



PAULIST
FATHERS

Preparatory Report Pre-Assembly 2025

*"Conscious of Father Hecker's charism, and our authentic Paulist tradition... [we] will evaluate the condition of the society and, by scrutinizing the signs of the times, will determine what apostolic needs of the church should become Paulist enterprises, boldly and judiciously carried out."
(Constitution, C27)*

paulist.org/preassembly

Dear Pre-Assembly Participants:

Thank you for being part of the Pre-Assembly process of the Paulist Fathers! Your participation in Listening Sessions this past summer and fall was invaluable for helping the Paulists to begin to set forth priorities for reflection and discussion at the October Pre-Assemblies.

Before participating in the Pre-Assembly, please prayerfully read and reflect on the enclosed Preparatory Report. This report includes:

1. A Roadmap for the 2025-2026 Pre-Assembly & General Assembly (pp. 3-4)
2. An introduction to the Paulist Fathers' "Nature and Purpose" (pp. 4-6)
3. A snapshot of the Paulist Fathers, Paulist Associates, and Deacon Affiliates (pp. 7-10)
4. A summary of key themes from the more than 30 Paulist listening sessions held in recent months (pp. 11-13)
5. A spiritual reflection on both the challenges and hopes of religious communities today (pp. 14-18)
6. Prayers for the Pre-Assembly (p. 19)

In October, the Paulists are hosting three Pre-Assemblies as the community walks the synodal path with around 150 Paulists and collaborators. The purpose of the Pre-Assembly is to reflect, discuss, and refine the emerging themes from the Listening Sessions and identify key questions and ideas to move the process of discernment forward into the Study Group phase.

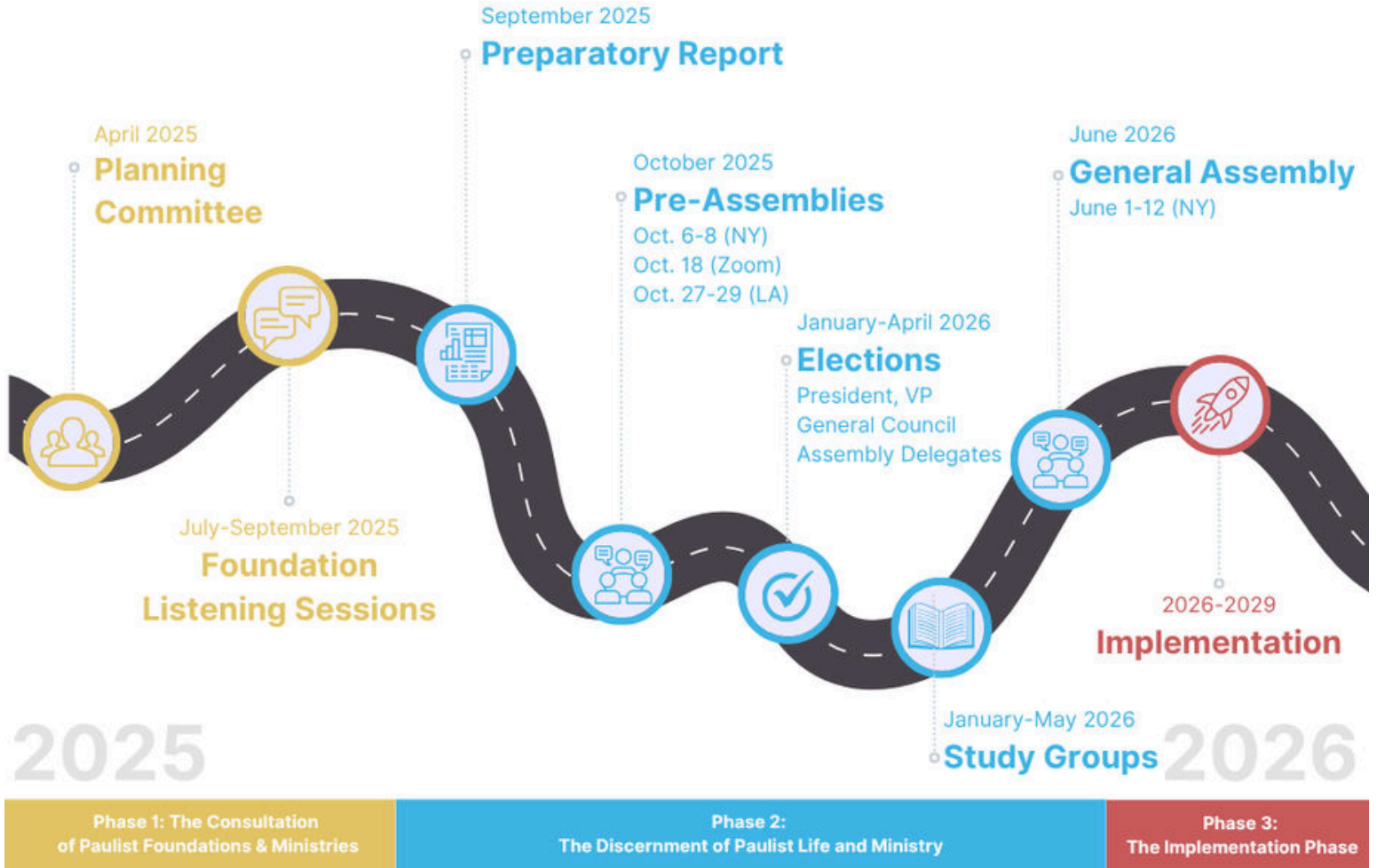
We look forward to listening to and learning from one another as we discern and pray together in the days ahead.

