



November 2022

ENCOUNTER
Catholics on Mission – Everywhere

Getting Back to the Roots of Mission



Even by his own reckoning, Fr. John Paul Herman SVD's job covers a lot of ground. As the new director of SEDOS (Service of Documentation and Study on Global Mission) in Rome, he works with 85 missionary congregations that span the globe in more than 100 countries. The group shares news and publications/bulletins on current challenges and realities in mission, and organizes conferences and seminars for education and outreach.

"It is a big job," he says with a laugh, and then adds, "It is a huge scope. A large scale."



A member of the Society of Divine Word Missionaries and native of northern India, Fr. John Paul's background is twofold: mission and communications. His expertise in the latter has certainly helped him with the former, and he is no stranger to Rome, having earned a doctorate in social communication at the Salesian Pontifical University there in 2014.

The principal work of SEDOS is the deepening and understanding of world mission, while interreligious dialogue and ecumenism are important topics for research and discussion. The work of supporting missionaries is made more complex by the fact that every region and continent has its own challenges, says Fr. John Paul. Congregations face unique challenges of their own, as well. The pandemic, of course, was an unexpected hardship; layer on top of that issues such as the global climate crisis, fundamentalism, and terrorism, and missionaries are being called to serve as never before.

Mission itself is in need of some reimagining in today's context, Fr. John Paul believes, because so many people have left the Church or feel it does not speak to them anymore in their daily lives. This calls for a paradigm shift in the way we think about church and about mission.

"We always think of mission as going out, but it is also a mission to one's self, a mission within, rooted in Christ," he says. "We need to be more spiritual, to



Top: SEDOS Staff picture: SEDOS staff with Fr. Peter Baekelmans CICM, the former Executive Director of SEDOS (far left), and Fr. John Paul Herman, SVD (far right).

Middle: YouTube channel Inauguration with Bishop Chacko T (middle)

Bottom: Performing in street theater as a missionary.

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focus on ourselves, to build our strength. Otherwise, we don't have much impact."

He notes that in his background, what he calls a more Asian context, the Church remains deeply involved in people's lives, not just during Sunday rituals but as a constant thread that reminds us that all Christians have a mission.

If he is called today to work in mission on a more global scale, as a newly ordained priest, Fr. John Paul lived in a much smaller context, as a missionary in northern India, on the borders of Tibet and Bangladesh.

"Initially, I spent four years living as a missionary, without any house, and went around village to village with no home," he says, sounding a little wistful about that time, more than three decades ago. "I lived with the people, working in the mountains and forests and interiors. That was my rich experience."

When his congregation called him back for studies, he entered the formal field of communications, teaching, training and performing in journalism, dance-music, theatre, and more. One of his jobs during the Covid lockdown was writing 84 episodes of a Hindi television serial called "YESHU" about the life of Jesus, from birth to age 12. In northern India, Christianity is not common, he says, so his task then was to communicate the traditions of another faith in a way that captured the imaginations of his audience.

In his own life, Fr. John Paul credits missionaries for introducing him to Christianity when he was a child, after a group of missionaries "adopted" his family and helped to raise and educate him.

"We could feel the work of the missionaries, the selflessness," he remembers. "That inspired me to become a missionary."

That formative experience continues to be felt in his work today. SEDOS has just published a book, *New Trends in Mission: The Emerging Future*, and by the time of this publishing will have recently hosted a one-day seminar, "Revisiting the Charisms in Today's Contexts," which will mark the formal launch of the book.

The topic is very much on Fr. John Paul's mind, as it is for most people in formal mission work. The challenge is to strengthen anew the roots of the Church, he says, for without those roots, it cannot stand.



Top: Serving as a missionary in Northeast India.

Bottom: Addressing the press.

"That is being discussed in various ways, how to bring back the spirit, the mission, to oneself. Everyone has mission. It is not just the missionaries. Every person has the mission, to live up to that Christ-centeredness, that experience, and everyone can share it with others," he says. "Without that experience, there is no mission. It can become like any other work that doesn't have the spirit, the rootedness."

For more information on SEDOS, visit www.sedosmission.org.

Article by Julie Bourbon, ENCOUNTER Editor

The Seven Concerns of Mission Leaders

USCMA Town Hall Meetings Synopsis

The USCMA Town Hall Meetings took place between August 2 and October 11. Eighty mission leaders registered for the five gatherings, with some attending more than one session.

Each Town Hall Meeting began with a prayer and a review of the new USCMA mission statement, which was approved in April 2022. It grew out of the board's efforts to discern a future for USCMA, a process that began before the pandemic and intensified through the worst of it. The board spoke with members and with Dr. Bob McCarty, their consultant; they also interviewed and surveyed members. The fruit of all these efforts is a focused mission statement: USCMA is a community of faith leaders engaged in networking, formation, and advocacy for God's mission.

