



# Engaging Aging

## Paulist Spirituality Speaks to Aging

**Reverend Ronald Franco, CSP**

*“There is  
no virtue  
which the  
Spirit does  
not teach if  
we would  
hear its  
whispering  
voice in our  
hearts.”*

*Isaac Hecker Diary,  
November 1, 1843*

*The Paulist Vocation*

An elderly priest I lived with more years ago than I care to count used to like to say, “don’t get old.” His lament, I eventually realized, referred not just to the physical ailments and diminished physical capacities that typically accompany aging but also to the increased sense of ministerial marginality that may seem an even more inevitable accompaniment of a priest growing older. In his particular case, he was still physically able to maintain a surprising round of activity that belied his age and infirmities. But no amount of activity could hide the fact that he was slowing down, nor could it counter his experience of feeling increasingly part of the past, even as he continued to live in a society, in a Church, and indeed in a religious community that were inevitably living in the present and very much looking ahead to the future.

Like him, I am a member of The Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle (“The Paulist Fathers”), the first male religious community founded in the United States, a community with a rich history of mission deeply formed by and reflective of American experience and energy.

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## Paulist Spirituality Speaks to Aging, continued

Ask most Paulists when and how they felt most authentically Paulist and they will likely respond with experiences of life in active ministry - preaching, teaching, celebrating the sacraments, helping to form fellow disciples for mission, meeting people where they are in this world and helping them to come closer to Christ. So, when one can no longer do those things or must do them less frequently and less energetically, it is only natural to worry whether one is still doing the mission.

While the physical health of each of us varies and the actual degree of feeling left-behind differs from person to person, my sense is that these experiences are almost inevitable at some level for everyone if one lives long enough. Certainly, they became an important part of the spiritual journey of my own religious community's founder, Servant of God Isaac Hecker.

### ISAAC HECKER

Isaac Hecker (1819-1888) lived a classic 19th-century American life. Born in New York City, the son of German immigrants, whose father eventually abandoned the family, he was raised by a single mother, who had converted to Methodism. Having survived smallpox as a child, Isaac early in life developed a powerful sense of God's special providence. Meanwhile his older brothers proved successful in business and were active in Jacksonian-era Democratic politics. Isaac himself from an early age began to seek after the truth, while his heart was moved with the desire of doing good to others. The first channel in which he was directed was that of politics. He imagined political reform "as the remedy for existing evils and of rendering mankind happy."

Gradually, however, without ever fully rejecting the radical reform agenda associated with populist democracy in the Jacksonian era, his priorities evolved from political to social to religious

concerns. In American religious history, this was the era known as the Second Great Awakening, an experience of religious ferment which aimed at both individual conversion and community transformation.

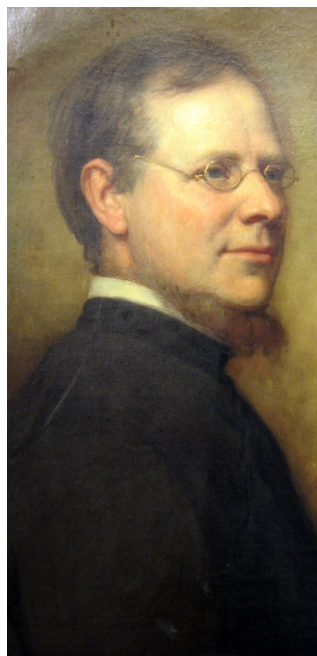
In that spirit, Hecker eagerly sampled as many as possible of the leading contemporary philosophical and religious ideas, none of which, however, answered the demands of his reason or proved satisfactory to his conscience. Confident that it was not reasonable to suppose that God would implant in his soul such an ardent thirst for truth and not reveal it, he courageously continued his search for the truth, finally finding it in the Catholic Church, which "burst upon my vision as the object to which all my efforts had been unintentionally directed." In thus describing his spiritual quest and its seemingly surprising outcome, Hecker wanted to emphasize what would become his lifelong conviction that Catholicism was consistent with and indeed the true fulfillment of the aspirations of human nature.

