

Mission & Charism Study Group Report

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Introduction

Over the course of three meetings, the Mission and Charism Study Group reflected on the identity, language, and future direction of the Paulist mission. Drawing on insights from the listening sessions, the pre-assembly process, and our own conversations, we highlight several converging themes that may assist the discernment of the General Assembly.

Of particular note, there is shared recognition that the Paulist mission & charism remain deeply alive and recognizable “on the ground”, even as there is uncertainty about defining “mission” vs. “charism” or how to clearly articulate our Paulist identity in a way that is compelling, unified, and forward-looking.

Our synthesis also takes into account the broader moment in the life of the Church, particularly among religious communities and societies of apostolic life. As the number of vocations continues to decline, many communities are returning to their founding charisms with renewed intentionality as a way of re-energizing vocations, mission, and lay engagement. This moment also invites the Paulist family to more deeply ground and articulate our mission within the broader theological vision emerging in the universal Church, particularly through the emphases of Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV on evangelization, encounter, synodality, missionary discipleship, and renewed attentiveness to the Holy Spirit.

In this context, a renewed understanding of our Paulist mission, rooted in our foundational sources, namely St. Paul, Fr. Isaac Hecker, and the movement of the Holy Spirit - could serve as a powerful catalyst for renewal across the entire Paulist family, including not only members of the Society, but also Paulist Associates, Deacon Affiliates, lay collaborators, and lay leaders who share in our mission.

National Landscape

The contraction of consecrated religious men and women in the United States over the last decades serving in ministries as well as sponsored institutions (schools, hospitals, ministries, etc.), has increased the need for renewed engagement with and formation of the charism of a religious community. Many women’s religious communities and religiously sponsored institutions have been leading this work over the last decade. Today, an increasing number of communities of men are renewing focus on the work of mission and charism by returning to the founding charism of the community and discerning how to apply it in new and creative ways for the 21st-century.

Charism was historically conveyed through embodied presence, through living in community and daily immersion in particular spiritual programs and practices. It was understood but rarely formally taught. While charism formation has often been viewed as something that is “caught not taught”, the increased number of lay partners and collaborators needed in an environment of fewer consecrated men serving in ministries and apostates makes the shift from embodied charism transmission to intentional charism formation not optional. Where the Society’s physical presence once did the work automatically, that work must now be done deliberately, structurally, and relatedly. Communities are implementing this through initial formation, ongoing integration into daily work, and ongoing formation opportunities.

Another key insight from communities is that charism formation cannot rest with a single person or office, because staff and leadership transitions will inevitably expose that fragility. The mission is “everybody’s business.” Clarifying a founding charism is not a documentation project but a discernment process requiring serious retrieval of the founder’s spirit and honest translation into the present moment. One way of approaching the field of charism formation today is through a four-step process:

- First, *serious retrieval*: engaging directly with the Society’s own self-understanding, constitutions, history, and the spirit of the founder as lived rather than merely described.
- Second, *interpretive translation*: articulating how the founding charism speaks to the present moment and the institution’s particular context, including the populations it serves, the issues of the day, and the questions those we serve are actually carrying.
- Third, *honest discernment*: distinguishing between the essential charism and the historical forms through which it has been expressed, resisting both the temptation to freeze the charism in a particular cultural moment and the opposite temptation to dissolve it into whatever the culture currently finds acceptable.
- Fourth, *structural embedding*: moving formation from optional and episodic to required and ongoing, for staff, volunteers, leaders, collaborators, and the broader community.

Best Practices

Much of the leading work in charism formation has come from religious communities working in a school environment that employ large numbers of lay employees. Best practice models have included a blending of in person, online, and hybrid formation opportunities.

- **The Holy Cross Charism Initiative** based at St. Edward’s University. The HCCI provides on-demand text and video courses that can be used by local school and ministry leaders at their convenience. This is essential given the diverse time zones and schedules of their local communities.
- **The Christian Brothers Conference** offers a diversity of in-person programs and institutes to provide mission and charism formation for lay staff and collaborators.

S.O.A.R. Analysis

Strengths | What are we doing well?

1. A Missionary Spirit Rooted in Authentic Encounter and Accompaniment

There was strong consensus throughout our conversations that evangelization remains central to the Paulist mission. At the same time, the study group repeatedly emphasized that what distinguishes the Paulists is not simply that we evangelize, but how we evangelize: through radical encounter, hospitality, accompaniment, joyful engagement, and a style of ministry that helps others experience the Church as a place that can be called home.

In reflecting on “Paulist behaviors”, the group identified qualities such as being down to earth, engaging people before and after Mass, entering into the complexity of people’s lives with nuance, and fostering an inclusive and welcoming spirit. These practices point toward deeper values embedded within the Paulist tradition, especially encounter and accompaniment, evangelization, and welcome.

At the heart of these practices is a fundamentally missionary identity. The Paulist approach to encounter, particularly with those at the margins or peripheries of the Church and society, is rooted in a genuine desire to facilitate encounter with Jesus Christ and the life of the Church. Paulists minister with a conviction that evangelization begins through authentic human encounter, attentive listening, and accompaniment.

