



## **Digest of the Discernments of the Jesuit Communities**

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 2022, Jesuit communities of the Province engaged in communal apostolic discernment, which consisted of a series of spiritual conversations about Jesuit ministry and life in community. Superiors of Jesuit communities distilled the movements and graces of these conversations and shared them with Apostolic Planning Advisory Board. What follows is a digest that brings together the fruit of reflection, and spiritual conversation of the Board, who prayerfully considered the experiences of desolation and consolation shared by the Jesuit communities, their insights regarding a reimagined apostolic future and their emerging apostolic interests when considering a new Apostolic Plan.

The Board has prepared similar digests of the regional gatherings of lay colleagues and Jesuits and the gatherings of Jesuits in formation. We encourage you to read them on the [Apostolic Planning website](#).

These digests will help the Board as they draft an apostolic plan for the Province, which will include specific objectives, timelines, and accountabilities. In their drafting, the Board will seek further input from Jesuits and lay colleagues. An email will be sent next week detailing how the apostolic planning process will continue with its consultations.

The voice of this report, “we,” are the members of the Advisory Board for Apostolic Planning, who address the Jesuits of the USA East Province.

## **1. Movements of Spirits in the Jesuit Communities**

### *Expressions of Spiritual Desolations/Sense of Fear or Foreboding*

We acknowledge the desolation experienced and characterized as feelings of fear or foreboding, resistance, hostility, cynicism, and sadness that emerged concerning the planning process and issues surrounding it.

In particular, we recognize your skepticism of the Apostolic Planning process itself. The focus of your conversations, you reported, did not address concrete issues, and so did not produce what's needed for actual decision-making. Without concrete proposals and real data, you expressed concern that you were engaged in a dreaming process that was out of touch with reality, raising the possibility that, as one community reported, "we would be simply rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

You also expressed your worry that given the magnitude of apostolic need and your over-identification with institutions, that you will lack freedom and indifference needed and leadership will experience a decision-making paralysis. This planning process will then go nowhere. Criticism for not including the Constitutions as a guiding document in discernment was also expressed.

In addition, you expressed your weariness regarding the retrenchment narrative; worry over the ongoing secularization of your institutions and the ensuing decline in their apostolic vitality; sadness over the loss of your voice in the very institutions founded by the Society of Jesus; and concern that the low degree of familiarity among the three heritage Provinces will hamper planning.

Finally, you expressed distrust in leadership perceived to be neither thoughtful nor prayerful in their closing of the Camden "JUST" mission, Wheeling University, and the Wernersville novitiate; and fear that the Province leadership will lack necessary decisiveness thus straining community life and causing your apostolates to continue lacking vitality.

### *Expressions of Spiritual Consolation / Sense of Joy and Gratitude*

We acknowledge the consolations you experienced and characterized as feelings of joy, hope and gratitude, which emerged regarding the planning process and surrounding issues.

We were gratified to learn that you felt your conversations were animated by the Spirit and were experienced as energizing, bonding, grace-filled, productive, empathetic, gratifying, edifying, hopeful, fruitful, and evoking gratitude. The experience of listening and being heard, you reported, fostered an appreciation for the faith journey and apostolic work of your brothers in Jesus Christ which is a source of enduring consolation. Going forward, you expressed a desire to improve your listening as a means to improve

your apostolic work. The spiritual conversations were, as one community report expressed it, “positive and consoling experiences for us as a community.”

Your conversations sparked a desire for closeness and companionship with God; to discover your needs as a community to reach out apostolically; a renewed desire to bring others to Jesus. It was an opportunity to express gratitude for what you have done in the past and an eagerness to continue in the present, guided by the UAPs, which you consider a gift from God.

Regarding the future, as men of the Spiritual Exercises steeped in a tradition of a life-giving Spirit, you expressed your openness to and acceptance of change, and acknowledged that major changes in your life and ministries are necessary and inevitable now and not in the next generation the Jesuits. You face this future with a shared vision and hope, freedom, and trust in Jesus Christ. As one community expressed, “we are not only open to change, but recognize that if we do not change, we will die as an organization.”

