

INTERVIEW WITH CAROLINE HEALY, COURSE LEAD, MA IN CATHOLIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, ST MARY'S UNIVERSITY



*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “In my view, Prof. Grace’s contribution to research in Catholic education concerns building it and developing it as an important sub-discipline of education in its own right... Founding a journal to build contributions from all over the world, not just Europe, ... has been outstanding.”
- “It has been fun being his office neighbor for the past five years and spending time during busy schedules taking short breaks and just being happy colleagues and companions on our Catholic education journey together, laughing at Gerald’s ever-witty banter.”

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

I am Senior Lecturer on the Doctor of Education (EdD) Programme and PhD doctoral supervisor at St Mary’s University, London, as well as a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. I am privileged to lead the MA in Catholic School Leadership Programme as the previous director, Professor John Lydon, enhanced its student numbers greatly which is benefitting current Catholic schools in the UK and Ireland in terms of succession planning in leadership. Professor Gerald Grace is one of the well-known former eminent external examiners of the programme, alongside Richard Pring. He has continued to take an interest in the students, their dissertation research and programme numbers since then.

I have had roles in higher education for nearly 30 years and have experience of teaching in the systems of the UK, United States and Ireland and carrying out research in collaboration with a number of European countries. I am the National General Secretary of the Catholic Association of Teachers, Schools and Colleges for England & Wales which represents the majority of Catholic schools. In addition, I am also an elected member of the Council of the Catholic Union of Great Britain, to advance Catholic education in the public arena.

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 Caroline Healy, Course Lead, MA in Catholic School Leadership, 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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I am also part of an exciting philanthropic-funded research project concerning the research capacity-building of post-doctoral researchers from Africa which was a project initiated by Prof. Grace during a conversation in Rome with African colleagues. I have been involved in the facilitating of seminars on distinctive leadership nationally and internationally. Finally, I am a trustee of the St Mary's university charity SHOCC which promotes student and staff volunteering in schools and orphanages in Africa.

My current research interests concern formation of Catholic school teachers and leaders, Catholic school leadership, distinctive Catholic identity, maintenance of religious charisms, parents as primary educators and inclusion of the disadvantaged and vulnerable in Catholic education. My recent publications included a chapter in an edited volume, *Irish and British Reflections on Catholic Education* co-authored with Professor John Lydon entitled 'Shepherding Talent – a informal formation programme for aspiring school leaders. I was also most honored to be invited to write a chapter entitled 'Catholic Education and a New Christian Humanism: in Honour of Grace' for Professor Gerald Grace's festschrift *New Thinking, New Scholarship and New Research in Catholic Education: Responses to the Work of Professor Gerald Grace*.

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

I first met Professor Grace at a conference of the Association of Catholic School Schools and Colleges of England and Wales in 2015 which was held in Chester, in North West England. He was giving a keynote on distinctive leadership and his talk was inspiring because it was counter-cultural to the usual talks on leadership I had previously listened to. However, I had heard of Professor Grace by reputation many years before. In London in 1996, my then PhD supervisor, the distinguished late Professor Maurice Kogan, discussed the work of Professor Grace and how he was doing outstanding work creating new knowledge and a discipline in the area of Catholic education.

This foresight led to the creation of journal in Catholic education, *International Studies in Catholic Education*. Leading American researchers at the University of Notre Dame, have not surprisingly referred to Professor Grace and his close colleagues as the most eminent researchers in Catholic education in Europe and ones who continue to contribute to empirical research and new knowledge in the area of Catholic education. Since 2016, when Professor Grace moved his journal of and Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education (CRDCE) to St Mary's, I have been most fortunate to know him as a fellow colleague and friend.

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

In my view, Prof. Grace's contribution to research in Catholic education concerns building it and developing it as an important sub-discipline of education in its own right, so much so that we are still discussing it today. Further, he is a distinguished academic that has led debates in the field and contributed significantly to new knowledge and concepts in this area, especially 'spiritual capital' and 'mission integrity'. Founding a journal to build contributions from all over the world, not just Europe, but also Africa and Latin America has been outstanding. These contributions help sustain Catholic education as a distinctive education sector among other offerings.

