INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SULLIVAN, EMERITUS PROFESSOR AT LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

August 2021

EXCERPTS:

- "GG is someone who has stood between the living tradition of our faith and contemporary educational policy developments; he has interpreted one to the other and built bridges between them."
- "Here was a writer who could fearlessly expose the unwelcome implications of the managerialist language that swamped the reading of school leaders, someone who combined a stout defense of Catholic education at the same time as acknowledging its shortcomings."

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

After many years of teaching and leadership in Catholic schools (in Lancashire and London) I worked for seven and a half years at (what is now) St Mary's University, UK. For five of those years I designed, directed and did much of the teaching on the MA in Catholic School Leadership, as well as providing consultancy for many Catholic schools and dioceses. In 2002 I moved to Liverpool Hope University as the UK's first Professor of Christian Education, becoming Emeritus Professor in 2013.

Since then I have also worked for five years at Newman University, UK as a Visiting Professor of Theology and Education. My strap-line was to help Catholic education to be distinctive, inclusive and effective and to integrate in my teaching and research the intellectual, professional/practical and the spiritual dimensions of being a Christian educator. I work at the interface and as a bridge-builder between Theology and 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 Sullivan, Emeritus Professor at Liverpool Hope University. The interview is part of a series in honor of Professor Gerald Grace's retirement from St Mary's University.

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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 when, as a secondary school Principal, I attended a conference where he was a keynote speaker in the early 1990s. He asked us, as Principals, to submit to him (as part of his own research) a list of ten moral dilemmas we faced as Principals. I found this a very helpful exercise for me to clarify my own thinking. He and I were the opening two speakers at an international conference (in Durham, UK) for academics and professionals involved in Christian education in July 1996. Our paths crossed many times after that, at Catholic education conferences and with regard to International Studies in Catholic Education. I was always impressed by his grasp of the field, the clarity of his communication and his dedication to developing the study of Catholic education as a serious field for academic investigation.

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

GG is someone who has stood between the living tradition of our faith and contemporary educational policy developments; he has interpreted one to the other and built bridges between them. He has displayed an intelligent and critical fidelity engaged in a sophisticated and nuanced way with secular and secularist trends in education. He offered realism in service of fidelity, resourced by tradition but not restricted by it. Here was a writer who could fearlessly expose the unwelcome implications of the managerialist language that swamped the reading of school leaders, someone who combined a stout defense of Catholic education at the same time as acknowledging its shortcomings. He demonstrated that faith could be expressed credibly in an academic register. He has provided a level of analysis and the development of vocabulary which could assist school leaders in negotiating the dilemmas they faced and as they addressed increasing state intervention on behalf of market approaches to education, forces that appeared to me then, as they do now, as mostly malign. All fields of study have their leading figures, their champions, their exemplars, those who get the field started in a major way. GG has done that for Catholic education.

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

I would say that his influence has been indirect, in that my own decisions about which areas to research and how to investigate them were not drawn from GG. He comes at issues from a sociological and empirical angle, whereas I approach them with a more philosophical and theological orientation (though we both believe it important to bring an historical perspective to bear on topics under review). He has certainly always encouraged my research over the last 25 years. He also reinforced and confirmed (in scholarly way) the suspicions I already held (before we met) about the deleterious effects of managerialism on the human and divine endeavor of education. And he has modelled something close to my heart as an academic: the importance of clear communication that is accessible to people outside the academy. Too many academics give the impression that being abstruse, esoteric, abstract and immensely complex and difficult to understand are virtues rather than vices.

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

Let me refer to two features of my own experience and how I have tried to make my research and scholarship useful for practitioners. First, I have tried to listen carefully to the questions and concerns, the commitments and aversions of the multiple partners who have an interest in Catholic education: students in schools and universities, their teachers, Principals, parents, chaplains, support staff, parishioners, school governors, local and government inspectors, teacher educators, clergy, diocesan officers, and other groups who provide in-service and development opportunities for educators. Although such sources do not determine my own scholarly interests, they do afford strong evidence of neuralgic topics that need untangling and further investigation. Where feasible, I try to relate my own particular concerns and interests to issues that emerge from such listening opportunities. Being constantly involved in communicating with these different constituencies and groups helps me to get a sense of what is understood and not understood about Catholic education and what needs further attention, clarification, affirmation and reinforcement (or rebuttal).

Second, I have been pleased to respond to countless requests over many years to give talks to all these groups about my own research and writing on Catholic education – and such occasions give me fresh opportunities to listen to and learn from others what matters to them. These encounters in turn feed into and greatly help my writing since I hold these audiences and their concerns in my head in the process of working on chapters, articles and books and I bear in mind the level of understanding I gauge is present among my interlocutors – which then influences the language I use, the arguments I develop, what I explain and what I think I can take for granted.

Having said that, I do not believe that all research must be immediately and obviously useful to practitioners; some research can only be useful to some practitioners if they are ready for and open to it and not unduly preoccupied with other priorities. Plus, some blue-skies scholarship that at first sight seems removed from the classroom may

turn out, in due course, to have important implications for practice.

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

I have listed a dozen critical areas for future research in Catholic education on p.37 of my chapter 'Diversity and Differentiation in Catholic Education' in Researching Catholic Education, edited by Sean Whittle (Singapore: Springer, 2018). But here are four areas that come to mind as being important and which seem in need of further treatment.

First, the relationship between the Church and educational bodies such as schools and universities. What do they expect and need from each other? How they understand their respective roles in Catholic education and formation? How do they relate to each other? Too often the Church fails to function adequately as an effective learning community or to learn from its schools and universities how to engage and get the best out of people; and too often Catholic schools and universities fail to draw sufficiently from the Church's rich intellectual and spiritual tradition.

The second area is the need to develop an historical perspective and awareness of this intellectual and spiritual tradition, without which Catholic educators find themselves rootless and floundering in the face of insidious and insistent individualism and an often hostile secularism.

Third, the whole area of new technology and communication media needs a constructive and critical interrogation by researchers in Catholic education, if we are to reach up to the needs of our time.

Fourth, in order to engage our culture winsomely, faithfully and effectively, and also as a resource for the curriculum, Catholic education needs to retrieve and build on a renewed Christian humanism.

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

Not specifically for research in Catholic education, but any advanced research programme aimed at a doctoral qualification. Among many considerations to be kept in mind by prospective research students the following three seem widely applicable and often insufficiently thought about. First, are you clear about the principal question that your research project seeks to address, the question that will hold together all aspects of your investigation, and to which all subordinate questions should be related. Without this, your research will lack coherence. Second, who do you hope will benefit from your research and how do you hope they might use your research? Without this, your writing will lack a clear sense of audience and is likely also to be weak in drawing out appropriate implications (of your findings) for others. Third, insofar as this lies in your power, think about what kind of supervisor/advisor best suits you and what you hope the student/supervisor relationship will do for you. This relationship is likely to endure for several years; the journey is demanding on both partners and will go through different phases, from dependency on your part to eventually, through your efforts and gradual increase in autonomy and the skillful handling of the relationship by your supervisor, you being recognized as a steward of your discipline, trusted to uphold and promote its ethical and academic standards. Without careful thought about this relationship – and your responsibilities within it – the research journey could become frustrating and more difficult than it needs to be.

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

I have been touched by how Gerald always prioritizes personal concern for me before we get onto academic or professional matters in our conversations. He regularly asks after the health of my wife (who has undergone various life-threatening operations in recent years). That concern for and interest in persons matters a lot to me and to others.