You expressed, too, a willingness to adopt simpler lifestyles and described a sense of joy and adventure when considering apostolic planning. You continue to find consolation when encountering in your ministries those who are poor and underserved, Christ poor and humble.

You hear the “cries of the poor” and desire to extend your apostolic reach though your choice of lifestyle and ministries guided by the UAPs, which you consider a gift from God and a source of inspiration to you and your lay colleagues.

Centered on Jesus Christ and opened to the Spirit, with humility and vulnerability, you believe that you are willing and able to deepen your relationship with Christ and make the necessary communal and apostolic sacrifices. Experiencing deeper openness, flexibility, and freedom, you have great confidence that Society will continue to rise to the challenges in the Church.

Finally, you expressed in this or other similar terms a “strong and joyful conviction that what we are doing and how it is unfolding is God’s plan in which we are the instruments, not the masters. Our hope is in the Risen Lord, not in ourselves or our institutions.” And, in your sharing you experienced what you imagined Ignatius and the first companions experienced: discerning with hope amidst few resources and men - producing both a cautious optimism that the apostolic planning will be fruitful and hope that the Provincial will articulate well a vision we all can support.

## **2. Institutions in the Midst of Contrasting Valuations: *Promising Apostolic Platform “and” Threat to Living Our Charism***

As an Apostolic Plan is constructed, we believe that your reflections centered on Jesuit institutions as reported by the superiors and consultors revealed contrasting valuations

of their apostolic efficacy. Those reflections focused on institutional susceptibility to external forces; loss of influence and control; institutional entrenchment; institutions as apostolic platforms; new roles for Jesuits in Jesuit-sponsored institution, and our inevitable disaffiliation from some.

Various versions of “Reimagine, don’t rebuild” were a recurring maxim.

We appreciate the reality that Jesuit institutions, especially the universities, are secularized with little the Jesuits can do to reverse the trend. As one community expressed, “In our higher education institutions, we fear that if we Jesuits do not speak the name of Jesus then no one will.” Your loss of voice and the experience of marginalization within the very institutions you founded, we noted earlier, evokes feelings of desolation. Because so many Jesuit institutions are beyond your control and influence, you think apostolic planning will not be about the future disposition of these apostolates or institutions but, rather, the assignment of younger Jesuits to the impossibly large number of institutions bearing the name “Jesuit.”

Despite the encroaching secularization, there was conviction expressed that your institutions do remain apostolically effective. But they are apostolic means and not ends, therefore, you must discern how your institutions can best respond to those living on the margins, how to be places of better access, inclusion, success, and care for the whole person. While outside your legal control, they do have the resources to meet the underserved. This will require the spiritual formation of lay leadership and discernment as to which institutions more effectively advance the UAPs. This will influence, too, the distribution of Jesuit manpower.

And even though your institutions remain apostolically effective, you expressed a desire to move the Province’s attention away from elite institutions; to venture beyond your traditional structures, works and living situations into new and innovative endeavors at the margins, at the frontier; to rethink your traditional ministries in new contexts, among new populations. You envision an apostolic plan that encourages your younger men to work in ministries that focus on those who are marginalized.

You expressed concern that because they often house and employ you, your dependence on institutions can compromise your freedom and silence your independent and prophetic voice. Your identity as Jesuits, you cited, is more important than the identity that comes from association with a particular apostolate.

As viable apostolic platforms, you believe the institutions give you privileged entry into the lives of youth, parents and stakeholders and are a means to encounter those who are marginalized and serve those who are poor. The resources of your parishes, schools, colleges, universities, spirituality centers have been directed to serving the poor. Schools can help break the cycle of poverty.

But you recognize, too, there must be a new role for you in Jesuit-sponsored institutions. You must work to ensure that your Jesuit vision is carried on. You believe you are being

called to be present to Jesuit institutions in new and different ways. You are eager and open to accompany rather than administer, collaborate rather than lead, influence rather than control, support rather than direct. You are eager not to be priests in charge but partners in mission, builders of community.

