

## **Evangelizing in Cursillo, To Whom; The Beginnings (PART I)**

Prayer; Lord, you have made us for yourselves, and our hearts will be restless until we rest in you, Amen. Because of the subject matter we are covering here, this talk in two parts, discussion and break to help digest.

As you may be aware, about 10 years ago, the Canadian Cursillo Movement made contact with Eduardo Bonnin, the primary founder of the movement. Since then, a real attempt was and is still being made to go back to the founding charism and inspiration that brought Cursillo into being. Recently, drafts of books and articles are starting to become available and are providing great insights into the founding charism. Perhaps you have read some of them in the National Newsletter, "Fully Alive". A main objective of the National Secretariat is to get this information published and available to all.

I would like to share with you a few of the things that I have become aware of on my own little pilgrimage into this (relate a bit of my background, involved since 1984, part of WE, WS, School of Leaders, National conferences, now part of the National Secretariat) Most of the documents we have been looking at are relatively recent writings, many by Eduardo himself. One becomes aware of the profound understanding and depth of thinking that went into them. That is why they are withstanding the test of time. As part of this, I have had the opportunity to work on translating the Spanish 'Study of Environments' rollo and other rollos as well, that are presently used in Majorca and that contain the essence the original rollos. It is interesting to compare these 'first generation' rollos to the present talks in the Canadian Leaders manual. There are some changes and shift in direction.

To start off, lets look at a particular aspect of Cursillos history to help us grasp some of the essence of the founding concepts. I think you will find it very interesting because in looking at how things were done, we can start to see what they were trying to do and who they wanted to speak to. The reference I use here is 'The Story of Cursillo' as written by Francisco Forteza, who was a protégé and good friend of Eduardo Bonnin. He came on the scene sometime after Cursillo began but has deep knowledge and understanding of the Movement. This book is considered authentic and Canada has been given the rights to translate and publish it in English and it is now close to publication.

Eduardo Bonnin, who was the principle thinker and founder of Cursillo, grew up in a well to do family and was well educated in good schools and was even tutored with selected professors. His family wanted a good Catholic education for him in the traditional Church in the Spain of that time. They wanted to protect him from some of the liberalizing forces and a questioning of a powerful and influential model of the church

that was present. Through all this Eduardo was considered brilliant but was shy, timid, and reserved by nature. Then a major change happened in his life. As all young men in Spain had to do, he joined the army and suddenly was introduced to the big world. Here he made a discovery that influenced his entire life.

In the army, he found groups of ordinary men (quotation from Francisco Forteza, 'Story of Cursillo') "that in spite of living in surroundings not only de-christianizing, but probably hostile to the Catholic religion, never the less, (the soldiers) kept intact a series of values and principles basically evangelical. These men, in Eduardo's opinion, had better Christian ideals than those prevailing in the pious surroundings he had been brought up in and he knew so well. The values of these non practicing Christians - rejection of lies and hypocrisy, sincere happiness, a lack of class distinction, and true comradeship, struck him in a way only possible as someone educated to see these men as outsiders".

Well, how could this be explained. First, here were groups of men living a life of values and principles that were outside of any religious influence, and were living better lives than some that supposedly were 'Christian'. (sometimes I think my experience can back this up as I'm sure yours can, we sometimes see people living 'good' lives outside of any formal religious affiliation while on the other hand we often see bitter arguments within the church, polarization on different views of what it means to be Catholic, where the tabernacle should be located, kneelers. What is sad here is not that there are differences, we will always have them, but that it is sometimes difficult to find the Christian charity within these debates that we are supposed to be all about)

About this time Eduardo attended a short course called the 'Course For Pilgrims' that was put on by a Church lay organization of the time called Catholic Action. They were preparing for a major pilgrimage to the Shrine of St. James at Compostella ("a hundred thousand pilgrims") This Catholic Action seven day long course was geared towards preparing leaders to organize and administer the pilgrimage.

Eduardo was profoundly influenced by his attending the Catholic Action seven day course and after, he concluded that something similar, yet different, would be able to "inject new Christian energy not only into predetermined tasks like the pilgrimage, but also into the concrete realities of normal daily life." That same year, Eduardo wrote "Study the Milieu," which was motivated by his army experience. This grew into the rollo that became and still is today the essence of what Cursillo is about. One has the substance of Cursillo if one grasps the core of this rollo. We will go into that a bit later.

