



# Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education

## Report 2022-2023

### Introduction

Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education (G.R.A.C.E.) is an international research-based partnership between Catholic educators at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick (Ireland), Boston College (USA), The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA), St Mary's University in Twickenham, London (UK), and the International Office of Catholic Education (OIEC), which represents Catholic schools worldwide to the Holy See. As a community of practice, G.R.A.C.E. provides an original opportunity for practitioners and scholars of Catholic education, religious education and theology in our respective countries and contexts to affirm, study, collaborate, and respond meaningfully to challenges we face in the field of Catholic Education locally and globally.

Toward this end, our initiative:

- Seeks a deeper study of ecclesiology and Christian anthropology and its significance for Catholic education
- Pursues new theories of Catholic education based on empirical research
- Strengthens a global argument for the importance of faith-based schools in a plural society
- Attunes educators' abilities to notice, engage, and celebrate the presence of God's grace in the world
- This partnership promotes research and learning to develop the head, heart, and hands of those involved in Catholic education.

Since its beginnings in 2017, the project has engaged in a range of activities in person and online, including throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, involving hundreds of participants globally. Just a few of the initiatives particularly relevant in the Irish context are detailed in the brief overview that follows.

## **Identity and Ethos in Catholic Primary & Secondary Schools in Ireland: Exploring the Attitudes and Behaviours of Stakeholders**

### **Research Project at Mary Immaculate College May 2022 – April 2024.**

In 2020, a team of researchers at MIC, Professor Eamonn Conway, Dr Eugene Duffy and Dr Dan O’Connell, initiated a research project aimed at establishing a clear baseline and a set of signposts for the advancement of value-led Catholic education – in diverse settings – in the Republic of Ireland. Dr Brendan O’Keefe was invited to join the team as an independent consultant. It was determined that a budget in the region of €200,000 would be needed and as no funds were available internally, this would have to be generated entirely from external agencies. These funds were generated between 2021-2022, enabling the hiring of two researchers at post-doctoral level to assist with the project.

The research project is co-funded primarily by the following bodies:

- The All Hallows Trust
- The Presentation Sisters SE & NW
- The Irish Jesuits
- The Diocese of Kerry

Significant funds were generously provided by these and other bodies for additional G.R.A.C.E projects detailed in this report. Dr Dan O’Connell became the research project’s Principal Investigator in 2022. This followed the retirement of Dr Eugene Duffy from MIC, and the departure of Professor Eamonn Conway from MIC’s Department of Theology & Religious Studies to take up the Chair of Integral Human Development at the University of Notre Dame Australia in 2022. There are three co-investigators working with Dr O’Connell: post-doctoral researchers Dr Catherine McCormack and Dr Donna O’Doherty, and Professor Eamonn Conway (UNDA). Dr Brendan O’Keefe and his consultancy company provide expertise in research methodologies and analysis.

In early to mid-2022, surveys were sent to all boards of management, principals, teachers, religious education teachers and other staff (secretaries, special education teachers, etc.) in both primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland under Catholic patronage.

The relatively high level of responses, numbering almost 4,000, mean that this is the largest ever data gathering exercise in regard to the realities of Catholic education in the history of the Irish State.

The current status of the project is that all the quantitative data has been collected. The gathering and processing of some qualitative data is still ongoing. Analysis is at a very preliminary stage in regard to all of the data. We have, however, a general profile of the various stakeholders who responded positively to our request to participate, and are satisfied that this includes a statistically sufficient number of boards of management members, principals, teachers, religious education teachers and staff to conclude that our findings will be reliable. It is anticipated that significant findings will emerge from the research in regard to participants’ sense of their own religious identity, their understanding of Catholic ethos,

their experience of initial and continuing professional development in regard to their roles in Catholic education, etc.

In mid-2022 we pilot-shared some preliminary insights from the data with the projects' donors as well as with a small number of key stake-holders in order to confirm and 'test-drive' some of the findings and to seek guidance on how to proceed with analysis and presentation.

Over the coming months, the team will be finalising data collection and commencing a detailed analysis of the findings in conjunction with experts in relevant fields, culminating in the publication and launch of a comprehensive report in Spring 2024.

