

## Cristo Rey Schools and the Preferential Option for the Poor

### Szkoły Cristo Rey a opcja preferencyjna na rzecz ubogich

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**Abstract:** Cristo Rey schools are a unique and distinctive form of Jesuit education. They have been very successful since the mid 1990s and are deemed to be coherent with Jesuit educational principles and the preferential option for the poor. They are only available to young people from low-income homes and are open to young people of all faiths and none. The Cristo Rey schools offer an intense and supportive environment for the students and prepare them for admission to college and university. Nevertheless, there are critiques of these schools that focus on: the financial model that means that the students must work one day a week; the nature of this work and questions about the ethical perspectives of the employers. There are further questions about cultural dissonance between the students and staff of the schools. This article explores the sociological and theological foundations of the Cristo Ray schools, evaluates their effectiveness and success and analyses the various points that are raised in the critique of these schools.

**Keywords:** Cristo Rey, America, Jesuit education, preferential option for the poor, pope Francis

**Abstrakt:** Szkoły Cristo Rey są wyjątkową i charakterystyczną formą edukacji jezuickiej. Od połowy lat dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku odnoszą one duże sukcesy i są uznawane za spójne z jezuickimi zasadami wychowawczymi i opcją preferencyjną na rzecz ubogich. Są dostępne tylko dla młodych ludzi z rodzin o niskich dochodach i są otwarte dla wszystkich wyznań oraz niewierzących. Szkoły Cristo Rey oferują intensywne i wspierające środowisko dla uczniów i przygotowują ich do podjęcia studiów w college'ach i na uniwersytetach. Niemniej jednak spotykają się z krytyką, która koncentruje się m.in. na modelu finansowym, w którym uczniowie muszą pracować jeden dzień w tygodniu, na charakterze pracy uczniów oraz na zasadach etycznych pracodawców. Pojawiają się także pytania związane z dysonansem kulturowym między uczniami a personelem szkół. W tym artykule zbadano socjologiczne i teologiczne podstawy szkół Cristo Rey, oceniono ich skuteczność oraz przeanalizowano niektóre kwestie podnoszone w krytyce tych szkół.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Cristo Rey, Ameryka, edukacja jezuicka, opcja preferencyjna na rzecz ubogich, papież Franciszek



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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Jesuit education has been conceived as empowerment of the poor and as a means of fostering social justice. This paper explores the example of the Cristo Rey Jesuit Network of schools in America as a model that coheres with Jesuit educational principles and enacts the preferential option for the poor. The paper begins with a concise overview of the scriptural roots of the preferential option for the poor which has become embedded in the theology and ecclesiology of the contemporary Catholic Church. This is followed by an examination of the Jesuit approach to education and considers the original focus of the Jesuits and how, over the ensuing 450 years, they have responded to and continue to respond to changing times and promote new perspectives in their educational work. The article then focuses on the origins and development of the Cristo Rey Network of Jesuit schools and the ways in which these schools are coherent with Jesuit educational principles. Two further sections discuss the effectiveness of Cristo Rey schools and provide a critique of the Cristo Rey schools. The article is completed with some concluding remarks.

### 1. PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

A key aspect of the papacy of Pope Francis is his commitment to the preferential option for the poor. This is easily discerned in the adoption of the name Francis, after St Francis of Assisi, and his lifestyle and teaching (Martins 2018). It can also be traced back to when he was the archbishop of Buenos Aires and his rejection of the traditional rich trappings and princely lifestyle of a prelate (Berryman 2016). The preferential option for the poor, or option for the poor, are contemporary terms for the care and compassion for the poor that is at the heart of Christianity (Gutiérrez 1996; Pope Francis 2020a). This can be seen in the life and teaching of Jesus. His three-year public life was that of an itinerant teacher and he did not seem to have a permanent home, nor any possessions. In his teaching Jesus drew specifically from the holiness code and other parts of the Hebrew scriptures that mandated care for the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan (Green 2014). All the four gospels, particularly the gospel of Luke, highlight that Jesus has come for all and especially the poor and the marginalised. The care of the poor was a concern of the early Church, and this was manifested in different ways through the history of the church. In the 1960s the term, preferential option for the poor emerged from Latin America as the churches in Central and South America sought to respond to the call from Vatican II to 'read the signs of the times'.

