

Evangelizing in Cursillo, To Whom; The Environment (PART II)

In one of the notes that I came across in Bonnin's writings, he was reflecting back on Cursillo over the past 50 years. He said that yes, he believed that Cursillo had indeed effected for the better, many peoples lives, those around them, and the world in which they lived. His lament though was that Cursillo has never really been tried as it was intended. He mentioned two particular aspects. First, have we lost the message in the Study of Environments rollo from which all the other rollos take their cause and sense. Secondly, as a result of this, have we gotten sidetracked into other activities and causes. The question is; do cursillistas really understand what Cursillo calls them to. Lets dig into this a little deeper and see if we can get a glimpse of what this is about.

In the earlier talk, we discussed Bonnin's army experience where he found groups of men living a life of values and principles that were outside of any religious influence, and were often better at it than groups that supposedly were 'Christian'. It was from this insight that the founders concluded that the structured elements that one lives in (be it the army, the work place, organizations, and church groups) is less important than the the level of communications between the persons that make up the groups within the structures. It is the communications and the resulting relationships which will determine the well being and dynamics of the group. What are the values, attitudes and ways of living that are prevalent within these groups.

The important point here is that people are more influenced by the people and circumstances in their lives and the level of communications that occurs there, than they are by the structures they live in. In this case even though these soldiers were living in a non Christian structure, the army with all its unchristian ways, they were able to still live lives with values and principles that were basically Gospel.

Now as we mentioned, from this basic insight came the motivation to carry out the study that brought about the first talk that became the foundation of all the weekend talks and became central to Cursillo; It basically says; that while structure and institutions are important in our lives, they are very difficult to change. What can be influenced and what has the most influence on people anyway, is the people and circumstances around us. This is important and I would like to just go quickly through it again because the concept of environment is probably the most misunderstood term in Cursillo.

Our overall surroundings are complex and multifaceted. Included are;

- The structures that we live within; we live in an orderly structured society and it is a good thing we do. There are work place structures, there is the boss, codes of conduct, things we have to do and regulations to follow to keep our job. There are governmental structures around us, laws of the land one

has to follow, be it federal, provincial, municipal, have to pay taxes, have to stop at red lights and stop signs.

- There are institutions; school, college, hospitals or even prisons are all institutions and all have their own laws, customs and ways of doing things and when involved with them, they effect our lives.

- There are cultural influences; ethnic customs and traditions we grow up with, or common cultural influences, we talk about the culture of consumerism, or the culture of individualism.

All these structural, institutional and cultural influences effect how we live our daily lives. They make a big difference in them.

Now, when Cursillo refers to environment, we are not talking about any of the above! It does not mean the structures or institutions, or culture or even the temporary spirit within a group. It simply means the circumstances themselves, that surround one. This includes the people because they are an integral part of one's surroundings. That's all, doesn't go beyond it to all the other complexities. It is simply the circumstances, the conditions that effect things, that surround one and including the people.

Most the times our environments are relatively uneventful, life goes on in everyday normalness. Look at your own lives, most the time our lives go on in ordinariness (that is not to say things don't jump off the tracks once in a while, they say life is what happens when you have planned something else!) There are all kinds of people and circumstances around you. There is your family, one set of people and circumstances, if you are in the work place, there ia another set of people and conditions, in your social life there are other people and circumstances, same in your parish life. And most of these people in your different environments don't know one another.

Each persons environment is multi faceted and made up of all these different sub environments. It is you that is the common element to all of them and has contact with all the people in those environments. No one else has that. Just think of it, you are the only one who knows all the people you do. Your environment is unique.

So when we refer to our environment, we simply mean the circumstances and people that are around us in our daily lives (mention the Vision II workshop, covers more deeply)

LIVING LIFE AS LAY PERSONS.

Lets talk about the practical aspects of living our everyday lives as Christians Most of us in cursillo are lay people. We live our lives in our lay surroundings of families, work place, social and cultural groups,

our church and other structures and institutions. This is a valid way of living out our lives, of finding happiness, of being good persons, of living out the Gospel. Sometimes we do not take our lay state seriously. We think of it as the fall back, catch all situation for all those who never took their faith life to heart. Sometimes we tend to think; “Well, I will just make do here and leave the serious stuff up to the real religious people.”

