

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL CHARISM AND PURPOSE OF CURSILLO**

The following is intended to provide an understanding of the Charism and Purpose of Cursillo through the words of the founder of the Movement, Eduardo Bonnin. These excerpts are taken directly from things said or written by Eduardo over the years. The source is identified before quotations.  
(Compiled by Dennis Coates for Toronto's Leaders' School, February 2007.)

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(An initial explanation by Eduardo):

Before beginning, it is necessary to clarify my meaning. In the course of this presentation, the word man is used in a generic sense; it always means man and woman.

### **SIGNS OF HOPE**

(Excerpts from an interview with Eduardo Bonnin conducted by Bishop Josef Cordes, 1997. In early 1997, Eduardo Bonnin received a visit from Bishop Cordes of the Vatican. Bishop Cordes was called to visit founders or responsible people of some of the Apostolic Communities and Spiritual Movements which have some importance in the Church today. In 2003, Bishop Cordes was President of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum.")

God is not just an answer but is THE answer. I have experienced that when a person has faith, when he believes, he trusts and has confidence in the most amazing reality and in the most difficult thing to understand. God in Christ loves us, loves me. Everything else flows abundantly and as an unexpected gift from that. I sincerely believe that sometimes, with the best of intentions, we make the mistake in believing that God came into this world to save it. I humbly confess that I do not believe this. I believe that he was incarnated and came into this world to save man, not the world, so that man can be happy because of the faith he has in God.

In my life I have seen people who are very happy although they have nothing and others who are not happy, dying of boredom, even though they own much. All of this helps me to better understand why God says that his kingdom is not of this world and why he puts his Kingdom where he is present, where he wants to be present, and also where it pleases him to stay. It is in the interior of each person, in his intelligence and in his heart.

Even with all that, I am convinced that even though God's Kingdom is not of this world, he can give a sense and "fullness" to the kingdoms of this world.

When I left for my military service in 1938 I realized that the world was very different to the image that I had of it. In that environment the values that were being lived were completely opposed to those that I had lived in my family. That is what started me to question myself. "Are these people the way they are because they find the law tiresome or are they just ignorant of the doctrine?" In observing the details of the lives of these men, gradually I was convinced that it was not the law that was tiresome but that ignorance of the doctrine weighed heavily on their lives.

From that moment on my principal occupation consisted of finding out what was in reality the fundamental core essential to the doctrine and to the Christian message.

I believed then, and I believe today, that it is the Gospel that synthesizes and summarizes best the Christian doctrine. Jesus' message is first and foremost news for man from which is born a preoccupation and arouses a desire to know him. This Christ who, through his grace, offers the surprising possibility of becoming his friend, awakens and reinforces inside of each person the best of

who he is. To go forth in the knowledge of Christ and also in the knowledge of himself as a person, with his capacity for conviction, determination and perseverance, is what interested me the most.

The Movement of Cursillo, by the Grace of God and the prayers of a lot of people, was born of an intense preoccupation with the real people in the ordinariness of daily life, ordinary people whose main preoccupation is with simply living, rarely have time to ask themselves why, and even less to find time to be preoccupied with the meaning of their existence. What we wanted at the beginning and have always desired, is that the liberty of man encounters the Spirit of God.

Around that central idea, convinced that efficiency consisted mainly of finding the point of convergence that would facilitate that happy encounter, we ourselves have proposed – me first and after that some others – to study what would be the place and the most adequate method to achieve that result rapidly, simply, and in an attractive manner. When the second course for pilgrims to St. James of Compostela was given in Mallorca, the president of Catholic Action insisted I go, which I did. I then saw in these young men a life-style, a joyful and relaxed attitude that convinced me. But I couldn't free myself from that question, "What will happen after the pilgrimage?"

Out of this model we got the idea of how to give the message at the depth we wanted to convey, to communicate our ideas. It wasn't the talks and explanations that would motivate them, but to live the message with them, to infect them. To live with them, bringing them to a place that would facilitate the dialogue between the people. In these Cursillos we also retained some of the pilgrim topics of discussion because we couldn't create only new things.

