

***Cristo Rey* Institute United States of America A MPJP Case Study**

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This paper provides a brief case study of the MPJP, *Cristo Rey* Institute, which sponsors schools in dioceses across the USA. This paper is one of six case studies produced by the ACU Inclusive Governance in a Synodal Church (IGSC) project in 2025. It draws on a one-hour interview conducted with two representative members of the Board of Sponsors of the *Cristo Rey* Institute.

The project thanks members of the Sponsor's board for generously meeting with the researchers. Particular thanks to Jen LaMaster, a member of the Sponsor's Board and Provincial Assistant for Secondary and Pre-secondary Education of the Upper Midwest Province of the Society of Jesus, and Sr Vickie Perkins SCL, a member of the Board of Sponsors and of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth.

Process of establishing MPJP (founders and establishment)

The *Cristo Rey* Institute (CRI) is a relatively recent (2017) PJP of Pontifical Right. It is a Public Juridic Person or Ministerial Public Juridic Person (MPJP) of Pontifical Right that is unique in several instances. It is a collaboration between the *Cristo Rey* Network (of schools), and three religious institutes, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, the Clerics of St Viator (Viatorians), and the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits).² Secondly, its board of sponsors is a representation of concerned and committed Catholic laity, ordained and religious. Such a collaboration is enabled through a unique focus on ensuring the provision of *Cristo Rey* model schools for young people in communities experiencing poverty and other obstacles to quality college-preparatory education.³ Such an undertaking is seen within the mission perspective as a participation in the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ. As current *Cristo Rey* Institute⁴ board sponsor Sr Vickie Perkins SCL put it: "We wanted *Cristo Rey* schools to continue and to do so, they have to have sponsors." This point of purpose is put succinctly in CRI's mission statement:

The *Cristo Rey* Institute (CRI) is a permanent body of religious, ordained, and lay people established under the authority of the Pope to participate on behalf of the Catholic Church "in the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ and to continually implement His charism and values, especially to the underserved children and families." It is specifically charged with providing the possibility of official Catholic religious sponsorship for *Cristo Rey* Network Schools.⁵

² This project uses the term "religious institute" to describe the gift of the spirit in which individuals make a lifelong commitment to gospel life in community, framed by vows or bonds of chastity, poverty, and obedience and committed to apostolic service. Societies of Apostolic Life are similar. They may also be called orders, institutes, societies or congregations.

³ Robert Birdsell, "The *Cristo Rey* Story: Serving the Marginalized through Learned Ministry," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 40, Article 24. (2011)
<http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol40/iss1/24>

⁴ Here on the *Cristo Rey* Institute will be denoted by the initials CRI.

⁵ See: *Cristo Rey* Institute Mission at <https://www.cristoreyinstitute.org/whoweare>. Accessed 16/04/24.

Sr Vickie went on to observe that very few religious institute communities are currently taking on the sponsorship of Catholic schools, as Catholic education in the United States is seen to contract under its current funding model.⁶ According to Jen LaMaster, current Provincial Assistant for Secondary and Pre-secondary Education for the Upper Midwest Province of the Society of Jesus and board of sponsors member, this is another unique feature of CRI. That is, the Institute is sponsoring Catholic schools and so growing the system.

While it is beyond the scope of this present case study to explore in further detail either the *Cristo Rey* Network partnership with CRI or the *Cristo Rey* funding model, Jen's point in relation to growth rather than shrinkage of Catholic education, is an important one. Briefly, *Cristo Rey* schools follow a unique funding model sometimes termed a 'corporate work study model'. This model sees the *Cristo Rey* high school student spend some time during the week working with partner companies generating income to enable a high quality, college or university preparatory school education. Initially growing out of the first *Cristo Rey* school in Pilsen, Chicago, the *Cristo Rey* Jesuit High School, the model has grown to become the centerpiece of the *Cristo Rey* Network.

The network has grown to become a type of school district, of some 40 schools, of which 15 are directly Jesuit sponsored. According to Jen, the role of the network is to periodically review the mission effectiveness of *Cristo Rey* schools, particularly around their Catholic identity, but to also be primarily concerned with the educational operations. Jen points out that the network supports the school through curriculum and finances.

Sr Vickie further noted that originally, it had been representatives of the *Cristo Rey* Network that went to different Catholic religious institutes seeking their support in sponsoring a new *Cristo Rey* school for their network. This resulted in three of those institutes becoming willing foundation sponsors so as to found the CRI, which would in turn act as sponsor schools in the *Cristo Rey* Network on behalf of the Catholic Church. It was from the sponsorship of the three institutes that CRI was begun.

