‘Spiritual capital’ and ‘charisms’ in the mission of Catholic schools

A dialogue between a sociologist and a theologian involved in Catholic education

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Introduction

In his research on Catholic education, Professor Gerald Grace has paid particular attention to Catholic values as expressed, for example, in the ‘preferential option for the poor’. In particular, he focused on the spiritual and religious resources used by headteachers, which he referred to as ‘spiritual capital’ (Grace, 2010). In doing so, Gerald Grace opens up a particularly interesting and challenging perspective. However, it may be important to have a better understanding of the concept in relation to our understanding of the mission of Catholic schools.

For the theologian composing this chapter, Gerald Grace’s main challenge is that he is an historian and a sociologist. How could a sociologist understand what spiritual capital is? Will not the transcendent dimension of this ‘capital’ only escape the sociologist? But the friendship I have with Gerald Grace and the esteem I have for his research prevents me from getting lost in judging him in this way. Gerald Grace is an atypical sociologist (everything about him is atypical, inasmuch as a Frenchman can pass judgement on the behaviour of a British scholar) and this makes him particularly open to interdisciplinary exchange. He is a man with a Catholic view of scholarship.¹

Thus, if it is possible for the readers of this contribution to imagine a dialogue between an English sociologist and a French theologian, I intend to initiate this exchange on the basis of a specific question: Does the ‘spiritual capital’ of which Gerald Grace writes have something to do with the ‘charisms’ of which the Christian tradition speaks? For the theologian, it is a question of saying what the charismatic dimension of the mission of Catholic schools is and of verifying how this can be linked with the sociologist’s reflection on spiritual capital.

For the theologian’s part at the beginning of this exchange, it is appropriate first of all to pay benevolent attention to what the sociologist says, then to articulate this proposal with the notion of charisma and, finally, to look at the practical consequences for Catholic schools.

Gerald Grace’s notion of *spiritual capital*

It is within the framework of his research on school leaders that Gerald Grace shows that headteachers are drawing upon a spiritual and religious resource which he calls ‘spiritual capital’ (Grace, 2002). He defines it as a sustaining and inspirational factor for the mission of these leaders, which he describes as ‘resources of faith and values derived from a commitment to a religious tradition’ (Grace, 2002, p. 236).²

The interest in the notion of *spiritual capital*

Grace’s approach is interesting in many ways. The first is that, as a good sociologist, he is interested above all in the protagonists of the mission, those he calls ‘front line practitioners’. This avoids an overly theoretical discourse on the Catholic school and allows for reflection on the practices of those who, in the daily life of schools, have to find resources to meet the educational challenges they encounter and thus ensure their mission. Another very enriching aspect of Grace’s proposal is the consideration of the social, cultural and anthropological educational challenges that the use of this ‘spiritual capital’ makes it possible to face.

What is most original is that a sociologist can take an interest in these questions as they constitute a challenge to the faith, hope and charity of those engaged in educational responsibilities. On this point, Grace opens the possibility of the intervention of the theologian and seems to call for a dialogue between our two disciplines.³ This becomes even more convincing when he qualifies the commitment of these people as a ‘factor of vocational commitment’ (Grace, 2010, p. 118). Above all, establishing a link between spiritual capital and vocation, as proposed by Grace, invites us to think deeply about the nature or form of this spiritual capital, if it is linked to a call and therefore of a relational nature.

***Spiritual capital* and charism: Initial approach**

It is then that the dialogue between sociologist and theologian can become necessary and, in the final analysis, fruitful. Indeed, the sociologist’s natural source, which Grace clearly states (Grace, 2010, p. 119), is Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). But while this is not unrelated to Bourdieu’s research on education from 1970 onwards (Bourdieu, 1990), it remains internal to sociological thinking and is quite clearly rooted in Max Weber. However, when Weber puts forward the notion of *charisma*, always in the singular, it is to speak of a personal charismatic authority (Weber, 1954 and 1968). For Grace’s reflections, this is not without consequence, because speaking of spiritual capital allows him to keep his distance from a conception of charisma as power. For Grace, it is therefore a question of looking outside the sociological ‘tradition’ for a foundation for the leadership of heads of schools.

It appears then that the spiritual capital put forward by Grace is not the implementation of a religious type of power, but the capacity to deploy spiritual resources in a community in the name of a common mission. As he himself says, it is not a question of a 'power over' people, in a rather clerical way, but of a 'power to maintain an educational mission and to animate and inspire others' (Grace, 2010, p. 119).