### **G.R.A.C.E. International Colloquium**

#### **at the University of Notre Dame Australia's Perth Campus January 2024.**

The International Steering Group of the G.R.A.C.E project is organising the project's first international gathering hosted by the University of Notre Dame Australia on its Perth campus. Dr Dan O' Connell and Dr Catherine McCormack of Mary Immaculate College intend to lead a delegation of ca 15 G.R.A.C.E. participants who will join a similar number led by Dr Melodie Wyttenbach of Boston College as well as colleagues from St Mary's University, London.

Notre Dame University (USA) through its Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) Ireland will also form part of the Irish delegation.

The Colloquium provides a unique opportunity to enhance leadership capacity within Catholic education in Ireland significantly by developing a new generation of internationally experienced and connected thought leaders. At the same time, those already at leadership level in Catholic education, whether in schools, management or trustee bodies, and emerging leaders, will also be able to exchange perspectives on emerging opportunities and challenges, deepen their knowledge and develop their skills, drawing upon expertise being forged in a multiplicity of intercultural and pluralist contexts. Through participation in this Colloquium, as well as an add-on bespoke programme specifically developed to maximise the 'take-home' value for Irish participants, those travelling to Western Australia will engage in a comparative learning experience that will allow for the deep reflection and conversation necessary to support the building of a new vision for strategic leadership in Irish Catholic education into the future.

#### **G.R.A.C.E Study Symposium for Irish Participants, Rome, April 2022**

With the generous support of the Porticus Foundation, 34 Catholic educators from both Northern Ireland and the Republic were able to participate in an intensive Study Week at the *Villa Palazzola* outside Rome in Easter 2022. Participants were drawn from a cross-section of teachers, researchers, lecturers, trustee body members, and others in Catholic educational leadership, whether active at primary, secondary and third level, as well as postgraduate students and emerging scholars.

The purpose of the visit was to build a national network of those committed to Catholic education for the 21st century, that would sustain, energise and connect participants to one another and improve their continuing contribution and commitment to Catholic education.



While in Rome, we reflected on our experience of Catholic education in Ireland today. These conversations were informed by presentations from members of the group regarding what is working well in their world of education. We reflected on the importance and significance for our work of *Fratelli Tutti* (2019), where Pope Francis invited us to ‘dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all’ (#8).

However, the day that had the deepest impact on us, prompted the most conversation and reflection among the group was when we met Pope Francis in private audience for over thirty minutes. He spoke to us about the importance of education and used the metaphor of the relationship between the roots of a tree and its branches. The roots are the source and are essential. He said ‘Without roots, there is no moving forward. It is only through roots that we become people: not statues in a museum, like certain traditionalists, who are cold, stiff, rigid, who think that being prepared for life means living stuck to the roots. This relationship with one’s roots is necessary, but we also need to move forward. And this is the true tradition: taking from the past to move forward. Tradition is not static: it is dynamic, aimed at moving forward’. He spoke of the tension between risk and security in education. At the end of the meeting, he came around the group, met everyone individually and give us all a rosary beads each. Every person in the group was profoundly moved by our meeting with the pope.

One the same day we also met Dr Melanie Rosenbaum in the Dicastery for Catholic Education, where we learnt about the work of the Dicastery and the importance of the *Global Compact on Catholic Education* (2019). We then went to the Irish College, where we had a very moving and insightful input from Sr Pat Murray IBVM, Executive Secretary of the International Union of Superiors General (IUSG). She spoke to us about the importance of our roles as “dream

keepers, life-lifters, seed sowers, and companions” journeying with those in our care. Our day finished with a visit to the Basilica of San Clemente.

While we studied together, we also prayed with one another each day, nourishing our faith and deepening our relationships with one another. In the words of one of the participants, ‘The most important thing which took place there, in my estimation, was having the space to be able to engage with like-minded people in this kind of dialogue and forge connections moving forward from here’.

### **G.R.A.C.E Continuing Professional Development, Formation and Publication Activities**

Several members of the participants in the Rome 2022 Study Visit participated in a weekend retreat at the Nano Nagle Birthplace, February, 2023 led by Dr. Catherine McCormack.

