



## **A Digest of the Discernment of the Regional Gatherings**

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 2022, lay colleagues and Jesuits of the USA East Province engaged in communal apostolic discernment, which consisted of seventeen regional gatherings focused on spiritual conversation about the apostolic future of the Province. The Conveners distilled the movements and graces of these conversations and shared them with Apostolic Planning Advisory Board. This document is a digest that brings together the fruit of reflection and spiritual conversation of the Board, who prayerfully considered your experiences of desolation and consolation, your insights regarding a reimagined apostolic future and your emerging apostolic interests when considering a new Apostolic Plan.

The Board has prepared similar digests of the Jesuit community discernments and the discernment of the 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 Advisory Board will continue its consultations.

The voice of this report, “we,” is the Advisory Board for Apostolic Planning, who address the participants in the regional gatherings.

## **Section One: Consolations and Desolations**

In your prayer prior to the regional gatherings, you experienced both consolations and desolations in regard to the process and implementation of USA East Apostolic Plan.

### *Desolations: Considerations from which spiritual desolation emerged*

We acknowledge the desolation you expressed, characterized by feelings of trepidation, foreboding and skepticism that emerged over the course of your Regional Gatherings.

Regarding the Catholic Church, participants expressed despondency and desolation over the enduring wounds of sex abuse crisis; the ambivalence of the young toward the Church; and polarization in the Church in the United States which is often experienced as a lack of charity and justice toward the marginalized, especially women and members of LGBTQ communities.

The following tendencies were cited as rendering apostolic work ineffective, and thus, a source of desolation: unreflective hyperactivity; over-focus on institutions; transactional relationships with individuals, family and donors; a lack of collaboration among institutions; institutional structures that impede creativity; unreflective program expansion; and our failure to hold ourselves accountable to mission.

You cited that societal divisions, competitive marketplace, pushback from parents, students, and donors all contribute to your inability to balance the need for financial support against Gospel demands. You experience a hesitancy to challenge power structures.

You expressed frustration around the hesitancy by Jesuits to value lay collaboration for its particular gifts and contributions rather than as a solution to the dwindling number of apostolically active Jesuits. This, you believe, restricts empowerment of lay colleagues, and thus damages apostolic effectiveness.

You were clear that the Apostolic Plan's implementation will undoubtedly bring with it the experience of loss and subsequent grief. You expressed worry that you will not grieve well if you don't understand the process as a paschal experience.

### *Consolations: Considerations from which spiritual consolation emerged*

Characterized by feelings of joy and gratitude, consolations emerged, "a positive spirit filled the entire day."

You recognized the challenges inherent in Apostolic Planning but affirmed the positive spirit of companionship and cooperation present. You experienced energy, hopefulness, joy, empowerment, commitment to truly discern, a sense of inclusion, and gratitude.

We sensed your strong desire to strengthen the Ignatian mission in our institutions and a hope that the commitment, creativity, imagination, and innovation of Jesuits and lay colleagues together can create bold and prophetic centers, places of faith, hope, and love. You believe that our institutions can be places of welcome especially for those feeling wounded or alienated, as one report put it, “soft places to land for the People of God.”

Although seen as profoundly daunting, the Universal Apostolic Preferences (hereafter, “UAPs”) generated a sense of excitement and hope among you. The UAPs give direction and definition to your purpose as you focus on reading the signs of our times and listening to and responding to the cries we hear.

There is value, you contend, in expanding self-identify beyond institutions to a region; making richer and deeper connections to the different apostates in a region; strengthening ties to other Jesuit works; and having connections to people with shared experiences and goals; thus, creating different kind of community, a different kind of apostolic effort.

You resonated with Pope Francis’ invitation to synodality as a model for creating an apostolic plan.

You expressed gratitude for the gift of Ignatian spirituality and the role it plays in motivating and sustaining you in your work in Jesuit apostolates.

Also, you “resonated with the Jesuit call to recognize and address the root causes of injustice” and share a desire to do so with intentionality going forward. That being said, while recognizing that the Society often deals well with the wealthy and are increasingly conscious of the poor, there is worry that the “middle may slip” through an apostolic crack.