What appeared clear to us was that the Catholic Action Cursillos were too long at one week. We thought a period of three days would be ideal. We thought we could reach a greater number of people.

Reflecting, praying, studying, and praying again, was the way in which the Cursillos in Christianity were conceived, born and developed.

I had already belonged to Catholic Action, but I didn't like the apathetic routine and pious rhythm that we had to give to all activities. We were moving with a different rhythm in a different direction, always concerned with the needs of those who are far away from the Church.

We began the study of the environment. We wanted to know how people are; we tried to group people in our imaginations according to what they were living. This included atheists all the way to those who were living and acting as authentic Christians and Catholics.

Some anecdotes from this time would clarify what we were looking for. What we say is that Cursillo has to be heterogeneous – that is, all kinds of people had to join together in an adventure: people that are near and those that are far away, the intelligent and the ignorant, the workers and the high and mighty, students and manual workers.

The "spirit of Cursillo," which is the substance of the Gospel adapted to the diversity of individual situations, erupts sometimes in a person with a powerful drive that was not always easy to contain. The bursting force of a bubbling and overflowing generosity that was shocking then and shocks still today, when not choked by rules and bureaucratic procedures.

For lay people, Cursillo brings the discovery that if their human values are consecrated to live a more Christian life instead of being used to resolve the internal problems of the Church, it contributes to increasing the prestige of the Church and bringing it closer to the world.

We have to thank some priests who had confidence in us, letting us explore freely to find new ways, wishing to find the most adequate one in order to communicate the good news that in some way would break through old ideas and would overcome boring habits with the eternal strength of the Gospel.

Needless to say that new ideas cause problems. We went through very hard times, and some of those experiences lived in the Movement are still painful today and hurt my sense of justice.

To feel Christian and not feel self as a member of the Church seems to me to be a contradiction. When this happens I tell myself that it signifies an ignorance of what it is to be a Christian or what the Church is. It is a very common contradiction. The message of Christ reaches many men uniquely and exclusively by way of rigid and demanding moral precepts that are separated from the source of their truth. It appears absurd to them, and the notion that the Church reaches them in a manner so diminished and false that for many, the Church is formed solely by a few men who are light years away from the reality of life, and who use language that makes communication very difficult, and makes dialogue impossible.

The Cursillo is a movement in the Church, but not for the Church, but rather for the world, meaning for everybody in the world, in the same way that the Church herself is. As part of the Church, it needs priests and lay people in it, who, in addition to a constant dialogue, must be faithful to and not distance themselves from the Foundational Charism.

I believe that what the movement has achieved, all that it has tried to accomplish in the world, has become a reality because its author is the Holy Spirit.

As to what a Charism is, I firmly believe in what theology affirms. We can verify that a Charism is a gift of God given to the one he chooses. It is given not for the one who receives it, but for the community so that the community and the Church will benefit.

According to my understanding, the Charism has been confirmed with time, because of the manner in which people, possessing the right disposition necessary for the three days of the Cursillo, and who grasped the simplicity of the message, have welcomed it into their lives, trying to live it daily, fixing and affirming what they have learned in the Cursillo, namely the Group Reunion for the personal dimension and the Ultreya for the social dimension.

In both cases, it is by carefully cultivating the dynamism of conversion, through the unifying force of friendship, which not only brings people together and creates a bond, but it makes them also feel voluntarily united in the daily and human life of a small group, which creates and maintains, in the small things, a heartfelt closeness, where one can express himself as he is, in front of the others.

It is a very distinct and different spirit than what the so-called "pious people" are used to living. The conclusion drawn by those who have lived the experience of Cursillo is the evidence that God loves everyone in Jesus Christ. Each knows that to be Christian is first to feel being loved by God, and to live in wonder of it, since what is most authentically Christian is to let God love us. The interior attitude created by this reality, when believed and fully lived, becomes a leaven and is transmitted to others. But, to grasp this, to experience it, to encounter God who is love, it is necessary to present ourselves to him as we truly are.