You believe that an increase in the apostolic effectiveness of your institutions can occur if you can re-imagine yourselves, in light of the Universal Apostolic Preferences, as freer and more creative Sons of Ignatius, and as men of faith, models of character, voices of hope, community builders, agents of change, intercultural, collaborators across institutions, listeners, sharers of vision, spiritual guides.

Finally, you acknowledge that disaffiliation from some Jesuit-sponsored institutions is inevitable. You recognize, with urgency, that you cannot maintain your presence at all your institutions. As one community expressed, “We need to let some of our institutions go rather than wait for time to take them from us.” You are being forced to make concrete choices. You are faced with the questions: Is the mission accomplished? How do we know? How free are we to let go? Have we prayerfully discerned?

### **3. A Reimagined Apostolic Future**

You acknowledge that change is inevitable. Your conversations around change centered on the spiritual dispositions needed to make change and the types of change needed in community life, ministerial style, and in missioning of Jesuits.

#### *Types of change*

We understand the desolation emerges from the difficulty, complexity, resistance, and implementation around concrete change. The following are the types of changes you discussed across Jesuit communities.

First, change in community life. You observed that openness to a future apostolic mission necessitates an openness to change in your communal lifestyle that is in accord with the UAPs, especially in “Showing the Way to God.” To this end, you envision community life that is simpler and fosters the sharing of goods; has a wider hospitality; and positions you alongside those who are poor so that you may bear credible witness; and identify with and experience their concerns. You believe this, too, would hold you more accountable, increase fraternity and create communities that are psychologically, emotionally, physically, and spiritually nourishing. As one community observed, “We are encouraged because we already see this happening among us.”

Secondly, change in your ministerial style. The maxim noted in the previous section on Institutions, “reimagine, not rebuild” is repeated here as well. You believe that your hope in Jesus Christ and your Ignatian grounding affords you the freedom and openness to be present to our apostolates in new and different ways. You acknowledge that you must reimagine your roles as supporting not controlling. This includes increased collegiality with

and spiritual formation of lay colleagues as they assume more and more of the responsibility for the apostolates. Your apostolic involvement, you state, necessitates “more and more collaboration.” And while you “desire to labor still in traditional Jesuit ministries of teaching, spiritual direction, retreats, and accompaniment of the sick, dying, and marginalized,” you “leave open the possibility of offering these ministries in new contexts and to new populations.” You think, too, your current apostolates can be re-imagined with more freedom and profound creativity in light of the Universal apostolic Preferences.

Thirdly, change in the missioning of Jesuits. Here you envision an apostolic plan that would encourage your younger men to work in ministries that focus on the marginalized in our society.

#### *Your spiritual disposition for facing change*

Acknowledging that concrete change in the near future is necessary and inevitable, your spiritual disposition toward change can be characterized as flexible and free, and, as one community put it, “cautiously optimistic.”

“First and foremost, there is a sense of hope,” a degree of optimism and consolation rooted in your Ignatian identity, your shared vision and confidence in the Spirit that allows you to look forward with trust. Your ability to risk, you believe, is in proportion to your trust and reliance on the person of Jesus Christ as individuals and as a community, humble and vulnerable.

You describe a feeling of freedom and openness to the future. Expressed were the freedoms to change your way of proceeding; to “detach from your usual and habitual ways and your sense of entitlement;” to adapt in ways that usher in meaningful change in work and lifestyle; to reimagine your relationship with institutions; and to allow the future to permeate your discussions. You expressed a willingness, as one community observed, “to discipline your egos” and embrace our identity as Jesuit rather than aligning it with an apostolate.

As religious men, you recognize that the need to be available will incur sacrifice regarding where you work and how you live. But you believe your hope and trust in Christ, recognition of your diverse talent, fraternal care for each other, and your common prayer will aid your flexibility in decision making. As one community put it, “we are steeped in a tradition of openness to a life-giving Spirit who continuously invites us to depth, openness, creativity, and transformation.”