## **Section Two: Areas of Apostolic Interest Emerging from the Regional Gatherings**

As in the Jesuit communities, you engaged in spiritual conversation in three rounds and a plenary session based on a central question inspired by the UAPs.

The areas of apostolic interest emerging from your spiritual conversation and ensuing plenary session centered on: Ignatian Spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises, the Catholic Church, Regionalism, Universal Apostolic Preferences, Collaboration, Youth and Young Adults, Reconciliation and Justice, and the Poor and the Marginalized.

### *Spiritual Exercises and Ignatian Spirituality*

The experience of the Spiritual Exercise and the dynamics Ignatian Spirituality offer a pragmatic means of showing the way to God and provide the motivating, guiding, and

sustaining force to engage in the other three UAPs. In your view, the Exercises are a fundamental response to the deep human desire for meaning; a means toward a sense of shared identity, belonging and purpose; a basis for servant leadership; and a way to bridge divisions.

You believe that your greatest gifts are the Spiritual Exercises and Ignatian Spirituality and, therefore, should be widely shared with our colleagues in various apostolates; the young adults to whom we minister; the elderly, our parishioners, incarcerated people, homeless persons, migrants, and members of underrepresented communities.

In addition, you believe the Spiritual Exercises and Ignatian Spirituality have the potential to deepen our faith, help build Ignatian community, strengthen your apostolic efforts, mitigate the polarization in the Church and Society by promoting belonging over exclusion; offer a way of engaging in respectful dialogue, and a means to develop leaders who animate the vision and values of the Spiritual Exercises. Yet, as one report observed, “many of us feel foreign to the Ignatian way and are requesting guidance and support to be formed in Ignatian spirituality.”

To this end, you believe the apostolic need to create the paths that introduce and foster growth in Ignatian spirituality and provide the opportunity to experience the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola across a wider spectrum of individuals and groups is paramount.

### *The Catholic Church*

Except for the fruits of prayer and reflection around the Spiritual Exercises, the Catholic Church figured most prominently in your reports. The strains of ideological tensions and conflicts and patterns of disaffiliation within Catholic Church in the United States were factors that caused desolation and confusion. In addition, you see the negative public perception of the Church as an obstacle to our evangelization and catechetical initiatives.

The Society of Jesus, through the practices of synodality and its particular way of proceeding, has a unique means to serve a Church in dire need of becoming a more listening and a more welcoming Church in order to share more authentically the Gospel.

You consider the fruitful dialogue experienced by participants in Pope Francis’ synodality initiative and by those who participated in the spiritual conversations points to a new model of Church life, a means of communication that invites deeper participation in our personal, communal, and ecclesial faith journey.

You mentioned that, beginning with the directive in the Spiritual Exercises to take the retreatant “where he or she is,” the Society of Jesus is spiritually formed and inclined to offer a “wide variety of entry points” into a life of faith and an ecclesial community for people coming from many and varied circumstances.

The Ignatian spiritual proclivity toward inclusion positions you well to meet the challenge of encountering and ministering to those persons who are marginalized, disaffiliated, dispossessed, alienated, poor and unwelcomed as well as the spiritually hungry, the unchurched, and young adults.

To this end, you believe there is a profound apostolic need to design creative and imaginative programming and ministries across apostolates that allow you to embody a Church that eschews exclusion, one that is “joyful, bold, and prophetic,” one that is both Catholic and catholic. In particular, attention should be paid to the role of service and social justice work as means to both engage youth and young adults and to transcend polarizing labels by finding common ground in serving the common good.

### *Regionalism*

We acknowledge your energy around the call to Jesuits and lay colleagues to extend your apostolic efforts beyond the confines of our institutions, apostolates, and the geographical regions within the Province. As one report observed, “The Regional Gatherings seem to be pointing us beyond our known horizon of collaboration.”