In prayer and gratitude,

Pre-Assembly Planning Committee

Jonathan Lewis (Chair)
Heather Kinney
Dr. Susan Timoney
Fr. John Ardis, CSP
Fr. Bob Cary, CSP
Fr. John Hurley, CSP
Fr. Dan Macalinao, CSP
Fr. Rich Whitney, CSP

2025-2026 Pre-Assembly & General Assembly Roadmap in a Synodal Church



The Pre-Assembly is a key part in a year-long process of listening and discernment, leading up to the 2026 General Assembly. Learn more about the process below:

LISTENING SESSIONS

This Summer and Fall, the Paulist Fathers hosted more than 30 listening sessions including hundreds of Paulists, Paulist Associates, Deacon Affiliates, lay staff and collaborators in a process of consultation.

PRE-ASSEMBLIES

In October, the Paulists are hosting three Pre-Assemblies as the community walks the synodal path with around 150 Paulists and collaborators. The Pre-Assembly will reflect, discuss, and refine the emerging themes from the Listening Sessions and identify key questions and ideas to move the process of discernment forward into the Study Group phase.

STUDY GROUPS

Following the Pre-Assemblies, in January, the Paulists will convene study groups made up of Paulists, collaborators, and national experts to continue to explore key topics and move toward possible recommendations for the General Assembly to consider.

Finally, this spring, the Paulists will elect a President, Vice President, members of the General Council, as well as members to the June 2026 General Assembly—the highest deliberative body of the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle. The two-week General Assembly will take up the ideas and themes that have emerged throughout the process, as well as other topics, and deliberate to develop resolutions guiding the community for the next four years.

IMPLEMENTATION

Following the General Assembly, the Presidential Board and General Council of the Paulist Fathers will meet regularly to implement the resolutions of the General Assembly over the next four years.

The Constitution of the Missionary Society Saint Paul the Apostle

PART 1

NATURE AND PURPOSE

C1. The Paulists find their identity and specific purpose within the community of the church. As a pilgrim the Church of Christ moves through time. It is a prophetic church which always ponders God's saving activity and probes each age's deepest needs in order to bring all people to the reign of God; a missionary church which communicates God's word and life to the world; a unifying church, inviting everyone to share one Lord, one faith, one baptism. It is led by one Spirit, who distributes His many gifts to achieve one charity, and who guides it through a universal shepherd and the other bishops in communion with Him.

It is an open church which, since God speaks to men and women in their experiences, learns as well as teaches, listens as well as speaks; a concerned church because its pastors and people must find in its resources a strength for the troubles of the times; a church always in need of purification, striving for a renewed understanding of its mission in order to be the more effective sign to the nations that Christ wills it to be.

C2. Founded by Isaac Thomas Hecker as a religious society within the church, the Paulists seek to be a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit and a prophetic instrument for His sanctifying action. They are called to share in the life and mission of Christ's church as community, servant and witness.

The Paulists are a community, sharing different tasks and gifts in the love of Christ, guided by a unified and participatory government. They are a servant, ministering with word, sacrament and zealous care to the needs not only of "the household of the faith" but also of the vast community of God in the world. They are a witness, bringing the good news of Christ not only to believers but particularly to unbelievers, and exhibiting those unique qualities of freedom and joy which a reflective experience teaches them will best display Christ and his church to the people they serve.

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C3. The Paulists, a canonically approved clerical society of apostolic life of pontifical right in the Roman Catholic Church, are clergy and laymen who promise to work together in community in order to help each other to grow in grace and to collaborate in their common tasks.

As members they dedicate themselves to an intensive following and manifestation of Jesus Christ by fidelity to a life of gospel simplicity, chastity and obedience

Finding in St. Paul the model and inspiration of their life and mission, they bear the title The Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle, and are popularly known as The Paulist Fathers, or The Paulists.

They welcome as affiliates men and women who are not members of the Society but wish to share in the Society's ideals and work.

C4. The Paulists aim to live their Christian life and experience its growth in service of the whole church and humankind. In the spirit of their founder, who sought to interpret the church to the modern world and the modern world to the church, they strive for openness and discernment as they labor to extend the reign of God.

The mission of the Paulists is to persons, individually and in all social groups in which they live, with a special concern for the peoples of North America. These missionaries help men and women to discover Christ wherever He is acting; all that they do should converge upon the single purpose of assisting Christ to build up His reign on Earth.

C5. Sensitive to the Holy Spirit and true to the insights of Father Hecker, the Paulists seek to carry out their mission in different ways among different peoples. Particular activities are stressed for their current aptness in realizing Paulist objectives:

- To those without religious commitment or church affiliation and to nominal Christians, the Paulists try to communicate, with all available means, the good news of salvation.
- Ecumenism is a permanent element in the total life and work of the Paulists. Every member should be responsive to the unifying action of the Holy Spirit in other Christians and in their Christian churches, and wherever possible, they should pray and work with them in the one mission of Christ.

- At the same time, the Paulists are committed to prepare and receive those persons who, following their conscience, wish full communion with the Roman Catholic church through the local church.
- Regarding the Jewish people, the Paulists recognize our common spiritual patrimony and the continuing action of God in their life and aspirations. The community strives to build mutual Catholic-Jewish understanding and respect through study, dialogue and cooperative action in matters of common concern.
- In the case of Roman Catholics, Paulists labor for their renewal and progress in faith and Christian living, so that the church may be a clearer sign to all people. The Paulists strive to make the faithful aware of their own missionary vocation and solidarity with all men and women.
- Every Paulist should have a gospel identity with, and concern for, the poor and less privileged, and seek to serve them with Christian generosity.
- The social, civil and humanitarian struggle to humanize the world is a sign of God's action in history. Paulists joyfully meet this challenge to serve our neighbor, and thus reflect the love of God in Christ. They should undertake to work with all people of good-will to help build a better world consonant with human dignity and the needs of the age.

