

The Three Encounters

Introduction

The Cursillo is a means to finding a practical solution to all of life's problems. Its effectiveness is linked to Grace, to the technique, and the enthusiasm, devotion and spirit of love with which one lives it.

The method of the Movement is the result of long and prayerful study and discernment on how to reach the goal of having the candidates live the fourth day, through an effective use of the three days. The Cursillo Movement didn't just happen, it was very carefully thought out using not only the Truths of our faith but also the fruit of the study of sociology and psychology.

Its success is directly related to three things, an understanding of what it is to live in Grace, the way in which the leaders understand and carry out their role, and the participation of the candidates on the weekend.

The candidates are encouraged to come to the realization that to live in Grace, is the key to their happiness and the success of the Cursillo. To live in Grace, in the thinking of the Founder, is to know Jesus as a friend, alive within us, to come to know Him as He really is and this leads to a deep desire to follow Him.

Our task as leaders

As leaders in the Movement our primary task, is not to build and maintain structures, simply for the sake of having a Movement. Our primary task is twofold. First it is to do all that we can to make the Three Encounters possible. The Three Encounters which this talk will examine. And second, to then stand back and let God's Grace work in the candidates.

If the leaders on the weekend are successful, the candidates will come to their own decisions about wanting to live in Grace and will realize for themselves, in their own time, what they need to do in order to be in Grace. They will want to 'clean their house' without being made to feel coerced or pressured. An analogy that the Mallorcans use for this is: if the windows of your house are dirty, you cannot see the beauty of the world outside clearly.

To bring the candidates to this place the weekend provides the opportunity to make the Three essential Encounters. Somehow, there seems to be little mention of the Three Encounters in a direct way in the literature and yet they really are the whole purpose of the Movement.

Once a candidate has encountered themselves, Christ and the others, our job as leaders is to support them on their journey. It is not our role to guide them into anything but simply to support and encourage them. Not our favourite apostolic activities, organizations or piety

Where do the three encounters lead?

As we live our piety, study, and action, we make the three encounters over and over, with ourselves and with Jesus and with those who share our lives. We find the Christ who is alive within us, we find Him as He is through His Word and in His Church and we find Him in each other and we live in Grace and we find joy in the midst of everything.

"To achieve and feel this joy I have had to discover God, who was hidden in all the basic things of my life, in all those seemingly unimportant things, But when I awoken and become aware again of the origin of everything I discover that life has meaning and I accept the partnership with the eternal. Thanks be to God." Jesus Valls, II Conversations of Cala Figuera.

The first encounter – The encounter with self, the place where we befriend ourselves.

Eduardo Bonnin, our Founder, realized very early, that all of life is a pilgrimage back to the Father and each one of us is on our own, personal pilgrimage. The most important encounter, the one that is so essential, is the encounter with self and this is the theme of the First Day. How essential that first Encounter is to conversion, but it is important to realize that conversion is not a change, it is rather a process which will continue every day until we are finally home with our Father. The important point is that the process will not begin and therefore cannot continue, until we encounter ourselves. Until we come face to face with who we are, and this is the meeting that takes place on the Cursillo weekend, where, provided the opportunity, we come to see ourselves with the tenderness and compassion of God and it is really a foretaste of what is to come. We see the wrinkles and the warts, we acknowledge them and own them as our own, but instead of guilt and anguish, even horror, over the garbage that we all carry around within us, it is as if the gentle light of God's love puts everything into perspective and we see ourselves as He sees us. When we think of our own children as they come in from play, covered in mud, dirty and dishevelled, all we see is a dirty little kid but one whom we know, underneath, is that glowing little thing that we love to death as they come freshly scrubbed from the tub. We know them, we love them, no matter what. So often we secretly see ourselves as worthless and in truth we don't like ourselves and as a result we go one of two ways. We either spend our lives trying to prove to the world that we are not ugly and flawed or else we sink into despair and wallow in the mire of our worthlessness. God sees us, not in the winter of the despair we sometimes feel, but in our springtime, in the promise of all that we are to become. We are everything with Him, and nothing without Him. This journey inward is where God leads us in our prayer, this is our piety, this is where our relationship with Him grows and this is where we come to know ourselves as loved unconditionally, where we come to love ourselves, and this is where the process of our conversion continues. It is here that we come to know ourselves as we are known and are able to befriend ourselves as we learn to accept ourselves as friends of Jesus.