The Latin American bishops, faced with the destructive social injustice of the political, military and economic oppression of the poor in many parts of Latin America expressed a new commitment to the poor and social justice for the poor. This was not an abstract notion but a concrete commitment to the poor and a challenge to the oppressors. This approach was supported by the Catholic

theologians of liberation theology who were heavily criticised for being influenced by Marxism and adopting Marxist theory. After the late 1980s these criticisms could no longer be applied to many of the leading Catholic theologians in this field. Prompted by the publication of *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* and *Instruction of Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1984; 1986), many of these theologians ceased to use Marxism and Marxist theory. Nevertheless, deep-rooted suspicions remain and many Catholics, including academics, have an antipathetic view of liberation theology, often based on a very superficial reading and limited understanding of the writings.

One aspect of liberation theology that has survived the theological and ecclesial turmoil is the *preferential option for the poor*. This is not surprising given its deep roots in the Hebrew scriptures and the life and teaching of Jesus. As stated above, the preferential option for the poor has been a major focus of the life and work of Pope Francis, and this has been widely publicised. However, it should not be forgotten that the deep concern for the poor was also a feature of the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI (Pope John Paul II 1987). Pope Francis has focussed on the preferential option for the poor in *Evangelii gaudium* (see sections 186-216), *Laudato Si* and many of his addresses (Pope Francis 2013; 2015; 2020a). One good example is his *General Audience "Healing the world": 3. The Preferential Option for the Poor and the Virtue of Charity*. Pope Francis calls Christians to active service by challenging and changing 'unhealthy social structures' (Pope Francis 2020b). Written at the time of the pandemic, he condemns exclusion and inequality, and he invites Christians not simply to offer aid, but to 'nurture an economy of the integral development of the poor'. Moving forward, Pope Francis provides four criteria for industries best suited to accomplish this integral development of the poor: industries that 'contribute to the inclusion of the excluded, to the promotion of the last, to the common good and the care of creation'. The next section will closely examine the Jesuit approach to Jesuit education.

## 2. JESUIT APPROACH TO EDUCATION

It is important to note from the outset that when Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus in 1540, it was never the intention to commit personnel and resources to run schools and universities (O'Malley 2000). The intended focus was global missionary work, to be 'men' for others (Whitehead 2007). This would be achieved by ensuring that they themselves were highly educated, flexible, mobile and available to go anywhere and face any task. The vision was that they would be focussed on active service and not tied to real estate, or to being static. Such men had to discern the signs of the times and meet the needs of the times.

However, the Jesuits were founding and running schools and other educational establishments even during the lifetime of Ignatius (O'Malley 2000). Requests came flooding in from Bishops and others, beseeching the Jesuits to

educate laymen. Ignatius understood the needs of the Roman Catholic Church and the wider world, and this led him ineluctably into the field of education and the founding of educational institutions. As demand grew, the Jesuits embraced this field of education fully and a system of education began to emerge, but not simply as a loose collection of schools (Whitehead 2007). Currently, there are 2,300 schools in the world-wide network of Jesuit schools and companion schools. These are in five continents and more than 70 countries, and Cristo Rey schools are part of this global network (Jesuits 2024).

The Jesuit Charism calls people to discern, to be ‘contemplative in action’, to ‘listen for the call of God’ in the world around them and, vitally, to actively respond to that call with a generous heart (Holman 2014). The Jesuits approach everything through the guiding principles of The Spiritual Exercises. This spirituality involves prayer and discernment that then galvanises and leads/calls to active service for the Greater Glory of God. Faith is to be experienced and lived; faith is to be nurtured.

