

# Q&A

**Fr. Christopher J. Devron, SJ**, is the president of the new Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School, a Cristo Rey–model high school that will serve Chicago’s West side. A native of the Chicago area, Fr. Devron earned a BA in philosophy and government from the University of Notre Dame in 1989 and entered the Society of Jesus in 1991.

In the course of his Jesuit formation, Fr. Devron has earned an MA in the history of philosophy from Loyola University Chicago, an MDiv from the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and an MA in theology with a concentration in African-American religious experience through coursework at Harvard Divinity School and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans.

From 1995 to 1996, Fr. Devron was executive director of the Inner-City Teaching Corps in Chicago, which recruits recent college graduates to teach in inner-city schools throughout the city. He then taught for a year at the Gonzaga Middle School Program for Boys in Harlem, and created a scholarship program to assist Gonzaga graduates attend private high schools. The following year, he was assigned as director of the Loyola Youth Center in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Following his ordination in 2001, Fr. Devron has worked as the founding director of REACH (Recruiting Excellence for Academics in Catholic High Schools), an initiative of Regis High School to identify, recruit, and financially assist academically gifted middle school boys to attend Regis and other top Jesuit high schools in New York. He has also taught theology and worked as a campus minister and chair of the committee on diversity at Regis, served as a weekend associate at the Church of St. Joseph in Harlem, and published articles in *America*, *The Tablet*, the *Journal of Popular Culture*, and *BustedHalo.com*. Fr. Devron is listed in *Who’s Who of American Teachers and Educators*.



## The Jesuits of the Chicago Province Open

**Q How did the Society of Jesus assess the need for a new Cristo Rey–model high school in Chicago?**

**A** At the invitation of community leaders and members of Chicago’s West side, the Chicago Province Jesuits and the Midwest District Christian Brothers co-sponsored a feasibility study in the spring of 2006 to determine whether a Cristo–Rey model high school would succeed there. With approval and guidance from the Cristo–Rey Network, we assembled an advisory committee composed of Jesuits, Christian Brothers, West side educators, community and city leaders, and parents. Then we canvassed Austin and surrounding neighborhoods and met with everyone from the Archdiocese’s Office of Catholic Schools to pastors to parents and students to discover what educational opportunities they most desired.

The need for this school is overwhelming. There are more than 14,000 high school–age youth in the area but only 7,000 spaces at nearby schools. Even with Chicago Public School plans to open new schools to serve 3,500 students on the West side by 2010, there remains a serious shortage of high school places. There are no Catholic schools in any of these neighborhoods, and more often than not, families are unable to pay the tuition fees for private education.

**Q What did the feasibility study conclude?**

**A** The people of the West side believe that education is essential to improving their community, especially in offering their young people a positive alternative to drugs, gangs, crime, and dropping out of school. Our feasibility study concluded that a Cristo Rey–model school on the West side is not only feasible, it’s necessary.

The committee also received commitments from over 60 businesses to provide our students with jobs, demonstrating that there is enough interest to sustain two Cristo Rey–model schools in the same city. In addition, a few generous benefactors already have pledged financial support toward our significant capital needs, which include purchasing land and building on the site that we will share with Chicago Jesuit Academy.

Thanks to the visionary work and help of John Foley, SJ, and Jim Gartland, SJ, in founding Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Pilsen in 1996, which led to the Cristo Rey Network, we have had a strong sense of support and direction. Additionally, Jack Crowe and other veterans of the early Cristo Rey are helping us with this new initiative.

# Cristo Rey-Model a New High School on Chicago's West Side

*interview by Jeremy Langford*

**Q What in your Jesuit formation has prepared you to serve as president of Christ the King Jesuit Preparatory School?**

**A** When I asked Brother Ed Seiderewicz, FSM, founder and president of the West side San Miguel Schools, how I could best prepare for my leadership of this new school, he simply said, "Pray." I really believe that my Jesuit formation in St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises is the thing that will most help me.

My own apostolic labor has been for and with African-Americans who live in the inner-city. Throughout my formation, I've worked with African-Americans at schools, parishes, youth programs and non-profit organizations from Chicago to the Bronx to Harlem and Brooklyn. I've also studied the religious history and spirituality of African-Americans, and have developed a program in New York to recruit and financially support academically gifted students from low-income backgrounds to attend Jesuit high schools. It's amazing what kids can do when given the right opportunities.

**Q How will the Province ensure the Jesuit identity of Christ the King Jesuit College Prep?**

**A** As a Catholic and Jesuit high school, Christ the King will embody the Ignatian charism of knowing and serving Jesus Christ as "men and women for others" by offering students 1) opportunities for regular community worship and celebration of the sacraments; 2) a Christian service program; 3) a campus ministry program that includes regular retreats and opportunities for individual and group spiritual development and reflection; 4) a rigorous curriculum of Catholic theology and social justice; and 5) the example of faith, discipleship, and service offered by faculty and school leadership. This will be achieved through hiring for mission and adult faith formation. We'll also emphasize the unique cultural expressions of African-American spirituality.

**Q What is the status of the school now? When and where will it open, and what are the greatest challenges facing you in the months ahead?**

**A** The Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus has agreed to sponsor Christ the King as a Jesuit high school, in the same way that it sponsors Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School, St. Xavier High School, Loyola Academy, St. Ignatius College Prep, and Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. Now that the school has been approved by the Cristo Rey Network, the Archdiocese of Chicago, and Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the Superior General of the world-

wide Society of Jesus, it will open its doors in August 2008. For our first year, we will be housed in temporary facilities; in 2009, we'll move to our newly constructed campus at the site that now houses Chicago Jesuit Academy.

The greatest challenges now are attracting a leadership team and faculty who are committed to the Cristo Rey and Jesuit mission and vision, and attracting students who will be ready for our high standards of academic excellence and the rigors of working in a professional setting to support the costs of their education.

**Q How will you identify and recruit students?**

**A** The West side is blessed with several solid middle schools, among them, our own Chicago Jesuit Academy; the San Miguel School; Our Lady of the Westside parochial school; the KIPP School; and a few others. These schools will be good feeder schools for us. But we will also continue to strengthen the network of community leaders, parents, grandparents, churches, and organizations with whom we partnered during the feasibility study. We will also focus heavily on marketing and public relations efforts to raise awareness and let potential students know that Christ the King represents a wonderful opportunity for them.

**Q What are the school's financial needs?**

**A** As is the case for all Cristo Rey-model schools, our goal is that within the first five years of opening, 75 percent of our operating expenses will be paid by revenue from student internships. Other revenue will come through a modest tuition. We will, however, need to raise significant funds to bridge the gap and help students who need additional financial assistance. And, most significantly, we will need to initiate a capital campaign to pay for the costs related to building our campus.

**Q What role are lay partners playing in the life of the school?**

**A** The Province's enthusiasm for this new work is only possible because the Jesuits feel we can count on the support and investment of so many lay partners—willing, generous and available to help Jesuits in service to families and young people most in need of the opportunity of a Jesuit college prep education. On every level, lay people will take the lead in helping to create this exciting new school. Indeed, lay people have been there from the start, requesting and implementing the feasibility study and now, along with others, helping the school open in fall 2008. ■