As both Jen and Sr Vickie noted, such schools in this model and network require sponsors and so these religious institutes and other committed Catholic collaborators, come together to ensure that God's mission to bring about God's Reign is provided for in different communities across the US where *Cristo Rey* schools are feasible, for the empowerment of young people through education. The Board of Sponsors currently has 17 members, at least three of whom are designated as Class A members representing the founding religious institutes, with other members designated as Class B sponsors, drawn from different engaged communities of support.

⁶ See: Robert Birdsell, "Public Juridic Persons and Catholic Education: A New Governance Model for Catholic Schools" *Cristo Rey* Institute, 2024 <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/public-juridic-persons-catholic-education-new-model-schools-dussman-5doec/>

What is also unique about the founding of the Institute was that when it began it had no sponsored ministries. As Sr Vickie noted, CRI was founded for the purpose of starting schools. So, while founded in 2017 by the three mentioned sponsoring institutes, its first sponsored *Cristo Rey* Network high school, *Cristo Rey* Orange County Highschool opened its doors only recently in 2023. This was followed by *Cristo Rey* Miami High School in 2024. Jen noted that CRI expects to sponsor its third school, *Cristo Rey* Charleston High School, which will open in autumn of 2026. In light of their unique funding model and appropriate due diligence, the founding of a *Cristo Rey* high school follows a process set out by the *Cristo Rey* Network, specifically requiring a feasibility study.

Indeed, there are two key features of CRI sponsorship that are important to highlight here. The first is the point about the necessity of the feasibility study, which would also be a feature of the *Cristo Rey* Network. Sr Vickie notes that as soon as the feasibility study is begun and CRI is determined as the sponsor, two or more members of CRI work closely and collaboratively over a long lead period of time with that local community and the network.

The second point worth noting is one made again by Sr Vickie. She stated that CRI only sponsored schools that couldn't initially find a sponsor elsewhere. From this point, there is an important sense in which CRI's missional role is to be the safe hands to ensure that those communities for which the Network cannot find a sponsor, would not then miss the opportunity to have a *Cristo Rey* model school.

From this collaborative foundation and approach, an essential feature of CRI as an MPJP that emerges is the multiple charisms coming together that are then communicated into their sponsored schools. Jen was clear that the idea was not to create a hybrid mishmash of the three founding charisms, but to provide multiple points of identity that would enable the schools to understand themselves in each of their unique spiritual inheritances, and so from different charismatic perspectives. Although beyond the scope of this present paper, it is worth noting that the charisms of all three founding religious institutes have long histories and periods of testing in their Catholic mission heritage and engagement. Jen suggested that far from being confusing, these multiple charisms provide a strong sense of belonging and identity for the schools, in being a part of a larger institutions beyond the *Cristo Rey* Network, which have a strong history of a very definite presence in the world in three inspired strands. Equally, the charism and mission oversight is another key feature of the role play by CRI in the larger MPJP. This role is exercised through such activities as site visits, regular communications and the cooperation agreements in place.

Finally, it is worth briefly exploring the choice of an MPJP governance form for CRI. There are after all, other formulations for a governance body such as this. To this question, Sr Vickie noted that the MPJP form had a strong history and prevalence in the Catholic health care system in the United States and whilst they were new governance form as custodians of Catholic education, it seemed right to draw upon the wisdom from health care. Sr Vickie further noted that she was unsure if the *Cristo*

Rey Network considered other forms, but by the time she was a part of the conversation, a PJP was the only governance form being discussed.