That is not the way it is. God chooses each person to become the best they can, to grow to their full potential, where ever that person is situated in life. We are called to be Christ’s hands and feet, to be the face of Christ in the world. Yes, we need more priests and sisters and brothers, but we also need more lay people who see their lives as vocation and accept it fully. In our parish, at the intentions we pray for vocations to the priesthood, religious life and also to single and married life. We are to bloom where we are planted.

As lay people, our baptismal call give us what we need within the church to reach out to others, bring the ‘good news’ to them and to grow towards Holiness in our lives (and here you might read; to find real happiness and fulfillment in our lives) We have access to God’s Grace, the Eucharist, prayer, the deep expression of faith and rich tradition of our church, in Cursillo the friendships in the ultreyas and group reunions, palanca, and this all in the larger community of brothers and sisters made up of clergy, religious and lay.

So what is it that cursillistas are supposed to be doing. I will give some examples here to show what sometimes happens in Cursillo. Please understand that the examples I mention here are not bad in and of themselves, they are good. But the point we make here is that this may not be what Cursillo is intended for.

Cursillistas ARE NOT called to dash off into some new and unknown environment. They ARE NOT called to parachute into some strange or arbitrarily selected environment or structure in which they know no one, and nothing about its inner workings.

Cursillistas ARE NOT called to take on new causes and activities to do good things. Cursillo is not meant to provide a labour pool for other causes beyond one’s own environment, no matter how good they might be in themselves.

Cursillistas ARE NOT called to get overly involved exclusively in big church activities. Now I think we can say that practically all cursillistas are involved in their parishes, as they should be. Parish life is important. But on the other hand, Cursillos call reaches beyond just getting involved in parish ministries and activities.

Now here is an interesting one, cursillistas ARE NOT called to get overly involved in the administrative side of Cursillo itself (that might be the secretariat or weekend team, whatever) if the result is that the persons primary lay environment is neglected. Cursillo is surely one of the rare movements that cautions about getting over involved in itself!

What is the test on this? Over involvement exists and is to be avoided when the results are that the persons own natural lay environment is neglected. That is how important the environmental approach is.

The PRIMARY CALL to each cursillista is to go back into the same field of activities, same circle of friends, same every day life, that they are already part of and know, be it family, work place, social groups. Now there may be exceptions to that as in the case of a situation that is so bad the person cannot survive there let alone bring change to it. But most of the time, cursillistas go back into their present environments.

BEING LEAVEN IN ENVIRONMENTS;

Now we talk about going into and being leaven in our environments. What does that mean. If we look up the word 'leaven' it says; "an influence, that spreading quietly and strongly, changes conditions or opinions. It modifies and tempers the surroundings". You have seen what happens when a drop of dye or colouring is put into water. It spreads through the whole, changing it. That is what we are called to do; To spread quietly and strongly through our environments, (the circumstances and persons around us) and change and modify conditions and opinions. It is about bringing a Christian influence of care, concern, respect, and hope, to those we find there. This is all done with the simplest of methods, by forming and nurturing relationships and friendships.

The environments that we move in, in our everyday lives can gradually become pervaded by the spirit of friendship if the key people in them encourage and support it. What is that spirit; it is about knowing the person, caring for them, and trusting them. It is about being able to communicate at a deeper level with them. It is about overcoming that distance that leads to miscommunications, misunderstandings, and mistrust. It is about being the Good News to the others and helping them become the Good News.

So what is a cursillistas main activity, here it is; to influence through friendship all the lay environments that he or she is part of within their everyday lives. It is that simple. This is the environmental approach that we refer to.

There is one other aspect of changing environments that I want to mention here and that is the primary importance of the person. Environments are changed through the persons within them. Cursillo approaches the environments through the persons, not the structures. Persons are always treated with the

respect and dignity they have been given as Children of God. In the Vision II workshop we go into this more thoroughly.

