



At Home in the World

As provincial of the Chicago and Detroit Provinces, Fr. Timothy Kesicki, SJ, is on the road more than 200 days a year. He wouldn't have it any other way.

Fr. Kesicki shares his vision for the joining of the Chicago and Detroit Provinces with his brother Jesuits on the campus of John Carroll University, his alma mater, in June of this year.

*by Jeremy Langford
and Julia Arnold-Hess**

When Fr. Tim Kesicki joined the Jesuits on August 31, 1984, he focused on the big picture. “It is always worth remembering that a Jesuit does not simply enter a province as much as he enters the worldwide Society of Jesus,” Fr. Kesicki explains. “From our very beginning St. Ignatius Loyola wanted us to be available to serve the Church wherever we are needed in the world.”

Fr. Kesicki’s sense of mission and availability have served him well for the past 25 years, and are vital to his new role as provincial of the Chicago and Detroit Provinces. The most significant part of a provincial’s work is to visit each Jesuit and Jesuit ministry within his province on an annual basis.

“People frequently ask how I am adjusting to this new mission as provincial,” he says. “The one thing that I can say with absolute certainty is that I am rarely in my residence or office. I am on the road more than 200 days a year. It has reached a point where members of my family call me only by cell phone and begin by asking, ‘Where are you now?’”

As provincial of the Detroit Province for the past year, Fr. Kesicki’s answer was a little more predictable—somewhere in Michigan or northern Ohio visiting the 164 Jesuits and 16 Jesuit ministries of the region. But since being appointed by Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás, SJ, to add to his existing duties the role of provincial of the Chicago Province, Fr. Kesicki covers a greater terrain, visiting an additional 228 Jesuits and 23 ministries in Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and southern Ohio. “Sometimes,” he says, “I have to look at a phone book to remember where I am!”

All kidding aside, Fr. Kesicki is known for his love of travel, energetic leadership, and ability to remember people by name. In appointing Fr. Kesicki to his dual leadership role, Fr. General Nicolás explains: “Practically speaking, this means that the Detroit and Chicago Provinces should now move forward as if they were one province.”

For Fr. Kesicki this phase of the national realignment process, which will streamline the Jesuit Order by reducing the number of Jesuit provinces (regions) in the United States from ten to five, is a sort of homecoming. “Many people remember when the Detroit Province didn’t exist and was part of the Chicago Province in the years before 1955,” he explains. “In one sense we are returning to that era. However, this is one step in a process that will eventually bring the Chicago, Detroit, and Wisconsin Provinces together into a single province. The goal of the realignment is to consolidate Jesuit resources at the province level so that we can make more Jesuits available to serve in our ministries.”



The Kesicki children—(front) Mary and Tim, (back) Michael and Daniel—pose outside of Sacred Heart Church in Erie, PA, on the occasion of Michael’s first communion. “This is one of our favorite childhood photos, because no one is smiling! Our brother Michael was very serious about his first communion,” says Mary. In July of this year (right photo), Fr. Kesicki visited his mother’s hometown of Casoli d’Atri in Abruzzi, Italy.



The sheer labor required to prepare an Italian holiday meal meant that the children learned how to cook at an early age. Fr. Kesicki remembers turning the crank to make homemade spaghetti as a young child. “I loved seeing how food changed form,” he says, and cooking remains one of his passions. In fact, those who have dined with Fr. Kesicki have learned that he is knowledgeable about red wines and where to find a good meal in many cities.

“Tim has a great sense of humor and loves nothing more than to share a great meal and laughter with friends and family,” says Fr. Jim Prehn, SJ, provincial assistant for secondary education who was a novice when he met Fr. Kesicki, then a regent at University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy.

One of the consistent themes Fr. Kesicki hears on his visitations is the call to send more Jesuits. “It is heartening to see how valued our presence is in the cities where we serve,” he reflects. “A key question many people ask me is ‘What do the Jesuits need for us to do?’ It is consoling to know that so many want to assist in furthering our shared mission. Jesuit provinces have changed greatly in the 469 years of the Society’s history, but the mission and overall formation of Jesuits remains the same as it did in St. Ignatius’ day. Whether it is sharing the Spiritual Exercises or bringing fresh water to the poor in Haiti, we Jesuits rely on and are grateful for the support of so many.”

can go out and weed the garden.’ The other kids would complain, ‘Why’d you say that? Now we have work.’”

He was also busy perfecting his playful side. When his mother went to tend her garden, he would be hiding in the tomato bushes, waiting until she was close enough to jump out and make her scream. “That was Timmy,” Carmella affectionately recalls.

A big house with a sprawling back yard, the Kesicki home was often filled with laughter and the aroma of Mrs. Kesicki’s Italian cooking. Raised in Casoli d’Atri in Italy’s Abruzzi region, Carmella loves cooking. “The kitchen was the gathering place,” remembers Mary McDermott, Fr. Kesicki’s sister.