## **EVANGELIZATION THROUGH CONVERSION**

(Eduardo Bonnín, excerpts from a presentation to the first Canadian National Encounter, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, 1992)

When we speak of “EVANGELIZATION” in the context of the Cursillo, we do not only mean it in the sense of simply passing on or spreading the Gospel Good News, but rather to succeed in making the person “BECOME” the GOOD NEWS, that joyful good news that Christ is alive in and amongst his people today just as surely as He was 2000 years ago.

This in essence was the vision and mission of the Cursillo from the beginning. To find the best possible method of bringing about this conversion – of moving a person from where they are to where they could be; from human to fully human; from alive to fully alive in recognition, acknowledgement and acceptance of their true identity and dignity as beloved children of God.

We were convinced then, as now, that the average man of today is very much aware of, and living fairly close to, the Gospel values, yet at the same time are, and consider themselves to be, far removed from Christ and any personal identification with him. It is from this that our original conviction sprang, that if we could find a way to help each person identify in a personal, relational way with the Christ of the Gospel and the Gospel of Christ, this would be key to allowing and motivating each person to attain their fullest potential.

When we started to champion our belief that our brief, yet intense, method could succeed in accomplishing this goal or, at least, initiate the process, by making the candidate realize that what they were seeking was exactly what Christ was offering, the same old sceptics used to tell us, as they still do, that we were “out of our minds” if we thought that three days were enough to convert the distant ones.

Our reply then, as now, was twofold. The Holy Spirit needs only an instant, but we need the time to become aware that he really is talking to us. The second was to explain that “a Christian is not something that you are but something you are becoming.”

Conversion, in fact, is not an EVENT that suddenly happens, but rather a PROCESS that unfolds through a series of stages that comprise a SEARCHING, a MEETING and then a series of steps through which the “meeting” makes itself concrete resulting in everlasting and ever deepening PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS that in Cursillo we call PIETY, as it relates to our relationship with God, and FRIENDSHIP, as it relates to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

While one could certainly bring about an understanding of this process by deep theological teachings, we believe that the key to making this joyful Good News accessible to the average man is to make them aware that their long search for happiness, friendship and love makes the three encounters with SELF, with CHRIST, and OTHERS easier, that is to say, attractive and attainable.

The method known as “Cursillos in Christianity” was built on this simple conviction and approaches the conversion of the person in three distinct stages, which we call PRECURSILLO, CURSILLO, and POSTCURSILLO.

In the PRECURSILLO phase we try to identify, befriend and then help a person who is “searching” for that “something” that he identifies as happiness, or fulfillment, or his ideal, and that we know is really that “somebody” – Christ. In doing so, we broaden and accelerate his search and direct it towards those three essential encounters.

By doing so we endeavour to make his previous unrest, which is so often repressed, suppressed and silenced, become the very motivating force for his newfound enthusiasm for a sound, upright, sincere and hopeful conversion.

During the Cursillo itself, we attempt to crystallize this unrest and searching through the three essential encounters, or meetings, first of the person with himself; with Christ and with others, and with the grace of God we almost always do so.

In spite of this success, we should not think that this person is now a “Christian” and that the job is done. All we can say and feel is that the person has initiated the conversion process, nothing more, but also and more importantly, nothing less. When done correctly, and simply, according to the authentic method, the three days instill a hunger and identifies the method he can use to feed this ever growing hunger, a conversion process really with Christ, himself and others that, of necessity is ongoing and relational, founded on and sustained throughout the Postcursillo.

This means that while we can say in a very general sense that on the “weekend” the person converted himself to Christ, we know that it is during the adventure of the 4<sup>th</sup> Day that he will come to perfect this conversion and have a chance to become a Christian, to become Christ, in theological terms.

