

A Reflection on Productive and Counter-Productive Predispositions for Engaging in Apostolic Planning

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A feature of Apostolic Planning is its power to surface a Jesuit's mindset(s), even toward Apostolic Planning itself. This power is observable in "intellectual critiques" and "emotional reactions" that it can elicit in the participants. These reactions could be fear of change or frustration because of the perceived ineffectiveness of previous Apostolic Plans among many others. For this reason, individual "remote" spiritual preparation (beginning in July 2022) and "proximate" spiritual preparation (two weeks prior to the first session of Apostolic Planning) are essential to rediscover our essential individual spiritual predispositions. A community superior who will lead a multi-session discernment process needs to strongly encourage his community to invest time in asking (i) for the grace of indifference and spiritual detachment, and (ii) for the grace to understand one's mindset(s) that might be counterproductive.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge potential areas of unfreedom that could prevent a person from being attentive to the movements of spirit. At a minimum, the areas of unfreedom described below should lead to a careful analysis of the vocabulary to be used throughout the Apostolic Planning process.

Fr. General guided a one-day online retreat for the Provincials of Canada/USA in the fall of 2021. In his points for prayer, he touched on the personal spiritual predispositions that can spoil the Examen. It is not much of a reach to reflect on the potential impact of these same personal spiritual predispositions for each of us as we prepare to enter spiritual conversation with the goal of discerning our Apostolic future. The counter-productive personal spiritual predispositions he mentioned were the following:

- Feeling a threat to one's "comfort zone"
- Distrusting the process that is being proposed
- Brooding over similar experiences with frustrating results
- Lacking faith in the possibility of change
- Fear of being dissatisfied with the results
- Lacking spiritual or psychological energy to launch into a new process
- Plagued by general skepticism

Some other predispositions could be added to this list.

The predispositions mentioned above are part of the human condition. In the Society of Jesus, when considering the renewal of our shared apostolic direction, attachments, counter-productive spiritual predispositions and the unfreedom related to them can be considerable obstacles. Our spirituality holds that one's grip on attachments and the grip of spiritual predispositions on us can be loosened, but only because of a grace asked for and received.

Let's turn to a description of some potential areas of unfreedom. This list is not exhaustive, but it is a start.

Generational differences in the Jesuit formation process

Jesuits under 50 years of age have had a more integrated “USA East-like” Jesuit life through their years in formation. They have effectively been USA East since they entered the Society. By around 2035, almost all apostolically active Jesuits will have entered a multi-Province novitiate. Strong “Heritage-Province” identities in Jesuits may be circulating throughout the Apostolic Planning process. While the way in which these identities will manifest themselves during the Apostolic Planning process are yet to be seen, we should exercise caution. Knowing that the communal discernment in the fall will contribute to the eventual Apostolic Plan may stir Heritage Province identities that could adversely impact the process.

We need to acknowledge that for some Jesuits, Heritage Province membership could be a primordial identity marker, a source of pride and personal identity, and it could drive a lot of initial individual contributions in local community meetings. These identities will appear in our communal deliberations as loyalties, territoriality, competitiveness, lobbying, expressions of pride and of shame in our histories. Individual Jesuits over fifty will have varying degrees of awareness of the impact of their Heritage Province on their perspective. We will be providing them the resources to pray through some of these. These loyalties must be acknowledged and dealt with in a compassionate way because, in a sense, all Apostolic Planning has elements of a paschal experience, a “dying” or “letting go,” as the new USA East Province comes to life.

Because of the structure of formation over the last twenty years, younger Jesuits have a great deal of familiarity with their peers that is only mildly influenced by the three Heritage Provinces.

This may also be a time for us to reflect on the value of “intergenerational solidarity.” One can imagine assumptions in the minds of older Jesuits about younger Jesuits and vice versa. Each of us might ask ourselves if the assumptions in this regard lead us to be more open-minded or more closed-minded toward the voice of another generation of Jesuits.

Heritage Province identities and Fairness

The issue of fairness may emerge at some point. A Jesuit with a strong Heritage Province identity should not assume that the Apostolic Plan will guarantee that our total USA East resources will be equally distributed among the three Heritage Provinces. But one can assume that the geographical location will be one of many criteria used to establish the apostolic priorities of the new Province. The issue of “fairness” could lead a Jesuit to feel that the three Heritage Provinces should be treated equally, and he may feel unfairly treated if his Heritage Province is “slighted.”

At the same time, if a Jesuit with a strong Heritage Province identity enters this process assuming that one of the three Heritage Provinces would be declared the “winner” of the “Province Apostolic Planning Sweepstakes” in terms of allocation of resources, he may short-circuit in himself honest participation in communal discernment about the apostolic direction of our new Province.