C6. The Paulists follow their vocation in a constantly renewing church. The particular works of the community, its foundations and forms of mission are means to the end of disclosing Christ to every person. Therefore, these works are undertaken insofar as they are judged to minister to the needs of those whom the community serves, and the continuance of these works is always subject to that judgment.

Paulists try not only to be attuned to the needs of the present but also to form a vision of tomorrow's world and to anticipate the needs of the church in the coming age.

C7. Besides individual gifts, the Paulists try to bring to their chosen work qualities of faithfulness to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, zeal, interest in people, intelligent labor, love of liberty, a strong sense of co-responsibility, personal and collective initiative, leadership, flexibility and creative and constructive imagination to devise experiments within the framework of ecclesial and community cooperation.

C8. In keeping with the ideals of their founder, the Paulists work not only in North America, but also in other countries where their capabilities and particular vocation make them useful. From the experience of the universal church, and from the North American experience, both of which have enriched their spirit and enterprise, they have reaped benefits which they want to share with the world that Christ came to save.



PAULIST FATHERS BY LOCATION



Today, Paulists serve in:

- Parishes and downtown centers in Austin & Horseshoe Bay (TX), Boston, Chicago, Grand Rapids (MI), Knoxville (TN), Los Angeles, New York City, Rome (Italy), San Diego, and San Francisco
- Campus ministries at UCLA and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville
- Hecker House of Mission and Studies in Washington, DC
- Media and publishing, including:
 - Paulist Press, the oldest Catholic publishing firm in the U.S.
 - Paulist Productions, an Emmy Award-winning film and TV company
 - Busted Halo, an award winning online ministry and SiriusXM radio show
- Pastoral and Sacramental ministry in Vero Beach, FL & Lake George, NY

PAULIST FATHERS BY THE NUMBERS

87
PAULIST FATHERS

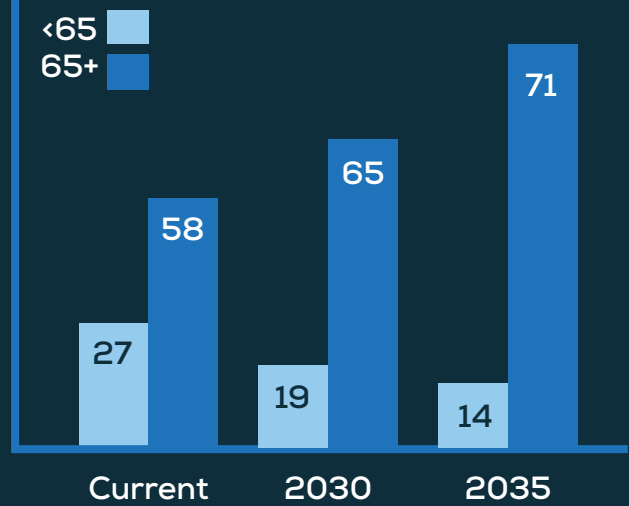
33 Active in Ministry

52 Senior in Ministry

4 Students

23 Entered Eternal Life since January 2020

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF PAULIST



MINISTRY ASSIGNMENTS:

	Pastors & Superiors	6
	Pastors	3
	Superiors	4
	Directors	5
	Associate Pastors	10
	Media Ministers:	
	<i>Busted Halo</i>	2
	<i>Paulist Productions</i>	1
	Full-time Missionaries / Preaching Apostolate	2
	Community Roles:	
	<i>Full-time</i>	6
	<i>Part-time</i>	15

VOCATIONS & FORMATION:

2 - 4

Participants on average in Sunday Evening Virtual Discernment Group

24

Participants at Come & See Weekends in the last 2 years

IN THE LAST

10
YEARS

- 25 men accepted
- 14 ordained as Paulist Fathers
- 4 in formation now
- 5 admitted but did not enter novitiate
- 7 left during novitiate or before First Promise
- 4 left after First Promise
- 0 novices for 2025-26 (2 deferred to 2026)

PAULIST COMMUNITY LIFE:

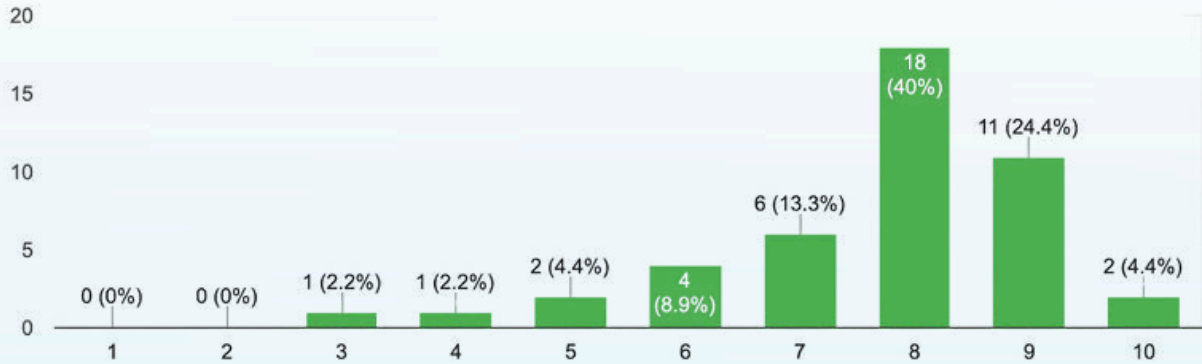
- 4** petitioned to live outside community (2 still discerning)
- 3** living independently
- 6** in retirement/nursing homes



