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How About a Good Catholic Story?

By DANIEL HENNINGER



Here's something you don't read every day: a positive story about the Catholic Church. Amid the media brimstone and penitential outpourings, much of organized Catholicism proceeds with its mission. This is one corner of that mission that is helping young men and women.

On June 10, Cristo Rey High School in East Harlem will graduate all of its 50 seniors. All come from families near or below the poverty level. All will attend college. Most were accepted into seven colleges.

Begun in 1996 with the goal of making its students ready to attend college, the Cristo Rey Network now has 24 high schools teaching some 6,000 students in the U.S.—in big cities like Chicago, L.A. and New York; in Sacramento, Portland, Waukegan, Detroit and elsewhere. Virtually all the students in the network's schools are Latino or African-American. St. Martin de Porres High School in Cleveland, my hometown, is near St. Clair Avenue and 55th Street, a hard neighborhood. Its college-acceptance rate this year was also 100%.

The Cristo Rey system is often associated with the Jesuits, because they started the first school on Chicago's Lower West Side. But the system's operation and support now includes many Catholic orders and communities: the Congregation of the Passion, Dominican Sisters, Sisters of Charity, the Christian Brothers, the Clerics of St. Viator, the Basilian Fathers, the Salesians, the Vincentians—29 in all. There is no requirement that applying students be Catholic. About 60% are.

Cristo Rey high schools are not charters, which take public money. These are private schools, financed with a clever, innovative system, which I will describe in a moment.

I mention charters because one of the alleged sins of alternative schools for minority students, such as Cristo Rey, is that they "cream" the public system's smart, high-achieving students.

Cristo Rey explicitly does not take the highest-scoring students. Father Joe Parkes, the energetic Jesuit who serves as president of Cristo Rey New York High School, noted that the first time this year's

graduates took the Iowa Test of Educational Development, their average score fell in the 48th percentile. Cristo Rey pulls its student body from the middle of the pack, at best. Four years later, they go to college.

This is not the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. It is a system that works, literally. The system's financial support model, which pays students to work, is surely one of the most innovative ideas seen in awhile in American education.

Every student at a Cristo Rey high school works full time one day a week with a local private company or not-for-profit. For entry-level work—real work, not make-work—the companies pay student teams between \$20,000 (Denver) and \$30,000 (Washington, D.C.). That money goes into the school's annual budget.

The employer gets a Cristo Rey student every day of the week, freshmen through seniors. So on a Tuesday, the school might assemble all the sophomores and shepherd them to work, and gather them in at day's end. This means the students have to do five days of school work in four days, and that alone may have a lot to do with the success rate.

That work contributes about 65% of a school's budget and keeps average tuitions low, at about \$2,350. As a former president of the network has noted, "Our students are by far and away our biggest donor."

This is the honorable tradition of working your way through school.

Based on chats I had with some seniors at the Cristo Rey Harlem school, the time spent working at big-time firms left them self-assured, conversational and direct. Though college is the goal, you already sense they'll do fine long-term.

Glancing at the Cristo Rey website (cristoreynetwork.org), the number of companies who hire its students is astounding. Household names include: Black & Decker, Legg Mason, Prudential, Skadden Arps, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, (Arthur Andersen until the feds destroyed them), McKinsey, Iron Mountain, Citadel Investment, R.R. Donnelley, Sidney Austin, Baker Hostetler, the Cleveland Indians, Pitney Bowes, Grant Thornton, Wells Fargo, Eli Lilly, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan Chase, Sullivan & Cromwell, Xerox. It's a long list.

A full college education is what Cristo Rey shoots for, and at its just-concluded annual meeting in Omaha, the network committed to having the National Student Clearinghouse monitor its graduates' performance in college.

If the trial lawyers now partnered with the exterminating angels in the media don't drain everything out of the American Catholic Church, good work like this will continue. There is an argument, too, that some struggling Catholic schools should become secularized charters, accepting public money and the inevitable public strings. But the time I spent at Cristo Rey in Harlem convinced me that its independence was crucially important. This admirable network of schools can only maintain its amazing rags-to-college batting average if it's free to stay as it is—getting paid to do God's work.

Write to Henninger@wsj.com

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