Unconscious assumptions about one’s identity as a Jesuit in terms of a Heritage Province loyalty could be an obstacle to moving forward as a new Province. Jesuits will be encouraged to pray for the freedom to lovingly lighten the grip on those Heritage Province identities.

“Rapid Typecasting” vs “Deep Listening”

In our posture in the community discernment sessions, we may tend to see brother Jesuits as “types” and then place that “type” in a box rather than engaging the Jesuit in front of us through deep listening. We need to see another Jesuit as the person he is rather than seeing a “type of Jesuit.” The more closely a Jesuit listens to others, the wiser and kinder he will be. This type of listening, at the heart of spiritual conversation, also requires humility and social courage. Through deep listening during spiritual conversation, a Jesuit begins to see the brother in front of him as the ongoing narrator of his own life, bringing his experience of navigating among his different ministerial and personal roles, and steering through certainties and doubts.

Scarcity vs. abundance

We will undoubtedly hear some Jesuits speak from a deep-seated sense of scarcity of resources. The Province has a slide deck of all the “scary slides,” that describes the USA East Province in numbers (See Appendix for an example). When fear of scarcity and anxiety-driven scarcity mitigation are a Jesuit’s spiritual predisposition as he enters Apostolic Planning, he can offer little to the conversation. Scarcity could generate anxiety and reveal all sorts of resource hoarding strategies. When in reality, many new abundances have developed. We need to strike a balance between “acknowledging” scarcity but “discerning” from abundance and new life. We need to name those abundances and embrace them. Why do we resist acknowledging a great storyline in our Jesuit history: the accomplishment of so much with so little? Examples abound! Would someone please cue “The Paraguayan Reductions” and “Fe y Alegría”?

Mindsets about Apostolic Planning

In addition to the influence of age, Heritage Province identities and our brooding over scarcity, the speech emerging from our “mindsets” operating in our spiritual conversations will need to be monitored carefully. Let’s examine some examples.

- The “Standard Operating Procedure” (SOP) mindset: This Jesuit dutifully participates procedurally in the activities of Apostolic Planning, bringing a kind of joyful compliance, with the assumption that, in the end, the USA East Province will make minor adjustments and then return to one or another version of “SOP.” He feels that the Apostolic Plan will not really affect his future.
- The “Mergers and Acquisitions” (M&A) mindset: This Jesuit simply focuses on the practical matters of the Provinces joining together, making leadership and administrative adjustments in the “C Suite,” or Province Curia, and eliminating some “business operations.”
- The “Here-we-go-again” mindset: This Jesuit delegitimizes Apostolic Planning with some combination of sarcasm or silence, claiming that the last Apostolic plan was completed, put on the shelf, and forgotten, even though none of the Heritage Provinces has implemented a strategic plan in more than 35 years. This Jesuit inhabits a narrative that allows himself to be emotionally and spiritually unavailable, painting himself as an honest realist. Eye-rolling and sitting in the back row with arms crossed may be involved.

- The “Expert” mindset: This Jesuit perceives himself as having the right answers. The expert is focused exclusively on solving problems and would perceive Apostolic Planning as an attractive Olympic-sized problem-solving exercise to which he would enter the fray of competing solutions. He has little time for nostalgia as it keeps us “looking in the rearview window” and lures us back into the past. He is proud that he is not fixated on the past like other Jesuits. But he does not realize that all his data and expertise have him exiled in “Nowtown.” If you are a hammer, everything is a nail. This Jesuit has “overlearned” deficiency expectations. He assumes that something is wrong. He just needs to find it and fix it. Since he focuses on problem-solving, he tends to look at the world as breakdowns to be fixed. We are experts at creating categories of deficits, and we can be addicted to problem-solving.

On top of that, the expert’s mind can only envision one or two solutions because of the “narrowing effect of expertise,” which this Jesuit may or may not perceive as an obstacle. This Jesuit can also “bend your problem” in such a way that his expertise becomes the best solution. This Jesuit will speak up early and often, pouring forth knowledge and expertise. We might refer to this set of attitudes as “mission hubris.”