MPJP overview (current structure/situation),

- ✓ As noted briefly above, CRI's board of sponsors consists of a minimum of three Class A sponsors, representing the three founding religious institutes. A further minimum of three Class B sponsors are also required, who represent committed members of the Catholic laity, Catholic religious and the ordained. As an 'aggregate of persons' (Canon 116), this board of sponsors is essentially constituted not only as a 'board' but as a community of Christ's faithful, the Church, and so representing the Catholic Church in their sponsored ministries as the Church authority.⁷ This is expressed in Article 2 of the Canonical Statutes of *Cristo Rey* Institute as: CRI acts through Members that possess policy-making and executive authority sufficient for the governance of the Public Juridic Person in carrying out its purpose, in accordance with the applicable rights and duties as established by the Catholic Church.
- ✓ Thus far in this early stage of development as an MPJP, all 17 sponsors are volunteers, giving much time and energy to preparing and sustaining CRI's sponsored ministries. Sponsors are chosen in one of two ways. Firstly, Class A sponsors are selected and invite by the founding religious institutes. Thus, according to Sr Vickie, someone represents the Jesuits, someone the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth and someone the Viatorian community. Class B sponsors are invited from within existing networks.
- ✓ Sr Vickie spoke of a person who might be suggested to the community of sponsors through some service such as recognition of their commitment to the mission. From this point curriculum vitae might be collected and reflected upon, conversations of invitation might be had and an agreement reached amongst the sponsors as a whole. Crucially, though, only Class A members representing the foundational religious institutes can approve Class B sponsors. To be appointed a Class B sponsor a person must, according to CRI bylaws, satisfy Class A members in relation to the following attributes:
 - (a) Embody a sense of spirituality and mission;
 - (b) Understand the teaching and faith traditions of the Catholic Church and be in full communion with the Catholic Church;

⁷ Can. 116 https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib1-cann96-123_en.html
§1. Public juridic persons are aggregates of persons (*universitates personarum*) or of things (*universitates rerum*) which are constituted by competent ecclesiastical authority so that, within the purposes set out for them, they fulfill in the name of the Church, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, the proper function entrusted to them in view of the public good; other juridic persons are private.
§2. Public juridic persons are given this personality either by the law itself or by a special decree of competent authority expressly granting it.

- (c) Have, or be willing to be formed in, a knowledge of and commitment to the vision and mission of *Cristo Rey* High Schools;
 - (d) Have an understanding of contemporary Catholic education issues as well as other competencies relevant to the responsibilities of the Class B Members; and
 - (e) Comply with any other requirements specified by the bylaws.
- ✓ The powers of CRI sponsors are similarly worth reviewing since they give a clear sense of its structure but also are suggestive of the way in which Class A sponsors have come together to enable Class B sponsors to carry out CRI's mission. The powers, duties and rights of CRI members are laid out as:
- Class A Members shall have the exclusive power, duty, and right to seek approval from the Holy See for any changes in the Canonical Statutes of CRI; seek dissolution or suppression of CRI from the Holy See; amend the Bylaws; and elect or remove Officers of CRI.
 - Class B Members shall have the power, duty and right:
 - (1) to serve as a member of the governing board for one or more CRI Schools;
 - (2) to provide oversight for and assessment of the Catholic identity and mission of CRI Schools through participation in Mission Effectiveness Reviews to be held annually for the first three years of a school's operation and every third year thereafter;
 - (3) to monitor the manner in which CRI Schools conduct their operations to assure that they operate in a manner consistent with the teachings, ethical principles, and laws of the Catholic Church;
 - (4) to monitor that CRI Schools adhere to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, including pertinent curricular expectations;
 - (5) to monitor the development and integration of the Catholic faith in CRI Schools; and
 - (6) to recommend to the Class A Members any amendments to the Bylaws.

What emerges again is, in spite of nomenclature such as 'Class A and B', an egalitarian sense of collaboration where communities are empowered to join God's mission.

- ✓ It is also worth noting that as Sr Vickie pointed out, while each of the sponsored schools had their own independent boards, the Board of Sponsors retained several 'levers' including the necessary endorsement of key leaders such as school president and school board. Here, these reserved powers were likened to those of religious institute.

- ✓ In the light of these statutory arrangement, it is also important to review the stated purposes, philosophy and mission in approval statutes of CRI for they provide further clarity CRI's governance role described immediately above. The purposes for which CRI has been formed are as follows:
 - (a) To define and authenticate the vision and mission of CRI;
 - (b) To ensure through its governance, policies, and practices that each CRI School operates in conformity with the teachings, ethical principles, and laws of the Catholic Church;
 - (c) To sponsor certain *Cristo Rey* Network schools, consistent with philosophy, purpose, and Mission Effectiveness Standards established by the *Cristo Rey* Network;
 - (d) To participate in the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ
 - (e) To continually implement the charism and values of Jesus Christ, especially to underserved children and families, as reflected in the Gospels, in all facilities, organizations, teachings and programs of CRI Schools; and
 - (f) To provide spiritual leadership to CRI Schools regarding Catholic identity and mission.

