

## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN LYDON, PROFESSOR AT SAINT MARY'S UNIVERSITY



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon  
January 2022

### EXCERPTS:

- “The concept of ‘spiritual capital’, defined... as ‘resources of faith derived from a religious tradition’, in my opinion, represents one of Professor Grace’s main contributions to research in Catholic education.”
- “Perhaps my fondest memory is of Professor Grace insisting that, in the middle of NCEA 2009 in Anaheim, we hire a car and I drive him to the Mass on Easter Sunday at the Basilica of San Juan Capistrano... [But] while in Anaheim he refused my request to journey to the burial place of a former USA President whose politics he disagreed with profoundly!”

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

I hold degrees in education and theology from the Universities of Durham, Liverpool, and Surrey. My doctorate focused on teaching as a vocation for lay teachers in a contemporary context. I am Professor of Catholic Education and Editor of the journal *International Studies in Catholic Education* at St Mary’s University, London. Prior to this I was the Programme Director for the MA in Catholic School Leadership at St Mary’s University. I also taught at the University of Notre Dame, London Global Gateway. Before my career in higher education, I served as a school leader for over 30 years in Salesian schools.

Significant areas of my scholarship and research focus on spiritual capital, Catholic school leadership, the maintenance of distinctive religious charisms and the relationship between these and competing school paradigms in the 21st century which focus on the marketization of education and school effectiveness in the UK. I am a doctoral supervisor and mentor to post-doctoral researchers from Africa who are enhancing their research capability in the area of Catholic education.

#### 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 John Lydon, Professor 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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I was recently appointed leader for education of the Catholic-Inspired NGO Forum, working in partnership with the Vatican Secretariat of State. I am also a founding member of the International Catholic Education Alliance and Global Researchers to Advance Catholic Education (GRACE). I serve as a member of the Executives of the World Union of Catholic Teachers, the Catholic Association of Teachers, Schools and Colleges of England & Wales and the Catholic Union of Great Britain.

**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 in 1998 when he was invited by Professor John Sullivan to give a lecture at one of the seminars for graduate students (included me) who had embarked upon the MA in Catholic School Leadership, a programme which Professor Sullivan had instituted in the previous year. I remember being inspired by the erudition of his contribution, focused on one of the chapters of *School Leadership: Beyond Education Management*, a ground-breaking text published in 1995. I remember thinking at the time that we were privileged to be in the presence of three giants of Catholic education research, with the late Professor Terrence McLaughlin being present alongside Professors Gerald Grace and John Sullivan. Professor Grace's presentation inspired me to suggest to the Salesian Provincial that he be invited to deliver the keynote at the first Salesian Conference on Catholic Mission in 1999 in Coventry.

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

The concept of 'spiritual capital', defined by him initially as 'resources of faith derived from a religious tradition', in my opinion, represents one of Professor Grace's main contributions to research in Catholic education. I have written a chapter about this in Professor Grace's recent festschrift published in 2021, *New Thinking, New Scholarship and New Research in Catholic Education: Responses to the work of Professor Gerald Grace* (2021, London: Routledge). This contribution of spiritual capital became very significant for me in practice when Professor Grace was appointed as External Examiner for the model formation programme, the MA in Catholic School Leadership in 2005 at St Mary's University, London.

I directed the programme and developed the curriculum with a focus on capacity building in the area of spiritual and theological capital to 'bridge the gap' between theoretical underpinnings and school practice for graduate students who were also Catholic school leaders. The programme provides school leaders with an opportunity not only to become familiar with the Catholic Church's rich teaching on education, but also to become more effective school leaders by developing both secular and spiritual competencies. As External Examiner, Professor Grace

could see the concept of spiritual capital being developed in practice and described it as a flagship MA programme "... (with) excellent resourcing ..., innovative modes of study and outreach, ... quality teaching and highly professional tutorial guidance. It is also well informed by Church documents on ecclesiology, Christian principles and education." Professor Grace's work on the mission of Catholic education and fidelity to it in practice has also inspired me to develop this as a major theme for graduate students to consider in their assignments and reflections. His commitment to the Catholic Church's mission to the poor has been equally inspirational and has motivated me to underline this theme in the MA in Catholic School Leadership programme.