It is for this reason that the Postcursillo is designed to facilitate the nurturing of those three essential encounters that took place on the Cursillo so they grow and develop into true friendship – friendship of the person with himself, with Christ, and with his brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is no doubt that the key to this process of friendship building is the last encounter – friendship with others. Here we mean not only the “others” that encompass “all”, but especially the friendship with those who are intimately involved in our conversion process, those in our Group Reunions and Ultreya.

Friendship is the key to the Postcursillo. We hold as axiomatic two basic truths about the human condition: one is that nobody can truly “find” themselves except through the simultaneous “relating to” and comparing of” oneself with “others”. Secondly, and more importantly, we hold that no one can maintain a basic and cheerful acceptance of self and at the same time be driven by an overwhelming sense and demanding need for self-improvement and personal perfection unless he is able to see himself reflected at one and the same time both with his friend’s “strengths” and his friend’s “weaknesses.”

This natural longing for personal growth and development occurs best when it is nurtured in an atmosphere of true friendship rather than the typical adversarial, competitive, and anonymous world of mere acquaintances and strangers.

These two essential aspects of growth that we call self-acceptance and personal development are not sufficient to propel man to his true and full potential however. For this to happen, there needs to be a third element that completes, defines and orients one’s life.

When friendship develops between two people who share the conviction that Christ, who dwells in both of them, gives meaning to their lives, past, present and future, then a new dimension is attained that is transcendent – resulting in an active, conscious, and growing perception of their integration with and in Christ, which becomes a natural and inevitable part of their self-identity.

It is in this reality that allows man to find, assert, and orient the direction of his life – not only is he himself “essential,” but he also comes to know who he truly is in relation to other things and other people.

He realizes both his true identity as a child of God in the family of God and the humble dignity that ensues from this transcendent reality, compelling and propelling him on his journey of conversion, reinforcing his courage to “stay the course.”

From this understanding of his true identity, the person who is on the journey comes to realize that he is the only one who can, in truth, influence his particular and unique place in all the environments he finds himself in. Furthermore, and because his conversion is normal and natural, his influence is neither contrived nor forced, but occurs in an almost effortless manner that is normal, natural and harmonious.

What we have outlined here is the most simple, effective and universal method we know of to provoke, instil and nurture the men and women of today to become fully human through a lifelong process of conversion, that is the ever deepening awareness of their true identity as living children of God, in growing imitation of Christ, until they become the "Christ" that "Christ is counting on us" to become.

Because he shares his life with his friends who share his conviction and meaning of life, he knows that they, who he no doubt loves and admires, are also not free from problems and errors.

This is, in a nutshell, how and why the Postcursillo methodology was developed right from the very beginning but that for some reason always seems to be ignored or forgotten in the various proclamations and justifications that attempt to explain or vindicate the Movement and its method.

Thankfully, though, many nonetheless do try to live it.

Surely, we could have concluded that what the person will need following his Cursillo is an organized program of study and directed activities. Instead we believe that what is really essential is that he lives in friendship with his brothers and sisters.

Our experience shows us that knowing and acting do not necessarily imply, or lead to, LOVING. However, we do hold that LOVING does lead to knowing and acting. There is no better way to facilitate LOVE in this day and age than by combining the love of human friendships with the transcendence of God's love manifested in, and fostered by, friends who are also in the process of, and committed to, becoming Christians.

### **THE CURSILLOS IN CHRISTIANITY: A REALITY NOT YET REALIZED**

(Excerpts from a paper co-written by Eduardo Bonnin and Francisco Forteza, 1981)

The beginning or birth of the Cursillo Movement is to be found in the reaction that a group of young men had by becoming familiar with the environment and who tried to study it thoroughly in those years of the nineteen forties.

The serious study and the immediate and concrete practice of all this led us to the knowledge and conviction that the truth of that which is specifically Christian was not incarnated in the lives of those who were considered Christian: that which is essentially evangelical was not a reality in what was lived because it was not grasped and made part of the inner life, but rather it was only visible, and then with some difficulty, in some superficial implications.

