

GLOBAL RESEARCHERS ADVANCING CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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I had the extraordinary privilege recently of being part of a Colloquium on Catholic Education in Rome from 19-23 April 2022. I am conscious that these are only my own humble reflections and experiences. I am taking the opportunity to bring you through the initiative and some sense of these very graced and special days we spent in Rome.

GRACE is an acronym for Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education. It is an international research-based partnership between Mary Immaculate College Limerick, Boston College, United States, the University of Notre Dame Fremantle, Australia, and St Mary’s University in Twickenham, London. According to the website GRACE provides ‘an original opportunity for scholars of Catholic education and theology in our respective countries to affirm, study, collaborate, and respond meaningfully to challenges we face in the field.’ Our visit to Rome was funded by Porticus (a philanthropic organisation which has education and faith as some of its priorities), the Presentation Sisters, the Jesuits and the All Hallows Trust and we are very grateful to these groups for their generous support of and investment in Catholic education.



We stayed at the summer villa of the English College, La Palazzola, in the outskirts of Rome on the hills surrounding Lake Albano. One could see the summer residence of the Popes, Castelgandolfo, across from where we were located. The place itself was conducive to taking time apart and fitted beautifully into the image of the Upper Room and Easter-time where our days were punctuated with beautiful liturgies and reflective spaces and the time given to serious engagement on the challenges of being a Catholic educator today.

In preparation for the visit to Rome, we had all engaged weekly over Lent in online meetings on a choice of three areas: reflecting on the Lenten Gospels and two groups focusing on aspects of education. It meant that we had some idea of the group and had made links through these meetings or being involved in the preparation of liturgies in advance of the trip. I joined the Lenten Gospel reflection group and I was also part of the group for the liturgical preparations. It was a wonderful way of making connections prior to the visit itself in Rome.

Our group in Rome comprised researchers, educators and practitioners in Catholic education from primary, second, third level and at diocesan level from North and South, East and West of Ireland. It was refreshing to meet with people who saw the value of Catholic education, to connect into a community of practice across different disciplines in a cross-sectoral context so that there was a sense of joined up thinking in areas of convergence and yet areas of specific focus also emerging in response to challenges on the ground.

Dr Daniel O'Connell and Fr Eamonn Conway were the main protagonists in organising this trip, ably assisted by members of the group in structuring our time there to build connections and to engage with relevant literature and movements in Catholic education. 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. Daniel summarised the context saying that in 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, there were sixteen militarised walls; now, in 2022 there are 65. And some of the walls may not be visible e.g. social, economic, political, physical, walls constructed through racism, abuse, gender identity, environment etc.. Much divides us. Yet, Pope Francis calls us to the universal open mindset which is evident in the papal encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: 'Let us 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' (Paragraph 8).

Further on in the same encyclical, it is stated that life, for all its confrontations, is an art of encounter. In the culture of encounter, it is not what happens to the other but rather what happens to me and you in the encounter. That is the art of real dialogue and real encounter. Nobody said that was every going to be easy! "This means working to create a many-faceted polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which "the whole is greater than the part". The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. Each of us can learn something from others' (Paragraph 215). The important thing is to remember where we had these encounters. What did we learn from them? How were we challenged? Disturbed? Where were the consonances and the dissonances? (I would use musical analogies, wouldn't I!?) These days for ourselves, were days of profound encounter.

Papal Audience

Our second day (20 April 2022) is the one which will stay in our minds for the rest of our lives. We set off in a bus from La Palazzola at 6am sharp to meet the Pope. Even the carpark had the papal colours of yellow and white around its walls and floors! Never in our wildest dreams, did most of us realise that this was actually going to happen.