As Hecker came to understand his inner spiritual experience in terms of the action of the Holy Spirit, he found himself more and more drawn to institu-

Stained-glass window of Isaac Hecker as Founder of the Paulist Fathers. It is located in the Chapel of the former Paulist House of Studies, Washington, D.C.



## Paulist Spirituality Speaks to Aging, continued



1858 portrait of Isaac Hecker by American artist George Patrick Alexander Healy.

tional Christianity. His early identification of Divine Providence with the divine indwelling made theological sense of the continuity between nature and grace, which he felt from his own experience, thus easing his way into the Church and laying the groundwork for his mature thought about the relationship between Church and society and the evangelization of the latter by the former. The outcome in Hecker's case was both a conversion to Catholicism and an enthusi-

astic embrace of an ecclesiastical vocation becoming, as he recalled near the end of his life, not only "a most firm believer in the mysteries of the Christian religion, but a priest and a religious."

As an enthusiastic new Catholic, Hecker's practical task was how to live this new experience not just for himself but for others. His zeal led him first to the Redemptorists and then - after over a decade of fruitful Redemptorist life and ministry - eventually to establish the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle (The Paulist Fathers) in 1858.

For the next dozen years, he served as the active pastor of a growing Paulist parish, while continuing to preach parish missions and deliver numerous public lectures. Earlier as a Redemptorist, he had published two books, *Questions of the Soul* and *Aspirations of Nature*, which popularized his apologetical method. Resisting controversial historical polemics, he proposed the

truth of the Catholic faith in a way which made it appealing and accessible to mid-19th-century Americans, while at the same time contributing to what Hecker, in a letter to his friend and fellow convert Orestes Brownson, called "a higher tone of Catholic life in our country," one consequence of which, he believed, would be to make the Church more attractive to non-Catholics.

Clearly, Hecker understood that any successful mission to non-Catholic America presupposed an effective mission and ministry within the American Catholic community. "The Catholic faith alone," Hecker wrote to Brownson, "is capable of giving to people a true permanent and burning enthusiasm fraught with the greatest of deeds. But to enkindle this in others we must be possessed of it first ourselves."

At a time (not so unlike our own) when political polarization was literally tearing the country apart, Hecker remained convinced, as he said to Blessed Pope Pius IX in 1857, that "the Catholic truth," once known, "would come between parties and act like oil on troubled waters." For Hecker, Catholicism was a powerfully unifying force, binding citizens together, and thus blunting the dangerously sharp cutting edges of conflict and dissension, fusing the private interests of individuals and factions into a common social and civic unity.

Hecker appreciated the problem posed by the fundamentally fragmented character of American society with its fragile connections among individuals, and the dilemma of how to create a community capable of uniting individuals consistent with their individuality and freedom. However, he never wavered in his conviction that what he had found in Catholicism - and what he had been able to find only in Catholicism - could and would be America's answer as well.



## Paulist Spirituality Speaks to Aging, continued

Hecker's final book, *The Church and the Age*, published the year before his death, remains the most comprehensive summary of his most mature thought on the themes that had preoccupied him for most of his life. It offers Hecker's mature insights on his lifelong faith in the simultaneously interior action of the Holy Spirit within the individual and the Holy Spirit's exterior action in the authority of the Church. It also represents Hecker's final and mature formulation of his core convictions about the Church and the contemporary world in general and in particular the vexing question of Church and State in the United States, Italy, and France (the latter two being the countries where Church-State relations were persistently neuralgic at the time and where such issues had the most immediate impact on the government of the Universal Church). Repeating themes long prominent in his earlier speaking and writing, *The Church and the Age* can confidently be turned to as a summary and synthesis of his most fully developed and mature spiritual theology.