The Jesuits became great innovators in education and set out a clear methodological approach to designing and delivering a curriculum and the educational practices of Ignatius and the Jesuits are located within seminal documentation (Whitehead 2007). Initially these were *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* and *The Ratio Studiorum* (Jesuits in Britain 2024; The Institute of Jesuit Sources 1996; Codina 1999) These were revisited in the 1970s and 1980s as the Jesuits read the signs of the times and changing circumstances, culminating in two further documents *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* and then *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach* (Society of Jesus 1986; 1993).

The increasing role of the laity is acknowledged in these latter two documents, and both documents are rooted firmly in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, which can be termed ‘the Ignatian Paradigm’. These documents also incorporate a response to the tensions between the vision and practice of Jesuit education. The tensions exist between educating future leaders of society on the one hand and a preferential option for the poor on the other hand. In other words, there is a tension between the Society of Jesus providing ostensibly ‘elite’ education and being of service to the poor. This tension was highlighted at the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Jesuits in 1975, the first general congregation post Vatican II (Cosacchi 2019). The 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation affirmed that ‘the service of faith must also include the promotion of justice’ for the Jesuits. However, there was, and has been, some critical debate on what is meant by justice.

Tensions also exist between a need for Jesuit schools to relate to the context of the local culture in which they operate, relate to and welcome other cultures and faiths and foster inter-faith dialogue. Arguably, the focus remains one that is profoundly spiritual, holistic, rigorous and innovative in nature. There was no intention to create a Jesuit ‘blueprint’ to be applied and replicated. Rather, the charism remains one of discernment, flexibility and adaptability. This enables the schools to be responsive to different cultures and circumstances and the end goal

is always empowerment. The documents cited above all reinforce the theoretical and the profoundly spiritual underpinnings of Ignatius and how such theory and spirituality then unfolds in practice in a contemporary context.

### 3. CRISTO REY SCHOOLS

Cristo Rey is a large distinctive network of Jesuit High Schools in the United States that blends the academic approach of Jesuit education with a professional, practical corporate work-experience component. The goal is for students to grow intellectually, personally, professionally and spiritually and to proceed to College and University. There are 39 Cristo Rey High Schools and 12,350 students, 99% of whom are students of colour (Cristo Rey 2023). Cristo Rey schools only serve students with limited economic resources and the schools are open to children of different faiths and cultures. The students belong to families that have an average annual family income of \$43,000. Catholic students constitute 60% of the school population. Further, there are 2,700 corporate partners and 34 sponsoring religious organisations working with the network. This network has produced 25,800 graduates from 72 University Partners. The 2022 Report describes the Cristo Rey Network as,

...the largest network of High Schools in the US, serving exclusively students from families in the lowest income quartile, our movement continues to demonstrate remarkable impact. Cristo Rey students and alumni are agents of change in their families, their communities and their workplaces.

The roots of Cristo Rey began in 1993, when the Jesuits of the Chicago Province gathered insights into the lived experiences of the marginalised and neglected residents of the Pilsen area of Chicago (an area of migrant population and multiple deprivation). They wanted to support the local community and so engaged directly with them to invite dialogue and give voice and representation to all who wished. The views of the community demonstrated strong feelings about education and, very quickly, the Jesuits determined the need for an affordable and accessible 'Catholic college preparatory high school' in the local community (Donovan and Thielman 2017). 'Cristo Rey' translates as 'Christ the King'; this nomenclature had important resonance for both the Jesuits and the Pilsen community – the bilingual nature of the school honoured the values and needs of the families and students, and it also respected Ignatius the founder of the Jesuits and his abiding reverence for Christ the King (Donovan and Thielman 2017, 5).