However, Fr Eamonn Conway was beavering away in the background to try and get us this most extraordinary of privileges. We ourselves would have been very happy to have ringside seats at the General Audience in St Peter's! But it far exceeded our expectations. We were in a queue, separate to everyone else's, ushered up to the Swiss guards to announce our imminent visit, to an area within the Vatican which is normally inaccessible to anyone except the VIPs or those high ranking official ecclesiastical appointees or international dignitaries! We checked through security and then went around again back up to the Swiss guards for our very own VIP pass to the inner sanctum of the hallowed ecclesiastical walls of the Vatican itself. So exciting! Our first stop was at the Pope Paul VI Hall where we had a good peer in the windows! No sign there! And we had many photocalls at the bust of Pope Paul VI outside. This was the place where the Synod of Bishops and any pontifical audiences take place. It has a capacity of 6,300 people. Some of us thought, at this point, that we must be here with a few thousand others. So we were on very important ground.

Our security guards accompanied us onwards towards another room which was adorned in magnificent art with five key moments from St Peter's life. To the right and left were four paintings: Peter meeting Jesus on the water, the washing of Peter's feet, the great catch of fish, Peter receiving the keys of the kingdom. And over the pope's chair was a magnificent tapestry of the post-Resurrection intimate moment of Jesus's affirmation of Peter. There are two indefinable figures in translucent light; they could be any of us. The room itself was beautiful, spacious, impressive. We were formally seated there. As it happened, I was last in the door, (too busy chatting to William, one of the security guards, trying to ascertain the secrets of the Vatican!) therefore the first to the right of the Pope as he came in. We were given a hard copy of the script which we presumed was the content of the Pope's address. We sat there in nervous chatter initially and then profound silence when we really assimilated where we were. We all had our own thoughts. Mine brought everyone I knew who was part of this with me, going back along my own ancestral memory to those who would have loved this opportunity, my own parents and siblings, those pioneering and founding Catholic educators across the world, teachers, leaders, those working in very difficult situations, the ravaged world in which we live, the voice of those who are voiceless, those who asked me to remember them when in Rome, friends shouldering burdens of sickness, terminal diagnoses, awaiting the birth of children, awaiting death.... I could go on. It's amazing what goes through your head and heart at such a profound moment in time. It's as if your life flashes before you.



And then the door opened. I was so moved. I was taken (as were the cameramen!) by surprise when Pope Francis turned towards me and extended his hand to welcome me to which I responded with my two hands around his saying I was delighted to meet him (understatement of all time!).

Pope Francis proceeded to go around each individual in the group greeting everyone. He arrived at his seat and was addressed on behalf of the group by Fr Conway who gave him a context of our visit there. The Pope said he would not speak from the script but rather from his own heart and in Italian which was translated for us. I really cannot adequately articulate this experience to you and I feel I'm not doing it justice at all. We were there representing the world because our group was a little microcosm of some of what is happening in Catholic education. We were privileged to be there but our privilege was not for ourselves but to be shared, to be communicated. We were like the women witnessing the resurrection after the darkness of Good Friday. Our hearts burned within us as did those of the disciples as we gathered there, as we talked and walked along the way. A few key points from what he said to us with a longer version available separately:

1. The image of the roots and the branch and the flowers of the tree. Roots cannot stay fixed in a sense of not being static. Don't stay stuck in the roots. They must evolve in order to produce the branches. It is the tension pull between risk and security. Easier sometimes to stay put without moving on.
2. Importance of head, heart and hands in education. All inseparable components in Catholic education. It's not a cerebral exercise.
3. Importance of relationship with the young and the richness. You hold the young people by the hand, listen and dialogue with them.



(Full text is: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/april/documents/20220420-catholic-education-project.html> and <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2022/04/20/0277/00584.html#inglese>)



When he had finished, the Pope gave time to meet us individually and presented us with a beautiful Rosary beads which had a papal coat of arms included. It is something which I will use daily but also treasure dearly. He gave time for further photos with the group. We even made it to the local 'L'Osservatore Romano'! There was no sense of rush in this at all. The whole experience was just incredible for each of us.

General Audience

We had such a sense of the universal Church at this General Audience in St Peter's Square. The Pope's address was said in many languages, French, German, Polish, Arabic, English, etc. and it really reflected the universality of the Church and the broad picture of where we are located. We are always part of the greater picture.



