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(Unsplash/Steve Harvey)



by José Luis Vilson

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January 18, 2021

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Editor's note: *In the weeks preceding the inauguration of the country's second Catholic president, National Catholic Reporter asked Catholic politicians, activists and scholars to offer advice to President-elect Joe Biden in a series that takes its title from Pope Francis' encyclical* Fratelli Tutti*: "Building a Common Future."*

In middle and high school, various teachers asked us to write four simple letters at the top of our papers — AMDG, an abbreviation for *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.

"For the greater glory of God" was a calling card for my Jesuit education, one that I hope informs the work of Miguel Cardona, President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for secretary of education, and the rest of the Biden administration. Every child needs a great school. We can't leave that up to the market. The Biden administration must create an educational system that allows for allocation of resources into every school regardless and because of their zip code and type. This means a system that holistically supports every school, not just financially, but spiritually as well.

As Catholics this is what we are called to do.

AMDG asks that we abide by an honor code that not only emphasizes fidelity of the assignment we undertook, but also to how that integrity extended to our works beyond the classroom and lessons we learned. At Nativity Mission School and Xavier High School in Manhattan, New York, I internalized the idea that my best work would be in service of others.

Before becoming a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University, majoring in sociology and education, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science. I steered my passions toward teaching in hopes of helping to open more doors for children who grew up in circumstances like mine. I worked at Harold O. Levy School 52 in Washington Heights/Inwood (shout-outs to Dyckman!) with a student population that was predominantly Latinx, predominantly poor and working class, with a significant Spanish-speaking population. I recognized how teaching in such spaces directly connected to the ADMG mantra I heard as a student growing up.

In spite of the inequitable working conditions and demoralizing policies that pushed compliance over humanity — including the scourge of high-stakes standardized testing — I found light in students and the adults who chose to serve them well. The children taught me and others what it meant to live out our stated values, to stand up and fight back when things didn't work out for the children we serve, and to love our work deeply even when we took serious losses and bumps along the way.

Yes, it's important to elevate the teaching profession by offering higher salaries and benefits comparable to other jobs that require higher degrees, contrary to what some dissidents have to say in the general public about "lazy teachers." Also, while we create great public schools for all children to attend, we must remember the soul and spirit work we intend behind the policies. Subterranean to the outward-facing elements of our jobs changing during the pandemic is how soul-crushing it was to see how drastically different teaching became with disparate access to electronic devices and broadband, lack of improvement for students' experiences with virtual teaching over the summer, and lack of cohesion around what teaching apart from our students needed to look like.

Teachers who stay do so because it's a calling as much as it is a profession. We can rarely detach ourselves from the young futures of America, less so for our most vulnerable and marginalized.

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We notice a divided nation with divisive rhetoric and derisive positioning around policymaking. While some might suggest that this came as a result of Donald Trump's administration's callous whims, so many of our most marginalized and disenfranchised populations across the country point to factors in the United States that already calcified mistrust and oppression for them.

Ever-widening economic stratification, insufficient health care and environmental racism are just some elements that suggest how America continually veers away from its stated values and its ostensible relationship to God. Children across the country are getting harsh lessons in the contradictions almost immediately, where the American dream has proven itself an American nightmare unwilling to face and correct these challenges.

Our country and its more than 13,000 school districts continue to run up against a wall that suggests we shouldn't educate every child equitably and humanely. If we believe that education is a function of society as a way of passing down knowledge to the next generation of doers and thinkers, we have failed in giving these opportunities to our citizenry writ large.

The people whom the general public has entrusted with this sacred responsibility to structurally show they care for our children have not met the moment or the era.

In this way, I'm asking us to live out our stated values politically and spiritually. If God truly lives within each of us when two or more of us are gathered, then we need to make the spaces where we gather our youth the spaces we know serve them. If we know that Jesus of Nazareth arose from squalor, then we have a duty to make our schools in our poorest districts the envy of the world in honor of the poor.

We should eradicate child poverty measures where we see them and address structural racism, xenophobia and other forms of identity oppression in our policies and practice. Yes, we can do so with culturally responsive and sustaining practices, professional development around trauma-informed learning and teaching, lowering caseloads for guidance counselors, social workers and other in-school mental health professionals, and, yes, making every public school a great school.

And. We must communicate all these things with the urgency, empathy and compassion that are required of every administrator, policymaker and child-facing adult in the service of education. Without this element, the other efforts go by the wayside. How we address this soul-reaching work will be important to the *why* of our work.

No longer can our country forget why education matters because, for so many of us, education feels like the only lifeline to improving our lot. We must continue to point to this greater glory so that the light we seek can shine on all of America's children.

This story appears in the **Building a Common Future** feature series. View the full series.