Many pre-assembly conversations echoed this insight. At the East Coast pre-assembly, they affirmed that “evangelization remains central to our (Paulist) charism,” while also emphasizing that seekers today are ultimately seeking Christ himself and are drawn in through a Christ-like spirit of welcome, joy, and authentic witness. Similarly, at the West Coast pre-assembly, participants noted “in a lot of ways the mission is clear to people in the pews and is felt, but we need to try to say it.” Together, these reflections suggest that the Paulist charism is already deeply embodied and recognizable in lived ministry, even when not always explicitly articulated.

*“The Paulists find their identity and specific purpose within the community of the church ...
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.”
The Paulist Constitution, C1*

2. Strong Preaching

Paulists are generally strong preachers and effective communicators who meaningfully engage with contemporary culture and make the Gospel relevant and accessible. Paulist preaching often reflects a deep attentiveness to the lived experience of the communities Paulists serve, seeking to name and illuminate the ways that the Holy Spirit is already active in the life of the community and the world. In this way, the Scriptures are approached not simply as words from the past, but as the living Word of God still speaking into the realities of the present moment.

Given the longstanding engagement of the community with media and communication, we wonder how the Spirit is calling us to proclaim Jesus Christ in ways that continue to be responsive to the needs, questions, and hopes of today's world.

"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 Paulist Constitution, C4

3. Spirit-Driven Mission

Attentiveness to the Holy Spirit is a defining feature of Paulist identity, rooted in the vision of Fr. Isaac Hecker. This attentiveness is demonstrated in the community's continued willingness to respond to the signs of the times with creativity and courage, such as in our commitment to be on mission in the "peripheries of the church", as well as being a reconciling voice in the midst of deepening division.

"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."
The Paulist Constitution, C1

4. Commitment to Unity Amid Diversity

Paulists see themselves as bridge-builders who embrace diversity. At our best, we engage across lines of difference in the spirit of St. Paul. Our recent emphasis on being a reconciling presence amid polarization, along with our commitment to communities at the peripheries of the Church, reflects this enduring style of bridge-building. This commitment also draws from a longstanding Paulist history of ecumenical dialogue, reconciliation ministry, and engagement across religious, cultural, and ideological boundaries. This missionary impulse resonates deeply with Pope Francis' repeated insistence of a Church that is "*todos, todos, todos*" - everyone, everyone, everyone. The Church must remain a place where all people can encounter Jesus Christ and discover a sense of belonging within the Body of Christ.

"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."
The Paulist Constitution, C4

Opportunities | *What unmet needs or invitations are before us?*

1. Renewing and Clarifying Paulist Mission Language

Throughout this entire process, both a desire for a renewed articulation of the Paulist mission and a concern about defining the mission in ways that could unnecessarily limit its expression emerged repeatedly. There was broad recognition that the absence of a widely shared contemporary articulation of Paulist mission has contributed to a sense of ambiguity within the community. The desire for renewed mission language hopes for language that is clear, simple, and expansive - able to unify and communicate who Paulists are today without diminishing the richness of our charism or the depth of our Paulist tradition.

Our conversations also noted that discussion of the “Mission Direction Statement” almost always refers back to the 1986 MDS, whose themes of evangelization, reconciliation, and ecumenism continue to resonate deeply within the community. At the same time, there is a widespread sense that the community is now living in a different ecclesial, cultural, and social context, and that the articulation of mission must be brought into deeper conversation with the realities of the present moment: the changing world, the American Church, and the life of the Society itself.

This renewal cannot simply be a matter of updating language. Our conversations surfaced the importance of more deeply grounding the mission of the community within the broader theological vision emerging in the universal Church through the continued reception of the Second Vatican Council and the recent pontificates of Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV. Themes such as evangelization, encounter, accompaniment, synodality, missionary discipleship, dialogue, and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit resonate deeply with longstanding elements of the Paulist charism. Yet there is a sense that the community has not always fully articulated or claimed the theological richness and ecclesial relevance of these connections within its own understanding of mission.

There was also recognition that past uses of the Mission Direction Statement have at times led to its functioning as a kind of yardstick by which individual Paulists, ministries, or foundations were measured or judged as being more or less “Paulist.” The study group expressed hope that any renewed articulation of mission would avoid becoming overly prescriptive or evaluative in this way, and instead serve as a unifying and animating vision that allows for diversity of gifts, ministries, and expressions of the charism across the Paulist family.

2. Reclaim Foundational Sources: St. Paul, Isaac Hecker, and the Holy Spirit

There was strong energy around retrieving St. Paul as a more explicit and foundational source for Paulist mission, alongside renewed engagement with our founder, Fr. Isaac Hecker, and a deeper attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. There was a clear sense that St. Paul should not remain simply a namesake or general missionary symbol, but be reclaimed as a theological and pastoral anchor for how the community understands its identity today.