Cristo Rey, led by Fr John P. Foley, opened the first school, focussed on serving the marginalised working-class, Hispanic and Latino immigrant families living in poverty in Pilsen. This was the Chicago Province's strategic response to the call to serve the poor. To establish the school, the Jesuits approached local business and commerce leaders to seek their time, skills and, contentiously, their finance. The Jesuits set up a collaborative, a 'working partnership with local corporations

to employ the students in exchange for tuition payments' (Aldana 2015, 179). This model of funding for annual attendance at the school was agreed as follows: 60% from work placement, 30% from fundraising and 10% contribution from the families (equating roughly to \$1000 per family) (Cristo Rey Network 2023; Donovan and Theilman 2017).

The students attend school four days a week with one day on corporate placement (Cristo Rey 2022). Initially, students were offered relatively menial 'entry-level' administrative roles, with their pay being given to the school. This model of work-placement has evolved to work that is highly 'meaningful and transformative' and 'a self-esteem builder' as students experience the value of helping pay for their schooling (Donovan and Thielman 2017, 57). There is also evidence of a positive impact on student attendance because of the motivational work-placement element, with 97% of pupils attending Cristo Rey schools daily. From the class of 2022, 48% of senior pupils were accepted by one or more partner Universities (Cristo Rey 2022).

#### 4. CRISTO REY AND JESUIT EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Cristo Rey schools, as Jesuit institutions, embody some of the key Jesuit educational principles. They represent a firm commitment to the preferential option for the poor and seek empowerment for the young people. Cristo Rey schools relate to the local culture in which they operate and include other cultures and faiths. The schools are characterised by Ignatian pedagogy, spirituality and relationships. The Cristo Rey Network is an expression of Jesuit spirituality and theory in practice; it is faith in action. It shows flexibility and adaptability to what has been discerned as a need; it is rigorous and innovative, working to activate positive change with the poor in a focussed manner. Targeting Black and Latino communities in deprived urban areas of the US is empowerment.

Building relationships with 'educators, businesses and communities' was one of the central aims of Cristo Rey schools (Cristo Rey Network 2023). Cristo Rey schools offer their students a unique work-study programme alongside a highly structured academic education. There is a 'culture of high expectation' in the schools, a culture that is new to many of the students (Bourbon 2015). This school and work experience provides opportunities to foster relationships with God, with self and with others, all of which supports active engagement in the 'mission of social justice' (Aldana 2015, 202). A network of interpersonal, professional expertise and tutelage is provided and one of the keys to the success of this model of schooling is the distinctive role of the mentor. Each student experiences a one-to-one corporate mentoring experience with a designated mentor (Bempechat et al. 2014). This is a significant relationship as Students from a low-income background are less likely to have an adult or peer to support them through the education system. Mentoring, therefore, 'can be a medium through which educational outcomes of low-income students can be positively influenced' (O'Sullivan et al. 2017, 115).

## 5. EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS

In 2006, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops charged Catholic schools to 'be available, accessible and affordable' (USCCB 2006, 266). Scanlon (2008), conducting research into fee paying Catholic schools in the United States, described the traditional 'grammar of Catholic schooling' as a 'cultural construction', one that is inherently exclusionary and elitist in nature and that acts as a barrier to those most in need. This is seen in those Catholic schools where pupils with additional support needs (physical, cognitive, linguistic or financial) and the poor and marginalised are not represented. Scanlon argues for a 'radical catholicity', one that champions the core values of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). This means a commitment to the human dignity of all, the common good and a preferential option for the poor. This 'radical catholicity' is in line with the vision of the US Catholic Bishops. By targeting those from more deprived backgrounds, the Cristo Rey network is a conduit for gospel values and CST to unfold in practice. Arguably, Cristo Rey schools epitomise such 'radical catholicity'. Further, as many Catholic schools in the US face an uncertain future, the popular and well-supported Cristo Rey network has been hailed as a model of sustainability.

