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In My Library
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Grace, G. (2002) *Catholic Schools. Mission, Markets and Morality*. London: Routledge.
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When undertaking research for my doctoral studies and related publications in the early part of the current century, two books were very influential on my thinking and continued to be influential as I pursued further and deeper research into Catholic education in the subsequent years. The first is the seminal work by Professor Gerald Grace, *Catholic Schools. Mission, Markets and Morality* (2002) and the other is by Professor John Sullivan, *Catholic Education, Distinctive and Inclusive* (2001) (also a seminal work). Like all great books, these two volumes are engrossing, capture the imagination with the scope and richness of the ideas, impress with the clarity of the lines of argumentation and, most importantly, both books stimulate research by others. Both of these books are written by academics with a strong background in Catholic education. They are both inspired by a Vatican II understanding of Catholicism, draw on a variety of major thinkers, are aware of the challenges faced by Catholic education, particularly Catholic schools, and actively seek to engage with the wider academic world. The books open up an academic space in Catholic education that breaks out of the internal, and sometimes protectionist, discourses of the Catholic academic community. As a result, this is an approach to Catholic education that is open to new ideas and eager to engage with the wider world and is, arguably, less concerned with more traditional apologetics, less anxious about being deferential and less prone to being defensive. Professor Grace, for example, argues very coherently in this book and in a number of other publications that Catholic schools have a positive impact on society and contribute to the common good (Grace, 2000, 2001). This is a view on Catholic education that can still be perceived, of course, by other academics as an ‘insider’ Catholic perspective but it is resolutely a ‘critical insider’ perspective that is looking outwards. For the purposes of this short article on My Library I will focus primarily on the book by Gerald Grace.

This is an ambitious book and engages with a number of major themes in Catholic education, drawing on extensive conceptual and field research. One of the aims of the book is to position scholarly research on Catholic education within the academy rather than be considered to be a specialised and possibly slightly esoteric area of endeavour. This is a book that addresses philosophical, societal and educational challenges to Catholic schools in England and Wales and their position in society. One of the very interesting aspects of the book is the ease with which Professor Grace draws on different disciplines. This includes philosophy, social sciences, literature and history. Professor Grace engages with the criticisms of Catholic schools (and faith schools) from some leading sceptics about the viability of this form of education within the context of the promotion of the ideal of liberal education. He examines the ideas and arguments of White and Hirst and provides well-constructed counter arguments. He engages with McLaughlin and Bryk, two leading academics in Catholic education in that era, but also with leading thinkers such as Durkheim, Berger, Bourdieu and Bernstein.

Professor Grace voices concern about the lack of a contemporary Catholic philosophy of education. He argues that Catholic educators have used the Catholic documents on education to construct theoretical frameworks to support their work in Catholic schools. While he himself draws from the ‘Vatican’ documents in the book, he does so with a critical eye. He champions the 1977 document, *The Catholic school* in further publications and presentations (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; Grace, 2003, 2009). He also encourages Catholic thinkers to contribute to a series of articles exploring the construction of a Catholic philosophy of education for the twenty-first century – in the journal he edits, *International Studies in Catholic Education*.

Perhaps one of the main reasons I return to this book often is because so many of the main themes are still very relevant today. Professor Grace has a very nuanced understanding of Catholic schools in England and Wales and is anxious that they are not understood as homogeneous. The ‘market’ pressures on Catholic schools and the tensions in retaining the mission integrity of Catholic schools are recurring themes in the book. This is now probably understood by many in terms of the (malign) neo-liberal influences on Catholic schools and other schools. The themes of charism and leadership also feature in the book. There is one theme in the book I continually revisit: the mission of the Catholic schools to the poor. I also frequently review this theme in other publications produced by Professor Grace (Grace, 2003, 2013; Grace and O’Keefe, 2007). The mission to the poor is firmly located in the history of the Catholic community in England and Wales (also not homogenous) in the 19th and 20th centuries. Professor Grace carefully explains that the education of the poor Catholics became a priority in England and Wales to ensure a basic education (at the least) and ensure the continuation of Catholic identity. This is very resonant with the historical context of the Catholic community and Catholic schools in Scotland. This mission to the poor becomes reconfigured in twentieth century theological terminology as the ‘preferential option for the poor’ in Catholic schools. This phrase is used by Gerald Grace in this book and other works and by John Sullivan in *Catholic Schools in Contention* (2000). Professor Grace uses this to very good effect in the Introduction to *the International Handbook of Catholic education: Challenges for School Systems in the 21st century* (Grace and O’Keefe, 2007).

This phrase is a major source of inspiration on my own research on Catholic schools (McKinney, 2018, 2021). The use of the phrase ‘preferential option for the poor’ in relation to Catholic schools is an exciting and captivating idea and catches my imagination. The phrase ‘preferential option for the poor’ does still require considerable excavation and I have explored and analysed, fairly extensively, the deep, complex and, sometimes disputed, scriptural, theological and ecclesial roots of the ‘preferential option for the poor’ and interrogate the use of this fundamental Christian idea in the vision and operation of contemporary Catholic schools. Other academics in Catholic education use this phrase and I probably encountered this before I read this book, but it was impressed upon me when I first started to read *Catholic Schools. Mission, Markets and Morality*.

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