Sometimes we slip and fail and we go back to that place where we are so disgusted with ourselves that we think "God cannot possibly love me, look at what I have done". Or perhaps someone we love betrays us, hurts us, or we betray them, and we resort to justifying our actions or reacting in anger. There is another lesson to learn, another step along the path leading us home. When we have blown it, we know, we get a feeling of dis-ease, of disquiet and often we try to turn away from what is causing our discomfort. But when we are sincere about growing, we know that we cannot, we must turn and face it and often this is what a candidate will bring to the weekend, this need to look inside and the fear of doing so. In their lives perhaps they have been running for years, filling the days with activities and pursuits that can only fail to bring the happiness we all seek. In the first hours of the Cursillo, we are led to look at ourselves, and, if the leaders know what their role is, the process begins. We discover that place that is inside each of us, the sacred place where God waits, where we can go, meet Him again, talk to Him, listen to Him and let Him love us back into life. As Eduardo says: *"Christ lives in each person through Grace, and His presence is manifested in a way that is appealing and attractive. We recall the words: "The Kingdom of God is within you". Let us seek Him where He says He is, in the interior of every person, that is where we will find Him. The Cursillo has always promoted this message and tries to follow the principle that each person will find self-acceptance in coming to know themselves as they really are, as God knows them, with their own potential and limitations, understanding that they can always be better, and realizing that the path they must take will be a joy, if taken in the company of friends."*

This first Encounter with self is often a painful journey that we would rather avoid, it is often much easier and more pleasant to encounter Christ and to find friendship with other people.

It is in the journey into self, that we gradually understand who we are and who we are to Him. Without it we run the risk of becoming so removed from reality that we are unbalanced, we focus solely on God and forget others, or focus on others and forget God. God Himself unveils for us the masterpiece that He has

created and in the journey into self we encounter Him the most profoundly, we come to know ourselves as a person and as such we come to the realization of who we really are.

The second encounter – The encounter with Christ

One of the topics at the I Conversations was Life and in the context of Cursillo, this also means Grace. In his talk on this topic Father.....said, *“The Cursillos, above all, bring about a strong reaction that melts the layer of ice that covers the heart. It removes the scales from the eyes. Opens both ears.. Shows men their condition as rational beings and the importance of their being children of God. Light streams in. Grace enters the soul forcefully. Love massages and causes the heart to swell. That is when the encounter with Christ takes place. A new world opens up before the eyes. The presence of Jesus gives a different significance and a new value to all things . . . It is an encounter that constitutes a true revelation.”*

In the encounter with Christ, the Cursillo is wrapped in the Grace that He earned for us. And the Cursillo settles itself into the nucleus of Christianity, in the Word of God made flesh: Who came so that we might have Life and Life in abundance (John, 10:10).

In a word, the candidates meet Jesus perhaps for the first time as a friend, as the Person that He really is, not what we have learned of Him and not the historical figure that is all that some believe of Him. The whole purpose of the second Encounter, is to enable us to know Jesus as close to us, alive and living within us. If I have learned nothing else from my contact with the Mallorcan Cursillistas, it is that they truly believe this and what is more, they live as if they believe it. I have seen it with my own eyes and have seen the joy in theirs. In the planning for this Conference I have reached out many times to those whom I know believe this and who turn to Jesus as quickly and as confidently as if they just had breakfast with Him. And they have been there for me and taken me to Him in their prayer without any need of explanations and I have felt His presence and His comfort. This is our whole purpose for Cursillo weekends, Ultreyas or Group Reunions, to help those who come across our paths to share in this gift that we have found. The awesome knowledge that we are not alone, He is there with us every step of the way as He leads us home. If we don't know this for ourselves, then we have nothing to share. Our happiness rests in friendship with Jesus and this is the purpose of the second day, to allow the candidates the time and the space for the second Encounter to take place. For this to happen, again, we as Leaders have to know what we are about and to stand back and let Grace flow in. We only facilitate it, we don't do it. As one young Cursillista in Mallorca said to me, “ When you have met Jesus you cannot help but love Him and loving Him, we want to follow Him, we cannot help ourselves”. Just think what that sure conviction does, especially in the life of someone as young as she is. No matter where, no matter what, He is there and what is most important, through the second Encounter we come to know it with deep conviction.

