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VIVA CRISTO REY!

A NEW CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL WITH REVOLUTIONARY PLANS OPENS IN SANTA ANA

BY MEG WATERS 8/24/2023



CRISTO REY ORANGE COUNTY WELCOMED ITS INAUGURAL CLASS ON MONDAY, AUG. 14. LOCATED IN THE HEART OF SANTA ANA, THE SCHOOL IS A NEW CATHOLIC EDUCATION MODEL FORMED IN CATHOLIC TRADITION AND IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY. PHOTO BY RENNE ENRIQUEZ/ DIOCESE OF ORANGE

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It was not your typical first day of freshman year. Gone were the bewildered 14- and 15-year-olds hunting for lockers, trying to locate classrooms and hoping to find at least one friendly face in the crowd.



AT THE NEW CRISTO REY CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL IN SANTA ANA, FANS WITH POMPONS AND CLACKERS LINED THE HALLWAYS TO GREET THE INAUGURAL FRESHMAN CLASS ON AUG. 14. PHOTOS BY RENNE ENRIQUEZ/DIOCESE OF ORANGE

At the new Cristo Rey Catholic High School in Santa Ana, cheering fans with pom-poms and clackers lined the hallways to greet the inaugural freshman class of 67 students. The campus is starting with only freshmen, adding one more class each year. It has 14 faculty and staff and is growing quickly.

The principal and all the teachers personally shook hands with each arriving student. Among the crowd were corporate executives – unusual visitors for any campus – but they turned out to welcome not only the new students but also their future employees.

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THEOLOGY TEACHER VINCE PRIETTO TALKS WITH A STUDENT ON CRISTO REY'S FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL.

Known for their academic excellence and college-preparatory curriculum, Catholic high schools have long been the gold standard in secondary education worldwide. Many of Orange County's most successful business and civic leaders hail from one of the county's award-winning schools, including JSerra, Santa Margarita, Mater Dei, Servite and Rosary. Competition for admission is high, yet tuition can be one of the biggest hurdles, especially for low-income families.

Back in the day, parishes often subsidized Catholic schools so more children could attend and get a quality education rooted in Catholic teaching. But a variety of social and economic changes have ended that model. Today, it is all too easy to see the economic divide that limits Catholic education to those who can afford it.

Cristo Rey, in the heart of Santa Ana, is a new Catholic education model formed in Catholic tradition and in partnership with the community, in this case, the business community. According to principal Karelyn Roberts, "Our goal is to get these kids into college, then into a career and finally into Heaven."

The school also has an active fundraising program to raise money for scholarships and support that extend beyond graduation to support them through their higher education.



CRISTO REY OC PRINCIPAL KARELYN ROBERTS WELCOMES A NEW STUDENT ON AUG. 14, THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. PHOTOS BY RENNE ENRIQUES/DIOCESE OF ORANGE

What initially began as a great idea in 1996 grew into a movement. In 26 years, the Cristo Rey network of high schools includes 39 schools in 23 states and the District of Columbia.

The mission, as stated, is to: *“Deliver a career-focused, college preparatory education in the Catholic tradition for students with limited economic resources, uniquely integrating rigorous academic curricula with four years of professional work experience and support to and through college. We partner with educators, businesses and communities to enable students to fulfill their aspirations for a lifetime of success.”*

Orange County is school number 39 in the network, and the third school to open in California. The model works through corporate partners, who commit to hosting four students per academic year at a total cost of \$36,500 or about \$9,000 per year per student. Most companies take a team of four students per year. Each student on the team shares an entry-level position with three other students and each works one day per week at the corporation. System-wide, 58% of the students are Catholic, but all faiths are welcome. The average household income is \$41,000 annually, and 98% are people of color.

Early in the academic year, students will participate in “Draft Day,” where corporations meet with the students at something akin to a career fair to explain their company and the work expected of the four-member team. Students are able to evaluate where their interests are and where they would like to work.

The companies do the same and at the end, they are matched up. Understanding that many students do not have transportation, the school provides vans to usher students from the campus to their workplace. The school also provides breakfast and lunch every day.



CRISTO REY ORANGE COUNTY IS A NEW CATHOLIC EDUCATION MODEL FORMED IN CATHOLIC TRADITION AND IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY.

Susan McKeever, Vice president of the Corporate Work Study Program, has built an inaugural team of 38 local businesses to partner with the students. Industries range from insurance and financial services to development, hospitality, engineering, and government agencies.

“We are especially proud that graduates from the Cristo Rey network are two and a half times more likely than their college-bound economic peers to graduate from college with at least a four-year degree,” she said. “We believe our Orange County students will meet or exceed this graduation rate.”

Currently, the campus is in a rented space at the former Immaculate Heart of Mary school site off McFadden; however, within three years, the school plans to move to a larger facility in order to expand the campus to accommodate up to 480 students.

Steven Holte, president of Cristo Rey OC, hails from Christ the King School in Chicago and has an extensive background in Catholic education.

“Students qualify through financial statements that indicate the family falls within the income guidelines,” he said. “All students are low-income, and families pay between \$25 to \$250 per month depending on income. All of our students have the opportunity to succeed in places that no one in their family has ever been before. They have no limits from economic resources.”

Cristo Rey is located at 2204 West McFadden Avenue in Santa Ana. To learn more, visit www.cristoreyorangecounty.org

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