

**Inauguration Address**

**Travis Russell, S.J.**

**at**

**Verbum Dei Jesuit High School**

**September 9, 2022**

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Verbum Dei Jesuit High School. A special welcome to our guests. I hope you can feel the Spirit that is alive here. Thank you for your presence.

I also want to thank our Board who so generously care for this institution. In particular, I want to acknowledge our board chair, Mr. Joe Viola. Joe, thank you for your friendship.

To the Jesuits here, I am honored by your presence. It means everything to me. To the faculty and staff who are the heart and soul of this school, thank you, thank you, thank you. I am edified by your passion and commitment. To our alumni and students, you are the best. Without you there would be no Verbum Dei.

Finally, I want to thank my family, especially my mother and aunt who are with us today. I often joke that even though Cristo Rey developed the Corporate Work Study Program, my mother invented it. She “encouraged” me to get a job my sophomore year of high school, and throughout high school I worked six days a week at Les Schwab Tire Center. The money I earned allowed me to buy my first vehicle and to afford college. More importantly, it taught me the value of hard work. Mom, thank you for being my biggest fan. I love you.

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Today is a celebration. We are celebrating a moment of opportunity, a moment that marks the beginning of the next chapter in Verbum Dei Jesuit's storied history. As we begin this chapter, my message to you is a simple one: Be bold. Take risks. Work hard. Make excellence a habit. And whatever you do, do not settle for anything less than what God has dreamed for you, which I promise is bigger than anything you can imagine for yourself.

The world needs you, Verbum Dei. It needs your big, audacious ideas. Mediocrity will not get us, or the world, to where it needs to be.

So, I will follow my own advice. I am going to take a risk. I am not going to speak in the platitudes of a president. I am going to tell you two stories. One about the importance of Verbum Dei Jesuit, and the other about the vision of a Catholic Jesuit education.

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This past February, I was in Tanzania as part of a school project. My classmates and I traveled to this African country to determine the feasibility of building a maternity ward for an order of Catholic sisters. While I was there, my understanding of Verbum Dei's importance grew. At the end of our trip, thanks to the generosity of my friend Tim, whom I did not know at the time, we, along with two others, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest free-standing mountain in the world. The climb takes six days, and every night, after an exhausting day's hike, Tim and I would talk.

On the first night Tim asked me what I was doing after graduation. I told him that I had applied for a job at Verbum Dei Jesuit High School but wasn't sure it was the right fit. I explained how I saw myself working abroad, doing something like we were doing in Tanzania. After I told him about Verbum Dei, he shared with me stories about his experience at Chaminade High School in St. Louis, and

instantly he became animated. Every night of our six-day climb, Tim, without prompting, would tell me a story from his high school years.

Now, it would be easy to dismiss the telling of high school stories as something guys do when they are stuck in a cabin together climbing a 19,000-foot-high mountain. But it was more than that. Tim and I were not reliving our “glory days” or desperately holding onto our youth. The stories shared from our high school days were real. They were heartfelt, and wove naturally into other stories, including how two strangers met halfway around the world trying to improve the lives of poor expecting mothers.

It was then that the importance of Verbum Dei hit me. Like Tim and me, and probably many of us here today, especially the adults in the room, high school played an outsized role in our lives. Whether we are conscious of it or not, high school is where a good deal our life was set in motion.

Don’t believe me? Ask the Jesuits here today. When did they first think about becoming a priest? For me, it was my senior year of high school in Mr. Wiley’s English class. I do not know why or how it happened. It’s still a mystery to me – especially since I went to public school and wasn’t even Catholic at the time!

Students, it might not seem like it right now, but high school determines a lot. It determines where you will go to college, where you will eventually work, where you will live, who your friends are, and perhaps, who you will marry. High school will set other important things in motion as well, things like developing your moral compass, your value set, your interests, your curiosity and desire to learn, your sense of justice, and hopefully, your faith. To paraphrase the New York Times columnist David Brooks, in high school you begin writing not only your resumes but also your eulogies – that is, who you will eventually become.

It begins now. In high school. That is why Verbum Dei Jesuit is so important.

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The second story is shorter. It's about my vision for Verbum Dei Jesuit, and it comes from the vision Jesus has for all of us, which he called the kingdom of God. For in the end, this is what a Jesuit education is all about: building the kingdom of God.

It was two days after I had been hired as president of Verbum Dei, and I was attending the annual Cristo Rey gathering in Chicago. A colleague approached me, and rather than giving me the customary, "Welcome, we're glad to have you here," he bluntly asked, "What is your vision for Verbum Dei?"

I was caught off-guard. I hadn't even started the job! So, not knowing what to say, I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind, "To be the best high school in Los Angeles." He chuckled, and then asked if I was serious.

"Of course, I'm serious," I said.

"No qualifiers?" he asked.

"Nope," I replied. "I don't want to limit our potential."

I have spent a lot of time since then praying about my response to that question. I have wondered if my answer was too bold or too arrogant. Or if in my desire for wit I forgot to consider the uniqueness of our mission. Yet, the more I pray about it, the more I am convinced it was the right response and is the right vision for Verbum Dei Jesuit. That's because when Jesus called his disciples, he did not say, "Now listen up. I've got a mission for all of you, and it is called the kingdom of God. To accomplish it, we must maintain the status quo. We must be mediocre and never grow."

Jesus never said that. Not once. If he did, the disciples would have never dropped their fishing nets to follow him!

Of course, as believers in Verbum Dei's mission, the question for us is what does "best" mean in the context of a Catholic Jesuit education, and how do we measure it?

According to the *Profile of a Graduate at Graduation* ("Grad at Grad"), there are five characteristics of a Jesuit education. Jesuit educated graduates are:

1. Open to growth.
2. Intellectually competent.
3. Religious.
4. Loving.
5. Committed to doing justice.

My dear friends, these characteristics are desirable not only for a Verbum Dei Jesuit graduate, but they are the personal characteristics which are most desirable for each of us to lead a good and fulfilling life.

Verbum Dei, if we achieve excellence in these five characteristics: if we are open to growth, if we are intellectually competent, if we are religious, loving and committed to doing justice, we will be the best high school in Los Angeles. But, if we settle for anything less than excellence, God's kingdom will languish.

Students, I say this because I believe in you. I believe in your infinite potential. I believe that if we set the bar high enough and you push yourself, you will rise above it. I also believe that you have an essential role to play in building God's kingdom. God has a dream for you, a dream that is bigger than you or anyone at this school can imagine. That is why I want Verbum Dei Jesuit to be the best. It is because I do not want you to settle for anything less than God has dreamed for you.

Do I believe we can be the best? Absolutely! And I believe it not because of my own ability but yours.

I believe in our talented faculty, staff and Board, who not only believe in the mission but make personal sacrifices to live it out. I believe in our kind and generous benefactors, who, without their support, Verbum Dei Jesuit would not exist. I believe in our corporate sponsors, who employ our students, who take an interest in them and prepare them for the future of work. I believe in our parents, who love their sons and trust us to educate them. I believe in our alumni, who do amazing things in this world and will be the voice that leads us forward. And last but certainly not least, I believe in you, the students.

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Today I accept the presidency of Verbum Dei Jesuit and the challenge of working together for a mission much greater than ourselves.

Please know I stand before you not as one who has received an impressive title and fancy medallion. It's not about those things. Rather, I stand before you as a Jesuit who wants to serve. That is why I joined the Society, and that is why I remain. I know the same is true for you. That is why you are at Verbum Dei Jesuit.

Thank you, all, especially the Board, for entrusting me with this great responsibility. I am humbled and honored to serve.

God bless.