The third encounter – The encounter with others

The third encounter for some of us is very difficult, especially if we are independent loner types. However, on the Cursillo weekend it happens quite easily for both team and candidates, it's like we're in a different mode. The spirit is tangibly present and each one of us responds to that presence and the candidates see the possibilities by what they experience. But as we move into the 4th Day, the journey really begins in earnest and it is then that we must answer the question, “After the weekend, - what?” Was the message that we gave genuinely a message that can now be witnessed in the evidence of how we live our everyday lives or do we go back to our old way of being...that was then, this is now, I have things to do and places to go, this is my real world. The third encounter, begun on the third day of the weekend, is the journey outward, the journey towards other people and it is here that we encounter Jesus present in His people.

This encounter is where the kind of friendship that we speak about in Cursillo begins to grow and flourish, in the Group Reunions and Ultreyas and this kind of friendship has nothing to do with feelings, it has to do with befriending and allowing ourselves to be befriended by those whom God sends to journey with us. It is only in relating to and interacting with others, that we come into contact with the reality of our humanity for

we see ourselves, all our gift, all our faults, reflected back to us from our friends. Friendship develops and grows in that space that exists between us as individuals, it forms the bridges and links us together. And in the process it very often causes us great pain and discomfort, but also great joy. In order for the encounter with others to take place, we have to allow them to come into our lives and we do this by sharing ourselves with them, in varying degrees. Sharing creates the bond, but it takes great courage to actually cross the bridge to the other side, for it is much easier and far safer to keep up the walls and to stare at each other across the chasm that separates us, each of us yearning for something that we cannot quite identify. What we yearn for and reach out for is understanding and acceptance, for compassion and love, for something inside of us instinctively knows that God dwells in the other and we know without knowing, that in coming into contact with the heart of the other person, each of us is touched by God and each of us becomes a little more whole, a little closer to being fully human, a little closer to home.

The truth is that we need each other, we are uniquely individual, and loved by God in that way, but He has made us a people, a community of believers whom He has created to live together and it is through each other that we experience His love in thousands of small ways. When we speak of friendship being the means by which we reach out to people, it means simply to be willing to journey, even if only for a very short while, with the person who comes across our path and to whom we reach out in friendship, giving them a glimpse of God's love. We never know how those brief encounters can change lives forever. We only have to look at the Jesus of the Gospels to know that almost all His encounters with people were brief, the woman at the well, the paralytic and the blind man. But for that moment in time, they knew His friendship and through it they were touched by God and their lives would never be the same again, as He sent them on their way to seek out truth for themselves. And this is the method of evangelization in Cursillo, to be so convinced of the Truth of God's love that the only thing we can do is to give it away.

In 1996 the Annual National Cursillo Conference had as its theme, "The Glory of God is a Person Fully Alive" and through the presentations and discussions we explored together just what that means and how it comes about. As Christians we all want to give glory to God, but to reflect on the concept of the Glory of God being a fully alive person was for many of us, a different way of looking at things. But that is exactly what the Cursillo attempts to do, to share the Good News that each person is loved by God, that God wants His people to be happy in this life, that He has created us as human beings with feelings, desires, appetites; with the capacity to experience sorrow and joy. It is in being human that we reach our potential and the more human we become, the more Christian we will be. God has created us as He wishes us to be, but unfortunately, for so long we misunderstood and thought we had to deny our humanity and become something else, angels or mystics, or else lock ourselves away behind walls of self denial and rigidity. (Again we can take our kids as examples. Would we really be happy to see our children docile and timid, obeying every rule we could dream up, or does it give us joy to see them running free, laughing and happy as they discover life and the world that God has made for their delight? It might be less harrowing for us, but would it really make us happy to see them so solemn and so afraid?) I am sure that that is what God wants for each one of us, to enjoy the life He has given us, and to share that joy for life with those we journey with.

We can experience God within ourselves but it is only in the company of each other that we can become fully human and therefore fully alive. This is very simple, but as we hear so many times, it is very far from easy. This no longer involves just me, or me and God, this involves other people and let's face it, I might not like them, or God forbid, they may not like me. This part of the journey is where it often gets very rough and as Cursillo leaders, decisions need to be made that take us beyond feelings and egos, it is where we start to get serious.

