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LIVED EXPERIENCE IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Research and Reflections from Sub-Saharan Africa and North America
MATHEW N. SCHMALZ

Interviews in Catholic Global Studies:
Paul D. Murray

Paul D. Murray is Professor of Systematic Theology in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University. Since 2008, he has served as Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies, the UK’s first permanent center devoted to pioneering research and teaching in Catholic theology in the public academy. He is the author of Reason, Truth and Theology in Pragmatist Perspective (Peeters, 2004), editor of Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism (Oxford, 2008), and served as a co-editor of five other volumes. He is past president of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.

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Welcome, everyone, and my name is Mathew Schmalz. I'm Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Global Catholicism*, and this is part of our continuing series of interviews with scholars in the field of global Catholicism and Catholic studies, broadly understood. And so it’s my great pleasure to welcome Dr. Paul Murray, director of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University. Welcome.

PM: Thank you, Mat, good morning. Good afternoon here, good morning there.

MS: Yes, there is a time difference, and I appreciate your willingness to adapt to these constraints of international discussion. So I perused your professional website, which is certainly quite impressive, and you have quite an extensive scholarly background, and so I was wondering if you could share a little bit about your intellectual journey with us, and why you do what you do.

PM: Gosh, well, intellectual journey, in the British system, you’re probably aware that we tend to specialize quite early in high school years, and one tends to be either, rather arts and humanities or the sciences. And I was actually on a science and maths track, and very happy to be, so I was actually heading not towards theology, but towards a career in engineering. My life, I feel, has been either serendipitous or accidental departures on various points, and I kind
of fell into theology. I like to think I fell in, it was a falling into grace, rather than into perdition, and I found myself second year into an undergraduate theology program, really finding it the most fascinating subject possible for me, because it both feeds the heart in a way that literature had fed my heart and soul, but it also engages particularly the more philosophical doctrinal dimensions of systematic theology. It engages the conceptual apparatus in a way that mathematics and physics and such had done in my upper high school years, so I found myself really captivated by it. And I guess discovered—I think, maybe I am still discovering—discovered my vocation twofold. And in chronological sequence, rather than in matters of importance, I fell in love twofold over, one with the study of theology, and secondly, with my wife. So then the issue was how to put those two together, and become a lay theologian. And I’ve been privileged to have various opportunities to pursue that vocation. I’d done it in the context of adult theological education for the Archdiocese of Liverpool for a couple of years, which was great work, and that kind of pastoral context, ecclesial pastoral context for theology, even in its more abstract expressions is, I think, very important to me. For a decade, I worked in what in the States you would refer to as a liberal arts college, and then in the year 2000, the northern bishops asked if Andrea and I would move from, we were then in the center of the country, Birmingham, up to the northeast, where we had met, for me to be one of the systematics profs at what was then the largest Catholic seminary providing for the UK community, Ushaw. And my intellectual journey started out very much in a kind of theology and science interest. My teaching was in core subjects such as Christology, trinity, eschatology, atonement, and I still consider them, in many respects, my theological heartland, but one of the other unexpected departures or unanticipated departures was that when I was teaching at Ushaw, and we had a strong ecumenical program with the local Methodist college and the Anglican training house, and at the heart of what was in key parts, a shared program, at the heart of that was a double module in theology and ministry in ecumenical perspective, and all my colleagues at university regarded it, apparently, as the most important module in the curriculum.
MS: Oh, wonderful.

PM: But interestingly, none of them wanted to teach it.

MS: It goes that way sometimes, yes.