As the kitchen was the hearth of the Kesicki home, God was the center of family life. The family practiced a simple, steadfast faith that led Tim and his oldest brother to the priesthood (Michael is a diocesan priest in Erie).

“My mom and dad put God first,” Mary says. “We had the strong model of our parents’ own faith.” But Carmella notes, “I didn’t force my children to come to church.”

The Kesicki children went anyway, not wanting to miss anything. “The church and parish school were a big part of our social life,” Fr. Kesicki explains.

Yet, it wasn’t until college that becoming a priest entered Fr. Kesicki’s mind. While a student at John Carroll University, he

Journey to the Jesuits

Timothy Kesicki was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, on November 6, 1962, to Robert and Carmella (nee Adorante) Kesicki. The third of four children, he has two older brothers—Michael and Daniel—and a younger sister, Mary.

As a child, Fr. Kesicki was industrious. At age 4 he took apart his new tricycle to see how it worked. At age 10, through sheer determination, he and a friend built a tree house in a scrawny backyard tree. (“It had to be the biggest eyesore,” Fr. Kesicki quips.)

His mother, Carmella, recalls times when his boredom led to extra chores for all four Kesicki kids. “He would say, ‘What are we going to do today?’ and I said, ‘You



Fr. Kesicki pronounced final vows on October 4, 2006, at Gesu Parish in Cleveland, Ohio, with the support of his family: (left to right) Fr. Michael Kesicki, Stephen McDermott, Andrew and Elizabeth McDermott (front row), Mary McDermott, Fr. Kesicki, Robert and Carmella Kesicki, Daniel Kesicki, and Marcie Sanchez.

got to know some of the Jesuits, including Fr. Joseph Schell, SJ, who encouraged him to make the Spiritual Exercises.

As he became more familiar with the Society of Jesus, he felt a strong connection. "I liked the quality of the men I met," he says. Fr. Kesicki also felt the priesthood could provide an outlet for his restless spirit. "I was never a homebody," he says. "I felt a desire to get away, to see more of the world." His decision to enter the Society was unexpected. "Michael was no surprise," Carmella says. "Timmy was. But I never discouraged my kids from doing whatever they wanted to do."

"They were surprised. They always thought I'd make a good husband and father," says Fr. Kesicki of his parents. Still, they supported his decision. "They said, 'If you're happy in this life, then we'll be happy.'"

Indeed, the priesthood has enabled Fr. Kesicki to see more of the world. He spent a year in Uganda with the Jesuit Refugee Service, where twice he contracted malaria ("I grew up a lot," he says of the experience). He has also earned two master's degrees, taught and coached at the University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy, served as an administrative intern at St. Xavier High School in Cincinnati, and taught for four years at Loyola High School in Detroit.

From President of St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland to Provincial

When it was announced that Fr. Robert J. Welsh, SJ, was stepping down as president of Saint Ignatius High School in 2000 after 21 years, a search committee was formed to find Welsh's successor.

Only 37 at the time and lacking administrative experience, Fr. Kesicki may have seemed like a long shot for the position. But Jeff Leitch, who oversaw the search committee, says the committee saw potential in this bright, young, devout Jesuit.

"We had looked at a lot of different people with more experience, but it came down to his love of the priesthood," Jeff recalls. "It was clear he loved being a Jesuit. And he had charisma. Early in his presidency, Fr. Kesicki allayed lingering fears people had about his ability to lead the school. "He stepped into big shoes," recalls former board member Jim Hummer, "and did so with a lot of grace and energy."

"Fr. Kesicki always carried himself as the leader of the school," says Jeff. "It's no

Fr. Provincial Timothy P. Kesicki, SJ



Fr. Kesicki's Parents: Robert and Carmella Kesicki

Born: November 6, 1962, in Erie, PA

Siblings: Michael, Daniel, and Mary

Hometown: Erie, PA

Grade School: Sacred Heart School

High School: St. Mark's High School

University: John Carroll University, University Heights, OH

Major: Political Science

Activities and interests: biking, cooking, reading, and downhill skiing

Date of entry to Society of Jesus: August 31, 1984

JESUIT FORMATION

	DATES	INSTITUTION/LOCATION
Novitiate	1984–1986	Loyola House Novitiate in Berkley, MI
First Studies	1986–1988	Loyola University Chicago
Regency	1988–1991	University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy
Theology	1991–1994	Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, CA
Ordination	June 11, 1994	Church of the Gesu in Cleveland, OH

Ministry and Service Experience: Teacher at University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy in Detroit, MI; Pastoral Work with Jesuit Refugee Services in Adjumani, Uganda; Teacher at Loyola High School in Detroit, MI; Administrative Intern at St. Xavier High School in Cincinnati, OH, through Columbia Teachers College in New York, NY; President of St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, OH; Provincial of the Detroit Province of the Society of Jesus

Advanced Degrees: MA in Philosophy from Loyola University Chicago; MDiv from Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, CA



In a celebration commissioning Fr. Kesicki as provincial of the Chicago and Detroit Provinces on August 30 of this year, Fr. Kesicki thanked Fr. Edward Schmidt, SJ, (background) for his six years as provincial of the Chicago Province.

coincidence that he got tapped on the shoulder at a young age to be the provincial.”

