News



Sather Gate, leading to the center of the campus of the University of California at Berkeley. The Paulist Fathers plan to leave the university, where the missionary society has served in campus ministry since 1907. (Unsplash/Georg Eiermann)



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Facing a shrinking and aging group of priests in active ministry, the Paulist Fathers on March 13 announced that the missionary society will close three national offices and leave two campus ministry programs, including its 117-year ministry at the University of California at Berkeley.

The historic community of U.S. Catholic priests also said it will change its pastoral staffing model for three communities: Immaculate Conception Church in Knoxville, Tennessee; Old St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco; and the Paulist Center in Boston. Instead of having two full-time active Paulist priests assigned to them, those communities instead will be served by one full-time priest, who will be assisted by senior Paulist priests in residence.

Fr. René Constanza, the president of the Paulist Fathers, said in a prepared statement that the society decided on implementing those changes after heeding the "advice of external lay professionals" during a "comprehensive discernment process."

"We are responding to where we believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to serve, considering the changing landscape of the Catholic Church in the United States and the shifting demographics of our own members," Constanza said.

Related: Paulists say they are preparing to close ministries, due to fewer priests

In a chart that accompanied a previous letter written by Constanza, the Paulist Fathers said the number of priests in active ministry had fallen by almost half in 20 years, from 98 in 2004 to 50 in 2024. And of those, almost two-thirds — 62% — are in their 60s, 70s and 80s.

By 2034, the Paulists predict they'll have only 31 members in active ministry.

"Certainly, people live longer these days, and many of our beloved senior priests have generously and selflessly continued working well into their 70s and beyond, but it is obvious that the current situation is not sustainable," Constanza wrote in that letter.

In response to those demographic challenges, the Paulist Fathers, at the end of the current academic year, will conclude their ministries at both the University of California at Berkeley and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. Paulist Fr. Larry Rice, who has served as campus chaplain at the upstate New York campus since 2021, will move to a new assignment.

"I am very grateful for the RPI students, faculty, administrators, staff members, and community members who have contributed so much to growing the ministry here," Rice said in a statement.

Constanza said "it is with sadness" that the Paulist Fathers will also leave the University of California at Berkeley, where the society has served in campus ministry since 1907. The Paulist Fathers will return pastoral care of Newman Hall-Holy Spirit Parish to the Oakland Diocese.

"The Paulists will miss the Berkeley community deeply," Paulist Fr. Ivan Tou, pastor of Newman Hall-Holy Spirit Parish, said in prepared remarks.

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Of the Berkeley Catholic community, Tou added: "We have been so blessed by their faithfulness, friendship, and participation. Their ownership and leadership of the faith, resulting in many vibrant lay-led ministries, has given us great hope for the future of the Church. They will always be in our hearts and prayers."

Established in 1899, the Newman Club at the University of California at Berkeley was placed in the Paulist Fathers' charge on Aug. 15, 1907, according to the Paulist Fathers' website.

Similar to the Paulist Fathers' longtime campus ministry at Ohio State University — which the society left in 2022 after the Columbus Diocese took control of that ministry — the society's Berkeley ministry served undergraduate and graduate students, as well as older adults and their families from the surrounding areas in the East Bay and beyond.

Newman Hall-Holy Spirit Parish's website indicates that the faith community there has a wide range of ministries for students and older adults that include pro-life and rosary prayer groups, Bible studies, as well as social justice ministries that focus on

homeless outreach, nonviolence and welcoming refugees.

"It is with sadness that we will complete our ministry with the wonderful students, faculty, administrators, staff members, and permanent community members in Berkeley after 117 years. We pray in thanksgiving to God for our long and fruitful ministry with these faithful People of God," Constanza said in his prepared remarks.



Paulist Fr. René Constanza (CNS/Courtesy of Paulist Fathers)

The Paulist Fathers also announced "the upcoming completion of the work" for three long-established national offices: Paulist Evangelization Ministries; Landings International, a reconciliation ministry for estranged Catholics returning to the church; and the Paulist Office for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations.

By the end of 2024, the Paulist Fathers said those ministries will cease operations as "distinct apostolic endeavors," though many of their particular programs and offerings will remain available through other means. Constanza said the society established those offices in response to "the signs of the times in the 1970s and 1980s."

Meanwhile, the Paulist Fathers' three flagship media ministries — Paulist Press, Paulist Productions and Busted Halo — will "continue to be key expressions of our mission to the United States and around the world," Constanza said.

Paulist priests will remain in leadership roles at Paulist Productions, a company that produces feature films, documentaries and television programming, as well as at Busted Halo, a podcast and blog platform.

Constanza said the society will conduct a national search for a new president and publisher of Paulist Press to "carry forward the vision of legacy" of Servant of God Fr. Isaac Hecker, the founder of the Paulist Fathers who began the society's publishing arm in 1865.

"The Paulist Fathers remain committed to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with missionary zeal, especially with people beyond the Church walls and with Catholics who feel apart from the Church," Constanza said. "Rooted in hopefulness, we trust that the Holy Spirit is actively breathing life into all things."

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