The group highlighted Paul as a boundary-crossing missionary who moved across divisions of Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider, forming communities marked by real difference yet grounded in unity in Christ. Particular attention was also given to reclaiming a richer understanding of conversion within the Paulist tradition. While the language of “conversion” can at times feel loaded or overly associated with “convert-making,” the Study Group reflected on how central conversion is within the writings and missionary imagination of St. Paul. In this understanding, conversion is not primarily about winning arguments or increasing numbers, but about facilitating an encounter with Jesus Christ in a way that transforms lives, relationships, and communities.

The group noted that this understanding aligns closely with Pope Francis’ vision in *The Joy of the Gospel*, where evangelization flows from the joy of encountering Christ and the desire to share that joy with others. Such an approach reflects a distinctly Paulist style of evangelization rooted in encounter, accompaniment, and welcome. The missionary is not simply one who “brings” Christ to others, but one who is continually evangelized and transformed through the very act of encounter and proclamation. Reclaiming this understanding of conversion may offer an important theological foundation for understanding and articulating the mission of the Paulist community today.

Finally, our conversations also surfaced the opportunity to reclaim more intentionally the Paulists’ unique place within the history of the American Church as the first men’s religious community founded in the United States by an American citizen for the missionary needs of the American context. Historically, the Paulists have often played a prophetic and dialogical role within the life of the Church in the United States, engaging questions of culture, pluralism, ecumenism, evangelization, and public life with creativity and courage. There was a sense that the present moment offers a renewed opportunity for the Paulists to reclaim this voice and contribute meaningfully to the religious and cultural discourse shaping the country today.

“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.” The Paulist Constitution, C2

3. Lay Collaboration and Charism Formation

Our conversations also surfaced the importance of developing clearer frameworks for formation, participation, and shared mission that invite Paulist Associates, Deacon Affiliates, lay collaborators, and lay leaders into deeper ownership and exercise of the Paulist charism. As the wider Paulist family continues to grow, there is a need for intentional structures and greater clarity as to the relationships that exist among various members of the wider Paulist charismatic family.

As the number of Paulists decreases and lay collaboration increases, the assumption that charism will simply be “caught” rather than intentionally formed is no longer sufficient. This reflects a broader shift taking place across religious communities and presents an opportunity for the Paulists to develop more intentional, ongoing, and shared formation across the wider community.

4. “The Elevator Pitch”

In addition to offering updated, theologically grounded mission language, there was a recognized need for a concise and compelling articulation of Paulist identity, building on the success of memorable phrases from our history such as “the three pillars - evangelization, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, and reconciliation,” “Giving the Gospel a Voice,” and “Missionaries to Main Street.” While mission is more than “marketing,” this kind of language matters, especially as it shapes how people, particularly younger generations, first encounter, understand, and connect with the Paulist community.

Aspirations | What vision of the future is God calling us toward?

1. Clear and Energizing Mission Language
2. A Christ-Centered and Spirit-Driven Identity
3. A Reclaimed Pauline Identity
4. A Mission That Forms and Sends
5. A Tone of Joyful, Welcoming Evangelization
6. A Shared Mission Across the Paulist Family

Considerations

1. Undertake a process to develop a concise and compelling articulation of the Paulist mission that is grounded in the community's lived experience, theological foundations, and present context. While the General Assembly itself may not seek to draft an entire Mission-Vision Statement, it should provide sufficient vision, direction, and theological grounding for a designated group to carry this work forward following the Assembly. We hope that particular attention be given to intentionally situating the Paulist mission within the broader theological vision emerging in the universal Church, especially the continued reception of the Second Vatican Council and its ongoing development in the pontificates of Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV.
2. Encourage deeper theological, spiritual, and pastoral engagement with St. Paul, the writings and vision of Fr. Isaac Hecker, and the role of the Holy Spirit in shaping Paulist identity and mission. Such engagement will benefit in particular from fresh insights in Pauline studies, especially those that reinforce Paul's commitment to radical inclusion, hospitality, and unity amidst difference. Likewise, reflection on the Holy Spirit may draw from the fruits of new and maturing understandings of the Holy Spirit's presence and work.
3. Develop foundational and ongoing formation programs, offered online and in person, to promote, sustain, and embody the Paulist charism across our ministries. Such formation should help those who minister alongside us, as well as those we serve: lay staff, Paulist Associates, Deacon Affiliates, key volunteers, and parishioners to more deeply understand the spiritual and theological foundations that shape the Paulist approach to theology, spirituality, and ministry.
4. Consider engaging with a marketing company to help develop accessible and public-facing mission language that is concise and compelling.

Additional Resources (link)

- CMSM 2023 Presidential Address, Very Rev. Jeffrey S. Kirch, CPPS
- Harnessing Our Power Through Charism, Fr. Joseph J. Driscoll, DMin
- Aggiornamento, Ressourcement, and the Development of the Marianist Charism, Robert K. Moriarty, SM
- Charism Formation in Dominican Institutions of Higher Education Charism Formation in Dominican Institutions of Higher Education, Jennifer E. Schaaf OP
- A Delphi Study Defining Catholic Identity in American Diocesan A Delphi Study Defining Catholic Identity in American Diocesan Catholic Higher Education, Katherine Grooms