

Immaculate Conception Academy moving to Cristo Rey model

Students learn, earn in innovative system

By Tom Burke

The education tradition of the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose continues at Immaculate Conception Academy with the addition next year of a new look at tuition and preparing young women for life in today's world. The congregation founded the San Francisco all-girls school in 1883.

"If you want good news, you've come to the right spot," said Dominican Sister Mary Virginia Leach, ICA's new president as well as a 1968 alumna. *Catholic San Francisco* spoke with Sister Leach in her office at ICA about what is in store for the school, its students and families as it ramps up to instituting the Cristo Rey model into its core operating procedures with school year 2009-10.

"Cristo Rey is an opportunity to expand what ICA already offers and does well – secondary Catholic Dominican college preparatory education for young women," Sister Leach said. "It will not change that but will expand our opportunity to include students who might not even be able to think about a Catholic high school education because of the cost."

A Cristo Rey high school provides students with participation in a corporate internship program where cooperating businesses employ them in entry-level positions five days a month during the school year. Earnings are returned to the school as a substantial portion of the student's tuition. Through the school/business partnership students acquire job skills, self-confidence and the ability to apply their learning to the everyday world while completing a program of college preparatory studies.

There are currently 19 Cristo Rey schools in the country, two in California. The Jesuit order designed and initiated the Cristo Rey method to benefit low-income students in Chicago in the mid-1990s.

The Cristo Rey expectation is that a student's earnings will cover approximately two-thirds of the cost of education with parents making up the additional one third. In cases where families are unable to afford that sum, financial assistance, much like it is made available today in scholarships, will be awarded. ICA tuition for school year 2009-10 is expected to be in the \$12,000 range.

Beginning with the 2009-10 school year, all new incoming students must meet the Cristo Rey program's low-income requirements. Students returning as sophomores, juniors and seniors who do not qualify will be "grandfathered in" and go on to graduation, Sister Leach said.

"All students currently enrolled at the school will take part in and benefit from the Cristo Rey program," she noted.

The idea that students from families able to pay tuition will be excluded from attending ICA in the future has not been a concern among former students or supporters, according to Sister Leach.

"Alumnae to whom I have spoken about this change have been excited and most supportive," Sister Leach said. "I presented it to my own classmates at our 40th reunion in August and got many positive responses. I do believe what matters most is that all our constituents see this as a 'mission driven' endeavor so ICA can continue what has always been a driving value – providing quality Catholic, Dominican college-prep education for students, especially those financially limited."

Students will be recruited, Sister Leach said. "Our focus will start with schools in the Mission Alliance of Catholic Schools." Sister Leach said many families from areas near ICA struggle with affording elementary school educations for their children and often do not even consider high school where tuition is often double or greater than the grade school amount.

"The Cristo Rey model is an option for the poor in a decisive way that will allow young women to continue or begin Catholic secondary education by partnering in work-study opportunities with businesses in San Francisco," Sister Leach said.

Sister Leach said letters introducing the program have been sent to prospective employers and 25, including the Archdiocese of San Francisco and Seton Medical Center, have indicated a willingness to discuss taking part in the program. Some 65 employer/sponsors will be necessary to find places for all of the school's anticipated 240 students. "Each location will employ four young women, together constituting one full-time employee for the business," Sister Leach said.

Stephen Lanctot, a partner in the law firm of Coblenz, Patch, Duffy and Bass, chairs the board of directors at ICA.

The firm has committed to next year's program as a Cristo Rey sponsor.

"I believe in Catholic education and especially in the inner city," said Lanctot, a graduate of Santa Clara University and the University of San Francisco law school. He pointed out that the jobs the young women will perform are not fabricated to accommodate the program.

"These are kids who will be doing jobs we'd have to hire someone to do if not them," Lanctot said. "Employers will get the benefit of four hardworking ICA students."

"We are looking for employers in San Francisco," Sister Leach said. "We ask any company interested to call me at ICA."

The fact the program is functioning successfully at other locations is a benefit of invaluable measure to new sites, according to Sister Leach. She and ICA development director, Patricia Cavagnaro, will soon travel to Chicago for in-service opportunities.

"Why reinvent the wheel?" Sister Leach said.

A year-long feasibility study on implementing the Cristo Rey model at ICA has just ended. Included in the study were visits by current faculty and staff to Cristo Rey locations throughout the United States.

"The feasibility study is as thick as a phone book," Sister Leach said, noting the Cristo Rey network before accepting ICA into its ranks wanted to confirm all data, including San Francisco's having enough students to feed the school.

"Our people went to City Hall and looked at records about the Mission Corridor which now goes from Chinatown/Tenderloin to Bay View-Hunters Point. Are there enough kids? Yes! Will the demographics support this? Yes! Everything was a go."

Maureen Huntington, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of San Francisco, sees the Cristo Rey addition as very fitting to the City's landscape.

"Cristo Rey is a wonderful opportunity for ICA and the girls who attend," Huntington said. "I am so glad to see them moving forward with this."

Huntington, Catholic school principals and the larger community were among the many who took part in listening sessions and meetings during the last year.

Comments about the new program were solicited from ICA faculty and staff at a recent retreat day led by the president of a Cristo Rey school in Cleveland, Ohio. Responses included: "I'm excited about Cristo Rey," "I'm ready to start," "I'm in," "I'm ready to go," "It is exciting to be part of something new, awesome."

"It feels so good to be back at my alma mater for this exciting new moment," Sister Leach said.