It was in this climate, elaborating his plan of studying the milieu, that Bonnin worked out, from his experience with the CA Course for Pilgrimage Leaders, a whole new method for bringing back persons alienated from Christianity and revitalizing those who had grown lukewarm. This was done together with a group of friends that met, discussed, studied, read, and prayed.

He realized that under normal circumstances almost no one was able to interrupt his daily routine for a whole week. Therefore his program was compressed so that it concluded in three and a half days. He reshaped every talk given by laymen, using the same titles, piety, study, action, leaders, marginal works, but adapted them to the thinking of non-believers and aligned them with the principles of Study of Milieu. Bonnin left in place the initial retreat and also left unchanged the five talks on Grace as given in the Course by the priests; he preferred not to tread on their territory.

Turning to the management of the Cursillos, he did change substantially the duties of the team of professors, (read team leaders here, meant to be a bit humorous, witty, these were lay people) being careful that they should not be seen as being separate from the cursillistas, they served table at meals, were present at all the talks and all other exercises. He made certain too that they had a real personal relationship with each candidate (he called it 'corridor work', which happened between the scheduled events) At the same time, he used the environment as a form of relaxation, encouraged jokes and secular songs that were not folk songs and strengthened the action of the table groups.

Bonnin was adamant that one and the same program should be used for all persons, be they from different cultural and social levels, believers and unbelievers, rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Cursillo was to be free from restrictions based on creed, culture, or status, as long as the person was seeking truth and was sincere. This included adolescents, the only stipulation that they be sufficiently mature not to be scandalized by the frank discussions that went on in the table groups. This is interesting. The only restrictions on a person attending a weekend was that they be seeking the truth and be sincere.

This first Cursillo based on the preceding was held in Cala Figuera in 1944, and following that, about one per year being held until 1949.

The Pilgrims Guide was written during this period as a guide to prayers and devotions and raised some eye brows because it avoided conventional piety and mannerisms normally associated with lay prayer of the time. Prayer became more expressive.

### **Group Reunions;**

The Cursillo Weekend was the result of a group of secular friends who shared their living experience and projects. This group originated the Weekend and not the reverse. The group and its reunion existed before the Weekend. Prior to 1949, after the weekends, the Cursillistas kept close and frequent contact with one another, "contact with the brothers," as a group of friends without a specified agenda. This was considered an essential thrust, "union with Christ and union with brothers." So after the weekend the new cursillistas were naturally absorbed into the friendship groups in what we now refer to as the Post Cursillo.

In 1949, Cursillos began to be held much more often (20 in 1949 alone) This came about because the institutional church suddenly became aware of the effect that Cursillo could have on peoples lives, how it energized and revitalized them. Now this had a good side and a not so good side. On the one hand Cursillo suddenly became validated and had the support of the 'big church'. On the other hand, it now came much more under the influence of the thinking and ways of the 'big church'. But the immediate problem was; how could all these new people (coming off the 20 weekends) be brought into friendship groups?

Bonnin proposed that Christians who wished to do so might get together in small groups with Christians of similar interest and discuss their mutual experiences. These might be **interior**, such as spiritual practices and moments with Christ, or **exterior**, such as apostolic successes and failures. They might also wish to discuss their projects and apostolic plans. It was to be very open and suit the needs of the person. So the weekly group reunion was established as an essential element of the Cursillo method in 1949.

### **Ultreya, Page 34**

After formalizing the Group Reunion in 1949, it was observed that the small group of 4 - 6, while essential to the method, did limit the overall coming together of the larger community that had shared the common experience of friendly activity and relationships. There was the need to keep in touch, to "have a reunion of the group reunions". The plan was devised to establish some weekly collective reunions open to all Cursillistas. They were simply to encourage one another, promise to meet again, and all in a joyous atmosphere in knowing that they had shared the same pilgrimage, namely the Weekend. This was similar to the meeting of those on route to Compostela. The word 'ultreya' is the medieval word apparently used by pilgrims when they encountered one another at stops along the Way of St. James. It was used as a term of encouragement and a promise to meet again (perhaps similar to, "bye for now", "till we meet again", "Be seeing you")

The method used for the Ultreya broke all traditional models of "pious" meetings. All were greeted and welcomed, there was a friendly, casual, group sharing for one half an hour with different persons each ultreya, there was a witness talk in which one of the cursillistas shares their life, followed by other cursillistas commenting on the 'rollo', followed by comments by the spiritual director. The Rector of the Ultreya then gave news of general interest about the movement and, if there was a chapel available (which was usually arranged) all made an "open visit" to the Blessed Sacrament, during which the Rector or another lay person spoke to the Lord about what he considered the most important points covered in the meeting and made concrete petitions requested by the members.

