

INTERVIEW WITH CRISTOBAL MADERO, PROFESSOR AT UNIVERSIDAD ALBERTO HURTADO



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “The work of Gerald Grace is fundamental for approaching the tension between Catholic schools benefiting from the rules of the market and at the same time risking their identity because of that.”
- “Gerald is a reminder that to be meaningful and helpful, Catholic schools in today’s society need to have ministers, teachers, and leaders who conceive of the school and its role not only as a creator of social, economic, or cultural capital, but who also serve as mentors of spiritual capital.”

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

My name is Cristobal Madero, a Chilean Jesuit priest working in the educational apostolate for more than 15 years. I have been a chaplain and taught theology and philosophy in three different high schools in Chile: Colegio San Luis, Colegio San Alberto, and Colegio San Ignacio. I switched from a practitioner to an academic track in 2014 when I travelled to California to study for a Ph.D. in education policies at UC Berkeley. For the last three years, I have been working at the Jesuit University in Santiago: Universidad Alberto Hurtado. I study the evolution of Jesuit schools in the XXth and XXIth century and the transformation of the Catholic education subsystem in Chile and Latin America.

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

I haven’t had the honor of meeting Gerald personally, but long before the pandemic, online communication helped us to get in contact. It was the year 2013, I was finishing my Master’s thesis at Boston College, and I wrote a paper about Paulo Freire’s theological roots. My advisor suggested I submit the article to International Studies of Catholic Education, a journal I didn’t know at that time.

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 Cristobal Madero, Professor at Universidad Alberto Hurtado. The interview is part of a series in honor of Professor Gerald Grace’s retirement from St Mary’s University.

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As the editor, he contacted me with the good news of having the paper accepted to be published. Since that first moment, I felt Gerald's encouragement to pursue scholarship in Catholic Education specifically related to Latin America, my region. Over the years, I send one or two more collaborations to the journal, and in 2019 Gerald invited me to co-edit a special number on Latin America.

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

The work of Gerald Grace is fundamental for approaching the tension between Catholic schools benefiting from the rules of the market and at the same time risking their identity because of that. Gerald has also critically observed how Catholic schools deal with two impactful processes. One of these processes is secularization. The other is the hegemony of capitalism and its logic in the realm of education. I believe the notion of spiritual capital has provided the field with an essential concept to think about the role of Catholic education in general and Catholic schools in particular.

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

The work of Gerald has influenced me in two ways: one scholarly and another personally. Scholarly speaking, I have always used his concepts of spiritual capital and market values to analyze Chilean Catholic schools. These two concepts have been actual lenses to focus on what is essential and relevant from a research standpoint. Personally speaking, he has helped in ways he may not know. The last decade has been a difficult time for the Catholic Church in Chile which is going through what is probably the greatest crisis in its history. The institutional decline is added to the crisis caused by abuse, especially sexual, conscience, and power abuse perpetrated by representatives of the Catholic Church. In this sense, Catholic schools face in Chile a crisis caused by its leaders. The schools lost freedom and autonomy not by an oppressive or anti-clerical state, but because of the lack of accountability within the Church itself. The Catholic school in Chile today is looked upon with suspicion by the institution that has oriented, recognized, and sponsored it. It is the hope of educators and formators in school, for the sake of a quality education focused on the values of the Gospel whose message is more necessary than ever before, that the Catholic Church is up to the tremendous challenge that the school faces in times of convulsion.

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

I believe the first thing education scholars should do is to know and get involved as much as they can with the schools and their context. By this I mean, not just to read

about schools, students, families, and teachers, but to also visit schools, talk to students and parents, and learn from the teachers beyond their research questions. Most of the time, in my experience, you can tell when a scholar has no idea about what they are talking about. There is a balance that needs to be also present between being on the ground and being technically apt.

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

I think there are two related areas critical for research in Catholic education. You cannot understand one without the other. One is the identity of a Catholic School. Why is it that a Catholic school is necessary for society? Why do we need it? In some areas of the world, this question is easier to answer than in others because of the Church's commitment to the poor and, therefore, to give education where nobody else is providing it. There are some places where an answer is not that clear: in richer countries. In both cases, what we need is a clear identity for Catholic Schools. If we don't believe that the center of our educational endeavors is Jesus Christ and his good news for the world, we should close that school. We need to be convinced that the better lesson we can provide children and youth is that Jesus, the son of God, teaches us how to create a better world than the one we have today.

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

I would invite them to pursue scholarship with passion and a profound sense of the Signs of the Times, as the Second Vatican Council taught us. This means to be conscious of the treasure Catholic education bears and alert to what the culture and society tell us about what gives life and meaning to life these days. In addition, I would insist that any scholarship in this field needs to be technically excellent. As researchers in the field, we need to show that what we do is theoretically and methodologically up to the best standards.

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

As I said, Gerald's encouragement has been key for my development as a researcher in the area, and I will be always thankful to him. Gerald is a reminder that to be meaningful and helpful, Catholic schools in today's society need to have ministers, teachers, and leaders who conceive of the school and its role not only as a creator of social, economic, or cultural capital, but who also serve as mentors of spiritual capital. The schools need people who do not avoid living in the tension of the secular and capitalistic, but who learn how to live fruitfully in such a tension.