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WHY DO I ENDURE ALL THIS?

Challenges to Jesuits in Work-Life Balance

By Mark Scalese, S.J.

It is a truism among Jesuits that the reasons why we enter are rarely the reasons why we remain in the Society of Jesus. Likewise, it is often the case that the work we imagined ourselves doing when we applied is seldom the work to which we end up devoting our time — St. Ignatius himself was but the first and most visible example of this!

That dynamic has certainly been true in my case. When I joined the Society in 1987, I imagined that I would end up working in secondary education. I had already taught art in public school for six years and most of the Jesuits I knew up to that point were the men who taught me at Scranton Prep. I never imagined that I might work as a television producer in the Washington, DC, area after my ordination, much less that I could become a tenured professor at one of our Jesuit colleges. And yet here I am, happily, in the middle of my eighth year at Fairfield University, producing documentaries and teaching film production and cinema studies.

At present, I am one of fourteen Jesuits working here — a pretty healthy number by current standards. While my profile is not as high as our president, Jeffrey von Arx, nor my tenure as longstanding as the chaplain to our athletes, George Gallarelli (nearly fifty years!), my “portfolio” of responsibilities at Fairfield is as typical — and extensive — as the rest of my brothers. And like them, it is a real and enduring challenge to balance my work-related activities with the rest of my life as a Jesuit. Among many other things, I teach a full load of three courses each semester, serve as the director of our New Media: Film, Television & Radio Program, advise about thirty students, live in a sophomore residence hall, assist with campus ministry service trips and retreats, provide spiritual support for the Jesuit Volunteers in nearby Bridgeport, say Mass in a local parish, see four people a month for spiritual direction, and join my Jesuit brothers for Mass and dinner in our community.

As faculty everywhere can attest, I attend a lot of meetings every month: three in my academic program; at least one in my department; one in the College of Arts and Sciences; one for the general faculty of the university; one for the faculty handbook committee on which I serve; four in my residence hall; and two in our Jesuit community. And emails. I receive and respond to a flood of emails every day — from students, faculty, administrators, staff, our Jesuit superior, our provincial, the pastor of the parish, my family and friends, plus even more from Facebook, iTunes, Amazon, my cell phone carrier, bank, and credit card company...whew!

Keeping those balls in the air

The metaphors I use to describe my life are telling: like being shot out of a cannon, or drowning, or swinging from one trapeze bar to the next. Personally, I find it pretty difficult to keep all those balls in the air at once (yet another metaphor!). My day usually begins around 6:30 and doesn't end until half-past midnight. And in between I keep a pretty constant pace, going so far as to eat lunch at my desk to save time. About the only respite is the two hours I spend at Mass and dinner in our Jesuit community, and sometimes I need to forego even those because of activities at the university.

After dinner I usually end up back in the office for class prep or grading or meetings with students, often bringing my laptop home to the dorm where I can continue working in my room. Absent from this litany are any number of activities I enjoy: reading; watching television; exercising; going out to dinner with friends; wandering

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A priest celebrates mass at John Carroll University.

around museums in New York City; or walking through the leafy neighborhoods near our school. And the things I struggle to squeeze in — including prayer, or editing documentaries as part of my scholarship — rarely occur in longer stretches of time when I can revel in them.

Beyond the sheer number of responsibilities I have is how much time they require. Take those 30 academic advisees, for example. In the Jesuit tradition of *cura personalis*, I like to meet with each of them at least twice a semester: once at the beginning for 30 minutes, to assess their academic progress and to discuss their personal and scholastic goals; and once prior to registration to help them select appropriate courses for the following semester. Do the math: those initial meetings alone take up 15 hours! Or because of the types of courses I teach, it can take at least 15 minutes to grade a single student's work in editing, for example. That adds up to a four-hour commitment, just for one class.

Not everything gives life

The trouble is that some of my responsibilities at Fairfield don't give me much life, worse, take precious time away from those that do. Most of that involves the administrative paperwork and logistics that pertain to my role as director of our film and video program: sending regular email announcements to our 100 majors and minors; calling our faculty together and facilitating meetings; figuring out course schedules, enrollment caps, and room assignments; corresponding and meeting with potential adjunct faculty; submitting budgets and compiling data for the department or dean; signing forms for students

who want to become majors or minors. I do not have a secretary, nor did I seek out this role; it was my "reward" from our department for earning tenure. (I did receive a generous raise, but I never see my salary anyway because it all goes to our Jesuit community.)

Another issue is that, as a Jesuit priest, the hours when I am "on the job" don't correspond to normal working hours. Because I live where I work, I am always available for meeting with students after dinner to prepare for campus ministry trips, or saying Mass in my dorm at 10:00 p.m., or making brownies for residents followed by a late-night movie. Most of the time, I don't even get weekends off because I need to prepare homilies for the masses I say on campus or in the local parish.

Why?

Why do I endure all this? Basically, because Fairfield remains a very good place to exercise my vocation as a Jesuit priest. In religious terms, I do it all "for the greater glory of God," or the magis. In practical terms, I want to help others flourish as human beings, whether they be students, professional colleagues, parishioners, or anyone who watches my films. At this point in my career, all of the activities enumerated in this essay have become vehicles — excuses if you will — for loving people. Because of that, those 15 hours in which I cram individual advising sessions are enormously life-giving, not only for my advisees (I hope!) but for me. When I slog through grading assignments, I want to help my students catch a glimpse of their potential, not only as creative artists, but as human beings. Few things are more satisfying to me than watching our seniors struggle to take the vital issues of their life experiences and transform them into capstone films, TV shows, or scripts that move people. When I say Mass in my dorm, even if only 10 students show up, it is to help them get in touch with the mystery at the heart of their lives, the desire for God which they may not even be able to articulate.

I am willing to put up with the tedious aspects of my life at Fairfield because they are part of being a responsible colleague here, but mostly because they include so many other aspects that give me life and joy. Keeping all that in balance is not easy, and I am not sure that I even do a good job of it, but at this point in my life, it is definitely worth it.

And oh, how I welcome summer when it comes! ■