



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 2, 2025

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Leaders of Puerto Rican Parish Destroyed by Earthquake named 2025-2026 Lumen Christi Award Recipients

Father Melvin Díaz, pastor, and Dr. Carmen Alicia Rodríguez Echevarría, principal, recognized for joint efforts to revive parish and school after 2020 earthquakes

CHICAGO — [Catholic Extension Society](https://www.catholicextension.org) is proud to announce that Father Melvin Díaz, pastor of Immaculate Conception and Dr. Carmen Alicia Rodríguez Echevarría, the principal of the parish school, are the recipients of the 2025-2026 [Lumen Christi Award](#). The Award, established in 1978, is Catholic Extension Society's highest honor presented annually to people who radiate and reveal the light of Christ present in the communities where they serve.

In 2020, Immaculate Conception Church—a historic Catholic church in Guayanilla, Puerto Rico—collapsed during a 6.4 magnitude earthquake. The church walls fell and crushed the neighboring school. Although their church is destroyed and their school is half destroyed, Father Díaz and Principal Rodríguez recognized they have power to help their community move forward. Together, they decided that this church would take on a new mission and purpose: reviving their school.

"Father Melvin had a vision of revitalizing the school and church that would begin with the children. To accomplish this, he needed a trusted partner, which he found in a former student to lead the school, Dr. Carmen Rodríguez," said Father Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension Society.

Following the earthquake that left the structure in rubble, Immaculate Conception School's enrollment had dwindled to only 90 students. However, thanks to Father Díaz and Principal Rodríguez's relentless efforts, enrollment has grown to 229 students. They accomplished this even as Hurricane Fiona caused even more drastic damage in 2022. When enrollment grew quickly, with only half the space available prior to the earthquake, they got creative, transforming old storage rooms into classrooms.

The priest and principal have made a powerful team, who trust each other and lift each other up in their shared mission to build a better future for the children.

"God gave her to our community when we needed her the most, in the most difficult moment post-earthquake," said Father Díaz. "I have to recognize the light of Christ in her because of her loyalty and her communication, which is so sincere and frank with me."

"In his role as a priest, he's always offering a smile, a greeting, a hello with everybody. I thank him for the confidence he has given me over these years," said Principal Rodríguez.

"What I know of these two human beings, one a priest and another a committed laywoman, is their ability to maintain hope in a community battered by 1,000 problems. Their presence there is giving hope," said Bishop Rubén A. González Medina, Diocese of Ponce. "Poor, simple, yet joyful communities like ours remain affected by the earthquakes and hurricanes. So here we are, little by little, moving forward. Moving forward with our eyes fixed on Jesus."

Father Díaz and Principal Rodríguez were among 41 nominees for the Lumen Christi Award, submitted by bishops from [Extension dioceses](#), recognizing the incredible work of people and institutions from their regions. The recipient receives a \$100,000 award, split between the honoree and their nominating diocese. The funds will assist in the continual efforts to rebuild the school and historic parish.

Father Díaz said, "This award will surely be meaningful to the community. We can only imagine their immense gratitude upon finding out this award is for our community."

Principal Rodríguez said, "Our people will receive the award with so much enthusiasm. It will help our community as it moves forward—and most important are the children. We have so much hope in the present and for the future."

Rodríguez continued, "Thank you, Catholic Extension. You have truly been a part of our community's achievement in these recent years."

This annual award is a reminder of the positive and transformative impact of the Catholic Church in our society. To read more about Father Díaz and Principal Rodríguez's mission to rebuild Immaculate Conception school and parish, visit [here](#).

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About Catholic Extension Society: Founded in 1905, Catholic Extension Society works in solidarity with people to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities among the poor in the poorest regions of America. For more information visit www.catholicextension.org; follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/catholicextension or on X, formerly known as Twitter, at [@CathExtension](https://twitter.com/CathExtension)