Miller et al. (2022) also researched into Catholic inner-city/urban schooling, including the Cristo Rey Model. They acknowledge success in targeting, 'low-income students of colour when the model has been implemented with fidelity', that is, when all those in the community work in harmony for a shared goal; yet they also highlight potential structural and organisational barriers, writing of the 'significant social and financial resources required to operate these network models with (such) fidelity.' (Miller et al. 2022, 499). Some 39% of Cristo Rey students leave at some point during the intensive four years. The Cristo Rey network is fully aware of the hard challenges faced by many students, such as language acquisition, students from single carer/parent families, or from households where students are required to hold down part time jobs or be young carers (Donovan and Thielman 2017). Cristo Rey schools try to provide practical support in these circumstances, including an 'Academic and Support and Assistance Programme' in one school, and an 'Early Bird Academic Recovery Program' in another. This can result in long hours for all involved in the mentoring but the support and nurture for the social and academic development of the students is evident.

Overall, the 'multidimensional nature of relational support' emerges as a key element to the success of the Cristo Rey Network (Bempechat et al. 2014, 246). The positive influence of mentors taking a keen interest in the academic and skills development of their mentee can boost motivation and have mutual, all-encompassing benefits, reciprocal benefits. The opportunity for individual and social growth may occur for the student, with the programme also opening transformative opportunities for the mentor. Sweas (2016) notes that the mentorship programme, 'expands the horizons of white-collar workers as much as it does the students'. Mentors can deepen their skill set of collaborative and

leadership practices; indeed, some mentors even represent a 'father figure' to their mentee (Sweas 2016).

The Cristo Rey approach aligns with Pope Francis' vision of the preferential option for the poor. Pope Francis warns of the converse of this preferential option, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, and a spiritual poverty which is becoming all too prevalent in current free-market economies (Sweas 2016). It is important to recall that spirituality remains a core element of Cristo Rey. Further it is clear that 'some of the very executives who welcome Cristo Rey students into their businesses and hearts may be challenged by Francis' social and economic views' This challenge can be understood to be a positive step. Working actively together *with* the poor and marginalised (not *for* them) combined with insightful and meaningful dialogue, learning, understanding and empathy can all shape the lived experiences of both the corporate mentors and the students. This leads to a culture of mutual enrichment in the mentoring approach of Cristo Rey.

## 6. CRITIQUE OF CRISTO REY SCHOOLS

While acknowledging the strengths of the Cristo Rey schools, there are critiques of this model of schooling. These can be categorised as: the inevitable engagement with capitalism and capitalist values; the expectation that school pupils will work for their education; two (three) tier system in Jesuit schools in America; tensions between insiders and outsiders; clashes in cultural identity.

The financial business model approach to funding the Cristo Rey schools initially aroused disquiet and continues to fuel debate and strong views. The perception is that by engaging with businesses, the schools embrace capitalism and neoliberalist westernised ideology. Writers exploring Cristo Rey cite terminology such as economic viability, expediency, exigency and 'fiscal sustainability' (Burke 2012, 188). In a very striking criticism, Burke likened the approach to that of indentured labour, 'the non-reflective work of corporate drudgery...that prepares... for the docility of obedience rather than the thoughtfulness of leadership.' (Burke 2012, 190).

There are further searching questions about the fact that students are expected to 'work' for their education (Sweas 2016). There is serious dichotomy here in the justice-orientated approach of Cristo Rey schools: students who experience poverty are expected to pay for their tuition. This reinforces the perception that the engagement with unbridled capitalism is counterproductive and inconsistent with the CST and preferential option for the poor. This dichotomy can be analysed further by returning to the words of Pope Francis: industries that 'contribute to the inclusion of the excluded, to the promotion of the last, to the common good and the care of creation' (Pope Francis 2020b). For the purposes of this study, how far do these businesses/corporations aligned to Cristo Rey schools fulfil all four criteria? By participating in the programme, they may fulfil the first two criteria in some way, but questions can be asked about how they engage with the final two criteria.