Note here again, the centrality of CRI's role in mission authentication and articulation as well as its mandate of mission formation and representation of the Catholic Church in its leadership. This is indicative of CRI's clear and central role in mission formation mandate for its sponsored schools, key to the purpose of its existence as a sponsorship board. Notice also the co-responsibility CRI shares with the *Cristo Rey* Network for mission in their schools. CRI fulfills its mission role in close collaboration in concert with the Church but also with another Catholic organization, namely the *Cristo Rey* Network. From its inception to execution, these statutes and their eight or so years of embodiment in the organization, reveal CRI as a deeply collaborative enterprise clearly bearing the hallmarks of community of communities in synodality. In this synodality, CRI comes to reflect the authenticity in the nature of the Catholic Church itself, providing an important reflexive reflection point to and for that Church. For Pope Francis has been clear about the synodal nature of the Church itself. He illustrates this point when he describes synodality as "... an expression of the Church's nature, form, style and mission... and a place where ... all can feel at home and participate."⁸ In the case of CRI, aspects of synodality are evident, one in particular being evident in both the processes undertaken to enact a shared mission, as well as the actual stated missional intent itself – to create and fosters communities of faith in communion with God who is mission, and whose mission has a Church. In so doing, CRI aligns itself as a moment of Church, ensuring Jesus' teaching ministry is an experience for some of the most vulnerable young

⁸ Francis, *Address of his Holiness Pope Francis to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome, September 18, 2021*.
<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html>

people in the communities in which it serves. Thus, in its governance so far described it becomes possible to write that the Mission has MPJP.

MPJP's current situation (what is working/positive, challenges, how is it synodal),

There are points to note and reiterate in this section:

- ✓ As both Jen and Sr Vickie stated above in different ways, the fact that CRI is working well is evidenced in the successful development and foundation of three new *Cristo Rey* high schools. Each new school has brought about increased learning and growth, such that expertise has grown on all levels of CRI and their collaborating partners. Jen put this in terms of the opening of their second school going very well as a result of the growing knowledge base and having learned from mistakes in the foundation of the first school, which Sr Vickie had experienced some operational leadership problems.
- ✓ The collaboration with the *Cristo Rey* Network is going well, with sharing of knowledge, mutual support and invitations from the network to be in regular communication and to join with the network at board level meetings.
- ✓ Jen also spoke of the members of the sponsor's board leading school board retreats, praying, faith sharing and sharing other knowledge with those groups in their care. According to Jen, doing such activities with school boards is also a critical learning from past sponsorship experiences.
- ✓ Another aspect going well currently is the regular communications with related bishops, particularly with regard to the new school about to be opened. This was a situation in which where the Archdiocese discerned it didn't have the wherewithal to sponsor such a school. As such, CRI was able to step into the place of sponsor and this has been a rewarding experience of bringing to life a new work through their experience and knowledge, for the service of that particular community.
- ✓ Following this point, Jen also noted that the school level, the diocese where CRI schools operate enjoy strong relationships of trust and communication with the local bishop and at times, the parish communicates. In relation to this, Sr Vickie noted from the feasibility study until when the school was operating, CRI overlooks carefully the relationship between the school and local Catholic community. An example of this was making sure the school president is maintaining a good connection with the local bishop and parish if that might be relevant.
- ✓ Sr Vickie also noted the process of engagement and communication, particularly during the feasibility study, as something going very well. During the feasibility particularly, two CRI sponsors spend a lot of time building relationships,

discussing aspects of school project and so being able to make sure the appropriate mission-centered leadership is provided for the school.

- ✓ There was also acknowledgement that after much discussion, the *Cristo Rey* Network was now contributing some money from its foundation towards CRI.
- ✓ There are of course challenges to this last point, given the Board of Sponsors is a volunteer organization in which those sponsors working closely with the schools, particularly during feasibility studies and subsequent foundation, do so by generously giving of their time and expertise. One of the challenges this presents is that it is in danger of narrowing the possibilities of which sponsors can do this work, but also how much work then necessarily falls to those sponsors with availability for non-remunerated work, to carry the MPJP. Further to this demand on time are such features as school board retreats, mission reviews, and site visits.
- ✓ Related to this last challenge is that of needing to have “new blood” come into the sponsorship board. This is the challenge of new growth and inviting new people and so gifts and skills, into the mix.
- ✓ Another challenge has been the nature of sponsor board meetings. Jen notes that they have been very “reporting heavy” and so not as prayerful or intentionally formative in the Holy Spirit as might otherwise have been possible. This has left the sponsor’s meeting times focused heavily on operations reports, leading to the suggestion of a lack of time to intentionally engage together in formation and formative discussions as well as synodal community in the prayer of discernment.
- ✓ A further challenge touched on during the interview was that of the need to consolidate CRI organizational practices and systems. It was noted by Sr Vickie and Jen both albeit at different moments during the interview, that part of the “growing pains” had been the unmet need to put systems in place to regularize CRI processes such as board meetings.
- ✓ A challenge that has been touched upon is the desire to develop a charism that was not a result of trying to merge the founding three contributing charisms, but rather the development of an understanding of charism that reflected CRI itself. Jen put this as a way of being respectful of the fact that the founding institutes were still strong and so dialogue to create something new with their support and wisdom was important.
- ✓ A further financial challenge noted was that of the *Cristo Rey* funding model. Because it relies on students being able to find work with corporate sponsors, it is necessarily limited to larger cities.
- ✓ Another challenge touched upon, was the consideration of the capacity for CRI to sponsor more schools, or what number of sponsored schools would be regarded