In the 1870s, however, not long after his return from the First Vatican Council, declining health gradually forced this ultra-active missionary to embrace a radical reduction in ministerial activity that challenged him to surrender himself totally to the Lord. For a while, he was still able to travel, and he continued meeting with European Church leaders, especially those associated with the Catholic Congress movements in Belgium and France, still promoting his vision of Catholicism in America and his hopes for European Catholic renewal as well.

Even so, the last period of Hecker's life was increasingly dominated by physical illness and suffering. In those final years, Hecker lived what one of his favorite Jesuit spiritual authors, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, called "the sacrament of the present moment." His struggle with aging

intensely focused Hecker on the one thing most important - his relationship with God - ultimately a greater and more important thing than anything one does in life. In sentiments that somewhat recall St. Thomas Aquinas' famous experience shortly before his death, Hecker expressed his own experience: "There was once a priest who had been very active for God, until at last God gave him a knowledge of the Divine Majesty. After seeing the majesty of God that priest felt very strange and was much humbled, and knew how little a thing he was in comparison with God."

### PAULIST LIFE AND MISSION

Isaac Hecker bequeathed to his community a strong tradition of ministerial activism. As a clerical Society of Apostolic Life in the Church, the Paulists promise to live and work together in community for our own sanctification and to collaborate in a common mission, rooted in Hecker's constant confidence in God's providential grace at work in our present time and place.

Inevitably, some of what Hecker actually said and wrote was historically and culturally conditioned. But, at the heart of what he said and wrote, was an appreciation of what he had experienced

Church of St. Paul the Apostle, New York, NY, is the Mother Church of the Paulist Fathers.



## Paulist Spirituality Speaks to Aging, continued

in the Catholic Church - as the Body of Christ, which continues the mission of the Incarnation in the world - and the individual, ecclesial, and social effects which flow from openness to that divine activity. Hecker's charism is a continuing invitation to read and reread our time and place through the unique experience of the Church's life and then to share that experience with the world in our particular time and place.

Hecker was well aware that his spiritual insights into American democracy's compatibility with Catholicism and what Catholicism had to offer to America hardly corresponded to conventional wisdom - on either side of the Atlantic. He never wavered, however, in his conviction that what he had been able to find only in Catholicism could and would be America's answer as well. Hecker's novel insight was how, since all creation is always ultimately ordered to grace, even certain new situations and social arrangements, which may initially be perceived as obstacles, may actually prove to be new opportunities for individual and social transformation through the Church's ongoing realization of the Incarnation.

For more than 160 years, Paulists have aspired to institutionalize Hecker's vision - for ourselves through our community life and for others through our diverse ministries. In our own very perplexing time of cultural, moral, social, and political polarization in both our society and our Church, the rapidly changing experiences of religious community life and of pastoral ministry continue to challenge us to reimagine Hecker's program of "personal perfection" and "zeal for souls."

This context, with its simultaneously hopeful and challenging aspects and dimensions, is where we Paulists continue to do mission, through encounter, accompaniment, and dialogue. Faithful to the example of our patron St. Paul and the



During their Mass of Ordination in May 2024, Paulist Ordinands Chris Lawton and Dan Macalinao receive the prayers of Fr. Thomas Kane, CSP, and Fr. Paul Robichaud, CSP.

charism of Isaac Hecker, who sought to evangelize America with a view primarily to reaching those outside the Catholic Church, we are especially committed to encountering, accompanying and dialogue with those who, in our present time and place, may find themselves distant from the fullness of the Catholic Church's life, welcoming and making present those who might otherwise absent themselves from our conversation.

Now as then, this mission has inspired energetic initiatives (famous among them our outreach in media and on university campuses) as well



## Paulist Spirituality Speaks to Aging, continued

as the sustained daily efforts to build up the Church in parishes and local communities. For over 160 years, Paulists have been very busy men and happy to be so.

