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The Right Man for the Job?

By Timothy O'Brien, S.J.

In the relatively brief span of my Jesuit life, I have heard the following (or similar) words innumerable times: “We would really love to find a Jesuit for this position...” The context has most often been job searches in Jesuit higher education, for openings as diverse as the institution’s presidency, appointments in campus ministry, and tenure-track faculty positions. By now, I hear those seemingly ubiquitous words with an almost credal inflection; a type of first principle mentioned whenever job talk comes up at a Jesuit institution.

As one in formation for Jesuit priesthood, I confess to various reactions when I hear this. On one level, these sentiments are encouraging. The fact is that everyone, Jesuit or not, likes to feel wanted. Moreover, these search committee confessions are reminders that there is an overarching goal of our long training. We are an apostolic order, and it is consoling to remember that there is good work to be done for the church, for the Society of Jesus, and broader world.

At the same time, a simple but important question sits on the back of my tongue when I hear someone talk of hiring a Jesuit: Why? It seems straightforward enough, but the answer is often elusive. Why does this school want a Jesuit in that particular role? Why is it important that a member of the Society hold this particular post at this time? Why prefer a hypothetical Jesuit to a competent, qualified, and passionate non-Jesuit? At times there will be answers to these questions, and their articulation will help hone the search for a qualified Jesuit. In other cases, the answers may show that the need for a Jesuit is less pressing than instinct suggests.

Yet it is not the institution’s responsibility alone to articulate why a Jesuit is needed. Indeed, full collaboration with our lay colleagues—rightly emphasized by the Society’s leadership—means that Jesuits have at least an equal duty in this process. Looking to the future, it seems to me that Jesuits will have to ask hard questions, individually and corporately, about the overarching apostolic needs and priorities of the Society of Jesus. Given that there are comparatively fewer Jesuits available for mission, asking “why?” is more urgent today than in the past. It will be in this light that the Jesuit and his superiors consider why a particular place and position is the best

use of his talents. The law of opportunity costs makes this an issue we can elide for only so long: a Jesuit sent to one place is no longer available to minister at another university, parish, or other work—no matter how noble and worthwhile.

It is also natural to wonder what effect smaller community sizes, together with fewer Jesuits pursuing doctoral degrees, will have on young Jesuits. Will this encourage or discourage us from entering the higher education apostolate? The final answer remains to be seen. Still, it is helpful to recall that Jesuit university ministry is a ‘vocation within a vocation.’ Young Jesuits, well aware of smaller numbers across the board, have entered the Society anyway. In other words, mission is more important than census for my ‘generation’ of Jesuits. My experience is that men in formation remain eager to serve in higher education precisely because the work is important.

It is common to hear young Jesuits remark that the Society of Jesus we entered will have a different face from the one in which we will live and minister. Precisely what that face will be remains uncertain. What is clear is that Jesuits in formation today are generous and passionate men eager to put their many talents at the service of the Church and the Society, including our institutions of higher education. In the end,

however, this is no longer simply a matter of matching talents with open positions. It is a question of discernment and apostolic priorities. To that end, individual Jesuits will be aided by clear expectations on the part of the Society, and clearly expressed needs from those who would love to hire them. ■



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