PM: There were indeed some interesting challenges. It was an obligatory module, which tends, I find, to get students’ backs up. To make something compulsory tends to take any of the delight away from it immediately for them, and there were just some intrinsic challenges to the module. But anyway, I was given it as the new kid on the block to teach, and I sweated over it for the summer beforehand, fairly anxious about how would I be honest about the challenges in the Catholic tradition, but in a way that the seminarians—and it was very much in the Pope John Paul II, and then Pope Benedict years—in a way that the seminarians could hear, rather than simply want to reject, but on the other hand, in a way that the Anglicans and Methodists would not perceive as just being a kind of an idealized gloss of a theoretical Catholicism that exists in the mind, but not in reality. So about two or three weeks into the course of that module, I actually found it was really clicking some things together for me. I’d never previously taught ecclesiology. I’d been, obviously, very interested in it as a committed Catholic layperson who’d worked in Catholic context, and indeed, for the Church, so I had read a great deal of ecclesiology and thought about it, but I’d never taught it, and it really opened up. It was a another path opened up for me, and that has become a major part of my work for the past 20 years. I’ve had a manuscript, a long manuscript, which I’m editing down, which I’m calling Healing the Wounds of the Church: And the Practice of Receptive Ecumenism. And then there’s a second volume related to it, which I hope to work on over the next few years called Catholicism Transfigured: Conceiving Change in the Church. And once through that, I’m hoping if the Lord spurs me, and I have energy for it, that I might return to some of the theological heartland work, and do some work on some essays on pneumatology and divine action, and really pick up some of those dormant theology and science interests.
The core Catholic gift at the ecumenical table is that written into our DNA when we are being true to ourselves is an instinct for hanging together and for unity—not uniformity, but unity—with rich, complex diversity.

Paul Murray

MS: Okay, well, thank you for sharing that. Before we get into specifics about Catholic studies at Durham and so forth, I just wanted to pick up on this notion that you were talking about, about the Church being wounded, and the Church’s wounds. And so where would you say the Church is particularly wounded now at this point in time?

PM: So I think a state of imperfection is a constant in human life and church.

MS: Very true.

PM: And I think there are lots of kind of specifics we could look to, for example, things exposed by the clerical sexual abuse crisis, which a project we’re running is looking at the way in which that’s not just a matter of high levels of individual miscreants, but is also exposing some weaknesses in our Catholic ecclesial culture, which touches on all of us. So there are things like that, but actually, you know, if I was asked to say, what is the one most significant wound in the Church Catholic, I would say the straightforward challenge we find in being Catholic and living according to the whole thinking, according to the whole. And I regard it as the core Catholic gift. The core Catholic gift at the ecumenical table is that written into our DNA when we are being true to ourselves is an instinct for hanging together and for unity—not uniformity, but unity—with rich, complex diversity. And in various ways, I think that call to be Catholic, to be whole church, to be one body, I think has been increasingly under strain, sometimes in the name of being Catholic. You know, we should not pervert the notion of Catholicism into a form of sectarianism.
MS: Wow, that’s very powerful, and it certainly resonates very strongly with my experience as an American Catholic, and also it does resonate very strongly globally, I think. So tell us a little bit about Durham, and the initiation or birth of Catholic studies.

PM: Gosh, it’s because we’re always in the middle of things, it’s always difficult to know at what point to start a story, isn’t it? You know, I don’t know whether your readers, and listeners, and colleagues will know much about the place of Durham. It’s up in the northeast corner of England. About an hour’s drive from the, an hour and 20 drive from the Scottish border. Hadrian’s Wall is a lot closer to us, just 15 miles up the road. And in one sense, you might say historically, it was a forgotten back corner of the Roman Empire, but interestingly, it’s a place that has been rich in Catholic Christian culture and heritage for 1,400 years plus. The Irish monks who settled off the west coast of Ireland in Iona were invited to establish a similar island monastery by King Oswald off the coast of Northumberland, at Lindisfarne, the Holy Isle of Lindisfarne, famous for Saint Aidan, Saint Cuthbert, and it’s from there that the re-evangelization of most of England took place. And one of the most famous saints associated with that tradition is of course, the polymath and chronicler, the Venerable Bede.

MS: Right.

