The ‘calling’ of Professor Gerald Grace

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Introduction

In the UK it is hard to think of a more significant figure in the academic study and research field of Catholic education since Arthur Beales (1905–1974). Gerald Grace has not only contributed noteworthy research in advancing the field of Catholic Education Studies but he has also helped shape its contours both in the UK and internationally. His contribution to Catholic Education Studies in the UK has no equal in modern times. At his professorial inaugural lecture on 7 November 2016 at St. Mary’s University (I have lost count of the actual number he has given at various universities), he celebrated the fact that:

The academic and professional field of Catholic Education Studies has now achieved international recognition. This has been established by the contributions of Theologians, Philosophers, Historians, Social and Economic Scientists, Natural Scientists, Education scholars and researchers, School leaders and teachers and members of Religious Congregations with missions in education who have written about Catholic education, in all its forms, across the world in recent decades.

(Grace 2016b, p. 1)

This statement is no exaggeration and only Gerald Grace had the credibility to have made it because he created the conditions that made it so. With unceasing dedication and without remuneration, Gerald has spent the last 25 years building a field of study that others had simply neglected or ignored. We need to remember that Gerald already had enjoyed a very successful and eminent academic career as historian and sociologist in a number of distinguished education faculties. He has taught Education at King’s College, University of London and the University of Cambridge, together with serving as Head of the Schools of Education at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Durham University. In September 1996, he retired early from Durham University with a clear purpose and hence began his second academic career, or perhaps more appropriately, mission, that has born much fruit and spanned the last 25 years.

I first met Gerald Grace at an important conference on Catholic education in Cambridge in 1993 and have been a friend ever since. This seminal conference was organised by Terry McLaughlin, a friend of Gerald's from the days when they were the only two Catholic lecturers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. Terry brought together academics from the USA, Australia, Ireland and the UK and the conference was entitled 'The Contemporary Catholic School and the Common Good'. The conference was sponsored by the Von Hügel Institute, Cambridge and Boston College, and was held at St. Edmund's Hall in Cambridge. While there had been many professional Catholic education conferences, academic conferences focused on Catholic educational research were extremely rare. It is therefore hard to overstate the significance of this conference since there had been no serious contributions to this academic field since the publication of a collection of papers in *Catholic Education in a Secular Society* edited by Bernard Tucker (1968). Tucker's contributors included his fellow ex-seminarian Richard Pring and the theme of the book was generally critical, revolving around the statement 'There is a growing minority in the Church which finds the common Catholic position on education questionable'. McLaughlin's conference was more positive and in many ways ground-breaking, but critically it influenced Gerald Grace and the purpose for which he was to later give himself. Many of the conference papers were published in *The Contemporary Catholic School* (McLaughlin, O'Keefe and O'Keefe 1996). Gerald contributed a chapter.

Gerald expressed his admiration for the research on Catholic education that was being undertaken in the USA, particularly the work of Anthony Byrk (1993) and his colleagues from the University of Chicago. Byrk gave the keynote speech on the theme of his new book, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. It was at this conference that I first met Gerald and we discussed a number of themes around Catholic education. We both noted with some concern that UK Catholic education had attracted relatively little attention from educational researchers and that while there had been Catholic researchers in the field, they had largely ignored the Catholic educational contribution. We found this state of affairs also remarkable considering the size and significance of the Catholic network of schools in the UK. While the USA had major Catholic universities with important Catholic University Schools of Education, the UK had only Catholic Colleges of Education in which there was little, if any, research into Catholic education. We noted the work of Arthur Beales (1963), Anthony Spencer (1971), Michael Hornsby-Smith (1973) and Alan McClelland (1973, 1992) in Catholic education, but also recognised that this research was generally non-empirical and increasingly dated. We also observed that all four of these Catholic professors worked in secular institutions. We agreed that there was an urgent need for research, beginning with an examination of the goals of Catholic educational policy and measuring how effective these goals had been in schools. Gerald returned to Durham at the conclusion of the conference with a renewed mission, something he later termed a 'calling' to renew the field of

Catholic education. He simply thought that there was no use complaining about the state of Catholic educational research; it was time for action.