THE PREFERENTIAL BUT NOT EXCLUSIVE OPTION FOR THE FAR AWAY (Ref. TDO)

We have talked about the call to go back into our environments and to nurture relationships and friendships and bring a Christian influence to them. Lets define that further and take a look at what we might expect to find out there.

“Cursillo’s first and preferential objective should be that Christ’s message reaches those that are far from Him”. Who are “the far away, the distant ones”, that Cursillo refers to? The far away are defined as; “those that do not have faith, or don’t know they have, because they are absorbed in things which they think are important but will ultimately not satisfy them”.

Lets look at a couple of categories of the different types of people that we might discover in the study of our environments that we are called to undertake. The following is something out of the first generation ‘Study of Environments’ rollo that we have translated and have been looking at.

In it, they give us an overview (they call it taking a reconnaissance flight) over the people we identified as the ‘others’, those we barely know. The purpose is to give some insights into what we will find when we go back into our own environments. This prepares us and gives us some confidence on how to deal with our environment. It even gives some hints on where the best ‘fishing’ is. It recognizes that some people just won’t be interested, so why ‘fish’ where no one is interested!

Here, in looking at these categories, we do not condemn anyone but we seek to understand and reach out to them. But first we have to recognize them.

The Far Away; those at a distance from God, and seem to have no relationship with him.

- some we find, are indifferent to God, God is unimportant to them, just doesn’t matter much to them, apathy.

- some perhaps made their first communion and that is all, they have had little or no contact with the church and that is just fine with them, they are caught up with the business of their lives.

- some may be caught up in the world of consumerism and individualism, “if I just have this one more toy I will be happy’, or, “what am I getting out of this, if this isn’t doing anything for me right now, forget it”.

- some may see God as a demanding God of rules and regulations and they are fearful of God.

Often, these people are simply misinformed about God and have never taken the trouble to find out about Him. They don't know God as he really is because they have never been properly introduced to Him, they don't know Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, however we may find 'distant one's' in surprising places;

There are those that appear to be 'religious', or at least a bit so, but have no depth or life to their faith.

- They do religious 'things' out of habit or for status. They go to Mass (at least sometimes) because they always have. You know, it is good to be seen there, keep up my card carrying membership, might need the church some time, but don't ask me to explain it or to do anything.

- those that are casually involved in the church, sometimes just on special occasions, to be seen and satisfy their own egos, be it activity like music or some other special occasion.

We are certainly not saying these people are bad or what they are doing is bad. It is just that they could be living their lives to a much fuller level. Perhaps we might even find some of these people sitting beside us at Sunday Mass. And how well do we know that person sitting next us? This is what the study of our environment is all about.

Lay people have access to these 'far away' persons in their contact with them in a way that no one else has. These are people that we bump into in our everyday lives of family, work, social involvement. The big church mainly has access to the people that are coming to church. But what of the people who are on the edges or even beyond the doors of the church. Who is better situated to know these than the people that are already there, and that is us, as lay persons, living our lives in the world.

Cursillo's call is to help these 'far away' persons find an easy path to God and their personal happiness through relationship / friendship. It is a pretty big transition for a person to come into the big church. Just think of the person who may be living a somewhat disorderly life or as a 'free spirit' doing what they want, when they want. Compare that to taking part in Mass, where we all behave very orderly, all stand up, sit, listen, sing on command! We are pretty well trained in ways of liturgy! Talk about what must appear as highly controlled group behavior to an observer who doesn't understand what is going on and who knows little about the big church. One of the purposes of the ultreya is to act as a half way house (this warm, friendly, non threatening place) to those that are not familiar with the ways of the big church.

These far away that are searching for meaning and happiness in their lives, have an openness for solutions to their problems. Often we think of the 'others' as being hard nosed about what they are and not interested in things of a 'religious' nature. That can be true, but on the other hand, they are often very open to things that they see will help ease their distress and make their lives better.

Now, an amazing thing happens when we are grasped by the good news that we are loved; a spontaneous, evangelical, creativeness is released. Now we often see this on and after weekends, the profound and enthusiastic change that can occur in people. Perhaps we experienced it ourselves. In the

Early Cursillo of the 1940's, many were astounded by this; that ordinary lay people could go on a three day weekend and after it, be more convinced and speak more boldly of their faith than people who had years of theological training and back ground within the church. Now as you might expect, this also created some conflict.