### **School of Professors** (meant to be witty comment, profs in black robes VS ordinary lay people)

The School was established at the same time as the Ultreya. Bonnins thinking was that the school should be a place of meeting, coordination, and reflection for those who hold or wish to hold leadership in

the Cursillo movement. He did not maintain that theoretical development should come to an end but that it is essential that those who participate should contribute. He espoused small reunions that fostered meditative thinking. These groups for common reflection were held in an informal atmosphere, and often weekly with Eduardo in his office (it is interesting that in later writings by Bonnin he speaks of the primary purpose of the School of Leaders as being to energize and enliven the ultreyas by welcoming, getting into conversation groups, and just getting to know the others better.

A second and more common form of School was to have new members prepare repetitive presentations on the Cursillo theme and submit them for critical review to the more experienced members.

The Cursillo, in the Spain of the time, was for men only and it was with considerable struggle and resistance from the establishment that in the late 1950's, weekends for women finally began. They at first were only for spouses or "spouses to be" and it took a while especially in some areas, before women were accepted as individuals and not as marriage partners. Bonnin held to the principle that "there are no male and female souls".

#### **The Style of Speaking, Page 41 - 44.**

The style of expressions that developed from these early Cursillos brought forward a way of speaking and many idioms that came into common usage, and are used even to this day. The practice of using suitable non religious terms that non religious persons would understand but at the same time related the spiritual realities, was developed. In explaining doctrine, morals, and other matters relating to theology, new elements were introduced.

The lay team members rarely used the scholastic theological language that was used within the institutional church. They used terms more related to Gospel teaching methods, similes and comparisons from everyday life, and often used, "it is like" to find images all could relate to (popular jokes, bull fights, movies, football, military, popular songs) They avoided terms that were used by smaller "in groups" of the time because, after all, the majority must remain the main concern of the Movement. This early style was characterized by sincerity and a pervasive joy in the mutual friendship that was surprising then and still is today.

Some colourful terms that were used; "to be coloured" - be in a state of Grace; "L'Amo" (the boss) - Christ; "a crowbar" - prayer and sacrifice; "to shave" - go to confession. As you might suspect, many of the "faithful children of the church" thought these terms 'showed excessive familiarity with the sacred', and frowned upon this (you can see that Cursillo was 'more than a little counter cultural' to the establishment of the time)

Cursillo also introduced changes to the way Catholics were accustomed to praying, and introduced collective prayer that became relatively loud, resonant, deliberate and rhythmic. Also introduced was group prayer before the Blessed Sacrament in full freedom to relate out loud in spoken prayer.

The song, “De Colores” which was a popular song of the time in Spain, became a theme song and is an example of the music that was used in Cursillo. It was deemed that songs should be non devotional, and easily learned and sung by a group. They should “shed new light on old ideas”. Equating spiritual gifts to coloured light was an innovative way of bringing a spiritual dimension to every thing in life, flowers, birds and even beautiful girls! (I’m quoting here!) De Colores became the unofficial hymn of the Cursillo movement (a religious group with a lay song as its recognized hymn!)

### **The First Secretariat, Page 105 - 109.**

The first secretariat specifically for Cursillo was organized in 1955 and was part of the moving away from the Catholic Action organization. There was consensus that an independent diocesan body for the movement was needed but there was struggle in determining its make up, e.g.; should the director be clergy or a lay person. There were many issues to be dealt with at the time, such as having Cursillos for women and separate Weekends for younger and older men.

### **Changes Over Time, Page 65**

The early 1950’s saw the beginning of development of a long series of well intentioned uses of Cursillo energies that continue to this day and obscure the unique dynamic of the movement. It is often converted into a kind of task force at the service of local interests and the specific aim is lost. The ‘big church’ of the time, “thought it necessary to instruct the laity and organize them. They had not come to understand that it is better to motivate people to think and act so that each secular person freely seek his or her own style and way of life in a climate of shared realities”. The movement was to be docile and disciplined.