The Ebbing Tide

My own research, published as a substantial book in 1995 (Arthur 1995), was the focus of many discussions between Gerald and I, particularly the basic theme and argument of the text: the ebbing of Catholicity from Catholic education. The text posits various models of Catholic schooling, which serve to demonstrate the stages along which Catholic education has been eroded and demonstrates how educational philosophy, psychology, management, curriculum theory and policy studies had all developed in the mainstream of educational research, to the neglect of the Catholic dimension in education (Arthur 1995, p. 247). Gerald professed that the research by Bryk and myself had inspired him and that many of the themes I addressed Gerald was to revisit in his own empirical research in the following years. Later in 1995, and while still serving as Head of the School of Education at Durham University, Gerald published *School Leadership: Beyond Education Management*, in which he inserted a chapter on 'The Dilemmas of Catholic Head Teachers'. Gerald had already begun to speak about the obvious gaps in addressing Catholic education in mainstream studies. This chapter identified that there was a real danger of the depletion of the historical deposit of spiritual capital in Catholic schools and of the gradual incorporation of Catholic schools into a secularised and marketised contemporary educational culture. In terms of school leadership, he wrote:

There is evidence that many candidates for the headship of Catholic schools in England can now talk confidently about achievements in test scores and examination results, business planning and budgets, marketing and public relations but are relatively inarticulate about the spiritual purposes of Catholic schooling. This is a major contradiction in a system of schooling which exists to give the nurture of spirituality a top priority.

(Grace 1995, p. 237)

Later, in an endnote (Grace 2010: endnote XVI), he repeated this full quotation and agreed that such an outcome was predicted in my book *The Ebbing Tide* (1995). While not endorsing all of my suggestions about a weakening culture of Catholicity in schools, Gerald's own research pointed to problems at the level of school leadership and on this issue he supported my general thesis.¹ This is why it is important to read Gerald's endnotes for a full understanding of what he is conveying to the reader. However, another interesting observation is that while Gerald's book received warm reviews described variously as 'excellent' and commended for its accessible and elegant style of writing, few, including David Halpin (2007), felt qualified to comment on the Catholic leadership chapter – this particular chapter received no commentary in most reviews.

Mission integrity

It was at this time that Gerald developed some early ideas about ‘mission integrity’ being the greatest single challenge facing Catholic school leaders across the world. Gerald was aware that the Catholic education mission is at the service of nearly 52 million students in more than 200,000 schools and colleges across the world. It is the largest faith-based international educational system, but he believed that perhaps because it has not been researched in detail, it is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Gerald knew that ignorance was the biggest enemy of understanding what Catholic education sought and he ambitiously wanted to do something about this. This mission ought not to be confused with a ‘retirement project’ because what he did was systematically embark upon a second career and he achieved far more than what some educationalists achieve in one career.

After leaving Durham, Gerald was ideally placed to move to the Institute of Education in the University of London and to persuade Peter Mortimer, the then Director and himself the alumnus of a Catholic teacher education, to provide him with a room and visiting professor status in order for him to establish a new Centre. Gerald offered his services freely and received no salary while endlessly writing letters to various Religious Congregations for much-needed funding. He received many positive responses and some money for which he has always been most thankful, acknowledging the help he received at every opportunity. He consequently founded the *Centre for Research and Development in Catholic Education* (CRDCE) in September 1997 and became its Director – the first Centre in Europe of its kind. The Centre later moved to St. Mary’s University in 2016 and he currently remains the Director of CRDCE. The Centre was significant because it made a clear statement that Catholic education was a credible area for research, housed in the world’s leading educational research institution, i.e. UCL/IOE. The Centre sought to encourage and support research and scholarly writing in the field of Catholic Education Studies as well as to support the work of Catholic schools and colleges, nationally and internationally, by the publication of staff development texts on various themes. Gerald offered the Centre as a place for consultancy to the bishops in England and Wales and as a place to support the work of graduate students undertaking doctoral research on various aspects of Catholic education.

Gerald wasted no time and began his own research in four areas:

- the challenges of faith and moral leadership
- the challenge of academic success as the dominating goal of the mission
- the struggle between market values and Catholic values in education
- the challenge of maintaining ‘Catholicity’ in changing conditions.

His Centre became the focus for annual conferences, and he began a long series of visiting lecture tours, providing workshops and forming networks

around the UK and internationally. Gerald was concerned with researching the 'successes', 'failures' and 'uncertainties' of Catholic schooling and he used his considerable academic standing and influence to carve out a place for Catholic educational research in the heart of the mainstream of the educational establishment. Gerald was increasingly in demand. His after-dinner speech at the BERA Annual Conference dinner on 4 September 1999 was unprecedented by the fact that he was the first professor of education ever to talk openly about his research in Catholic education to such a gathering. He was normalising the study of Catholic education and I have always thought of the famous Heineken advert when thinking of Gerald – 'Grace reaches the parts others cannot reach'. His growing influence, that he undoubtedly accrued, was illustrated once again by an article in the *Guardian* newspaper published on 6 April 2002 entitled 'Holy Spirits in the Classroom'. The *Guardian* is not a newspaper overly sympathetic to the educational work of the Catholic Church, but Gerald was able and unafraid to write that:

One of the prime purposes of Catholic schooling is to keep alive, and to renew, the culture of the sacred in a profane and increasingly secular world – a daunting challenge since the nature of the sacred is not easily articulated and represents "a struggle to conceive the inconceivable, to utter the unutterable and to long for the Infinite".