Dicastery For Catholic Education

We were then invited to the Dicastery for Catholic Education, also in the Vatican's secret spaces! There we met Dr Melanie Rosenbaum. She asked us to reflect the key challenges for Catholic Education in Ireland today. These could be summed up in the following groups of issues:

- Catholic identity in dialogue with society
- Stakeholders, mission and passion
- Process, Spirituality and Personal life of the Catholic Educator
- Organisation, structure, theology and academia

Dr Rosenbaum reflected on the role of the Dicastery within the Church e.g. in schools, primary and second level, universities with Catholic institutes, pontifical universities, Institutions of the Holy See, accreditation of programmes across the world. Her words resonated with what we had heard Pope Francis speaking in the morning. She did emphasise the importance of knowing our own identity as Catholic educators before you can engage comprehensively in dialogue and the importance of networking, linkages, witness. The Mission Statement of the



school should be there and should be available to all teachers, parents, students, all stakeholders. It should be given to teachers, parents and students. She made reference to the Global Compact on Education outlining the importance of making human persons the centre of all we do; listening to the voices of young people; advancing women; empowering the family; welcoming all especially most vulnerable; finding new ways of understanding economy and politics and safeguarding our common home. All of this was

very refreshing and renewing

for all of us to hear as well as the clear synchronicity between her message and that of Pope Francis earlier.

Irish College Visit

Some of us walked over to the Irish College passing the 'Wedding Cake' and the Colosseum en route. We were hosted there and had a beautiful meal followed by an address from Sr Pat Murray IBVM who is the Executive Secretary of the International Union of Superiors General. I have had the privilege of knowing Pat and know that she is one of those incredibly prophetic figures who is passionately committed to education in all its manifestations. 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. She emphasised that we are Christ in the



world today, that this is how people are most likely to meet Christ is through us, our actions and our words and the importance of that in our roles as educators.

We got a beautiful tour of the Irish College chapel and the magnificent stained glass windows and mosaics there as well as their plans for the College going forward into the future.

Visit to San Clemente:

A Dominican Fr Paul Lawlor (a Kerry-man as it happened!) who is also a foremost archaeologist brought us on an incredible tour of the church of San Clemente. The man is so erudite yet he made his scholarship so accessible to us and it was just wonderful to both see and hear. The church of St Clement was built on top of a much earlier church and he brought us down through a historical journey into what was etched on the walls, columns, frescoes and into every fibre of the foundational building. It was a fascinating journey from the Domus Ecclesia on which it was originally built up to the current day.



Reflection and Models of Good Practice

We took time to reflect on our mammoth day together in Rome. It was really beautiful and very rich to have the time to engage in this manner and not lose the experiences of the previous day.

We also took time to hear some snapshots of good things which are happening in Catholic Education in different areas:

1. School Culture Framework: Ian Corbett, Primary Teacher from Clare, gave us input into this area. It was conducted in some CEIST schools over a period of time and was looking at what we do, why we do it and how we do it in Catholic schools. It examines the animating principle and beliefs on which our Catholic education is based.
2. Joining the Dots: Dr Amalee Meehan, DCU, spoke about this initiative which really focused on teachers' own spirituality and necessity to be able to nourish one's spirit and soul
3. Interfaith Cafe and Dialogue: An initiative of an interfaith group in Limerick which reached out to local primary schools. This input was given by Dr Patricia Kieran MIC who was involved in it.
4. Children's Faith Formation in Primary schools was conducted by Charlotte Keane, primary teacher from Clonmel.
5. Catholic Education Partnership was explored by Marie Griffin.

This was an incredibly renewing, nourishing, valuable experience, and it was wonderful to meet with others and we hope to continue this community of practice with some topics emerging from our discussions and interests. I am very grateful to all those who made this possible, to those who facilitated it and those whom I have had the privilege to meet.

