

## Fr. Alex Steinmiller: Ministering to those on the Margins



*“...the passion for working with this population comes from responding to the sadness that occurs in a family that is struggling with housing, employment and other problems. The feeling that it is just too late. Add to that the sadness of an at-risk youngster that just can’t make it to school.”*

Fr. Alex Steinmiller CP recently spent some time at the offices of the Passionist Earth and Spirit Center in Louisville. We talked about his background and work, most recently with the Holy Family Cristo Rey Catholic High School in Birmingham, Alabama. Alex has been working with marginalized and high-risk people since 1975, when he became involved with public housing and education in Detroit. He formed a team of religious and laity called Life Directions, a nonprofit that addressed the needs of at-risk youth.

For Fr. Alex, the key formula for working with an at-risk person is to connect him or her with someone who is “higher achieving,” as a mentor and guide. This model proved itself in Detroit as well in the work he later took on leading the Holy Family Cristo Rey Catholic High School in Birmingham.

Fr. Alex moved to Birmingham “lock, stock and barrel” in 2006 with the assignment to create a Cristo Rey High School from the Holy Family Catholic Passionist School. Holy Family was founded in 1943 and officially closed in 2007. Three months later it opened as the Holy Family Cristo Rey Catholic High School.

The Cristo Rey school concept was begun in Chicago in 1996 by Fr. John Foley, a Jesuit priest, who was asked to take a classic Jesuit high school education and make it accessible for poor and underserved students. The critical idea is to have students work in entry-level jobs with companies who would substantially commit to them and their formation. The students earn a stipend from this work, which helps defray their tuition and expenses. The Cristo Rey Network has been remarkably successful; by 2020, they hope to serve 14,000 students annually in 40 Cristo Rey schools and have 20,000 alumni. More on the history of Cristo Rey Network is at <http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/page.cfm?p=367>.

In Birmingham, with no experience as a school administrator, Alex brought his considerable passion and engagement with at-risk populations to the daunting task at hand. He knew the

“key formula” and how to work with others who were skilled with at-risk populations. Already having most of the components he needed for the new school, he sought others who could help guide him through the unfamiliar world of school leadership and administration.

The early years of the Cristo Rey project were very challenging. He describes it as a “death, resurrection and pascal mystery process.” They lost their first principle very quickly, another served only for two years, and others quickly turned over because of the difficulty of the work. Alex calmly states the challenge: “Starting a school is not easy, to say the least. There is no formula or prescribed plan. It’s all about seats in the bus and finding the right people for the right seats.”



The school was intended for 13-18-year-olds who are underserved in their communities. For Fr. Alex, “the passion for working with this population comes from responding to the sadness that occurs in a family that is struggling with housing, employment and other problems. The feeling that it is just too late. Add to that the sadness of an at-risk youngster that just can’t make it to school.”

“The Cristo Rey model offers students the opportunity to apply themselves in the classroom but to hold down a job, developing soft skills that they bring back to the classroom. That’s the ‘special sauce’ that makes it all work.” The school breaks the cycle of poverty, in which students feel that the world holds nothing for them and that it is pointless to have long-term goals. “So the hope of the school replaces the stuff that young people go after: sex,

money, drugs, and gangs. The jobs they are doing with businesses offer them both hope and needed life and work skills.”

At Holy Family, it costs \$9,700 per year to educate a student. 60% is earned by the students through paid stipends from their work experiences. Parents are required to pay something and the school fundraises the rest.

It all comes together at Holy Family with “passion, compassion and the generosity of lay people, faculty and organized mentors.”

The results of the Cristo Rey project in Birmingham are impressive. Almost all of the students are people of color and 100% of them have been accepted in college. This is particularly

impressive in Alabama where only 11% of people of color have college degrees. For Holy Family graduates, 37% receive a 4 year degree.

Fr. Alex is thankful to have found a replacement for himself as President: a Catholic priest with background in academics and a degree in theology. Fr. Alex is now looking forward to continuing his work with his other passions, including a long-time interest in nonviolence.

Fr. Alex sees one of our social sins in something he calls “forcism,” or violence, which many see as the key to solving all our problems: abortion, war, police brutality. However, the use of force simply does not work. Forcism also flies in the face of the teaching of Jesus, who met force with forgiveness and so modeled a new way to live.

In Detroit, Fr. Alex was terribly moved by the prevalence of violence around him. Every 18 hours, a youth under 16 was being murdered in Detroit. So Fr. Alex found several others who taught weekly groups in high schools, which focused on de-escalation and conflict resolution – a practical, down-to-earth self-defense strategy against violence on the streets or abuse from a father or boyfriend.

In his work with young people who are at risk, “often it is helping them deal with setbacks and disappointments in their lives.” He calls it the “jack-in-the-box” problem. For youth who have suffered serious trauma, “something triggers the jack-in-the-box, and kids would literally explode at school. We helped teach ways to control their own behavior.”

Another “next challenge” for Fr. Alex has already begun. He has made a deliberate choice to work with “unchurched people” over 18 and under 35. “I am doing that in the Hispanic community, working with a parish part time. We are welcoming to the 25 or so young adults who come to mass and who know others who aren’t going to church. We meet them all, reach out, and open a door.”

These are the “solteros” or single young adults who have no families, have issues with drugs and alcohol, violence and pregnancies, and feel they are living outside the church because of their lifestyles. Many are undocumented and have a hopeless life. “So we offer reconciliation, some hope for the future, and help to reestablish goals. We welcome them back – into the Church or even just to the edge of it.”

Also a 2010 article on Fr. Alex and the Holy Family Cristo Rey Catholic High School here: <http://alabamapossible.org/2010/10/father-alex-uses-relational-ministry-daily/>