to regularly work with Gerald, and in so many aspects of academic life I have regarded Gerald as mentor, from whom I have learned much.

**How do you see Prof. Grace's main contributions to practice or research in Catholic education?**

Gerald's 2002 work is seminal, playing a central role in helping to establish the field of educational studies in the UK. I would argue that Gerald (like Professor John Sullivan) was giving an emphatic response to James Arthur's dire analysis in the *Ebbing Tide* (1995). This analysis maintained that "Catholicity" is seeping out of Catholic schools in England and Wales. This analysis was not grounded in anything like empirical evidence and research. Grace went out to Catholic schools and interviewed serving head teachers. He gleaned high quality evidence and was able to come to a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the state of Catholic education in England and Wales. Grace demonstrated the need for careful argument based on first hand research (rather than conjecture and rhetoric) about Catholic education. In this Grace has done an invaluable service to the field of Catholic education studies in the UK. Beyond this Grace has also opened the field up through his editorship of the journal *International Studies in Catholic Education*.

**In what way did Prof. Grace influence your own practice or research in Catholic education?**

My primary research interest is in the theory or philosophy of Catholic education. I have been able to build on Grace's arguments about the need for far more work to be done around the philosophy of Catholic education. It provided an initial impetus, helping to justify why the philosophy of Catholic education needs to be further researched. I was able to see my research as part of a wider goal: furthering the much needed clarity around a robust theory of Catholic education.

**How can Catholic education scholars make sure that their research is useful to practitioners?**

The most obvious way for Catholic education scholars to make sure their research is useful to practitioners is to emulate Grace's approach: to go into Catholic schools and find out what is going on the ground. Good quality empirical research will involve engaging with practitioners, and as such the findings will be relevant to them.

**What are for you the most critical areas of future research in Catholic education, and why is that?**

I would maintain that there are four critical areas of future research in Catholic education: (1) Further work on the aims/philosophy of Catholic education. This is because the traditional focus on 'parental rights' to justify Catholic education has some significant drawbacks (especially as Catholic parents no longer continue to automatically opt for a Catholic schools); (2) A related issue is 'identity' and Catholic education, to further clarify the extent to which Catholic education ought to foster 'Catholic identity'. This brings the focus back to the philosophy of Catholic education; (3) Leadership issues: who ought to lead Catholic schools? Why? How does this leadership link with the leadership/oversight of the Bishops? This is a deeply practical question, certainly in the UK where there have been decades of concerns about there not being enough 'Catholic' head teachers to serve the needs of Catholic schools; (4) How central is Religious Education to the project of Catholic education – is it really the heart of what Catholic education? Should it be central?

**What is your advice for graduate students who may be interested in conducting research in Catholic education?**

I would encourage graduate students to emulate the approach of Gerald Grace – go into Catholic schools and find out what is going on. Keep the focus on high quality empirical analysis of Catholic education.

**Is there a personal anecdote of your interactions with Prof. Grace that you would like to share?**

One of the impressive qualities of Gerald Grace is his charm and wit. He is also a person with a strong sense of mission: working as a researcher at the service of Catholic education. He also has an astute ability to engage with others and to win them around to collaborate with him. Most importantly Gerald is keenly aware of the importance researching Catholic education. I distinctly remember Gerald politely but firmly speaking to a junior colleague about the need for gravitas and seriousness in relation to this work. This is important advice which we all need to take note of.