While acknowledging the strides made in Jesuit/Lay collaboration within institutions, you made us aware of the need to expand our collaboration among persons and apostolates. Rather than spending time in siloed, sector-specific conversation, participants sought to free their vision from the limitations of their institutional affiliations.

In your reading of apostolic plans of other Provinces, you noticed examples of cooperation among individuals and organizations that expand apostolic reach and effectiveness. Some Provinces reorganized and focused on regional apostolic “platforms” that bring together Jesuit-sponsored apostolates in a region, and, in some cases, other non-Jesuit but similarly missioned organizations.

You shared an appreciation for collaboration among institutions. You have been accustomed to the independent advancement of each Jesuit apostolate as the best way to face the future. You expressed a need to understand the UAPs and see where our resource gaps are so that we can respond to them. USA East Province must lead the reimagining of our assets and create some sort of map. One report noted, “We struggled to see and understand what a reimagined regional Ignatian asset map would look like.” Would a regional platform be like an Ignatian apostolic ecosystem of new collaborative practices?

You experienced desolation when considering the daunting challenges of the UAPs. But you noted a shift in your gatherings. This was dispelled, replaced by an energy and hopefulness around the apostolic potential in creative, broad, and bold collaboration.

### *Universal Apostolic Preferences*

As you prayerfully reflected on the UAPs and heard the cries of profound need, you were met with feelings of desolation. However, this initial desolation was mitigated by the movement of the Spirit leading you toward collaboration and the growing confidence in the worth of first or small steps; reimagining your mission; recognizing the primacy of the first UAP as motivating and sustaining your embrace of the other three; and recognizing that the young are energized by the vision and boldness of the UAPs.

It is your belief that the UAPs must be not relegated to individual works or apostolic sectors but integrated into the work of all your ministries; become the guiding principle for the Provincial, the Directors of the Work and for individual and institutional choices within apostolates including making available the necessary resources.

### *Collaboration*

The prospect of greater collaboration, sensed as a movement of the Spirit, helped dispel the initial desolation experienced in the face of daunting apostolic needs.

You recognize, however, that collaboration presents a significant challenge. It will require you to re-imagine the relationships between institutions and apostolates, rethink your institutional self-identity; replace rigidity with agility; develop a culture of shared leadership; deepen the partnerships between Jesuits and laity; allocate your time differently; and reset your priorities. But you believe greater collaboration better serves the greater good.

### *Youth and Young Adults*

While you recognize the urgent need to accompany youth and young adults in their faith journey and moral formation, you acknowledge that your ministry here has not been that effective in developing a lively faith in Christ in your students.

These questions remain: How will we embrace and utilize the particular gifts that youth and young adults bring to the table? How will we address the special challenges that our youth face, i.e., mental health, social media? How do we integrate their concerns about equity and the environment into our commitment to the UAPs? If COVID has changed how and where they work, does this impact our ways of encounter? How do we understand their changing perspectives on sexual identity? How do we accompany young families? How do we reach out to those between college and child raising?

You recognize the need for more imaginative ministry. One report observed, “We named the resistance to change, the desire for the courage to change, and the deep desire to be radical and countercultural like Christ.”

### *Reconciliation and Justice*

When addressing the Society of Jesus' mission of reconciliation and justice, you noted that the prophetic voice needed for "educating young people for justice," was often quiet. You see this apostolic priority as being impeded by the pushback of parents, alumni, and donors. It was noted, too, that what is needed are not individuals committed to justice but "communities of justice" able to speak with a unified and prophetic voice. In addition, the role of service and the work of social justice was posited as a means of uniting people beyond polarizing labels through the common goal of promoting the common good.

### *The Poor and the Marginalized*

You recognize that you are consciously growing in your awareness of those who are poor: your need to encounter people on the margins and foster with them relationships that are authentic and reciprocal. You believe you need to learn how to be better companions.

### **Unexpected Silences**

It is difficult to interpret a silence, but it is important to note that scant attention was paid to the UAP, "Care for Our Common." When mentioned, it was acknowledged that it has not taken deep root in your imagination or work.

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