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# A Catholic alternative to diversity, equity and inclusion in education

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During my graduate work at Harvard Divinity School, I took a course that transformed my understanding of the U.S. civil rights movement. In his class “The Ethical and Religious Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” the moral theologian Preston N. Williams introduced me to a radically different way of thinking about the religious and intellectual underpinnings of the movement that fought for the full constitutional rights for those who suffered under Jim Crow. We read *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman, Reinhold Niebuhr, King’s speeches and sermons, the Gospels, the Exodus story, and the Old Testament prophets.

A product of public schools and a political science major in college, I came to the class with a secular and legal perspective on King’s agenda, his vision and the history of the civil rights movement. I believed that those involved in the movement were fundamentally motivated by a desire to extend legal rights to those who were denied them. I had not understood the movement’s religious and moral foundation—a foundation fueled by a profound belief in God-given human dignity. I was unaware of its commitment to solidarity, community and love—even love of one’s enemies—and its holistic and theological understanding of social justice. I did not appreciate the depth of hypocrisy King exposed in his “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” in which he condemned his fellow Christian ministers for ignoring racism in their midst. I certainly wasn’t familiar with the religious rituals of the mass demonstrations, in which protesters gathered in churches to sing, pray and listen to sermons before their nonviolent actions and marches.

*Catholic social teaching can provide a stronger framework for antiracism programs.*

Even if working for the movement didn’t require religiously motivated beliefs in the values of community, dignity and justice, they nonetheless provided King, Bayard Rustin and many of their fellow activists with a profound moral and ethical foundation that served as a powerful impetus for their efforts. As Rustin [wrote](#) toward the end of his life: “My activism did not spring from being black. Rather, it is rooted fundamentally in my Quaker upbringing and the values instilled in me by the grandparents who reared me. Those values were based on the concept of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal.”

It is impossible to say whether the civil rights movement and its vanguard of true believers would have succeeded in their struggle against Jim Crow without the Christian ethical and moral foundation that undergirded them. But one can imagine that if they had had to rely solely on procedural and legal arguments, the outcome might not have been the same.

## **Challenges to D.E.I.**

My radically transformed understanding of the civil rights movement’s ethical and moral foundations has influenced my thinking about the debates that currently engulf the concept of diversity, equity and inclusion (D.E.I.) in educational circles—especially as I consider my role as a leader at Regis High School, a Jesuit secondary school in New York City.

As I [wrote](#) in **America** in June 2021, many Black alumni at Catholic and Jesuit high schools communicated profound disappointment about their student experience in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the racial reckoning that followed it. Their claims and stories were heartbreaking and led to the unmistakable impression that many of our former students of color did not experience a strong sense of belonging during their high school years. Perhaps influenced by anti-Black racist attitudes in society at large or simply content with the status quo, school leaders often did not move fast enough to recruit qualified students, faculty, staff and board members from underrepresented communities. They also did not listen enough or perhaps at all to students from underrepresented backgrounds so as to create equal opportunities for them. They did not carefully analyze the data about the academic achievement gap and respond with meaningful interventions that could help promote the conditions for student success for those from historically marginalized groups.

In response to these failures, Catholic and Jesuit schools, like many other nonprofit organizations, mimicked the private sector and moved expeditiously to create new D.E.I. positions, hire staff, and identify and implement D.E.I. goals. Today, just a few years later, the D.E.I. framework itself is under fire across many sectors. It has become a frequent and favorite target of conservative voices in the culture wars. It now stands accused of embodying a double standard because of the failure of some of its strongest proponents to forcefully denounce antisemitic protests, conduct and hate speech on elite university campuses. Increasingly, voices on the left have also questioned the efficacy of D.E.I. Speaking of the workplace and writing from a progressive perspective, the consultant Aida Mariam Davis offers this [critique](#):

Though well-intentioned, D.E.I. has not delivered. This is not by happenstance, but rather by design. The D.E.I. industrial complex came into existence as a preemptive defense to avoid litigation by members of protected classes, particularly under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. For decades, the vast majority of Fortune 500 companies have implemented D.E.I. trainings, or other initiatives for their employees. The fact remains that these efforts have had minimal impact on the reduction of bias and have not yielded much in the way of qualitative behaviour change or other desired changes.

It is ironic that Davis links the creation of D.E.I. to the very legislative battle that King's movement fought so hard to win. A major difference between the period of the civil rights movement and the decades that followed is the fading influence of a common moral and ethical foundation that could speak persuasively in an increasingly cacophonous and crowded marketplace of ideas and values. The rise of secularization and the diminishing role of religion as a guiding moral force that could galvanize a community toward action are also significant factors—unless, of course, the community already possesses such a foundation from which it can mine strong moral and ethical values and principles.

Which brings me back to the communities that I have served over the past several decades: Jesuit secondary schools. Many school leaders have not intentionally aligned their D.E.I. efforts with a Catholic moral framework or based them on a religious foundation. Rather, these efforts seem curiously siloed, and D.E.I. directors often operate separately from the Christian service directors and campus ministers who are charged with implementing a school's religious mission.