From the very beginning of the Cursillo Movement, a warm approach was attempted toward those who didn't think or behave how we had been taught to behave as people of the Church, and it astonished us to verify, with overwhelming successive evidence that the Good News was grasped and understood better, and was better received in those places far from what we normally call Christian. It was going beyond the limits of the organized apostolate. It was necessary to move beyond being preoccupied with the structures, to concerning ourselves with the person, from the temptation of creating a professionalized leadership, to an attitude of journeying together.

## **Two Ways of Looking at the Purpose**

To tell the truth, it is an unquestionable fact that throughout the history of the Cursillo Movement there has always existed two ways to understand it and consequently, also, two ways to channel it and guide it toward its purpose.

Some believe that it is only to give vitality to the already existing structures and organizations, leaving the original in place, but with a better spirit; and others believe that if the Movement is given the space to live its basic and minimum structure of Group Reunion, Ultreya and School, it can bring the Good News of the Gospel to all the hidden places of human existence: personal, family and social.

The limitless and sometimes jealous zeal of each one of these perspectives has been revealed in each situation and circumstance. Perhaps it is well stated in the words of a man who came from a hostile and stubborn environment. He had a very low opinion of the criteria and practice of our Religion. On a certain occasion he told his bishop, at the end of a Cursillo: "Excellency, you do not know and cannot know what I feel now after finding Christ... Excellency, you have always had it. Not I. That is why I can only show you in some small way what is happening to me. What can I say? It is like a person born blind who could see, all of a sudden, and for the first time, a starlit night, the smile of his son, and his mother's face."

Those who have been living the Good News of the Gospel through tradition, inertia, or routine, as if they did not believe that it was good, or new and capable of restoring everything, have difficulty understanding, putting into context, and especially receiving the overwhelming and not always focused enthusiasm of the newly converted.

What we sought then, and what we seek still, is to help people to understand that the Gospel, besides being true, is possible in the circumstances of ordinary life, and not only possible, but effective.

## **PRESENTATION TO THE EUROPEAN GROUP ENCOUNTER**

(Eduardo Bonnin, excerpts from the presentation, 1996)

The Cursillo is directed to the person, not to the world. Its objective is to transform the person. The world is made up of men and women, many of them as lost as Paul on the eve of his journey along the road to Damascus, as Mary Magdalene on the eve of her encounter with Jesus, or of Xavier on the eve of his encounter with Ignatius. A person is always lost on the eve of their encounter.

This means that any frightful problem can be reduced to a mere 24 hours. Twenty-four hours or three days it doesn't matter. The important point is that Cursillo brings grace to a person.

When the focus is towards the person, the personal relationship with Christ and with our brothers and sisters will become more important than just morals, rites, and structures. Those who discover for themselves this will find happiness.

We could say that the aim of Cursillo is to communicate the joy of the faith using a concrete method which wants to achieve through God's grace and the prayers of many the understanding that Christians may be awakened to the dignity of their conscience and to their mission in their environments. That at the same time they should be conscious of their potential to awaken in others, preferably, though not exclusively, those who are distant as a result of not being informed or having been badly informed.

In some dioceses it has become the practice to use the Cursillos for other ends which are detrimental to its efficiency. Those who have experienced Cursillos are normally disposed to serve. This is so well known in ecclesiastical circles that it has resulted in the Church counting on Cursillistas to take the leading roles in many associations. This of course does not mean that these activities should result in the Cursillo being used exclusively for them.

Also, by the Grace of God, many vocations have resulted to the priesthood, as Deacons, but this does not mean that this is the aim of the Cursillos. All this, for which we must undoubtedly be thankful to God, must not make us forget the primary objective of Cursillo.