PM: And the joint monastery that Benedict Biscop established at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, it boasted one of the finest libraries in the Christian world, in the late seventh, early eighth century, and that was the context that formed Bede, and from that, ultimately we have, after the Viking years, Durham Cathedral established as a shrine to Saint Cuthbert, and later with the Normans, Bede’s remains were transposed there, and Durham became the primary center of Christian learning in medieval England, so much so that one of the earliest colleges of Oxford University was founded out of Durham Cathedral. Trinity College was originally known as Durham College. And then when we go into the recusant years, and the Catholic intellectual
community goes into exile under the Elizabethan Settlement into Douai in northern France, and it operated there for 200 years successfully—over 200 years. At the time of the French Revolution, the anti-Catholic culture of England had—it hadn’t been overturned legally—but it had lessened in its severity, and you might say that at that point, at the point of the revolution, it seems that English people decided that they could tolerate Catholics a little more than they could tolerate the revolutionary French, and the Catholic community was allowed home, because it was being persecuted. And Ushaw College was established on the edge of Durham. So we’ve had this interestingly rich mix, a great department of theology, Anglican in origin, which had grown like the mustard tree to become a place where all the ecumenical birds of the Earth could take rest and refuge, and with a great Catholic heritage, Ushaw College. And in the noughties, after I’d been teaching at Ushaw for a couple of years, and I was given a post, initially a short term post within the department of the university, I recognized that there’d been a very significant migration of Catholic students and Catholic staff from the Catholic institutions and into the common public space, the secular public university that Durham represented, and at the common table. You know, historically in England, Catholics have tended to do what I refer to as a form of Catholic parallelism.

MS: Okay.

PM: They’ve kind of done their own thing alongside whatever is either the Anglican or the secular standard. And the Centre for Catholic Studies was recognizing that the time was ripe and right for us to actually do Catholic theology, Catholic studies, explicitly at the common table in the pluralist space, where we could be explicitly Catholic engaged, actually in some respect, more so than in some Catholic institutions, explicitly Catholic engaged, but very ecumenically related. And in a place where there’s no line of analysis that can’t be pursued, no question that can’t be engaged, and where you have all the perspectives and resources of a pluralist mainstream academic institution.
MS: If you could expand upon that a little bit, why, for example, have Catholic studies, when you have theology and you have resources in theology. How would Catholic studies, then, in some ways differ, or complement, say, a regular theological curriculum and so forth?

PM: So playing with Anselm's theology as “faith seeking understanding,” which I think is still probably the finest three word definition of theology. Faith is always contextual, and ecclesiastically contextual. It’s shaped not simply as an individual affair of reasoning, and loving, and living, but it’s shaped to greater and lesser degrees for us by the ecclesial context and traditions that shape us. So I don’t kind of buy the idea that there is just theology in general, as it were. I think theology is an ecclesial exercise, understood in its full sense. And therefore, in a world where the ecclesial body of Christ is pluriform, divided, then the pursuit of theology, I think, needs to be confessionally pluriform in a way that recognizes both the points of commonality, but also the points of difference and distinction, and recognizes those points of difference and distinction not as sites for necessary battle, but recognizes them as sites for understanding and learning. Learning not simply about each other, but learning from each other, because some of these differences are not necessarily incompatibilities and incoherences. They are differences. They’re not necessarily incompatibilities. Some of them are, and there is a great deal of space open for us for rich cross trans-ecclesial learning, which can actually help expand the logic within our own respective traditions, and tend to some of the difficulties and challenges we find within our own traditions, which again, the same old logic that we’ve been running within our tradition is not necessarily going to be able to respond to those problems. It’s a bit like a hamster on a wheel. It can be a sense of movement, but it’s a circularity, a closed circularity.

MS: Well, could you talk then a little bit more about what particular intellectual questions, or I guess we could also say ecclesial questions that Catholic studies can address and engage?
**PM:** Oh, gosh. Well, I would say it goes right across not simply the theological curriculum. It goes right across the curriculum of, and research interests of, the university. Let’s remind ourselves with Aquinas that theology, yes, yes, etymologically, it’s reasoning about God, the study of God, thinking before God, but it’s the thinking of God and of all things in relation to God. So as I like to seek to provoke our first years, or somewhere between provoke and entertain our first years, looked at in one way, you might say that theology in religion is all about purity codes, and all about learning to live before the all pure God. There’s another sense in which theology is the most promiscuous of any of the subjects in the university, because it can fruitfully and properly engage all the other subject areas. Economics. Our Catholic social teaching tradition needs to engage our economic and political and social realities. That takes us into economics. It takes us into social science, an understanding of all things as having their origin in, that being sustained by and being oriented to for their fulfillment in the life of God, that kind of gives us all the natural sciences as dialogue partners, and the arts and humanities, the understanding, the understanding of human person, human sociology in relation to our history and environment, again, that takes us right in there. So, and I think one of the gifts of the Catholic tradition, again, going back to our core defining identity, according to the whole, according to the whole, that all things gathered together in Christ of Colossians, this gives us an instinct. This should give us an instinct for, whilst we all need to develop our specialisms in one or one or more of these conversations, it should give us an instinct that there are no conversations that we should not be fruitfully engaging.