JANUARY 2025 SURVEY OF COMMUNITY LIFE

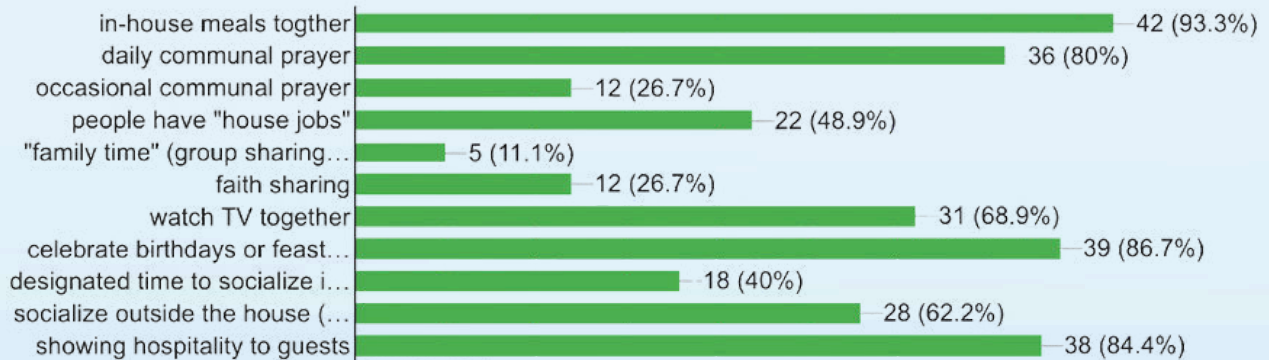
How would you rate your overall experience of Paulist community life in your local house?

45 responses



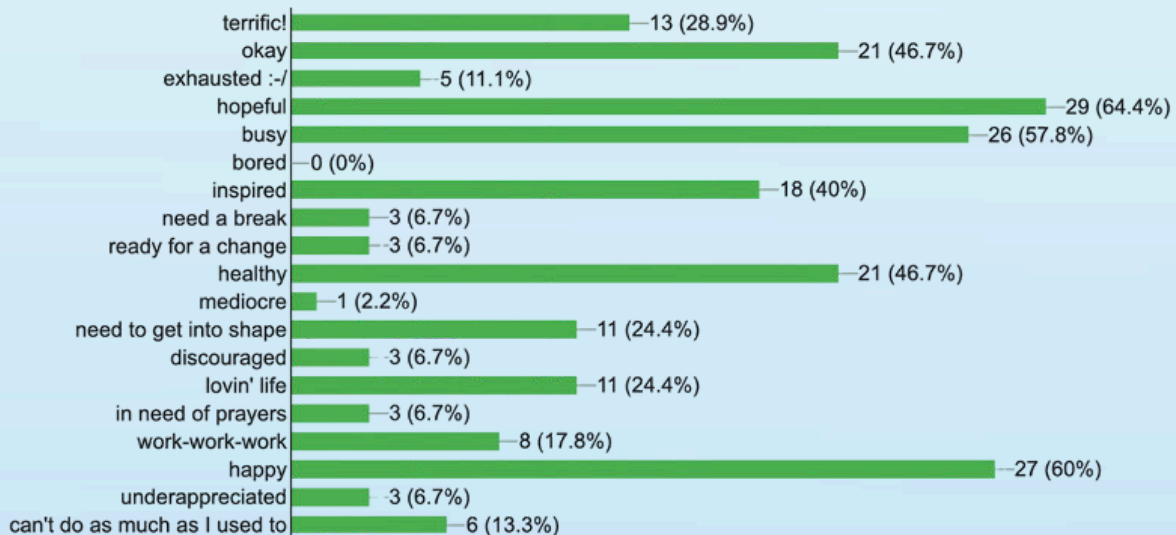
Which of the following happen on a regular basis in your local house?

45 responses



Before we get into details, How are you? Which of these short answers feel like they describe you at present?

45 responses



PAULIST AFFILIATES & ASSOCIATES COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT



PAULIST ASSOCIATES

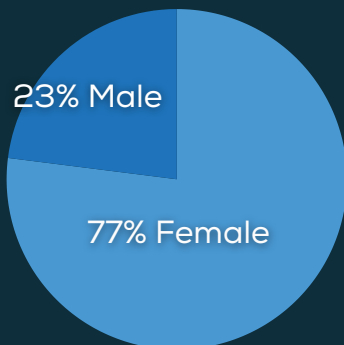
- Founded in 1998
- 167 total Paulist Associates
- 14 new Associates joined May 2025



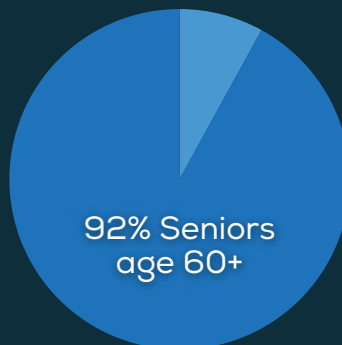
DEACON AFFILIATES

- Founded in 2008
- 9 total Deacon Affiliates
~ Serving across 7 dioceses
- 3 new affiliates joined July 2025