The rationale school leaders typically use for their D.E.I. programs and policies is devoid of the image of King's "beloved community"; the principle of the *imago Dei* and its insistence on centering human dignity as a moral imperative; and resources from Scripture and church teaching on the demands of justice. It feels as if we have traded the "thick" description of our moral tradition and its resources for a "thin" vision of procedural and legal goals that are inherently soulless. This thin vision is increasingly failing as a motivating force to effectively change our practices and actions, much less transform our hearts and minds. In relying solely on a fragile and defensive

D.E.I. framework, educators are failing to leverage the most powerful tool we possess to raise awareness about our personal biases, examine our consciences, and oppose structural and social evils such as racism, classism, ableism, misogyny, antisemitism and other injustices that exist within and outside of our communities.

The challenges of D.E.I. raise important questions. If you lead a Catholic Jesuit school community that shares many of the same moral and religious principles as King's movement—a movement that had enough power to take down Jim Crow—would you embrace a standard D.E.I. framework? Or would you identify a different one that can respond more effectively to the concerns of those who have been historically marginalized while promoting relationships and communities based on mutual love, respect and care?

### **A Framework of Belonging, Dignity and Justice**

Finding its origin in "[Rerum Novarum](#)," Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical on capital and labor, Catholic social teaching gives schools and school leaders all the moral and ethical resources they need in an alternative and improved framework. In an [article in America](#) in 1998, William Byron, S.J., wrote that Catholic social teaching is "underappreciated, undercommunicated and not sufficiently understood." Byron suggests this is because "its principles are not...clearly articulated and conveniently condensed." Despite the efforts of theologians and pastoral ministers, it can feel, even today in Catholic educational circles, as if Catholic social teaching continues to be the "best kept secret" of our moral tradition. But within Catholic social teaching we can locate the principles and core values of [belonging, dignity and justice](#), which together articulate a condensed framework and an ethical vision that can guide our school communities.

Christians profess faith in a Trinity of divine and equal persons united in perfect and mutual love as one God while each retaining a unique identity. This diverse trinitarian community—this one God—moves out in love to all creation. In God's loving embrace, each human person is offered a place in the life and heart of the Trinity itself and is personally invited and empowered with grace to create diverse communities of solidarity that reflect a trinitarian experience and vision. The Second Vatican Council teaches, "God did not create man as a solitary....

Companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential" ("[Gaudium et Spes](#)," No. 12).

In the Gospels and throughout the Scriptures we see what the value of radical belonging—what Greg Boyle, S.J., calls [kinship](#)—truly looks like. Jesus' mission inaugurates a beloved community characterized by nonviolence—i.e., the reign of God—in which there are no outcasts and no division between insiders and outsiders. Each person Jesus encounters, regardless of background or identity, meets in him a sense of belonging and care. The parable of the good Samaritan; Jesus' striking and countercultural treatment of women; the Pentecost story, in which the Holy Spirit establishes the church within a multicultural and multilingual gathering; St. Paul's controversial insistence that Greeks and Gentiles are worthy of faith, grace and salvation—each of these stories offers a profound example of the value of community, diversity and belonging.

Catholic social teaching rests on the conviction that every person is created in the image of God and therefore endowed with dignity. As [Byron](#) writes:

the principle of human dignity forms the bedrock principle of Catholic social teaching. Every person—regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic—is worthy of respect. It is not what you do or what you have that gives you a claim on respect; it is simply being human that establishes your dignity. Given that dignity, the human person is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end.

This principle also appears in the [Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus](#), which call us “to walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice.”

Justice, the third core value of Catholic social teaching’s moral framework, is distinguished from charity and, at the same time, is its corollary. Service to our neighbor and sharing our resources with the “least of our brothers and sisters” (Mt 25) exemplify the virtue of charity. But the church teaches that “Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated” and that working for justice is a constitutive element of our Catholic faith (“Justice in the World,” 1971 Synod of Bishops). Therefore, the demands of this faith are not satisfied solely through practicing direct service to the poor and acts of charity, or even through avoiding personal sin.

Catholic social teaching affirms that evils like racism exist in systems or structures, as opposed to consisting merely of private acts of bigotry committed by individuals. This affirmation requires us to recognize and question the social realities and structural dynamics that perpetuate these inequalities. As the apostolic preferences state, “the path we seek to follow with the poor is one that promotes social justice and the change of economic, political, and social structures that generate injustice. This path is a necessary dimension of the reconciliation of individuals, peoples, and their cultures with one another, with nature, and with God.”

In adopting Catholic social teaching’s core values of “belonging, dignity and justice” and using them as a framework, Catholic and Jesuit school leaders can offer their students and communities a clear moral foundation and a compelling ethical vision for their programs and policies. They can also motivate and inspire their schools to become shining examples in the world of education and beacons of the beloved community. And they will deliver anew on the promise and the purpose of St. Ignatius Loyola and his companions in approving the Society of Jesus’ founding of schools in the first place: to create through their alumni a vanguard within society that will advance the common good.

In this way, we can hope that someday a future [Bayard Rustin](#)—a prophetic changemaker, a drum major for justice and righteousness—will be able to say: “My activism is rooted fundamentally in my Catholic faith, my Jesuit education, and the values of belonging, dignity and justice they instilled in me. They were based on the concept of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal.”



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