There is a shift in perspectives that leads the sociologist to distance himself from sociology alone, which leads him to consider spiritual capital, in a very evangelical way, as a treasure to be shared openly with everyone. This is why Grace's reflection leads him to two new questions. The first is that of the link between this spiritual capital and the theological literacy of school leaders. Here, it is about their 'ability to communicate knowledgeably how the faith of the Church relates to contemporary everyday experience' (Weeks and Grace, 2007, p. 8), a skill that goes to the heart of the mission of Catholic schools. The other question is precisely that of the link between this spiritual capital and the notion of charisma. With John Lydon, Grace seems to be looking for a rather extraordinary version of charisms, as appears among the great charismatic leaders (Cf. Lydon, 2009), even though he refuses to think in the form of a 'dramatic charism and charisma of exceptional leadership' (Grace, 2010, p. 120) and that he wishes to favour 'the sustaining resource for everyday leadership in Christian living and working'. It is therefore a question of introducing a notion of charisma that goes beyond Weber. For by going beyond the Weberian notion of charisma, Grace's proposal can help on the one hand to understand how the implementation of spiritual capital depends on the mission of a community more than on the power of its leader, and on the other hand to shed new light on a question addressed by Grace, that of the transmission of the spiritual capital of a Religious Congregation to a community of lay people, i.e. the renewal of spiritual capital in the next generation.

Pauline charisms and *spiritual capital*

In order for the notion of charisma to enrich that of spiritual capital, it is necessary to broaden the basis of reflection and to go beyond Weber to Saint Paul. Surprisingly enough, we have no systematic theology of charisms (see Hasenhüttl, 1970 and Gignac, 2009). But an exploration, even a quick one, of the sources of this theology in Saint Paul opens the way to a reflection which, by thinking in terms of structure and mission together, allows us to enter into a stimulating dynamic.

To the sources of a theology of charisms

The sources of a theology of charisms are easily accessible, both in Scripture and in the recent dogmatic tradition. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul states two fundamental principles. The first principle is that of a diversity of gifts from a single donor. The second principle is that of the link between gift and mission.

In verses 4–6, charisms (*charismata*) are structurally linked to ministries (*diakonia*) and to God’s ways of acting (*energēmata*):

- v. 4, there is a diversity of gifts, but it is the same Spirit;
- v.5, there is diversity of ministries, but it is the same Lord;
- v.6, diverse modes of action, but it is the same God who produces everything in all.

These three aspects constitute the unfolding of the same spiritual reality and emphasise, on the one hand, the power of divine action and, on the other hand, the functions that the gifts make it possible to fulfil. It is then a question of making God’s action visible in the community and, for this purpose, of looking away from the gifts themselves and focusing on the giver (origin) and on the putting into action of these gifts for the good of the whole body (purpose). This twofold concentration on the donor and on the implementation of the gifts prevents any attempt to subjectivise or substantiate the charisms and rather obliges us to an active conception according to which we should not speak of the charisms of the believer but of the charismatic dynamics of every Christian life.

The Second Vatican Council goes in the same direction, both in *Lumen gentium* 12 (henceforth LG) and in *Ad gentes* 28 (henceforth AG). In LG 12, the Council states that God’s gifts are distributed among all the faithful and that they are distributed for the common good and for the necessity of the Church, making the charismatic dynamic a common reality for believers and placing it in a missionary perspective. In the same sense, AG 28 recalls that the charismatic reality spares no baptised person and that it is ordained to one end: the building of the Church. In this sense, Vatican II conceives charisms as an ordinary mode of action of the Holy Spirit.

The charismatic dynamics of the life of the Church

A number of conclusions can already be drawn from this rapid overview.

First of all, it is necessary to note the elusive character of charisms which draw their consistency only from their giver, God, and the mission in which they engage. Charisms cannot therefore be defined by what they are, but must be defined by their origin and purpose, from a purely dynamic perspective.

Moreover, charismatic dynamics is a common reality which requires the recognition of the participation of all the baptised in the life and mission of the Church. A charism cannot be an element that separates believers, but on the contrary unites them in the one Church. Thus, no one has the right to be passive in a Christian community because each one receives from God what enables him or her to participate in the building up of the Church and the implementation of its mission of salvation (Cf. Hasenhüttl, 1970).

From this, it appears that charisms are not goods to be possessed but goods to be implemented. God’s gifts are not quantifiable and the quality of Christian

life does not depend on the quantity or quality of these gifts, but on their fulfilment in the life of the believer and in the Church. It is here that the notion of spiritual capital can be fruitful for thinking about the mission of educational communities in Catholic schools.