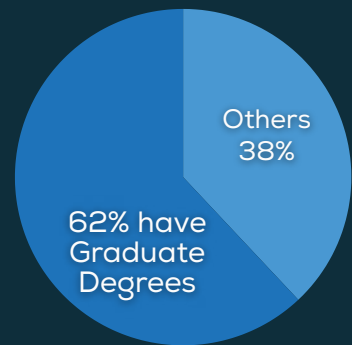
GENDER DISTRIBUTION



AGE DISTRIBUTION



EDUCATION LEVEL



ACTIVE ASSOCIATE GROUPS AND ACTIVE MEMBERS:

62	Columbus, OH	10	Los Angeles, CA
19	Horseshoe Bay, TX	9	Knoxville, TN
15	Diaspora (online)	8	Tucson, AZ
12	Austin, TX	6	Vero Beach, FL
10	Boston, MA	6	West Michigan /Grand Rapids
10	Chicago, IL		



**Based on Paulist Associates survey of 50% reporting during Spring 2025 Survey*

Key Themes From Paulist Listening Sessions

As a part of the preparations for the Pre-Assembly, the Paulists hosted more than 30 listening sessions including Paulist Fathers, Paulist Associates, Deacon Affiliates, & 100s of lay staff and collaborators. The following seven themes (not ranked) reflect the most recurring areas of focus.

1. Paulist Mission and Charism

Listening sessions focused on the need for an up-to-date and succinct articulation of the Paulist mission that fully reflects Paulist tradition of ministry and responds to our current American context. Listening sessions also identified the value in promoting the founding vision of Fr. Isaac Hecker and clarifying the Paulist charism and spirituality in a way that is actionable.

Listening Session Quotes:

- “Evangelization remains the Paulists’ core charism—keep it central in planning, preaching, and outreach.”
- “Reconcile core elements of Paulist mission with what we are currently doing/focused on.”
- Given the breadth of past mission priorities there was hope that the Paulists “fully integrate existing priorities (women in leadership, overcoming polarization, etc.) before naming new ones.”
- There is a “need to amplify the Paulist charism as such and by fanning it more deeply into flame among the lay faithful of our parish who readily expressed eagerness and readiness to contribute and collaborate – especially among women”
- “Reclaim Hecker’s vision for our current American reality. Focus more on being Catholic and American and how our rich history can contribute to responding to the signs of the times.”
- “Encourage a personal and communal relationship with the Holy Spirit to bring new creativity to mission.”

2. Paulist Community Life

Paulist listening sessions repeatedly mentioned that Paulist community life should focus on caring for one another and making authentic community life a priority. This includes remembering that the Paulist vocation is not only about apostolic work but also investing in community life among the brothers.

Listening Session Quotes:

- Paulists are “not just what we do, but who we are for one another. Caring for one another.
- “Paulists are good at speaking charity to others – but not always inside our own houses.”
- “The growing generational differences within the community highlight the need to strengthen our practice of fraternity and ensure that we truly support one another.”
- “We cannot give what we don't have. Without a deep, personal and communal experience of God's presence, we won't be able to lead others to a true encounter with God. We are experiencing a spiritual poverty among us, and there is a new revival called for in the Paulist community. We need inner conversion. The Holy Spirit is calling us to focus on our charism with a new lens based on the signs of the times, Scripture, & personal/communal prayer.”

3. Vocations

Given the declining number of Paulist Priests, listening sessions regularly commented on the importance of vocations including opportunities to reimagine vocations ministry, creating a concrete plan to promote vocations—especially in Foundations—and fostering a culture of vocations.

Listening Session Quotes:

- “We need to show there is an important need in society that we are addressing and that we are in need of good men to share in that mission.”
- We “see a pressing need to reimagine our approach to vocations ministry. It may be time to consider a radically different model. We are living in a moment when the vision and style of the universal Church align closely with the Paulist charism. This suggests that there are many people who would resonate deeply with our way of being Church and living ministry, if only we found more effective ways to reach them.”
- “Making Isaac Hecker's story more relatable to contemporary audiences...the need for more lay involvement in vocation efforts through partnerships with Paulist Associates, young adults ministries, and lay ministry leaders at Paulist Foundations.”

4. Lay Leadership and Lay Collaboration

Listening sessions shared that collaboration and co-responsibility with the laity is essential for Paulist ministry. Comments discussed the need to form adults and mentor younger generations to become intentional disciples and leaders. This includes the need to educate and empower lay leaders, associates, and young people to understand the Paulist charism and live the Paulist mission. Strengthening co-responsibility between priests and laity will also include equipping Paulist priests to practice co-responsibility.

Listening Session Quotes:

- “We [Paulists] are not alone. We have [people that work with us who continue to help us improve.]”
- “We need to empower creative people to share the mission with us, and encourage them to use their creativity.”
- The Paulists “need more opportunities to work with lay collaborators, including women in visible roles.”

5. Paulist Mission Field and Mission Impact

Listening sessions noted the changing reality of Paulist Foundations over the years and reflected on how current ministry outreach responds to the Paulist mission and charism. There was a hope that Paulists leverage the individual talents of Paulists, rather than simply filling ministry assignment gaps. Many sessions referenced the value to create ministry opportunities beyond traditional church buildings, reaching those on the peripheries, and finding strategic ways to impact more people through a “train the trainer” approach.

Also discussed was the need to coordinate among Paulists and Foundations to amplify the Paulist impact and avoid the sense that “everyone is doing their own thing.”