The key to all this, in our postcursillo, is to create an environment that encourages and does not hinder this enthusiasm, to let people be who they are and not place heavy restrictions on them. Often, in our liturgical mind sets of controlled behavior, we are not very open to this. But more importantly, how do we tap into some of this energy and let it energize our Movements, and at the same time, keep some order to it all. How do we channel it into the ultreyas, group reunions and School of Leaders.

This takes some effort because the new cursillistas that have this fresh enthusiasm have only experienced the weekend and their only thought is to dash off and have another weekend. And of course, Cursillo is about a lot more than weekends.

EVANGELIZING IN CURSILLO

Evangelizing is a popular theme and term used in the church these days. We hear of the 'new evangelization' which is about the idea that the entire Community of Believers is called to spread the Good News. In going through Cursillo literature, even the recent writings, one rarely sees the word evangelization. How come. Is Cursillo not into Evangelization? Just the contrary, Cursillo is an evangelizing Movement par excellence and has its own unique way of doing it.

It is just that Cursillo uses simpler, more process related, Gospel style language. One sees terms and phrases like, 'developing a warm, friendly approach to the distant ones', or, 'that the good news that God loves them through Christ, will reach them', or, 'making it easy for those far from God to return', or, 'answering Gods call to love our neighbor by simply becoming friends with them'.

One of my favourites follows the idea that Cursillo is more about 'being' than 'doing'. More than 'evangelizing' people (whatever that means) and simply spreading the Good News, Cursillo's call is that we 'Be the Good News'. In our daily lives, we become the Good News of the Gospel and live it out. That will shine through our lives and speak loudest of all. But it doesn't stop there. Our call is to help the others in our lives, those in our environments, to also 'Be the Good News'.

THE JOY OF FRIENDSHIP AND OPPORTUNITIES TO FORM FRIENDSHIPS

I would like to tell you a little story. When Eduardo Bonnin was in Canada, I think it was in 1992, we had the opportunity to sit down with him, ask questions and discuss issues. I asked him the question, what can be done when people don't come out to the ultreya and their group reunions. I was probably

expecting some 'how to' clues, some tips on what might be done to encourage people to come out. He gave a somewhat longer answer and in listening (there was a bit of a language issue) I was just not sure what he had said. It was the next day after having digested it and pondered it that I realized what he had really said. It was simple. The question wasn't how do you get people to come out? It was why wouldn't they want to? Why wouldn't they want to come out and spend some time with their friends? Powerful question!

When we speak of friendship, we are speaking in the language of the heart and its yearnings. And the heart speaks a different language than the head. We know instinctively the great benefits that friendship can bring to us and others. We spend our lives searching for soul mates. And we also know that it cannot be measured and quantified as our present culture demands in determining what is important (in the Vision II workshop we go into this)

Have you heard of the concept of "wasting time with our friends", not doing anything except spending some time with them. We know friendship is a process that we must nurture and spend time at to develop and that can take years. The present culture says, that is not a very efficient way of doing it, so why do it (thus the idea of wasting time with friends) But it is in this long term process of community building that we get to know ourselves, Jesus Christ and the people around us. Our experience tells us that there is often struggle in this process. There is a price to pay. We have to set aside our own immediate needs and wants. But in our hearts we know that it is our friends that give meaning to our lives and stick with us through thick and thin.

In Cursillo, it is the ultreya and the group reunions that provide the 'reason' to get together. The ultreya is this warm, friendly, welcoming, non-threatening place, to visit and share with our friends and to meet new friends. The group reunion provides the opportunity, at a deeper level, for a group of friends to get together to share their lives and become better friends.

These are the places where we gather together to spend some time with our friends. Do we want to do that. Each of us has to make that choice.

Questions to start discussions, part II;

- Do I choose to set aside time to spend with friends?
- How does nurturing relationships and friendship in my environments make them better.
- What do I think it means to 'Be the Good News' and to help others do the same.