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

Whilst Catholic education benefits from the spiritual capital formed in the past, it is vital that this spiritual capital is sustained by nurturing future leaders in Catholic schools. At St Mary's, the MA in Catholic School Leadership and the Shepherding Talent CPD Programme make a significant contribution in maintaining the spiritual and religious mission in Catholic schools by supporting the continuing professional development and formation of Catholic school leaders. A number of MA students have been promoted to positions of leadership and a high number in senior Catholic education leadership positions have progressed to doctoral studies. More women than men are currently participating in the programme and participation has been widened in the UK and internationally through rolling out new modes of study. The programme also attracts well-established diocesan leaders and those in multi-academy trusts. This development of spiritual capital of school leaders takes place by developing a community of learners and online tasks, which enables them to be more critically reflective.

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

Professor Grace has had a major influence on how we have conceptualized various programmes I just described at St Mary's, bridging the gaps between research and practice. As for me, teaching as a vocation and the continued formation of formators is an example of my research informing school practice in the classroom. In exploring the concept of teaching as a vocation in Christian tradition, it is important to articulate the essential interconnectedness between four elements: Christ as the foundation of Christian vocation – biblical perspectives, focusing particularly on the concepts of discipleship, emulation and charism; the way in which that vocation has developed within Christian tradition; historical perspectives focusing on two Religious Orders and current critical scholarship concerning teaching as a vocation and vocation demonstrated in the perceptions

and motivations of practitioners. Recommendations from this research are applicable in practice, for example for the maintenance of formation programmes both at Diocesan and Religious Order level.

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

Maintaining Catholic identity in the midst of the significant decline in religious trusteeships is a contemporary leadership challenge, but it is also an opportunity to strengthen the identity of all schools among a family of schools. Critical solidarity between Church and government is seminal in this context as Catholic schools in the UK are primarily funded by the state. Key sub-themes include the revisiting of the transmission of religious charisms by lay headteachers and Catholic identity in a changing cultural context. Further, the promotion of theological literacy, religious education and raising awareness of governance and inspection of schools with a religious character in the UK continue to be critical areas for research. Finally, research on the central mission of the Church and the promotion of mission integrity in regard to service of the poor and vulnerable in schools and the wider service to the Common Good are perennial concerns that require attention.

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

My first piece of advice is to research on a topic which will combine theory and practice and inspire real improvements on the ground in Catholic education at all levels and something which will uphold the central mission of Catholic schools, which is to serve those at the peripheries. Doctoral students are producing some excellent case studies of the work of religious orders, dioceses and schools. All of this is adding to the empirical research base of Catholic education. For example, one of my international doctoral students from Tanzania, Rev. Fr Auson Mushoshi, recently completed his doctorate in 2021 on his local diocese of Bukoba.

I also encourage students to participate in seminars, colloquia and conferences to disseminate their research and receive feedback from others, and to publish as they are completing their doctoral journey. One of my doctoral students, the Provincial of the Salesians of Don Bosco in the UK, Very Rev. Fr James Briody, is researching on the maintenance of the Salesian charism in a new era of religious trusteeship and lay headships. Another international doctoral student, Br Joao Carlos Do Prado, a member of the General Council of the Institute of the Marist Brothers based in Rome, is researching on the leadership and the Marist charism and he will be ready to complete and publish his work shortly.

Encouraging networking is also important. Two of my current doctoral students have been recipients of scholarships from the All Hallows Trust in Ireland. These scholars have benefitted by being able to engage with other doctoral students researching on Catholic education in Ireland as part of the Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (GRACE) Network. I also invite graduate students to other networks I am involved in, including the World Union of Catholic Teachers (WUCT), Catholic Association of Teachers, Schools and Colleges (CATSC), National Catholic Education Association (NCEA America) and the Network for Researchers in Catholic Education (NfRCE).

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

Taking 'anecdote' to mean an interesting story about a real incident or person, there are so many that it is difficult to choose one, as he has been a fantastic mentor and I am privileged to follow in his legendary/hallowed footsteps as editor of the international journal he founded. We have attended many Conferences together including presenting papers at the National Catholic Education Convention (USA) and more recently at an International Conference sponsored by the University of Notre Dame Indiana which took place at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in The Vatican during which the photograph below with Cardinal Versaldi was taken. Perhaps my fondest memory is of Professor Grace insisting that, in the middle of NCEA 2009 in Anaheim, we hire a car and I drive him to the Mass on Easter Sunday at the Basilica of San Juan Capistrano, one of the twenty-one famous sites along the California Missions Trail founded by Saint Junipero Serra in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that we had also joined the celebration of the Easter Vigil the previous evening confirms Professor Grace's unswerving and devout faith. While in Anaheim he refused my request to journey to the burial place of a former USA President whose politics he disagreed with profoundly!



Photo: Professor Gerald Grace, Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, and Professor John Lydon at the Vatican.