Listening Session Quotes:

- “Will smaller numbers restrict us from innovation? Will we be relegated to staffing existing foundations?”
- “Do you want to be missionaries or just run parishes? More creative pastoral outreach is needed, especially to young adult/college students and former Catholics.”
- “The Paulists create the environment for [the parish] to deliver a natural, pervasive, authentic, relevant zeal. The Liturgical and pastoral approach (preaching, teaching, music, outreach and welcome) creates a community that engenders living examples of Christ’s Love.”

6. Polarization and Prophetic Witness

Listening session participants frequently highlighted the tense political climate in our country as a pressing context for ministry. They urged the Paulists to respond to polarization—within the Paulist community and in the wider Church by fostering dialogue that unites rather than divides. Sessions also discussed that, while the community addresses polarization and builds communion, it must maintain a prophetic voice that speaks courageously for justice and the marginalized.

Listening Session Quotes:

- “With American democracy struggling and the divide inside the Church between conservative and progressive Catholics, how can we be a model instead of an example of polarization?”
- “The state of the nation looms large, and the framework of ‘confronting toxic polarization’ may distract from prophetic speech that galvanizes concern for the most marginalized.”

7. Innovation in Media

Listening sessions commended the Paulist investment in media ministry and recommended they continue to invest in more active and visible presence in media and social media. Multiple comments referenced a “one-to-many” approach through media ministries, emerging platforms, and leadership formation to magnify impact beyond parish walls. There is a hope that Paulists continue to innovate in using modern communication methods to make the Gospel heard. A part of this virtual ministry can include outreach and formation for adults and families outside the church building and sharing a louder prophetic voice in the public sphere.

Listening Session Quotes:

- There is a “much bigger reach when the Paulists find ‘one to many’ ministries e.g. missioning college students, publishing through Paulist Press, media ministries, etc.”
- “Continue to innovate with communications to share the Gospel”

Come
fort

Where is God in the Future of Women's Religious Orders?

by James Martin, S.J.

Editors' notes: James Martin, S.J., delivered the following speech at the 2025 assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in Atlanta on Aug. 14. The speech has been edited for length and style.

Like many of you, I'm getting older and belong to a religious order that, while graced with vocations every year, is aging, at least in the United States. That is not true for all religious orders: Some more traditional ones in the United States are exploding with vocations. And overseas, especially in the developing world, many orders of both men and women are growing.

But like so many religious men and women, many of you are facing the reality of apostolates being closed, consolidations of orders, deaths of sisters, declining vocations and even communities discerning what the Sisters of Charity in New York have called a "path to completion." At the same time, women religious are still in the forefront of Catholic education, pastoral work, social justice and spiritual direction. Moreover, all sorts of ministries and new initiatives are started every year. And both Catholics and non-Catholics still look to you for moral leadership. So where is God in all of this?

A reflection on the story of the raising of Lazarus, as it is recounted in John's Gospel, can serve as a framework to understand where God might be leading us. It's a tale about love, illness, death, grieving, honesty, openness, uncertainty and, ultimately, new life. What can it teach us?

Facing the Unknown

First, it teaches us love. This story is mainly about love, the source and ground of all our religious orders and the beginning of all our individual vocations. When Martha and Mary send word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus is ill, they don't say, "Lazarus, our brother, is ill," as you might expect. They say something more important: "He whom you love is ill."

This is the foundation of all our vocations, all our communities, all our ministries and all our futures. Our founders and foundresses were all in love with Jesus. And in some way, each of us has fallen in love with Jesus. All of us were attracted to the person of Jesus, have spent time with him in prayer, have studied the Gospels, have encountered him in the sacraments, have met him in those we meet and have lived out our lives in service to him. And as St. Ignatius Loyola said, "Love shows itself more in deeds than in words."

Even more important is knowing that he loves us. Notice that Martha and Mary don't call Lazarus "The one who loves you." But, rather, "He whom you love." All this starts with Jesus' love for us, which we've experienced in so many ways. We must start with that in any discussions about our futures and rely on the sure knowledge of his love for all of us, even when things look confusing, as they did for Martha and Mary.

After the sisters send word to Jesus about their brother's illness, something surprising, perhaps even confusing, happens. John writes, "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." Accordingly? Well, at least we're told he loved them. But his delay and seeming indifference raise the question of "Where are you, Jesus?" Or "What are you doing?"

We often hear that question echoed in our own hearts. We can wonder why we are no longer getting as many vocations, why so many in our circle of friends are dying and why our beloved ministry sites are closing. And we can wonder: Jesus, where are you?

Martha and Mary didn't understand where Jesus was. And Catholic sisters, as well as religious men, and many others, don't understand this.

Jesus' delay in coming to help Lazarus points to the essential unknowability of God's plans. "Why is this happening?" is often a question that, for now, is unanswerable.

When the disciples hear the news of Lazarus's death, they are confused. Jesus says that Lazarus has fallen "asleep," and he is going to awaken him. But the disciples misunderstand, as they often do in John, and think he means ordinary sleep, and they say, "He will be all right." So Jesus is blunt with them, as he has to be with us. He says, "Lazarus is dead."

This is an important insight. Some things are gone. In my own Jesuit province, in just the last few years, we've sold several retreat houses, which provided for the spiritual care of thousands of people for decades and were beloved not only by the retreatants but by the Jesuits. And it's painful.

But we all have to face this reality. Like Lazarus, who was loved by his sisters, some things are dead. It's important to name that, be grateful for what went before, grieve and accept it. Some ministries and houses and events and people, all beloved to us, all parts of our lives, all who made us what we are and contributed to the church, are dead. There is a need to celebrate what has happened, savor it and then give it over to God.