**MS:** So talk a little more specifically then about how the curriculum that you’ve developed fosters these kinds of conversations.

**PM:** Okay. So the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham, it might be configured a little differently than some centers in North America. I know this is not universally the case, but in my understanding, it is frequently the case that
centers for Catholic studies in the States are not necessarily in theology departments. They might be.

MS: That’s right. That’s true.

PM: I mean, some are, but many aren’t, and they might therefore tend to focus less on the directly theological and ecclesiological, and more on the, say the history and culture.

MS: Yes, true.

PM: We are very definitely located within, not alongside, within the Department of Theology and Religion. Which, as I say, is now a pluralist department. We were set up first and foremost as a research center, so we have an orientation. Our primary orientation is towards a postgraduate, rather than undergraduate in terms of what we have formally laid out. That said, practically all the full academic members of the Centre for Catholic Studies are heavily engaged in undergraduate teaching, and a very considerable amount of the Christian doctrine area, the systematic theology, the ethics, and indeed some of the study of religion program modules undergraduate level are de facto taught by members of staff of the Centre for Catholic Studies. We could very easily identify a coherent pathway in Catholic theology and Catholic studies already through our undergraduate program. We’ve not yet formalized that. But I personally hope we do before too much longer. I think it would be good for people around the country who are looking for programs rich in Catholic theology to be able to easily see that. Where we do have a named pathway is in the master’s program. We’re just about to bring out a distance learning version of that.

MS: Oh, wonderful.

PM: And that stretches across modules that are more directly historical in orientation, whether it be early modern Catholicism, or whether it be pre-Reformation Catholic history in the northeast. But we also have many modules in modern Catholic theology, in Catholic social thought and practice,
a module on contemporary Catholic ecclesiology... so that’s where we have most formally laid out a curriculum at master’s level. We obviously supervise doctorates across the full spectrum of areas of expertise that our department can handle. And then another way of looking at—a broader looser sense of looking at—what we understand by Catholic studies is to look at our five key program areas. So our first major program area—and these are big tent areas with multiple projects running under them—the first we call constructive Catholic theology, and it provides a home for anything from comparative work, say, on von Balthasar and Rahner, to theology and science in Catholic theological perspective through to ecclesiology ecumenics and ethics. One of our most interesting research projects in that area at the moment is called Boundary Breaking, which is study of the ecclesial cultural implications of the clerical sexual abuse crisis, and we’ve worked with some American partner institutions on related aspects of that. A second big tent area for us is Catholic social thought and practice and political theology, and that’s headed up by Professor Anna Rowlands. In each of those two big areas that I’ve so far identified, we work in partnership, at multi-level partnership with the Catholic Church, as well as with other Catholic academic institutions. We work in partnership with the local diocesan church. We work in partnership with the national church, national Catholic structures, and we are well-represented on international Catholic bodies, things like the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, and Anna Rowlands works very heavily with the Dicastery for Integral Human Development. A third big area for us is history of Catholicism, and this has really taken off. I’m not an historian, and I could see that it was important for us to engage this area, because Ushaw College that I previously mentioned has a very significant historic library and archive, and it was a kind of a no-brainer that we should engage that in some way, and develop, open up something in history of Catholicism specifically. When we were doing so, as I’m aware, the only person in a full-time academic post in a theology department in the UK at that time with a post in affective history of Catholicism areas was Eamon Duffy at Cambridge.
MS: Very well-known scholar, yes.

