

THE TABLET

Cristo Rey HS President's Family Tree Includes Bishop Ford, Sister Ita

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By [Paula Katinas](#)



William Ford at his desk at Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School, Flatbush, helped get the first New York City Cristo Rey school established in Manhattan. (Photo: Paula Katinas)

FLATBUSH — William Ford III, the incoming president of Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School, says he doesn't feel the weight of family history as he settles into his new role; instead, he insists, he just feels "really blessed."

This is despite the fact that Ford hails from a family with a storied history in the Diocese of Brooklyn.

His late aunt, Sister Ita Ford M.M., (1940-1980) — his father William's sister — was one of four Maryknoll sisters who were beaten, raped, and shot to death by military men in El Salvador on Dec. 2, 1980. The sisters had been working there as missionaries helping the poor. Their bodies were buried in shallow graves by the roadside.

Bishop Francis Xavier Ford M.M. (1892-1952), who was one of the first Maryknoll missionaries to serve in China, and who died in a prison camp in 1952, was a distant cousin.

Bishop Ford could be on the road to sainthood. Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio opened an initial investigation into Bishop Ford and declared him a Servant of God. Bishop DiMarzio has received permission from

the Vatican to start the process that could lead to canonization.

For William Ford III, the family history is a help, not a hindrance.

"I have a couple of people going to bat for me upstairs," he said. "They are among the people I consider my heroes and my guides of how one lives."

Ford was appointed in July to serve as president of Cristo Rey Brooklyn. But he is no stranger to Cristo Rey, a nationwide network of 38 high schools that operate differently than most high schools.

Students are in the classroom four days a week. On the fifth day, they work in paying jobs at various companies and corporations. The salaries the students earn are put toward their tuition.

"All of the Cristo Rey schools follow the same model of a strong college preparatory, faith-based education, and character formation, coupled with real-world work experience," Ford said.

Ford has more than 20 years of experience in the Cristo Rey network. He led the initial study to establish the first Cristo Rey school in New York City, which is located in East Harlem and opened in 2004. Ford raised the seed funding to launch the school, designed a curriculum, and obtained a provisional charter from the New York State Education Department. He also served as the founding principal of Cristo Rey New York.

He plans to bring that same energy and enthusiasm to his new post.

"My first task and one I very much look forward to is learning and showing my own gratitude to the great work that has been done already," he said.

Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School, which opened in 2008, is located at the site of the former Catherine McAuley High School on East 37th Street.

"Our students are in a unique position of going out and earning the biggest chunk of the true cost of their education by professional work experience. We have to nurture them and encourage them and then send them proudly forth to continue to march up the arc of their enormous potential," he said.

While he doesn't dwell on his family's legacy, he is proud of it. Bishop Ford died before William Ford was born. But he has fond memories of Sister Ita.

"Ita, in between her missions to Chilean all Salvador, was back in the States. So as a child growing up, I got to know her. She came and stayed with us to spend time with her brother and his family. And we became very close, all of us," he recalled.

The family was devastated by her murder. "It transformed our lives, to be perfectly honest. My father immediately threw himself into using his skills as a lawyer to find out what happened and who was responsible," he said.

In addition to Bishop Ford and Sister Ita Ford, William Ford pointed to another family member who served as an inspiration to him. "My great Aunt Bess, my father's mother's sister, was a Sister of Mercy who took the name Sr. Mary Ita," he said. "She taught art at Bishop McDonnell Memorial High School on Eastern Parkway. The Fords have cherished connections with the Mercy and the Maryknoll congregations."