I once asked my friend Janice Farnham, R.J.M., how she felt about the ending of some apostolates and even some women's religious orders. "Well," she said, "it's like a person's life. We come into this world, we do what God asks of us, and we leave this world. In a sense, it's a natural progression." Death is part of life and part of religious life, both individually and corporately.

But that is not the end of the story. Before we can even get to Jesus giving Lazarus new life, emotions have to be expressed. When Jesus finally reaches Bethany, Martha and Mary greet him, and they tell them how they feel.

When Jesus finally comes to Lazarus's tomb after a delay of several days—imagine how upsetting it must have been to wait for him to come, as we wait for a change that never comes—Martha is honest with him. "Lord," she says, "if you had been here, our brother would not have died."

How can Martha be so blunt? Well, she knows Jesus. It's an invitation for all of us to be honest with God about pain, death and loss. And about our hopes for the future. Because Martha also says she knows that God will give Jesus anything he asks.

When Jesus asks where her brother is laid, she says, "Come and see." What a powerful invitation! Martha uses the same words to Jesus that he used for his disciples at the beginning of his public ministry. Sometimes in our prayer, we have to invite Jesus to see something. Come into my life and see what I'm experiencing.

When Jesus comes to the tomb, he weeps. It's one of the most famous phrases in the Gospels: "Jesus wept." It's often seen as a sign of his sadness over Lazarus, and a sign of his humanity. Which it is. But New Testament scholars point out the words used in Greek are less about sadness and more about anger. Jesus seems to be angry. Why? Well, perhaps over the sheer fact of death or perhaps at what he knows is coming (that the raising of Lazarus will lead to his crucifixion).

But mainly, scholars say, he is angry about the lack of faith of the people, who seem not to believe that he can do something extraordinary. Do you ever wonder if God gets frustrated by our doubting what God can do with us?

Then Jesus says something strange: "Take away the stone." Why couldn't Lazarus just have appeared? My sense is that Jesus is asking the crowd to participate in the miracle, in the freeing, just as we are invited to help do that with our friends, our sisters, our brothers. What are the stones that keep our sisters and our orders from being freer? What keeps us from seeing the light? Where are the stones in our congregations?

But Martha is focused on something else. When Jesus asks her to roll away the stone, she says that there will be a "stench." Like so many of us, Martha is focused on the practical, the rational, the facts. She still can't see that Jesus has something else in store for her. Also note that Jesus is not worried about looking inside the tomb. He's not worried about looking at the parts of our lives that seem rotten, smelly or even dead. He's not worried about our confusion or our doubts or our fears. He is willing to look at that with us. So he asks Martha: Don't you believe in me?

Martha believes, like we all believe, even in the face of struggle. She says earlier, "I know you are the Messiah, the Son of God, and the one who is to come." But Jesus is even more than what Martha can imagine as the Messiah. And as if in reward not only for her faith but her honesty, he reveals who he is: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Here is the place many of us stand in our lives as religious and in our communities: afraid of the darkness inside the tomb. At the same time, still believing, still hopeful, knowing that Jesus is always with us, and wondering what is going to happen. When my dad was diagnosed with cancer 20 years ago, I confessed to my friend Sister Janice Farnham that I didn't know if I was going to be able to handle it. She said, "Can you surrender to the future God has in store for you?" This is our invitation, no matter which congregation we belong to.

Leaving the Tomb

Now, at the dramatic high point of the story, Jesus utters his famous words, "Come forth!" Here I'd like to look at this story from the point of view of Lazarus and ask what it has to do with religious life.

First of all, what this story offers us is the invitation to leave behind in our tombs anything that keeps us stuck or bound or unfree. We are invited to ask: What is keeping us from hearing God's voice in our lives, in our congregations, in our communities? Is it a fear of change? A fear of being seen as not important?

A fear that we made wrong decisions? Is it the fear of leaving something behind? Even a fear of physical death? Can we leave all those fears and worries and regrets in the tomb? Are there resentments or grudges or disappointments that you have? Can you leave that behind? What do you, what do we, need to leave behind to hear God calling us into a surprising new life?

Second, I want to share an insight that a woman shared with me during a talk about my book. She said that Lazarus, who was brought back from death, as he is lying on his tomb, had to decide to do something that no one else ever had to do. And that's where we are today as religious, whether we're young or old, or our communities are expanding or shrinking, or are being founded or moving onto the path to completion. What do I mean by that?

Each of us as individuals and each of our congregations has our own unique constellation of joys and hopes and griefs and anxieties. Everyone here has their own unique set of problems: physical, emotional, mental, even spiritual issues. And we all have our own set of gifts and graces: talents and skills and hopes and plans. So it's easy to feel: No one understands me. No one has this precise set of problems and opportunities. So it's easy for us to say, "I can't do this."

But that was precisely Lazarus's situation: No one else ever had to do what he did. So he had to say, "I can do this." And here's the point: What enabled him to respond to that invitation? It was precisely this: He knew who was calling him.

Lazarus does not leave his tomb because he thinks it's a good idea or some committee told him that he needed to or he read a book on self-improvement. Lazarus leaves the tomb because he knows who is calling him. Lazarus can say yes to that voice because he knows that voice. His moving ahead is only in response to a person. Like Martha and Mary, who knew Jesus well, Lazarus trusted in Jesus's love. This is what enables us to move ahead in our own lives and in our community discernment: knowing who is calling us—Jesus.