as the limit. This was particularly related funding, particularly given that the current arrangements for accompaniment of sponsored schools is dependent on sponsor volunteers.

MPJP's relationship with other Church bodies (incl. diocese, other MPJPs) and

CRI's bylaws mandate collaboration and connection with local Catholic communities in which their schools operate and with the *Cristo Rey* Network, to whom the high schools also belong.

- ✓ In this context it is important to reiterate the value and actual work placed on building relationships of trust with relevant bishops and where pertinent, local Church communities. Jen spoke of the importance of this in her own work with the Jesuits and how this carries over into role as Class A sponsor for the Society of Jesus.
- ✓ It is also clear that the CRI sponsors seek and maintain close working relationships of trust with the *Cristo Rey* Network, to which their high schools also belong. In effect, as sponsors of *Cristo Rey* model of schools, CRI are agents and supporters of the network as a work of the educational mission of the Catholic Church. Indeed, it is particularly to foster such Network schools, for which the MPJP exists. Important to note here, however, is that the *Cristo Rey* Network itself has no oversight of the MPJP but rather, as mentioned above, functions as a type of school district particularly concerned to ensure the school meet their standards operationally to be in the network.

MPJP's plans/hopes for future

The reflection on future plans and hopes during the interview discussion was very much anchored in the challenges mentioned previously.

- ✓ A desire to reflect on what is emerging in this new MPJP to develop a sense of a new charism. This is to continue to undertake to have charism conversation noted previously.
- ✓ Related to a challenge stated above, Jen has hope towards regularizing systems further within the processes of CRI. She noted that she saw this as an important way of responding to the growing pains over the next five year and a response to ensure sponsors might then be able to be freed up for formation and discernment reflection.
- ✓ This last hope and plan led to the hope of sponsor board formation. Here, there was a sense and desire to become more clearly intentional around communal sponsor formation as a Church community. Jen noted that she thought this

important and fair in that if the CRI sponsors were asking such mission formation of their ministries, they needed to ask it of themselves as well. Another level to this was to recognize that the board sponsors also need nurturance in their faith and communal life in order to mission oriented rather than just “ticking mission boxes” in their sponsored schools.

- ✓ A recruitment process is currently underway to recruit a part-time Executive Director. This is a new position with the person being paid to support the CRI Members fulfill their roles.⁹
- ✓ This paid part-time role will also have a part in income stream development. One of the hopes stated was review and undertake connections for the generation of a self-sustaining income stream. Search for and write grant applications was indicated in this hope and plan. It was further noted that while the schools do provide a small amount money there is more than needs to be done in areas such as mission support.

Conclusion

The discussion concluded on a note that returned to an earlier an important point, worth now concluding this case study. That is, at a time when most Catholic education in the US is contracting, the *Cristo Rey* Network is contrary to this, growing. It is doing so through the sponsorship of innovative and deeply collaborative agents such as CRI.

This MPJP is the coming together of a community composed of a majority of concerned and committed Catholic laity, as well as several Catholic religious and ordained members. What emerges from this is something vital, that seeks to support and sponsor the flourishing of ministerial gifts of Catholic lay people in the leadership service of Christ’s mission. That this mission is to provide quality Catholic education to some of the most marginalized and vulnerable young people and their families, is surely music to ears of such pioneer founders as Mother Xavier Ross, Louis Querbes and Ignatius of Loyola. It is certainly vital and sustain synodal music for a Church seeking to be authentic and a sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence as God continues to work through and with human hearts in making provision for Her peoples.

⁹ See recruitment notice: <https://www.cristoreyinstitute.org/news>

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