Fr. Kesicki’s warmth made him accessible to many students throughout his eight years, according to Jane Paoletta, his administrative assistant. “He was willing to stop whatever he was doing when someone stopped in the office,” she says. “When he moderated a student prayer group, he had the students come to his office for a pizza party so they would feel more comfortable approaching him,” she remembers.

Saint Ignatius board chairman Fred DiSanto recalls walking across the campus with Fr. Kesicki and observing the number of students Fr. Kesicki knew on a first-name basis. “His ability to remember kids’ names is unbelievable,” says DiSanto, adding that Fr. Kesicki’s friendship will be a quality these students will always remember. “And that makes for a very loyal alumnus.”

“Tim is a born leader,” says Fr. Ray Guiao, SJ, who serves as provincial assistant for formation and was a candidate for the Society when he first met Fr. Kesicki, then a second-year novice. “He’s a man of vision who knows how to call forth the best in others. He fosters a deep love for his own Jesuit vocation and the Christ who calls him to serve, and he is committed to the worldwide mission of the Society of Jesus in service to the marginalized populations of the world.”

Reflecting on his good friend, Fr. Marty Connell, SJ, says, “What especially marks Tim is his devotion to the Society of Jesus, and being a Jesuit means being available to be sent to any corner of the Kingdom.”

As Fr. Kesicki’s younger sister simply states, “Timmy has always been willing to serve.”

Moving Forward

In his remarks at the August 30 Mass commissioning him as provincial of the Chicago and Detroit Provinces, Fr. Kesicki focused on his mission moving forward: “Bringing the Provinces together is not the end, it is the means to an end. By leveraging the resources we have in these three great provinces, think of what we can do for our region and for the world!”



Fr. Kesicki shares his vision at this year’s Companions Dinner in Chicago.

Always quick to put big-picture ideas into practical terms, Fr. Kesicki continues, “If you walk the streets of Cleveland where I lived for many years and you talk about the Jesuits, no one there knows the Detroit Province or the Detroit Provincial Office. If you ask a person on the streets of Cleveland who the Jesuits are, they’re going to tell you St. Ignatius High School, John Carroll University, Gesu Parish, the Jesuit Retreat House, Walsh Jesuit High School. And I believe in every city you’d find a similar answer—we are known by our works, not by our province governance. The merger of these provinces is focused on the other end, which is our great institutions, our great works.”

The realignment is also meant to help the Jesuits of the United States continue to support the worldwide mission of the Society. This past February, Fr. General Nicolás wrote a letter to the worldwide Society of Jesus titled, “The Universal Vocation of the Jesuit,” reminding Jesuits that their vocation is “to go anywhere in the world where there is hope for God’s greater glory.”

“When I think of what this merger means,” Fr. Kesicki explains, “I think of the impact these three provinces will have on the international Society. I believe that through our continued relationship with Patna, Delhi, and Nepal we could be part of building a pluralistic democracy in India that could allow us to evangelize our people. I think that the merger of these prov-

inces could produce a graduate from Loyola High School in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, who could become prime minister of Tanzania and build a lasting peace in that region of the world. Or free men to go to China and perhaps free the Catholic Church from being underground and allow the Gospel to be proclaimed and public. Free men to go to El Salvador and countries like that to help sustain the poor.”

When asked what the future of the Jesuits looks like, Fr. Kesicki says, “if anything, we have our sites set on growth. Our novitiate at Loyola House in Berkley, Michigan, has 22 novices, which makes it the largest novitiate in the United States. We should take great pride in the fact that we have a full novitiate and we have many people choosing to become Jesuits. This year the Chicago and Detroit provinces missioned 11 Jesuit scholastics to teach in our Jesuit schools. We should celebrate these scholastics. Many came to the Society of Jesus because they were inspired by the witness of a Jesuit scholastic. We pray that that same tradition will continue in these men.” Fr. Kesicki also prays that the Jesuits will meet the challenge of evangelizing and bringing the face of the church to a new generation.

“We Jesuits know that we cannot accomplish our mission alone,” Fr. Kesicki explains. “And we thank all our companions for sharing in this new and exciting chapter in the Society of Jesus.” ■

*Portions of this article pertaining to Fr. Kesicki’s journey to the Jesuits and service as president of St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland were excerpted from an article titled “Higher Calling” by Julia Arnold-Hess that appeared in *St. Ignatius Magazine*, 2008, issue 1. Used with permission.