Lazarus comes out, bound head and foot in his burial clothes. Notice that he is wearing them, while Jesus's burial clothes are rolled up and remain in his tomb on the morning of the first Easter. Why? Because Lazarus will need them again; Jesus will not.

And when Lazarus emerges from the tomb, Jesus says, "Untie him and let him go." Again, this is an invitation for the crowd to participate in freeing. Where can you help people in your community be free? How can you help untie those grave clothes? The move toward new life comes from God, but sometimes we need people who see that we are newly risen and help us take off our grave clothes.

Toward New Life

What does new life look like for Lazarus? Well, he doesn't know. Neither do we. But let's consider a few possibilities, based on the three people in our story who encounter Jesus.

Like Martha in this story, can we not focus on the stench but on the promise of new life? And, as in the story in Luke's Gospel, when Martha complains about being burdened by work, can we be open to Jesus' challenge about how we spend our time? About what we're doing? Martha is working hard in her house, but, as Luke tells us, she's doing the wrong thing for that particular time.

So what are we invited to do now, based on the signs of the times? Let me suggest a few things.

As we all know, there has been a shift in many young people's desires for the church, and it is more toward the traditional. It's not the case for everyone, but overall, many younger Catholics seek more traditional devotions, like adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, devotion to modern-day saints like Carlo Acutis and Pier Giorgio Frassati, as well as more traditional liturgies. These young people sincerely seek a deeper identity as Catholics. In this audience are hundreds of women who have spent their lives teaching, counseling and accompanying young people. All of you have taken seriously your own relationships with God. With these young people, then, can you meet them where they are, accompany them and then help them in their relationship with God?

Likewise, many young people strongly desire a sense of community. We saw that recently in the vast crowds that came to Rome for the Jubilee for Youth. What can our experience of community, not only in what our founders and foundresses have taught, but also our own lived experience, teach them about community? About praying together? About supporting one another? About forgiving one another? There is so much wisdom here.

In other words, are we busy with many things but not the right ones? What are we doing in the course of a day as leaders of congregations, organizations and ministries? Are we about the work of the Gospel, building relationships, building bridges, free from the need to feel gratified that we have done something others can see, and even freed from the need for approval from familiar places?

One sister suggested this: What if we kept a "Martha Journal" and noted what tasks fill our hours? How would what we're doing reflect the invitation Jesus offers us today? How are we called to identify the work of these times, which is based on the signs of the times, signs that are different than they were even a few years ago. Remember that turn towards the traditional among so many youth.

In short, Martha asks us: What are we called to do?

Like Mary, who knelt at Jesus's feet in Luke's Gospel and did the same in the story of the Raising of Lazarus, can we grow in interior freedom so that we can more fully rely on Jesus and then offer the world and each other a contemplative presence? Notice that in the story of Lazarus, Mary doesn't initially rush out to see Jesus when he arrives. She waits for Jesus to call her. As in the story in Luke's Gospel, Mary is free of the need to do, do, do, and instead listens. Mary also does something that probably bothers Martha: She waits. Where are the places where we need to step back, to pray and listen more—even at the risk of initially not knowing what to do?

In short, Mary asks us: How are we called to pray and discern?

Finally, like Lazarus, can we let go of whatever keeps us unfree? All the ways to which we have become accustomed to living, thinking, loving, praying, working, serving, creating, responding and leave those grave cloths in the tomb, knowing that death never has the last word—that with God all things are possible—that this change of era in which we find ourselves is where God needs us to be and the unfamiliar land of "not knowing," no longer leaves us hesitant or timid.

In short, Lazarus asks us: Who are we called to be?

Can we, like Lazarus, fully trusting in Jesus, confident in the future because we are confident who it is who is calling us, say yes to God? Because the invitation for all of us, as men and women religious, as Catholics and Christians, is indeed, on every day of our lives, to listen to Jesus's voice and to "Come forth."

Pre-Assembly Prayers

Prayer for the Paulist Fathers

Almighty and ever faithful God, You spoke your Word to the world in your Son, Jesus Christ, and commissioned St. Paul to bring your word to all nations and to the ends of the earth.

Your Spirit led Servant of God Isaac Hecker to proclaim your word in North America using tools of the modern age. We ask you to strengthen and renew all members of the Paulist charismatic family - Priests, Lay Associates, Deacon Affiliates, and lay collaborators, to live as missionaries in the line of St. Paul and Father Hecker.

May we burn with passion to give the Gospel a voice so that all may know the mystery of your love. May we follow the Lord Jesus with the zeal of St. Paul and Father Hecker as we carry on the mission of the Paulist Community.

In the power of your Holy Spirit, we ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Adapted from the Paulist Prayer for Vocations

Prayer to the Holy Spirit (*Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*)

We stand before You, Holy Spirit, as we gather together in Your name.
With You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it.
We are weak and sinful; do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.

Let us find in You our unity so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth and what is right.

All this we ask of You, who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever. Amen.

"Every session of the Second Vatican Council began with the prayer Adsumus Sancte Spiritus, the first word of the Latin original meaning, 'We stand before You, Holy Spirit,' which has been historically used at Councils, Synods and other Church gatherings for hundreds of years, being attributed to Saint Isidore of Seville (c. 560 - 4 April 636)" (Synod Office). This simplified version was adapted by the Vatican Synod Office for the 2021-2023 Synods.



PAULIST FATHERS

"Our power will be in presenting the same old truths in new forms,
fresh new tone and air and spirit."

Servant of God Isaac Hecker

paulist.org/preassembly