Donovan and Thielman (2017, 4) point to a two-tier system in contemporary US Jesuit schools, where schools serving the upper and lower-income students continue to thrive, whilst those for middle income students from 'blue-collar families on tuition sensitive budgets' are in decline. It probably would be better understood as a three-tier system: the elite schools; the schools for blue collar families and Cristo Rey, as Cristo Rey schools are so distinctive. As the schools for blue collar families decline, the gulf between the elite schools and the Cristo Rey schools becomes even more marked and creates a strong sense of dissonance. This can be discerned in the early disquiet about the work programme in Cristo Rey schools that did not exist in the other Jesuits high schools (Couture 2007).

The three-tier system creates external tensions but there are also internal tensions within the Cristo Rey schools. Kabadi (2015, 189) comments on elements of 'structural homogeneity, in-group thinking and insularity' in a research study on one Cristo Rey high school. 'Insiders and outliers' were evident in the school community itself, with a preponderance of 'insiders'. These insiders are core, loyal and highly committed staff coming from affluent, successful political, social and economic backgrounds. These are often 'white wealthy males' originating from the traditional Jesuit high school and university environment and exhibiting a strong sense of 'ownership.' (Kabadi 2015, 190). 'Outliers' were the minority and, 'community members who endeavoured to penetrate the insiders' contingent' (190). This is a manifestation of the tensions in Jesuit education (mentioned above) that exist between educating future leaders of society on the one hand and a preferential option for the poor on the other hand. Yet the narrative of the tension in Jesuit education and between insiders and outliers must be balanced with the willingness of the teaching staff in some Cristo Rey schools to accept lower wages than would be earned in other schools and, inevitably, longer working hours (Donovan and Thielman 2017). The insiders are young men and women who have accepted the Jesuit call to be 'men and women for others'. They are the embodiment of 'men and women for others'.

Nevertheless, this tension can clearly flow into relationships between the school and the very community it strives to serve. Tensions can emerge between the school and parental/community perceptions. For example, where a family in need wished their children to remain at home to help as carers or, indeed, to be the main breadwinner. This was perceived to be counter to the success culture of the school. Tension was compounded in the corporate work-experience environment too, where students experienced a 'homogeneity', very different from their own cultural norms and points of reference. Critics argue that 'they are exposed to a world of privilege where they may feel they have to sacrifice their cultural identity to assimilate to the white, wealthy, male world of economic success.' (Kabadi 2015, 195). An alternative view is that the young people need extra support to work across cultures and address the intersection between power and family relationships (Wyttenbach et. al. 2022). These are migrant family relationships which are more rooted in a strong sense of collectivism rather than the prevailing individualism of American life and, rather than be assimilated, can be aided to find some middle ground.

## CONCLUSION

There are several (inter-connected) issues or tensions that have been explored in this paper. One tension is contained within the recognition of the achievements of the Cristo Rey schools, countered by hard questions about the means by which these achievements are accomplished. The work programme comes under scrutiny in terms of the corporate ethics of some of the partners and the fact that the young people must work (not required in more prestigious Jesuit schools). However, in economic terms, these schools would not succeed without the income from the work programme, as this keeps the fees required from families on a low income to a minimum. One issue that needs to be highlighted is that Cristo Rey schools are a unique model of Jesuit schooling. They are *de facto* exclusive in that they are available to young people from low-income homes only, and they are also inclusive in that they accept young people of all faiths (and none) from low-income homes. These Cristo Rey schools are deliberate interventions to support the economically disadvantaged young people and support them into social mobility. Many of the other schools available to these young people do not offer the same possibilities and the same level of support. Further, unlike many government interventions for young people of low economic status in different parts of the world, the Cristo Rey intervention is a sustained intervention that has been successful for generations of young people. This being the case, these schools, even with some well-founded and documented misgivings, are coherent with Jesuit educational principles and demonstrate a radical commitment to the preferential option for the poor.

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