Despite the perception that the Province is institutionally oriented and focused on maintaining the *status quo*, there was a general feeling among you that major change is possible in the life and ministries of the USA East Jesuits.

#### **4. Embracing the future: An Imminent Paschal Journey into Sacrifice and Re-founding**

*[Note: The word, “sacrifice” did not appear once in the reports from the Regional Gatherings.]*

We see sacrifice as an inherent component of religious life. What is sacrificed inevitably evokes feelings of loss and its accompanying grief. The following are the anticipated sacrifices that you have identified that will be asked of you if and when change occurs in the life and work of USA East Jesuits. They center on withdrawing from apostolates, transition to re-founding, and changes in lifestyle.

First, when considering withdrawing from apostolates you voiced a desolation around the reality of your diminished numbers and less than effective apostolates and recognized a need to let go of some apostolates, of institution you founded. There is a sense loss and an anticipated grieving process. As one community observed, “Sacrifice is part of religious life. When we [discover] our mission, then and only then, we will know what sacrifices the mission will entail.” There is recognition, too, that your new mission will demand “sacrifices some would rather not make.”

While you express a certain sadness when you look at your declining numbers, you also see that the Society is very much alive and forward-looking. You seem energized and hopeful around re-imagining your apostolic future in light of your history. Often, apostolic works begun by Jesuits were successfully carried on, with God’s grace, by lay leaders and partners. You acknowledge that you are engaged in that process today. “‘Sacrificing apostolates’ so that we can, according to our Institute and Constitutions, best serve those who ‘will best serve the Church.’ The reality of the global Society is exciting, and hope filled. Grace is clearly abounding. We feel affirmed in what we are doing.”

You acknowledged that a reimagined relationship with institutions will incur sacrifice as it will require changes in lifestyle. You recognize that less dependence on institutions will have ramifications: incurred financial sacrifices; being put in positions of greater vulnerability; possibly requiring you own your own living spaces; and assuming responsibility for all household tasks. In exchange, as one community put it, “we will be less compromised vis-à-vis the apostolate.”

#### **5. Areas of Apostolic Interest Emerging from the Jesuit Communities**

As Jesuits in the USA East communities, you did as Father General asked: pray over and reflect together on your life-mission with Universal Apostolic Preferences at the heart your discernments about your shared apostolic future.

From this experience we understand that you experienced an invitation from the Spirit calling you toward greater freedom. You have embraced this opportunity to examine your current ministries in light of the vision of the Universal Apostolic Preferences. And, that you understand them to be “a gift from God,” the foundation of your discernment and

inspiration for creatively reimagining your future. You believe, too, that the Universal Apostolic Preferences give you a way to define and communicate your apostolic concerns and needs for yourselves and your lay colleagues.

We will now turn to the areas of apostolic interest you highlighted; all of which are at the heart of the United Apostolic Preferences.

### *The Spiritual Exercises and Spiritual Ministries*

As men of The Spiritual Exercises, you know that they are at the heart of your charism, your way to God and your way into the world, a path toward vocations. As such the Spiritual Exercises and related spiritual ministries constitute “Showing the Way to God” and are, you state, your apostolic priority.

The Spiritual Exercises, you believe, root you in a tradition of openness to the Spirit. They are the tool by which Ignatius drew his first companions and ignited their apostolic fervor. Through the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, you discover your life in Christ, and forge your identity as individual Jesuits and as a community. They are an instrument employed throughout the ages in every apostolic effort.

As they are your greatest gift, you believe you need to find new and innovative ways to share the richness of the Spiritual Exercises and Ignatian Spirituality with the Church, with your lay colleagues and with those you serve. You especially need to explore the use and potential of technology and social media platforms as well as create spiritual centers that reach out beyond your current retreat houses into a variety of settings. You know you must use your current apostolic platforms with more intention and deliberation in bringing people back to the Church.

To ensure that your institutions, under the direction of lay leadership, remain Jesuit - that is, that the policies, practices, and decisions are informed by and reflect the value and vision of the Spiritual Exercises - you “encourage Jesuits to learn how to give the Spiritual Exercises and give spiritual direction.” Jesuits, regardless of their apostolic mission should be able to give the Exercises.