Throughout 2022, G.R.A.C.E. members participated in a series of international webinars:

Josephine Shamwana-Lungo *Preparing New Leaders in our Catholic Schools: Passing on the Charism Leadership Baton* to Lay School Principals in Zambia;

Dr. Melodie Wyttenbach & Dr. John Rogers *Effective Tools for Change Management for Catholic School Leaders*;

Dr. Augusta Muthigani and Angela Mitchell *Leading School Ethos Transformation in Kenya*, February 8th, 9-10.30am EST/5-5.30pm GMT.

April

Dr. Catherine McCormack (MIC) and Dr. P.J. Sexton (DCU), *Identity, Ambiguity and Professionalism: Dilemmas for the Diocesan Advisor in the Republic of Ireland*.

Dr. David Kennedy (DCU) & Dr. Sandra Cullen (DCU), *So, Is It True? Time to Embrace the Hermeneutical Turn in Catholic Religious Education in the Republic of Ireland*.

Dr. Bernadette Sweetman (DCU) *Reimagining Adult Religious Education and Faith Development in a Detraditionalised Ireland*.

May

Dr. David Torevell (Liverpool Hope University) & Michael James Bennett (Liverpool Hope University) *The Naked Truth: Temptation and the Likely ‘Fall’ of Catholic Education*.

Dr. Daniel O’Connell (MIC), Kate Liffey (St. Brendan’s Community College) & Dr. Amalee Meehan (DCU) *RE-Presenting Christian Tradition as a Source of Inspiration and Integration for Educators in Catholic Schools – A Proposal*.

Dr. David Fincham (St. Mary’s University) *Life to the Full: Sustaining the Catholic Curriculum*.

June

Prof. John Sullivan (Emeritus Professor Liverpool Hope University), *Catholics, Culture and the Renewal of Christian Humanism*.

Prof. Didier Pollefeyt (KU Leuven) *Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good is Bad. Religious Education in Catholic Schools Today*.

Dr. Richard Rymarz (The Australian Institute of Theological Education) *Utilizing Authenticity: Options for Catholic Education in a Particular Detraditionalized Cultural Context*.

Prof. John Lydon (St. Mary' University) *The Perennial Impact of Salesian Accompaniment in a Context of Detraditionalisation*.

See *Religions* for many of these papers:

[https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special\\_issues/Catholic\\_Contexts](https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/Catholic_Contexts)

Online Lenten Reflection groups have emerged as a feature of the project, including reflection on scriptural texts as well as spiritual reading. This has included, among others, study of *Morality: Restoring the common good in divided times* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Prof Tom Groome's *What makes education Catholic?*

In addition, several of the G.R.A.C.E. project participants from Ireland have contributed to two special volume of the open-source international peer-reviewed journal *Religions* on "Catholic Education in detraditionalised cultural contexts", edited by Professor Eamonn Conway. The call for papers for a second volume is open until Sept 30, 2022.

### **G.R.A.C.E MA & PhD students**

Alex McKillican was the first awardee of a G.R.A.C.E Project PhD scholarship, appointed in September 2020. He is examining the Christian elements in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire in dialogue with the Christian existentialism found in the work of John Macquarrie. This research is a previously unexplored topic in Irish adult education and Catholic education, and is under the joint supervision of Dr Tom Finegan (MIC) and Dr Jones Irwin (DCU).

Claire Considine is one of two All Hallows Trust PhD scholarship recipients. She is investigating "Spiritual Well-being: Its nature and place in Irish Post Primary Schools. Educator's views on Spirituality and Spiritual Well-being in Education" with Dr Dan O'Connell as her supervisor.

Joanne Ferguson is the second All Hallows PhD scholar and is researching 'Assessing the value of New Media in creating Prayer opportunities for Primary School children in Ireland' under the supervision of Dr Éamonn Fitzgibbon.

Several Fee Bursaries, funded by the Presentation and FCJ Sisters, have been awarded to candidates in the MA in Christian Leadership in Education programme.