In practice, Prof. Grace has always been since his early career as teacher, keen to include and provide interesting opportunities and experiences for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including taking students to the cinema and theatre. He embodies the Catholic education principles of the importance of a holistic education and inclusion for all.

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

In practice, Prof. Grace has influenced me by the importance of professionalism at all times and service. He is committed to his duties and responsibilities and this extends not just to colleagues, but also students, recently continuing to supervise a doctoral student who was taking a rather long time to complete.

In terms of research, Prof. Grace's commitment to empirical research and visits to schools to speak to people on the frontline is very valuable indeed. One such example was holding a conference in a school in North London focused on the contribution of Catholic schools to social justice in 2020. Gaining contemporary school leader and teacher perspectives is really paramount for moving the disciplinary field of Catholic education forward and disseminating their recommendations. Being close to schools is extremely significant for producing cutting-edge research and not just sitting in an 'ivory tower', so that everyone is made aware of contemporary successes and challenges in Catholic education.

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

First, it is important to disseminate research outside academia and research conferences by participating in conferences and seminars for practitioners. Good examples of these types of gatherings include Diocesan Executive Headteacher, Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher and Aspiring Middle Leader Conferences. Other conferences include the Catholic Association of

Teachers Schools and Colleges and the Association of Catholic Chaplains in Education. Including articles in communications with schools that are accessible such as in *Networking: Catholic Education Today* which are read widely by practitioners and serving school leaders is very useful.

Second, include practitioners in the empirical research and gather their opinions so that their voice is included in the current debates on Catholic education. Educators and academic researchers should come together to produce the best research possible so that is accurate and endeavors to arrive at the truth. This is really critical in an age of increasing secularization and calls for the removal of funding from schools with a religious character that some sections of civic society claim are exclusive.

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

The continued examination of formation programmes and their impact on the Catholic education sector is essential to provide the next generation of school leadership, especially in an era where senior leaders are choosing not to step-up and take on headship roles. Why there are less female leaders of secondary schools also requires evaluation. Increasing academization of schools will also require deep analysis in time and reflection on the positives of working collaboratively while critically considering the potential negative impact on individual founding school identities and distinctive religious charisms being lost to a more generic Catholic identity.

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

My initial advice is to focus on a topic that will enhance practice or the professional setting graduate students already may be working in, as this will produce authentic research and it will be easier to engage in consultation with other expert professionals in terms of conceptual frameworks and findings. This will produce higher quality research than working in isolation.

My other key advice is to become involved as much as possible in Catholic education networks to receive feedback on initial research findings and endeavor to become involved in the work of academia, particularly if graduate students wish to change careers and move into the higher education sector. Becoming knowledgeable on research methods and ethics, data management, intellectual property and publishing are essential researcher development in this regard.

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

I really enjoyed organizing the Catholic Union of Great Britain's Lenten Lecture in 2017 when Prof. Grace gave a lecture on 'Do our Catholic Schools have Mission Integrity?' which was really thought-provoking for the wide-ranging audience and demonstrated how his research is useful to civic society. In addition, supporting Professor Grace in a library project to ensure that all his body of work was in the St Mary's University and freely available electronically to all, including the two volumes of the *International Handbook of Catholic Education* he co-edited and *Faith, Mission and Challenge: the selected works of Gerald Grace in Catholic Education*. This generosity of allowing others, especially students, to access research without any restrictions is to be highly applauded. Professor Grace also invested considerable personal funds making his 2021 festschrift volume open access, demonstrating his commitment to sharing knowledge and the truth widely.

Finally, it has been fun being his office neighbor for the past five years and spending time during busy schedules taking short breaks and just being happy colleagues and companions on our Catholic education journey together, laughing at Gerald's ever-witty banter. The photo below was taken in 2021 to celebrate Professor Grace's birthday in his Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education (CRDCE) at St Mary's University, London!



Photo: Professor Grace with Prof. John Lydon and Dr. Caroline Healy.