This brought about an urge to “improve” the method to make up for these apparent deficiencies (Cursillo didn’t ‘standardize’ or ‘organize’ people enough in some peoples view) Many clergy and lay have tried to do this over the years, not realizing Cursillo stresses “being” rather than “doing” and has a vision of the Gospel message as a friendly, loving encounter and not as a science or doctrine to be studied.

### **MANUALS, Pages 155 - 162.**

In discussing manuals, we now start to see the documentation of the differences between the first, or early, or original Cursillo and the later, or second generation Cursillo. Until the 1960’s, the basic written documentation about Cursillo was an ongoing work, ‘Essential Structures’, that was in process of being put together by the lay founders. To embody the thinking of the lay founders was no easy matter but it finally came together. Problems, however, were encountered in publishing the document in Spain. It was finally the National Secretariat of Mexico that printed and published “Essential Structures” as written by the lay

founders. (the closest we have to that in English is; 'Structure of Ideas', which is available from the Resource Center)

Shortly after this, an unfortunate occurrence (from Bonnin's point of view) was the publication of the 'Manual for Directors', by the Secretariat of Ciudad Real (a city in Spain) in 1962. No one argued that a manual was necessary for Cursillo, but the result was far from the document the founders wrote, 'Essential Structures'. The 'Manual For Directors' gave the Ciudad Real version of Cursillo.

Comments from Forteza; "The lay founders have always believed that one of the greatest potential benefits of the movement is to assist Christians to go from the level of followers to the level of making critical choices in their lives. The new 'Manual for Directors' expressed just the opposite; rather than critical evaluation it was about adherence to regulations. It outlined a set of juridical rules and structures that could threaten the basic spirit of the movement. The manual also stressed a clerical approach that pushed parish needs to the front. It defined a focus for the post cursillos that stressed formation and had little to do with personal experience; it orchestrated our movement as the servant for the other organizations, for the works and activities of the diocese. The Cursillo movement, an instrument of Christian renewal was to become an instrument of the pastoral needs of the diocese".

#### EXPANSION TO OTHER COUNTRIES, Pages 171 - 172.

During the 1960's, Cursillo rapidly expanded to other countries.

In the early 1960s it came into the southern US and one of the issues was that of translating the outlines for the Rollos and other literature into English. The first Leaders Manual printed in the US in English is dated 1972 and the translations of the talks from Spanish to English appear to be quite literal. The next US manual is dated 1981 and it is here we can see the shift to the second generation thinking with the emphasis on the big organizational, rules approach, that showed up in the Ciudad Real manual. It also tended to use 'big church' language in the outlines and the explanations included much reference to Vatican II documents as justification of Cursillos approach. The present Canadian manual was published in 1990 and is basically a copy of the US manual.

What can be said about all this.

First, we do not mean to be unfairly critical of any one or any group. We are just telling it 'like it happened'. Many within the institutional Church supported and encouraged Cursillo as they do today. Cursillo would not have developed and grown to where it is today without them. At the same time there were many difficulties and conflicts between the movement and particular authorities in the church (remember, this was a powerful and hierarchical controlled church in the Spain of that time. At one point, Eduardo was banned by his Bishop from speaking publicly for nearly 10 years. Eduardo always respected the authority of the church, he had deep love for the church)

Also, in speaking of the first and second generation models of Cursillo, we are simply identifying that there are two models of Cursillo out there. We are not saying one is better than the other. The US (and the present Canadian manual) more follows this second generation, organizational, “here is exactly how you do it” way, which is reflected in their manuals including the latest which came out just a year or so ago. And we must say that the US has done many good things for Cursillo including at the international level. The US has done much in furthering the cause of Cursillo.

I also don't want to leave you with the impression that in the first generation Cursillo, anything goes. As we all know, Cursillo has certain basic non negotiable elements that are well documented and explained, as on the weekends, the rollo outlines, the group reunions, ultreyas, school of leaders, etc. But within these guide lines, persons are given the freedom to be themselves, to become as God meant them to be, not simple rules followers. Each person is to choose how they will evangelize in their own environments and not follow some prescribed formula.

Lets take a break now and you can discuss some of the things you just heard. Then we will continue on and look closer at the idea of environmental approach.

Question to start Discussions, Part I;

“The lay founders have always believed that one of the greatest potential benefits of the movement is to assist Christians to go from the level of followers to the level of making critical choices in their lives”.

Is that how you understand Cursillo? Why?