Charism and *spiritual capital* in the life of Catholic schools

It appears then that in Saint Paul, charisms are not to be understood primarily in terms of leadership or personal power, but in terms of organic function within a community and with a view to the edification of that community (Gignac, 2009, p. 140).

But to say that a charismatic dynamic animates the life of the Church, and therefore of Catholic schools, is to face the difficult question of the secularisation of these schools. It manifests itself in two directions. On the one hand, secularisation in the philosophical and sociological sense of the term, when religious motivations are marginal for a family that entrusts their child to a Catholic school (religious motives are only invoked in France for 5.6% of families), raises the issue of a possible sharing of the spiritual capital linked to the Catholic dimension of the educational mission. On the other hand, this is secularisation in the religious sense of the term, when the proportion of teachers belonging to a Religious Order in France has fallen from 40% to 0.1% between 1950 and 2020, and at the same time the proportion of religious school headteachers has fallen from 100% to almost 0%.

Under these conditions, how could it be possible to take a broader view of spiritual capital by qualifying it as a common good of the community and to deal more specifically with the question of the transmission of this spiritual capital?⁴

***Spiritual capital* as a common good**

First of all, it must be reiterated with conviction that the spiritual capital of Catholic schools, because it designates the resources of Christianity to carry out its educational mission, cannot be reduced to a catalogue of moral values. It is rather the work of faith, which must be thought of as a resource for the inventiveness and credibility of Catholic schools in pedagogical and educational matters. For this is where the usefulness, including the social usefulness of Catholic schools, comes into play: in their capacity to make faith available and effective in order to awaken freedoms, form people beyond their economic usefulness, promote growth rather than 'performance', and work towards a more just and fraternal society.

If we are indeed dealing here with spiritual capital linked to the charismatic dynamics of the Church, this calls for a serious consideration of the fact that the educational community is not a sum of individuals, but a subject in its own right which has this spiritual capital at its disposal as a common good, that is to say, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, to 'the sum total of social

conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily’ (article 406).

The principle here is that the responsibility of persons is exercised in a community that is ordered by a mission. Thus, the Catholic education project is not individualistic,⁵ but invites everyone to make a contribution within a community. This engages the members of the educational communities in a work of discernment of their willingness to contribute to the common project.

Setting the reflection on an institutional ground allows the sociologist to feel as comfortable as the theologian. According to this logic, if the community is a subject, then it must be taken into account that it is not the faith of those who make up the community that determines the catholicity of the Catholic school. As an ecclesial subject, the catholicity of the school is determined by its organisational form and ethos. What determines the catholicity of the school is its organisation and ethos, which guarantees the quality of relations within the community: how are decisions made? How is the differentiated participation of each individual in the common project promoted? How is the commitment and authority of each individual regulated? How is respect for each person’s convictions guaranteed in the joint implementation of a Christian project? The Catholic school is not only a community of subjects: as an ecclesial subject, it is an organisation that must be thought out and evaluated in the light of the Gospel (Cf. Moog, 2020, 147 sq).

So the headteacher’s leadership cannot be thought of simply in terms of a Weberian-type charisma, but must be thought of in a broader charismatic logic as an animating spirit of the community. It is therefore through the implementation of his or her responsibility that the headteacher enables the entire educational community to be the subject of an ecclesial mission. He or she is the pivot of the educational community.

In this way, school headteachers guarantee what, according to the Second Vatican Council, is the heart of the Catholic school: ‘its proper function is to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity’ (*Gravissimum Educationis* 8). The formulation is broad: ‘atmosphere’. But it refers to what makes the community so decisive for the Catholic school and, more broadly, for Catholic education: the relationship. If it is difficult to understand what such an atmosphere is, it is useful to be guided by what qualifies it: freedom and charity. It is then the requirement of an interpersonal relationship of freedom and charity which is the place and the aim of Catholic education and constitutes, in the end, the heart of its spiritual capital.

Charism and transmission of a *spiritual capital*

Another question is that of the transmission of this spiritual capital. It is understandable that an overly personal conception of the charism causes difficulties in terms of transmission when a Religious Congregation is no longer in a position to ensure by itself the teaching and direction of a school. In a Catholic

Church which is still discovering itself to be grappling with a profound form of clericalism,⁶ the ability of the lay faithful to guarantee the catholicity of a school project can sometimes give rise to suspicion. But is it so simple to make this spiritual capital depend on the structure or organisation?

