



Fr. Edward W. Schmidt, SJ, graduated from St. Ignatius College Prep in 1960 and then entered the Chicago Province Jesuits. He earned a BA from Loyola University Chicago and an MS in linguistics from Georgetown University before serving as pastor at St. Robert Bellarmine Chapel on the campus of Xavier University. In 1983 he helped found *Company* magazine and served as business manager there until he was appointed Provincial of the Chicago Province in 2003. As Provincial of one of the ten Jesuit Provinces in the United States, he sits on the board of the Jesuit Conference, which is currently undertaking a strategic discernment process that could reshape the Jesuit presence in the United States.

HOW BEST

THE TEN JESUIT PROVINCES DISCERN A

interview by George Kearney

Q Right now the ten Jesuit Provinces in the United States are participating in something called an “Assistancy Strategic Discernment.” What does that mean?

A It means the ten Jesuit Provinces in the United States are trying to face and respond to the realities presented to us by contemporary times, and we’re trying to face them together. The goal of this process is to determine how we can best utilize the resources we have. Those resources include Jesuits, financial resources, institutional resources, and a huge network of friends and colleagues. So, “Assistancy Strategic Discernment” means we’re engaging in a process in which we’re asking ourselves if we’re using our resources in the most effective way to fulfill the mission the Church has given to us. And if we’re not, can we find a better way?

Q It sounds like strategic planning. What’s the difference between “strategic discernment” and strategic planning?

A Discernment is an Ignatian term that links prayer and reflection with decision making processes. This discernment includes the big things that planning normally includes, analysis of resources, projections for the future, consideration of partnerships, but it also relies on prayer and reflection in a way that a typical planning process doesn’t.

Q Why is there a need to engage in this process right now?

A In the past, very often a Provincial would come in and ask the same questions we’re asking: “Are we as a Province best serving the mission of the Church and is there anything we can be doing better?” In the past this was usually done on an individual basis by individual provincials. Today I think we’re all seeing that the issues facing us aren’t confined to Province boundaries. Every Province is dealing with questions about Jesuit manpower, Jesuit presence in the schools—both in universities and high schools. These are

CAN WE SERVE?

PLAN THAT COULD RESHAPE JESUIT PRESENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

things that impact institutions all over the country and the feeling was that we'd be better served by doing this together. That's why all ten Provinces in the United States and all ten Provincials are working together on this. We're trying to find this future together.

Q So has the whole process been initiated because there are fewer Jesuits or will be fewer Jesuits in the future?

A No. That's part of it, but it's certainly not the only issue involved. In fact, the matter's much bigger than that. It's about our role in the modern world. The world is changing. Mass media and communication have a massive impact. We've got to come to grips with that and we've got to utilize that. In this country there are population shifts and trends in migration. Expectations for educational institutions and educators are changing. Sixty years ago, Jesuit high schools educated white Catholic males. Since then we've made an effort to respond to changes so we can continue to effectively serve. We've restructured many of our schools so we can also educate women. That's what we have to keep doing. We have to keep looking at how the world around us shapes what we do and we've always got to be alert to that question: Are we serving the mission as well as we can?

Q Do you have a sense of what the assistancy will look like at the conclusion of this process?

A I don't have a clue. I really don't.

Q Will there still be ten Provinces? There's been some talk that the number of Provinces could be cut in half to five? Or even to three?

A No, not necessarily. There seems to be an assumption and general perception that there should be fewer provinces. And it's possible that we'll have that result. On the flipside, some Jesuits have suggested that

we should have more Provinces. The appearance of the assistancy—the ten U.S. provinces—could be radically different. But I wouldn't say that's likely. What will be different are some of the other less visible factors of Jesuit life, how Jesuits live together in community and how that feeds energy into ministries.

Q What's the time-frame look like for this process?

A The Jesuit Conference Board, which is made up of the ten Provincials, will issue a progress report in June. Throughout June and July, we'll gather feedback on the report. In September we'll send questions to Jesuit communities and ministries. We'll spend much of the fall processing and responding to those answers. We'll continue this dialogue throughout the winter. By February 2006, we believe we'll have a good sense of the concerns and perspectives of Jesuits, Jesuit colleagues, and Jesuit ministries and we will at that point agree to a plan for the future. At that point the implementation phase will begin.

Q What's the long-term time frame like? Is there a target date for completion of the implementation phase?

A In truth, it's impossible to say. We don't yet know what the plan is and at this point there are far too many variables to even begin to accurately predict a completion date.

Q What will this mean to students at Jesuit schools? Parishioners at Jesuit parishes? Retreatants at Jesuit retreat houses?

A I suspect that folks won't notice too much change. My hope is that when this is all done, they're better served. If the Jesuit order has itself functioning more realistically, it's going to be a better servant of the mission in the schools and in pastoral settings, and then people will be better served.