All that resonates with the basic tenor of our activist American culture, in which career can often become a proxy for one's identity, a culture which encourages and applauds work and constantly seeks for recognizable results.

### GROWING OLD TOGETHER

As a pastor, I sometimes used to suggest that we occasionally seem to assume that all priests are still 25. Unfortunately, most of us are not 25 anymore. On the one hand, of course, priesthood and religious life offer unique opportunities to continue being actively engaged in ministry as long as one is able. We are all familiar with priests and religious who have managed to carry on and accomplish a considerable amount

Chapel of the Paulist Fathers' Mother House, located adjacent to the Church of St. Paul the Apostle, New York, NY.



even in their later years. And our natural tendency is to admire and aspire to that.

Thus, when the time came for me to step aside as pastor and enter "Senior Ministry," I was frankly devastated by the prospect, by what it might mean not to be really "working." I dreaded how I would fill my time, how I would give meaning and purpose to each day. As a matter of fact, like most senior priests, I am still "working" at some level. For years, I sought to serve the Church through sharing my religious community's charism with the wider world with which I was actively engaged. Now, however, most of my ministry is more inwardly directed. The same charism that called one outward to ministry in the wider world now points more inward to encounter, accompaniment, and dialogue within religious community. So now I serve the Church primarily through my service to my local community, in particular at present as Local Superior of the Paulist Fathers' Mother House.

We do well to remember that, just as the younger Hecker was correct in his insight that, to evangelize others, we must be first evangelized ourselves, that initial insight was likewise eventually enriched by his experience of aging, through which he realized how the mission of personal and mutual evangelization continues and takes on a distinctive dimension in later life.

Studies show that most priests love celebrating the sacraments. I, for one, especially loved celebrating Mass in a big church, with a large congregation, with vibrant music, and (hopefully) a well-planned homily that could connect with those who heard it. Now, more often than not, I celebrate Mass in a beautiful but modest chapel, with an attentive but

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From left, Paulist Deacon Chris Malano, Fr. John Lynch CSP, and Paulist Deacon Ben Chisholm attend a September 2024 gathering at Sacred Heart Home in Hyattsville, MD to celebrate Fr. Lynch's 100th birthday. Fr. Lynch is the second centenarian in the history of the Paulist Fathers. (All photos used with permission of Paulist Fathers)

very small congregation of just a few fellow Paulists, and with neither music nor homily. Yet the Risen Christ is just as present, confirming us in our personal resilience and commitment to Church and mission.

Living in an intergenerational house, whose members range in age from 28 to 85, everyday living increasingly reflects the challenges of aging. At table, in chapel, or in the common room, one finds oneself challenged to respond to and assist someone whose physical strength and mental power just aren't what they used to be. Alternately, I may be that person having to be helped where once upon a time I would have been the helper. This reversal of roles reflects the fundamental inversion of values that is the constitution of God's kingdom as expressed in the Beatitudes.

Aging in community highlights how being a disciple means more than listening to Jesus' words and preaching them to others. It also means being led, by him and with him, where he was led. It means leaving behind our perpetual aspi-

rations to accomplishment, our competitiveness with one another and within our own selves.

In contrast, Jesus challenges us to come to know ourselves and him in our limitations. He invites us to compensate for our own limited moral experience by paying attention - difficult as that may be - to the experiences of others, others whose lived reality of diminishment can cut through our narrow self-understanding and teach us something new, exposing us to realities and insights we would not otherwise be exposed to.

Looked at from the outside, this can be quite frightening, even threatening. But when we experience it together with our brothers in community, something different happens, and we experience the comfort of a renewed discipleship.

Every day, I am learning how our once outward-directed charism of welcome and accompaniment continues in our mutual welcome and accompaniment of one another, which now includes being welcomed and accompanied oneself, as we all together await being fully and finally welcomed and accompanied into the ever-closer fullness of God's kingdom.

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Christmas for the generosity of our  
many friends and benefactors.  
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Child will bring peace and joy to your  
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