As it is your apostolic priority, you see the need for programs to deepen the formation in Ignatian Spirituality at all levels of Jesuit formation; and a deepening and ongoing re-tooling in the Spiritual Exercises, preaching and presiding. You say you are “no longer given a pass” for substandard ministry of the Word.

You see the Spiritual Exercises as your means to “show the way to God,” to “form men and women who love Jesus Christ and His Church and who seek to sanctify the world.”

The Spiritual Exercises, too, you contend, must be seen as more than a tool but as an invitation to an experience of transformation. They are a means to accompany youth, especially young men who might consider a vocation.



### *Accompanying Youth and Young People*

Accompanying youth and young people is your tradition, your expertise, your mission. While you may be concerned with the vitality of their Jesuit and Catholic character, your institutions that serve the youth and young people should, you affirm, be retained, especially schools. You should review in what cities we have been most effective. It is your conviction that caring for the souls of youth, walking with them into a hope-filled future means providing those students who are poor the education that can lift them out of poverty. It means, too, you meet and respond to the spiritual hunger and needs of youth with the gift of Ignatian Spirituality. You show them the way to God.

You especially want to increase the accessibility of your schools, broaden your outreach to those students who are poor or marginalized, immigrants or refugees, who are underserved.

### *Walking with the Excluded*

Acknowledging that you “are men of privilege”, you desire to reclaim the apostolic drive and dream of the “early Society”, a small group of men engaged in a variety of ministries always with a preferential option for the poor.

As you listened to the cries of God’s people, you desire to walk with the excluded, to align yourselves and accompany those who are poor and who are in the margins, to be open to the gifts they can give you. You recognize the need to learn how to better encounter and better welcome the poor into our lives and into our communities.

You say, too, you need to reimagine community life so that that it gives a more credible witness to your mission. You need to simplify your lifestyles, to live in, be embedded in the communities that you serve, to experience for yourselves the difficulties of being poor in our society.

You affirm that “starting with those poor and in the margins in our own institution, we need to meet their spiritual, sacramental, educational, and social justice needs.” You believe you should “utilize social media” and your resources in your service of this mission and “use our critical thinking skills” to examine the apostolic effectiveness of your apostolates in carrying out this mission.

You need to find and sponsor ministries to those who are poor and work more closely with the local church and organizations who minister to people on the margins. You need to become more aware of the global realities of poverty.

Finally, to meet the needs of an expanding Hispanic Catholic population in our Province, you think must be better prepared to minister in Spanish.

## 6. An Uplifting Rediscovery of Jesuit Life

As noted previously, changing your approach to ministry from power and control to support and collaboration will have an impact on your community life as well. But whether smaller, multi-apostolic, institutionally housed, fiscally constrained, separately owned, on a campus or in a poor neighborhood, you contend that your first priority and ardent desire is that your community life be fraternal and healthy. As one community observed, “healthy community life is foundational to personal well-being and apostolic effectiveness.”

To deepen the bonds of brotherhood and community, you state that you need to pray together, listen to each other, share your faith, discern your mission together, learn how to be present, how to take care of each other, be confident that you are each willing to give yourselves to the common good, put aside ideological battles, engage in shared projects, share in the responsibilities of daily life, know each other, know each other’s hopes and dreams, especially those of the young Jesuits.

You desire to discern the way forward through communal conversation. As you head into an unknown future, you affirm the process of spiritual conversation as a means to deepen the bonds of brotherhood. You would like to incorporate this way of proceeding more regularly in your common lives.

And if your reimagined ministries evoke a call for our communities to be centers of hospitality, to be more open, more welcoming, and more public, you will be better able to do so if you are living in healthy and balanced communities that model fraternal support.

## 7. Renewed Governance for Renewed Mission

Jesuit life and governance are topics that have emerged in apostolic plans across the globe. While they may be seen as secondary considerations, the relationship between them and an apostolic plan seems inevitable. The composite view of the following reflections is far from comprehensive and certainly does not offer a blueprint for our Province going forward. Even though this is the case, we may still see specific decisions about governance in the apostolic plan.