PM: Eamon was a great friend and guide to us as we developed this program, and it has really taken off, and many religious congregations have been working with us on this as they move towards completion in their own congregational existence, and they want to have the narrative, the story of their congregation well told through archival engagement. So history of Catholicism was a huge area for us. The fourth area is Catholicism literature and the arts, so that is more recognizable to some of the centers for Catholic studies in the States, and this was not at first anticipated for us, and it came because scholars in the university in the English department, in the music department, and in visual arts and culture came when we established the center in 2007-2008 and said, “This is great that you’re doing this. We kind of already do a kind of Catholic studies.” You know, the former head of music, his specialism is 19th-century Catholic liturgical music. The former head of English, his specialism is Irish literature and poetry, much of which engages closely with the world of Catholicism. And the former director of the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture, who is a force of nature, engages particularly Hispanic art, which is necessarily very theological in its subject matter frequently. So we opened up a biennial program of conferences, and you may not have had this advert in the States. There used to be an advert when I was a younger man for a Dutch beer Heineken, and its strap line used to be “Heineken reaches the parts that other beers fail to reach.” Well, our Catholicism literature in the arts program is our Heineken, because it reaches the parts of the academy that the more directly theological and ecclesiological aspects of our work don’t as easily reach, so we’re really pleased with that. We are doing that jointly with the University of Notre Dame, and you’ll see how fluent I’ve become in correct American pronunciation there.

MS: Yes.

PM: And we are hosting our third international conference in that area between the 12th and 14th of July in the London Global Gateway of Notre Dame of Trafalgar Square. We’re very excited by the Canadian Catholic sculptor—
your namesake—Timothy Schmalz is flying over to both speak at the event, and to do live sculpting at the event, so it’s a great thing. And then a fifth big program area that is opening up for us that we’re very excited about is being called Lived Catholicism, so it takes the concept from the study of lived religion, and it applies it specifically to the world of Catholicism. And this is a great fit for us in Durham, because we are a department of theology and religion. In some institutions, the more ecclesially linked study of theology, and the more social scientifically based study of religion can end up in uneasy relationship with each other, shall we say. One of the blessings at Durham is that those two areas, those two broad approaches are seen both as each as necessary and as complementary, and as each bringing something to the other, and in the world of Catholic theology. Now, I’m a systematician. I do work with the conceptual framework and furniture, but it is really important that we don’t do that in an abstracted and idealized way, but that we actually engage with the living, breathing reality of the ecclesial body of Christ with both its gifts and graces, and its difficulties, tensions, wounds, paralyses. So lived Catholicism, if you like, helps us get the stethoscope onto the breathing lungs of the Church, and the beating heart of the Church in all its diversity, and surprisingly at times, challenges and pressure points. So that’s the five big areas we work with. And if we were to, which we never will, because we work in and alongside, rightly so, our colleagues in other disciplinary areas, but if we were to design a curriculum from ground up, as it were, it would reflect those five big areas, which we think really cover the range of what we consider to be essential to a whole Church, all integrated view of Catholic studies.

MS: Wow. So within the Centre’s work, how do you particularly engage global issues, particularly when it comes to lived religion where you quite correctly say that there is this plural diversity and so forth? I mean, how do you talk about that?

PM: So one of the serendipitous things is that when we moved into lockdown, I was actually on an extended research leave, and I say serendipitous, because I probably wouldn’t have been the right person to lead the CCS into a really
multivalent engagement with the virtual world. And Professor Karen Kilby, who’s the Bede Chair of Catholic Theology, with great alacrity and vision, really transposed the life of the CCS onto platforms like Zoom, et cetera, and Lived Catholicism is a creature of that transposition, because the two international conferences that we’ve had in that area were entirely Zoom-based conferences. And they therefore gave us precisely that kind of global reach and global community, and it was well over 100 scholars, and they were most typically scholars who had been squirreled away, seeing themselves somewhat as lone workers, say, in a geography department in the Philippines, working as a geographer, but working on something of specific Catholic context and of interest, or it might be someone in a politics department in one of the African countries, or somebody in a history department in Mexico, and these people all found their community, as it were, in this shared multidisciplinary approach to what the living, breathing diverse realities of Catholicism are in global perspective. And again, it’s beautiful for us that this is happening at this point in the Catholic story, as under the current papacy, a sensitivity to the global diversity of Catholicism is, I think, larger in the Catholic imagination and sensibility, and a greater sense of the diverse voices of Catholicism needing to be brought into enriched communion. We see that through the greater use that’s being made of bishops’ conference documents from around the world, and we see it also, I think, in the rather—okay, it might feel somewhat chaotic because of the speed with which it’s being done, but really—the opening of the Synodal Pathway, and the opening of conversation, Catholic conversation. I mean, Catholics who live according to the whole, if that’s our core identity, then open conversation should be our habitus, but actually we’ve not been terribly good at open conversation. We’ve tended to really protect and police what conversations we allow ourselves to have, and we’ve done that in the name of preserving our core calling to be one, fearing that to open a conversation will lead us into fracture. So we’ve done it under the name of seeking to hold together all those who have been given, as it were, to the Church, but actually, it’s been done at great cost of seepage, seepage and flow of people from the Church who’ve not found a space in which they can
be heard, where they can be listened to, and where they can be included in the conversation. Which doesn't mean that the conversation needs to be dictated by minority, or distorted, but as in any family, we need the conversation at the shared table, and I do think that’s what lived Catholicism is helping us do. And I think it’s one of the things that, even as we now relearn how to be gathered communion post lockdowns, we will take with us permanently into the future as with so many institutions. And today's conversation, Mat, which I thank you for, is another example of the way in which actually learning to become platform proficient is really opening up possibilities for global Catholic conversation that we weren't agile in before.