In France, many Teaching Orders are questioning the sustainability of their educational works and are expressing their willingness either to associate lay people with them or to transmit them to them. This willingness is expressed in very diverse ways but often through the use of the semantic field of charism: 'to transmit the charism', 'to share the charism', 'to transmit one's charism and mission', 'to keep a spirit alive'. These expressions carry a double risk: on the one hand, the risk that the register of 'charism' is used without theological precaution, as if a charism were an objectifiable good that could be transmitted, in the same way as school buildings, for example. On the other hand, the search for a legal framework likely to guarantee this transmission risks taking precedence over the reasons why the search for a framework would be necessary. To put it another way, there is a concentration on the institutional figure of the educational work which risks overshadowing the community reality of this work. In fact, an institution in the Church is always the form taken by a community which is the subject of a mission and endowed with its own history and culture.

In the context of the transmission of an educational work of a Religious Order to lay people, it must be remembered that if we can speak of a charism proper to an institute, it is above all in the name of the community which constitutes the institute and which benefits from a system enabling it to implement it. This is a multifaceted system: figure and work (writings, social works, heritage) of a founder, history and narrative of this history constituting the narrative identity of the Religious Order, specific practices (particularly educational) linked to the institute's mission, practices regulating the life of the institute: novitiate, constitutions, chapters.

But, although multiple, this institutional structure is unified by the community which constitutes the institute and which is itself instituted by practices linked to the charismatic dynamics of all Christian life: a life of prayer, fidelity to the Word of God and fraternal communion. In this sense, the institutional structure which allows the exercise of the charism, that is to say, which, together, constitutes a verified mediation of the divine origin of the gift exercised and its missionary orientation, is not transferable outside the institute.

However, it can be said:

- 1 that any transmission of a missionary work, and especially an educational one, requires clarification of the institutional mechanism by which the educational work can be carried out by another group. It is the role of the ecclesial authority to verify and guarantee this.
- 2 that the transmission of a missionary work from one institute to others, even those close by history, intention and spiritual intuition, requires the

- awareness on the part of the institute that it renounces all forms of authority and initiative. In this case, however, the modalities of communication and relationship between the new structure and the institute must be clearly envisaged so that the link maintained is clear and satisfactory for everyone.
- 3 that the sharing of the missionary work between an institute and another structure of the Church brings about a transformation of the institutional conditions for the exercise of the mission and requires the accompaniment of the competent ecclesiastical authority.
 - 4 that the ecclesiastical authority, as a guarantee of communion and mission, must be able to ask an institute to give an account of the institutional arrangement by which it intends either to associate itself or to transmit to others a missionary work of its own.

This is how the institutional form of spiritual capital, conceived as a charismatic dynamic, will be honoured. For it is this institutional form that guarantees the operability of spiritual capital, so that it is not based on individual goodwill or the 'charismatic' authority of a leader, but on the structure itself. The example of the transmission of an educational work by a Religious Order shows that this requires a set of institutional mediations to be thought of, but which can be evaluated in the light of the Gospel much more easily than the commitment of individuals.

It seems then that the dialogue between the sociologist and the theologian may have enabled a further step to be taken in an issue that lies at the heart of the mission of Catholic schools. In this book recognising the contribution of Professor Grace, we can only hope that this dialogue will continue for many years to come and that the spiritual resources of Catholic schools will be replenished in various ways.

Notes

- 1 This is why Grace launched the journal, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, in March 2009 to be an interdisciplinary publication inviting contributions from theologians, philosophers, historians, social scientists and educational scholars and researchers, as well members of Religious Congregations with missions in education. Today this journal is accessed in 112 countries.
- 2 A more detailed theoretical statement of spiritual capital was written by Grace in ISCE 2010.
- 3 An analysis of articles in the ISCE journal (2009–2020) demonstrates that theologians have made regular contributions, e.g. Boland (2012), Droste (2015), Wansborough (2016) and Moog (2016, 2019).
- 4 Grace regards the transmission and renewal of spiritual capital in all forms of Catholic education as an 'urgent priority' at this time. See Grace (2010).
- 5 Catholic values of community and solidarity are fundamentally opposed to market values in education which emphasise individual achievement and a 'winner'/'loser' culture in society, as described by Pope Francis in *Laudato si* paragraphs 53, 108, and more especially, 215.
- 6 By clericalism, I mean it in the sense given by Pope Francis in his 'Letter to the people of God' (20 August 2018).

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