### *Cura personalis: 600 Jesuits and One Provincial*

You expressed a concern that the size of the USA East Province impedes the practice of *cura personalis* as reconfiguration of the three heritage provinces does not allow for the Provincial and the Province leadership to know well the men they serve and, on whose behalf, they make decisions.

You expressed that the planning process is focusing on works and institutions over Jesuits. By reversing these priorities, the Provincial would be caring for the individual Jesuit, enhancing that Jesuit’s creativity and apostolic outreach.

### *Cura Apostolica*

With an agreed need for change, you expressed, a sense of urgency toward concrete, if painful, decision to be made; a fear of paralysis at the leadership level; and worry that Province leadership will not be decisive enough.

The Planning Process has also revealed a common desire to collaborate or work together. You appreciate that you are capable of discerning future initiatives together.

You see the Spirit calling you to let go of control and, as one community expressed, “allow decision making at the local level (subsidiarity) with the province providing resources and guidance to the local communities and communities providing resource and guidance to members.”

You expressed a concern that many of your lay colleagues might not be that aware of the hierarchical structure of the Society of Jesus and, that in “our consultative hierarchy,” the ultimate decision maker is the Provincial. Some concern was expressed in managing expectations when lay colleagues confront the reality that “we are not a democratic organization.”

### *Governance and Lay Leadership of Jesuit-Sponsored Institutions and Organizations*

You see the need to entrust your mission to your lay colleagues by investing in them as real partners, participating in their ongoing formation. Forming lay leaders in both the Spiritual Exercises and in the Constitutions is an urgent need.

### *Care of the Apostolic Vision*

A community shared a great hope that, whatever the result may be of your Province’s Apostolic Planning, “the Provincial will be in a position to articulate well a vision we all can get behind.”

### *Spiritual Conversation Model of Communal Apostolic Discernment as a Tool for Local Governance*

You expressed a willingness to try new things, to innovate and to act. We observed this strong desire for “more coordination and more cooperation” among you, and to “discern the way forward in communal conversation.” There is, too, an openness to initiatives and directions which come through Jesuit leadership. “This openness to an apostolic future also includes a commensurate openness to changes in the communal lifestyle that affect the apostolic mission.”

### *Reorganize the Provincial Curia*

You perceived a need to reimagine and restructure provincial offices which have become heavily bureaucratic and impersonal thus lacking in the *cura personalis* that should

characterize Jesuit governance. The Provincial staff should be restructured to increase lay personnel and reduce the number of Jesuits on staff and the number of superiors, etc.

Given multi-apostolic apostolates, the Provincial should consider regionalizing the Provincial Assistants by area rather than by sector.

### *Missioning a Jesuit*

You recognize, “that a natural tension can exist between an individual Jesuit’s desires and the needs of the Society and the Province.” But that there is a need to “move away from the ‘slot mentality’ of replacing one Jesuit with another. Some of you expressed a distrust in the missioning process since you have the experience of being unknown to the Provincial and not heard by leadership.

“Our younger Jesuits desire to be missioned wherever there is a need. They realize that this is the source of their being truly free as a Jesuit.”

“There is a common perception that few Jesuits are missioned to work with the poor in the Province. Younger Jesuits who express interest in ministry with poor need to be supported and encouraged to do so.”

### *A Special Responsibility of the Provincial: “Founding” the USA East Province*

One community encouraged the Province “to continue the slow process of knowing itself before final decisions about our future are made.” The three heritage Provinces, recently merged, are “still congealing, and [the emerging Province] is coming to know itself, its attachments and freedoms, and its strengths and limitations. This [lack of familiarity] was compounded by Covid-19 mandates.” More time may be required before making concrete apostolic decisions. Knowing yourselves better as a Province will allow you to “more clearly and effectively engage” in your apostolic work and form “lay colleagues who collaborate with us in the work that the Church asks of the Society.”

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