

INTERVIEW WITH LEONARDO FRANCHI, LECTURER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “Research is the foundation stone of university life. It is here that we find inspiration and strength for our teaching. Few academics will make earth-shattering discoveries and even fewer will be remembered in 100 years from now. This should be a consolation as it is a reminder that academic life is about preserving, curating and, when possible, enhancing the intellectual inheritance of humanity.”
- “Overall, the link between research and teaching is fundamental to the success of the academy. In Catholic academic circles this link is enhanced by the bonds of a faith which seeks understanding.”

You teach at the University of Glasgow. What are some of the particularities of the university?

I am double graduate of this university (MA and PhD), so it is very much part of who I am! We were founded in 1451 by Pope Nicholas V (Tommaso Parentucelli), a Renaissance Humanist and founder of the Vatican Library. It is one of three pre-Reformation universities in Scotland with a papal foundation. The other two are the University of St Andrews and the University of Aberdeen. Although it is now a secular institution, the ancient roots of the University of Glasgow are still visible all over the campus. Our motto, ‘Via Veritas Vita’ is part of the official university crest. As a Scottish university, we also have our own tartan.

As a research-intensive institution, the University of Glasgow offers a very high level of support to staff. Library facilities are top class, as you would expect. There is a strong international focus too: our graduates are found in many different countries, but we also have firm roots in Scottish life, especially in the west of Scotland.

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? In this interview, Leonardo Franchi, Lecturer at the University of Glasgow, shares insights about his research and teaching, including some of the leading thinkers who have inspired his work at the intersection of religion, culture and education.

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Our campus is normally full of people attending conferences, tourists who wish to visit our stunning main building and museums and, of course, a diverse body of students united in their common grasp of the polystyrene beaker of coffee.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

My main field of research is the intersection of religion, culture and education. The principal foci are currently a) Religious Education in schools and b) the formation of teachers. My interest in the religion-culture nexus stems, I think, from my undergraduate days studying Modern Languages. I did not realise it at the time, but I was offered a solid Liberal Arts education through the medium of Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. An awakening took place as a First Year studying Dante's *Inferno* when Professor Peter Brown (Stevenson Professor of Italian) suggested that we read St Augustine's *Confessions* as necessary background to Dante. As an obedient student, I bought a Penguin paperback copy of *Confessions* and still use it today. Later, my studies introduced me *inter alia* to figures such as Petrarch, St John of the Cross and Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.

After graduation, I spent a few weeks in Italy. As holiday reading I took *The Ratzinger Report*. This started a lifelong love of the work of Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI. My other intellectual companions are the works of Christopher Dawson, Maria Montessori and, more recently, Josef Pieper. (Romano Guardini is in there too.)

The field of Religious Education is a complex mix of theology, education and culture. I have learned a great deal from the works of contemporary scholars such as Graham Rossiter and Richard Rymarz (both Australians) and I have been fortunate enough to do some work with Richard. I 'chose' that field as it gradually became clearer to me that Religious Education was a sort of energy source for the life of Catholic education - although I would be very wary of limiting Catholic educational culture to the Religious Education curriculum. There needs to be serious discussion of what the wider curriculum looks like in a Catholic school.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

It depends very much on what is understood by 'share your values' in a professional context. As an educator, I see value in education and the expansion of knowledge but this needs to be bound by virtue and the formation of good character.

I would suggest that a good way for teachers to influence students positively is to be professional in our approach. This means, for example, responding to emails in good time, listening to their concerns without jumping in too quickly with advice and, in good time, offering some ways forward when things get tricky. Being professional is not about hiding behind pre-set standards but involves an appreciation of the nuances which often lie semi-hidden beneath difficult sets of circumstances. If we can do this in a natural and transparent way, we are sharing our values without being 'preachy' in our approach.

How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

Research is the foundation stone of university life. It is here that we find inspiration and strength for our teaching (and vice versa). It is important to show that, to use a well-known phrase, we stand on the shoulders of giants. Few academics will make earth-shattering discoveries and even fewer contemporary academics will be remembered in 100 years from now. This should be a consolation as it is a reminder that academic life is about preserving, curating and, when possible, enhancing the intellectual inheritance of humanity. It should be a work of love and not reduced to endless series of tasks with little discernible link to human flourishing.