The Cursillos in Christianity want to achieve that which is most urgently required – that the Good News will reach as many men and women of today as possible, to normal people who have to struggle to live, and to survive, or those who may have no pastime but to read the newspaper, listen to a radio or end up sleeping in front of their TV.

There exist errors in discernment and in direction. I often hear that Cursillo is a Movement of the Church when in reality it is a Movement for the world. As a result many people with good dispositions have been wasted, though not with bad intention. Many want the fruits that are the result of the authentic Cursillo, not for the world, but to correct or enliven the structures of the Church, which is where their focus lies. They do this without realizing that it is the ordinary people, the men and women of today who need to find direction for their everyday lives in all the places they live and work.

#### **FOUNDATIONAL CHARISM OF THE CURSILLO MOVEMENT**

(Eduardo Bonnín, excerpts from a presentation to the World Encounter, Seoul, Korea 1997)

An address given by Pope Pius XI to parish priests in Rome on Feb. 6, 1940 made a tremendous impact on us. He told us to be observant and to assess the situation by making a clear and detailed topographical picture, street by street, to recognize that there existed on one hand faithful people, and on the other hand groups of people who had moved away from Christian life.

“These are also the sheep that belong to the parish, stray sheep. You are guardians responsible for these sheep, and I would even say, mainly for these.”

We always had in mind the Distant Ones, the Faraway.

A few anecdotes of that time can shed much light on the intention of our attitude. For instance, we said that Cursillos had to be heterogeneous and bring people together from all walks of life; those who were close to the Church and Distant Ones, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, yuppies and workers, students, blue collar workers, etc.

It is advisable or necessary that young people should attend the weekends because, besides guaranteeing the future of the Movement, they learn how to talk and discuss with mature people, and mature people learn to talk and discuss with young people.

It is very helpful for a father/mother to talk to a son/daughter who is not his/her own. Likewise it is helpful for the son/daughter to talk the father/mother who is not his/her own parent.

The important thing is that we look for young people who have a personality and we should not set up any age barrier, which always complicates things.

Cursillo has to be focused towards the world and preferentially, though not exclusively, toward the "distant ones." The Cursillo in Christianity was not thought up, structured or prayed for to evangelize the world, but man.

The Cursillo Movement was not born as an answer from the Church to the world, but as one way to communicate to man that God loves him.

We know of no adaptation or alteration to the Movement which has made its purpose clearer, more precise, simpler, more understandable or more efficient.

In order to be able to grasp fully what the Cursillo Movement attempts and will surely achieve provided we don't distance it from its origins, it is wise that we start from the following basic facts:

The challenges that the world presents to the man of today have the same root as they always did; the absence of God in the mind and in the heart of man.

This is why the solution is always the same. The solution is Christ and his Grace, which is the only thing that can give him the feeling of being alive and of leading a meaningful life.

The Cursillo Movement, when it doesn't deviate from its original Charism, attempts to connect Christians who are trying to live their evangelical faith in spirit and in truth, with those who do not have the living Christ who is the only one who can bring them life, and who are preoccupied with fending for themselves with the result that they have no time to think about themselves and those around them.

The Cursillo Movement, when its value is not diminished by being misused, is an instrument and at the same time a place, where man can encounter himself and become aware of his existence and the existence of others, approaching them with the enthusiasm that stems from hope and establishing a mutual communication by listening to one another. This technique will allow them to get to know, understand, respect and value one another, finally learning to love one each other.

Although this may be a long process, Cursillo allows this to occur in a natural and normal way and offers the Cursillista the specific means to gradually transform the encounter into friendship. These specific means are the Group Reunion and the Ultreya.

That is what the Cursillo Movement wants to offer the man of today and for him to discover that his life has meaning.

The crux of the question is that we understand once and for all that, no matter what, however much the world may change, man does not change. He remains always the same and, therefore, the solution will always be the same.

The only thing that we can spread like a contagion is the faith that we have that Christ loves us. If we don't have this faith we cannot ferment anything: not attitudes, environments or structures.