- The “Fadster” mindset: This Jesuit engages in “untethered brainstorming” and assumes that the high degree of novelty of a proposal to be shared in communal discernment is the best signal of the presence of the Holy Spirit. He might reflexively embrace and fixate on a far-out option for its own sake.
- The “Over My Dead Body” (OMDB) mindset: This Jesuit is willing to verbally disrupt the small group spiritual conversation or attempt to delegitimize the entire process, acting as a saboteur. His resistance is typically rooted in personal animus toward the Jesuit(s) involved in leading the discernment or is autobiographical and revealing of issues this Jesuit may be carrying that he projects onto the communal apostolic discernment. This Jesuit will not respond to either reasonable arguments or empathetic listening to “bring him around.” This Jesuit might be a “lone ranger.” He effectively isolates himself, confident in his truth and considers that position a great honor. An OMDB Jesuit might have been a trailblazer at some point in the past, but the Jesuit leaders he was following did not give him the support he needed, and Jesuit leadership abandoned him at the first sign of resistance to the ideas of this OMDB Jesuit.
- The “Beginner” mindset: This Jesuit has learned that his perspective is limited because of his perception of himself as “inexperienced,” and he frequently feels disempowered by other Jesuits with an expert mindset who projects themselves as having the single best answer to the problem or challenge under consideration. This Jesuit has learned this because it has been transmitted tacitly to him since he entered the Society. Paradoxically, in contrast to the Expert, the Beginner is open-minded, and for him there are many possible Apostolic Futures.
- The “Founder” mindset: This Jesuit senses the beginning of a new Province, and that the Apostolic Planning will lead to the creation of the contours of that new entity and the establishment of our priorities for the future. He experiences some anxiety and fear because starting a new Province will mean the dying of some activities and the coming to life of others.

Toward becoming more “able-spirited” for Communal Apostolic Discernment

Each Jesuit of the new USA East Province ought to dedicate time and energy to prepare himself for our upcoming “spiritual exercise” of Apostolic Planning that will be the foundational experience for the USA East Province. The results of this “Communal Spiritual Exercise” will be consequential for all Jesuits and our Lay Colleagues. We will establish Apostolic Priorities that will affect the selection of our ministries, the redesign our governance, and the renewal of Jesuit life so that all will give greater glory to God.

A Jesuit could consider making “growth in interior freedom” the topic of conversation with his spiritual director well into next Fall. He could make the consideration of this aspect of his spirit the centerpiece of his annual retreat. Now may be the opportunity to begin to pray through our own emotions and judgements about apostolic planning - acknowledging any skepticism you might have.

Interior freedom is not a natural state, and the spiritual path to its acquisition is characterized by the seemingly endless series of deceptions by the Evil Spirit. Yet, it is the one necessary spiritual quality required for communal discernment, the method for Apostolic Planning. Interior freedom is not something that we can give to ourselves. So, we turn to God, and we ask for it. Interior freedom is a gift from God given during prayer and reflection. We could pray for that gift to “loosen our grip” on our possessions and our routines (riches), to ease our attraction to the metrics of popularity and prestige (honor), so as to give that glory to God, and to reduce our individual personal identification with a particular ministry or institution as a source of our self-worth and personal security (pride).

Only in this spiritual state, or “with the desire to be” in this spiritual state, or “with the desire for the desire to be” in this spiritual state can we truly contribute to the vision of our shared Apostolic Future. We need to be “able-spirited” for this journey. Prayer is required!

Appendix

Jesuits of the UEA Province (1)

as of September 2022

	2000	2010	2022
MAR (2)	455	353	
NEN (2)	446	317	
NYK (2)	629	385	
UEA (2)			640
Total (3)	1530	1055	640
Change in number of Jesuits (4)		-475	-415
Change in number of Jesuits as % (5)		-32%	-40%
Change in the number of Jesuits 2000-2022 (6)			-890
Change in the number of Jesuits 2000-2022 as % (7)			-59%

Notes:

- (1) Includes UEA members residing in the UEA Province, UEA members living outside the UEA Province. Does not include members of other Provinces residing in UEA Province.
- (2) In 2020, the UEA Province was created, and Maryland, New England and New York Provinces ceased to exist as jurisdictions of the Society of Jesus.
- (3) For the years 2000 and 2010, the number of Jesuits from the three former Provinces were aggregated so that we might better compare the change in the number of Jesuits over time.
- (4) The change in the number of Jesuits over the period from 2000 to 2010, and the change over the period 2011 to 2022.
- (5) The change in the number of Jesuits expressed as a percentage.
- (6) Aggregate change in number of Jesuits from 2000 to 2022.
- (7) Aggregate change in number of Jesuits from 2000 to 2022 expressed as a percentage.

Comment:

For 2022, the UEA Province has sixty members living in JCCU Provinces and forty in other non-JCCU Provinces. Of those in JCCU Provinces, about twenty-three are in formation. Of the thirty-five apostolically active UEA Jesuits, about twenty are in college or university. Of the remaining fifteen or so about ten are in parishes and in schools, and about five are individually missioned.

For 2022, the UEA Province has 33 Jesuits who are individually missioned: eleven in parishes, eleven in college or university, three in hospital chaplaincy, two in prison chaplaincy, two in social ministry, and one each in spiritual ministry, non-formal adult education and military chaplaincy.

For 2022, the UEA has 23 Jesuits living outside Jesuit community. Jesuits serving in Micronesia are not included.