University life has challenges, like in every profession. Too much stress on the importance of the 'impact' of our work and the 'esteem' in which we are held, for example, can easily foster academic self-centredness. The challenge of research is, I think, in reminding ourselves that the hours we spend in study etc. are hours well spent, even if immediate recognition as such might be lacking.

Overall, the link between research and teaching is fundamental to the success of the academy. In Catholic academic circles this link is enhanced by the bonds of a faith which seeks understanding. As St John Henry Newman reminded us, there is no split between the life of piety and good doctrine. Whenever I am involved in the organisation of Catholic education events, I do what I can to have Mass available.

You are providing training for the formation of Catholic teachers. How does that work and what may not work?

The University of Glasgow is one party in a three-way agreement with both the Bishops' Conference of Scotland and the Scottish Government. All students who wish to teach in Catholic schools in Scotland receive their initial teaching qualification from us. Our programmes offer courses in Theology and opportunities for Spiritual Formation. We have an excellent coordinator of Spiritual and Pastoral Formation, Fr Stephen Reilly, who is a full-

time member of our academic staff. The practical element of the programme involves teaching practice (practicum) in Catholic schools with opportunities to teach classes in Religious Education.

Of course, there are significant research questions to be addressed about teacher formation in general and Catholic teacher formation in particular. For example, what is the ideal balance between time in Higher Education (study of theory) and time in schools (practical experience)? There are also fraught debates over the relationship between 'skills' and 'knowledge' and, crucially, how to attract well-qualified candidates to the profession. Further (and related) challenges lie in the socio-cultural domain: to what extent can Catholic educational institutions thrive in an atmosphere driven by secularist attitudes?

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

Go for it! The lay Catholic finds holiness in doing ordinary tasks well. This is the essence of the lay apostolate, not occupying roles in Church organisations, although there might be times when we need to serve in such 'official' positions. Enhancing our qualifications, if we have the aptitude, is a way of bringing the Gospel message to daily life. We must aim to be very good at what we do while avoiding the flaw of 'perfectionism', which can lead too easily to pride.

In the wide field of Catholic education, there is much scholarly work to be done. The Global Catholic Education initiative has given us a glimpse of these horizons. Of course, we need a serious conversation across the Church about how to support research activity, not least financially. I am hopeful that we could be moving in the right direction.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

After my graduation from the University of Glasgow, I had experience of teaching Italian in the University of Glasgow's Adult Education Department. This whetted my desire for teaching in general. I then gained a Post Graduate Certificate in Education, taught in schools and studied for a Master of Education (MEd). I eventually ended with a PhD in Religious Education and a position in the University of Glasgow's Faculty (now School) of Education. None of this was mapped out by me, I assure you, but I am more than happy at how things have evolved.

Being an academic in the University of Glasgow has been a great experience: I have wonderful colleagues both at home and abroad whose work inspires me every day. I look to eminent scholars like Emeritus Prof John Sullivan (Liverpool Hope University) and Dr. Tim O'Malley (Notre Dame University, USA)—despite their being of different generations— as models of how to be a Catholic academic in the present age. And of course, our dear Pope Emeritus Benedict...

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

As you can see from my name, I am a Scots-Italian. My father, Benedetto Franchi (1926-2015) came from a small village in Southern Lazio called Villa Latina, left school at 11, worked on the land and on building sites and eventually came to Scotland where he met and married my mother, Grace. We had a small grocery store. I go back to Italy as often as possible and still make wine the way my father taught me: grape juice, natural fermentation, no additives.

I have a great love for Soul Music and golf. I would willingly swap one of my publications for being one Gladys Knight's 'Pips'! Golf, obviously, is the unofficial religion of Scotland: I have often said that Scotland is a collection of universities joined by golf courses. The sound of a birdie putt dropping in the cup is as meaningful as one of Beethoven's late string quartets...



Photo: Leonardo Franchi at a booth with his book Reclaiming the Piazza