Catholic schools and colleges are expected to be cultural and educational relays between the sacred and the profane – to be successful in league tables, while still keeping young people in a living relationship with a Christian sense of the sacred, and of the obligations that flow from this. The big question for the Catholic community in this country is, are the schools as effective in a religious context as they clearly are in the academic one?

In early 2002, Gerald defined *mission integrity* as 'fidelity in practice and not just in public rhetoric to the distinctive and authentic principles of Roman Catholic education' (2002a, p. 498) and *mission drift* was defined as 'an unintentional historical process which causes a school in its practices to move away from its foundational mission principles'. I would have perhaps questioned whether in fact that 'mission drift' was always 'unintentional'.

Grace's achievements

His first major text on Catholic education was *Catholic Schools: Mission, Markets and Morality* published in 2002, based on ground-breaking empirical research at the time. This book was the outcome of five years of interviewing 60 Catholic secondary head teachers in London, Birmingham and Liverpool. The research was part of a project within CRDCE, 'Catholic Secondary Schools in the Inner City: Challenges and Responses', and was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. We know that the empirical research base of Catholic education is

limited and by publishing this single text Gerald extended its base considerably.² The book has been widely reviewed and universally praised in the academy and by no less than Hornsby-Smith, Walford and Davies (2003) in their detailed review in the *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*. These reviewers (2003, p. 112) remind us that Gerald's 'endnotes are often illuminating' – a fact we should not forget! I also had the privilege to review it in the *British Journal of Educational Studies*. For me, his focus in the book on the renewal of 'spiritual capital and the critique of the secular world' was central. Gerald maintains that the Catholic schooling system internationally has benefitted from the presence of significant spiritual capital among its school leaders. He specifically lists priests, sisters and lay men and women formed by their vocation as Catholic teachers and through their own spiritual formation in Catholic schooling. I believe this insight is vital because Gerald then, through solid empirical data, shows that future generations of school leaders and teachers in Catholic education are unlikely to benefit from these sources of spiritual capital. In other words, spiritual capital is ebbing out of Catholic schooling. It is a declining asset, and Gerald makes clear that the renewal of this spiritual capital is crucial for the continuance of the mission of Catholic schooling. The *transmission of the charism* is in danger, as is the Catholic critique of the secular. Gerald revisits his earlier research with Catholic school leaders and discusses the *transmission processes* by which new Catholic leaders can develop the spiritual capital enjoyed by previous generations. He provides a detailed definition of what constitutes spiritual capital in the context of Catholic school leadership and primary among them is *vocational commitment* and *empowerment*. The Church is responsible for ensuring that this spiritual capital is renewed in its teachers, and Gerald is clear that failure to do so would mean surrendering to the secularism of the age. His concluding message in the book is unequivocal: 'The Catholic Church at various levels has to resist these strategies to compromise the mission integrity of its schools, colleges, and universities. It has to hold fast to the teaching of Jesus Christ'. He offers the insight that: 'using their understanding of the fundamental principles of the Catholic faith and of its associated moral and value positions, the Catholic head teachers of this study have, in the main, attempted to maintain the mission integrity of Catholic schooling in the face of many external pressures which could compromise that integrity' (2002b, p. 237). Gerald immediately began to disseminate his key messages from the book at numerous conferences and in May 2003 the *Times Educational Supplement* reported that he had addressed the Catholic Secondary Head's Conference of that year, asking:

How do Catholic high schools manage simultaneously to achieve relatively high levels of student learning, distribute this learning more equitably with regard to race and class than in the public sector and sustain high levels of teacher commitment and student engagement?

(TES, 16 May 2003)

Gerald was able to provide answers to guide schools with a strong sense of purpose and drive and a commitment to social justice, as an essential part of the Catholic faith.

The premature death of Terence McLaughlin in 2006 came as a devastating shock to many of his friends, but none more so than Gerald. It was only fitting that Gerald wrote the first chapter in Graham Haydon's book, *Faith in Education*, that celebrated Terry's contribution to Catholic education. Gerald Grace opens the volume with a short chapter that thematises McLaughlin's scholarship into three areas: parental rights and religious upbringing, the distinctiveness of Catholic education, and a defence of faith-based schools. This chapter gives a clear and sympathetic overview of McLaughlin's scholarship. What is important here is that the work of Terry and Gerald speaks to their deep religious faith, something they often brought to bear explicitly in their scholarship.³

In 2007, Gerald co-edited with Joseph O'Keefe, SJ an impressive collection of chapters in two volumes entitled the *International Handbook of Catholic Education*. Again, I had the privilege to review the book as Editor of the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (Arthur 2009). Knowledge of Catholic educational scholarship and research has traditionally confined itself to specific national settings and these two volumes brought together for the first time this scholarship in an international Handbook. The Handbook provides detailed accounts of how the principles of Catholic mission are being worked out in practice in the Catholic schools and colleges from Argentina to Zambia. The Handbook, with its 45 chapters, has certainly provided a stimulus for scholarly thinking about Catholic education and for more empirical research studies to evaluate its practice internationally.⁴ The then Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Archbishop Michael Miller, CSB, wrote in his contributory chapter:

Since research should serve the human person, it is altogether fitting that the Church's institution of higher education take up the pressing challenge of fostering serious studies that further the common good of Catholic schooling. This research should include longitudinal, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies that would enable educators to gain a more international and empirically based perspective on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges faced by Catholic schools across the globe.