The board launched a two-year restructuring process to align everything the association does with the renewed mission. Wesley Coccozello, with the Missionaries of Saint Columban, convenes the Implementation Team and supports four task groups: membership engagement, programs and services, finance and development, and governance.

What follows are the major concerns expressed through the five Town Hall Meetings. Using a keyword analysis on the summaries of each Town Hall, seven clusters of concern emerged; they are listed in descending order, beginning with the most frequently cited. They will be explored further and developed at the 2022 USCMA Convention, A Grace Filled Future – Ten Years of Animating the Joy of the Gospel, which meets in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 29-30.

Our Town Halls & the Restructuring Process



The Implementation team oversees the work of these four areas. The town halls focused on the following topics:

*Restructuring
Member Engagement
Programs and Services
Finance and Development*

An evening town hall covered the first three topics. Summaries and notes available online at <https://uscatholicmission.org/town-hall-gatherings>

Formation

One group said: USCMA should bring leaders together to share best practices, provide personal support, share prayer, and be companions in practice. A range of topics was covered, from forming those “new to mission” to having a framework for mission formation. There was a particular concern about the mission education and formation of seminarians, priests, and bishops. A variety of formats were mentioned, including affinity groups, formation through immersion experiences, and exploring more responsive and interactive “digital formation.” There was a clear sense that mission leaders contribute to the formation of one another when they come together and that new ways of being together – such as retreats, regional gatherings, and shared mission trips – need to be explored. One group expressed it this way: USCMA can sponsor events – local, regional, national, virtual – for people to come together, encounter each other, and learn from each other.

Relationships

Building relationships was another concern. One group summarized it this way: How can we create deeper mission relationships? There is a desire to build relationships within the diversity of mission leaders (young, old, lay, religious, ordained, new, experienced,

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etc.) but also with mission leaders from other countries. The challenge is to build relationships with other mission leaders outside of our regular circles. One of the challenges of building relationships is to identify mission groups and those who lead them. Affinity groups – that bring people together based on a shared responsibility – is one way to build relationships and foster mutual formation. Mission leaders need to share their experiences with other mission leaders.

Mission

It is noteworthy that mission itself is a concern. There is an uncertainty about the mission. What is it? What is it today? Perhaps we need a deep dive into the nature of mission itself. What is mission? Are there universal goals? Another group expressed it this way: What does it really mean to have missions in the 21st century? How do we “offer Christ” in the most appropriate, inclusive, and healthy way? Another group, making the connection between mission and holiness, asked: What are we really called to do in this age?

Call

Another concern is the leader’s responsibility to call people to mission. Sometimes that call is muted by the times we live in and, in some situations, it is blocked by others. Mostly, it is a concern that mission leaders have not taken up together. How to promote and amplify the call to mission so it is not just for the “select.” Mission is a sacramental duty. It is not an option. How can we spread this message?

Culture

Another responsibility is cultural awareness and sensitivity. Mission leaders also need appreciation of the differences in culture. We also need to know how mission leaders from other parts of the world view mission. Cultural awareness is both a domestic and international concern, and it is something that

USCMA needs to foster among mission leaders. Some cultures are excluded in the Church. Can USCMA create tools to navigate cross-cultural relationships?

Groups

Concern was expressed for different groups in the Church: laity, young people, and priests and how they are involved in mission, formed for mission, and shape a missionary church. Young people take short-term mission trips. They are not getting connected with regional or national groups. We need to connect with them and the people who are facilitating those trips.

Context

Concern was also expressed for the ecclesial and cultural context where mission leaders live. There are struggles in the Church and in society. The numbers are shrinking – Mass attendance, men and women religious, people involved in mission. There are challenges on how to fund mission. The Mission Cooperative Program was mentioned as an opportunity and a challenge. Some clergy do not appreciate or understand mission. Still, there is empathy for the struggles of the Church. How can USCMA respond to the polarization in the Church? Can mission leaders help US dioceses navigate the closing of parishes and shrinking staff/budgets?

Some of these seven concerns – formation, relationships, mission, call, culture, groups, and context – will be explored in more depth at the convention. All of them will go to the Implementation Team and the four task groups for discernment, planning, and action. They will inform and shape the work of the board. Leaders are encouraged to identify their concerns and to step forward, network with others, and explore and address those concerns.

By Don McCrabb,

Executive Director of USCMA

We now share space with NETWORK Lobby!



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ENCOUNTER is made possible
in part by a grant from the
[Catholic Communication
Campaign.](http://www.uscatholicmission.org/donate)



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