MS: So as we were talking about earlier, at least in my view, and I think it’s true, it’s not just my view, Catholicism and its study in the United States is heavily politicized, because the surrounding culture is fractured, wounded, to use your terms, which I find very evocative. Could you talk a little more about how in the UK, Catholic studies is situated within larger discussions culturally, not just within the Church, but outside of the Church?

PM: Yeah. So until relatively recently, the UK, politically and ecclesially has not tended to be quite so polarized as one has the impression is the case in the States. And Catholic friends in the States would say, “Well, the polarization in the Church is a kind of an ecclesial interiorization of a polarization, a prior polarization in American politics and society.” You know, we’ve not tended to have that quite so much in the UK, either politically or ecclesial. Saying we have not tended to, I think things are shifting. I think things are shifting post Brexit, and all sorts of other realities. And what I go by here is, I’ve said it a number of times, the core Catholic calling to live according to the whole. So one of the commitments behind the Centre for Catholic Studies is what we refer to as whole Church, a whole Church instinct, whole Church Catholicism. So there’s no such thing as an academic who doesn’t have various agenda and lines of argument they’re wanting to push, but within the CCS, there is no one line that all the academics are pushing, as it were. There is diversity within the CCS academic staff. There’s diversity
Perhaps what we are first and foremost called to be are agents of witness, and we hope at appropriate points, we might make some contribution to felicitous change in society and the Church....

Paul D. Murray
monks who went forth from that rich context, went forth and re-evangelized our country. Well, some of our alum who are now scattered around the world in various institutions, they are still in relationship with us, and they tell us that even more important than the first-class academic formation that they were able to receive in a place such as the theology department at Durham, even more important than that was the *communitas*—the experience of *communitas*—of the Centre for Catholic Studies. And in a way that has shaped their instincts for what they want to build and be in their relationships with colleagues and students in their career. And that I have to say is a cause of immense joy when we hear that echo come back to us in that way, because yes, as academics, we need to write the texts. We tend to find ourselves in trouble if we don’t write the texts. The most important texts that we write and perform are those that are written in our lives and in the lives of others, and that is true to the Catholic Christian tradition. So I guess that’s how we are seeking, whether it’s Anna Rowlands working in hard political realities, whether it’s Karen Kilby working in contemporary Catholic systematics, whether it’s our historians looking at the realities of specific narratives within Catholicism and their complexity—what we’re seeking to do is to offer something which can be taken as a model that can be like a virtuous virus, a virtuous virus that can help shape other things and inspire.

**MS:** Well, on that very positive and hopeful note, let us conclude, and let me conclude by thanking you so much, Dr. Paul Murray—Paul, if I may—for sharing with us your very rich experience, and very compelling vision of what Catholic studies can be, and how it can contribute to not only our discussions in the Church, but to broader intellectual discussions that shape the academy. Thank you so much.

**PM:** Thank you, Mat. Thank you for this invitation, and may your work be blessed.