(Grace and O'Keefe 2007, pp. 477–478)

This publication certainly confirmed the place of Catholic education as a distinctive academic and policy-related field. So significant was the publication that Gerald received an invitation to present a copy of the *International Handbook* to Pope Benedict XVI in December 2007, such was his growing international reputation in the field. Gerald, by his sustained efforts, ensured that Catholic educational research has achieved international recognition.

In 2000 at a conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, Gerald, James Conroy and I first discussed the need for a Catholic journal in education. After a huge amount of preparatory work on the part of Gerald, in March 2009, he established the journal, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, with an impressive international advisory board and with Conroy and I as ‘executive editors’. The journal is both international and interdisciplinary in scope and is devoted to the systematic study of Catholic education, in all its forms, across the world.⁵ The Centre moved to the School of Education, Theology and Leadership in St. Mary’s University in 2016. In the same year, *Faith, Mission and Challenge in Catholic Education: The Selected Works of Gerald Grace* was published in the esteemed *World Library of Educationalists* series. Francis Campbell, Vice-Chancellor of Gerald’s new home, noted in the Foreword to the book:

This book marks Professor Grace’s outstanding contribution to the Catholic Church’s education mission as teacher, university lecturer, and professor...? Gerald’s main theme in this book is a consideration of the purpose of Catholic education. In the introduction he identifies the key rationale of Catholic education, that it is ‘to keep alive and to renew the culture of the Christian sacred in a profane and secular world’ and informs us that the collection aims to stimulate further studies in the ‘academic and research field of Catholic educational studies’.

(Grace 2016a, p. 1)

Conclusion

Mission integrity is perhaps the most important concept that Gerald has worked on to examine the connections and disconnections between the Catholic mission of Catholic education and the practice in Catholic schools. He has consistently argued over the last 25 years that in Catholic education maintaining mission integrity is an imperative; it is non-negotiable. As he says: ‘Mission integrity is defined here as fidelity in practice and not just in public rhetoric to the distinctive and authentic principles of Catholic education’ (Grace 2016b, p. 194). I could not have said it better myself. It is important to note that Gerald always gave attention in his research and scholarship to the challenge of striving for the common good and social justice in education and society, but from a Catholic perspective informed by his faith.

Gerald’s leadership and vision have provided educationalists, and the Catholic Church, with a prominent university-based Centre, a prestigious academic international journal and two significant international volumes together with his own ground-breaking and extensive publication list, which clearly place the academic study and research of Catholic education on an international footing. Gerald’s calling has been to ensure that Catholic education, as a field of study, takes its rightful and respected place in the academy. It is an extremely impressive story and one that ought to be more widely recognised and celebrated. Pope Francis in

October 2014 awarded Gerald a Papal Knighthood (KSG) 'for services to Catholic education, nationally and internationally'. It is time the bishops of England and Wales recognised his success in this venture by calling for the British Honours system to acknowledge his achievement and unfailing service.

Notes

- 1 In 1997, Gerald Grace was invited to write a review of James Arthur's text, *The Ebbing Tide: Policy and Principles of Catholic Education* (1995). The invitation came from a newly launched theological journal in the Netherlands. Grace wrote the review but it was never published because the journal failed to receive enough subscriptions. While Grace commended Arthur for writing a scholarly and provocative analysis of the contemporary challenges for Catholic education in England and for his call for more systematic research in the future, Grace made the point that we had to wait for more research, before we could say explicitly that Catholicity was an 'Ebbing Tide' in Catholic schools. Perhaps it was taking new forms? Professor Grace intends in the future to publish this 1997 review in *International Studies in Catholic Education* and to update this in the light of the new evidence now available.
- 2 It was later translated into Spanish.
- 3 When they were both lecturers in the Cambridge University Faculty of Education in the 1980s, a critical college referred to them as 'the agents of the Vatican'!
- 4 A recent report from the publishers of the Handbook, i.e. Springer, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, shows that as of August 2020 over 100,000 downloads of chapters have been recorded across the world.
- 5 This was the first ever international and interdisciplinary journal devoted to the systematic study of Catholic education. It began in March 2009 taken by only 40 countries and with article downloads below 500. In 2020, Routledge the publisher reported access to *ISCE* in 112 countries and article downloads of 15,000.

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