The way in which we approach those who have yet to hear the Good News is the exact opposite to the way in which we ourselves need to proceed and this was explored last year in the Study of the Environment talk. Very often those we meet live with closed hearts because of the circumstances of their lives. In this situation we need to win first their heart, before we can ever begin to try to reach their mind, and eventually their will,

and the only way to do this is to treat them with the dignity and respect that it is their right simply because they are a person. In dealing with ourselves however, it is quite the reverse. We very often don't want to do what we know we are called to, and are very good at rationalizing our way out. But if we are serious about the journey, this is where we must engage our wills and this also means using our knees. If we pray for the courage and strength to do what we know in our minds we are called to do, once we act in accordance with what we know to be true, then our hearts will follow. No-one said this would be easy, but it is the only way.

As I already said, I have learned far more about the meaning of Cursillo from what I have observed lived in Mallorca and some of us had an opportunity to see how it is possible to share the Good News without ever speaking a word, and I'm speaking about Maria Dolores Sureda, a Mallorcan Cursillo leader who has graced our annual Conference on two occasions. Maria is a woman who is a wife and mother, a lady who for more than 30 years has been a leader in Cursillo and who, in spite of her lack of English, spoke volumes about the love of God, of joy and peace and serenity, a gracious and beautiful witness to all that we are called to be. At the conferences I don't think there is one person who was not touched by her presence. This is what we are called to as a Movement, to have those around us say of us, "See How They Love One Another". But as we all know, this doesn't just happen, it takes work and commitment and a desire to have everyone reach the end of the journey. We cannot leave people behind, no matter how big a pain we think they are, for if we do they will either go back where they came from or else get lost completely. Every time we lose a member of the community, the community is depleted, there is a void, an ache that will not be ignored.

For many of us, especially in the early stages, it is as if we see the world after Cursillo through rose coloured glasses. Our world has not changed, but we have, and we assume that because this is Cursillo and everyone has experienced what we have, our lives on the journey together will now grow and flourish and be wonderful forever after. It is excruciatingly painful, when suddenly, our Utopia appears to disappear and it often happens very rapidly. This phenomena needs to be understood and we can rest assured that it probably was exactly the same for the first Christians. We can also know, that the road ahead may get pretty rough. What has happened is that we have been living a dream, it's like the honeymoon stage of Cursillo. But most of us know, that honeymoons come to an end and life goes on at kitchen sinks, behind desks and computer terminals, struggling each day to live as family, fighting the traffic, or dealing with people in the real world. This is where we all come face to face with our humanity in all its flawed wonder. Personalities come to the forefront, ideas surface that clash with those of others, egos raise their ugly little heads and prejudice threatens to overwhelm reason and we enter a period of terrible disillusionment. We wonder if this thing called Cursillo is worth our energy and sometimes heartache.

When this happens, between friends, between groups, in Ultreyas, in the Schools, in whole Movements or wherever, choices have to be made and decisions taken. The question we must ask ourselves is, are we committed to the journey or do we want to go home and recapture the dream because it is more comfortable than what we are facing. If we are committed as individuals and as communities we now face a difficult trek across what might appear to be a desert, where nothing seems to bring relief, there are hurdles and barriers to navigate and the goal seems to have disappeared behind insurmountable mountains. This is where the analogy of pilgrimage is so strong. I'm sure many a pilgrim has laid on the hard ground at night and thought about a soft bed at home, but true pilgrims are willing to face the hardships they encounter, they keep their eyes on the goal and they forge ahead. We are no different. We have a goal, we are committed to reaching it and are willing to make the sacrifices that the way ahead demands. Although we travel together, the journey we each make is individual. We are in sight of each other, but the journey is personal for I cannot reach the goal, on your back or without putting one foot in front of the other each day.

What we must understand is that this journey is not really about Cursillo, it is our own personal journey home to be with God and Cursillo is simply the method, the way, by which we have chosen to travel. The journey we make together is one of support, we are simply companions helping each other along the way. The Cursillo Movement is not about turning everyone into a Cursillista, it is about helping each one to

become all that God intends them to be, giving Glory to God as Fully Alive people. When the Cursillo Movement really reaches its goal, it will be the instrument of its own demise.

The pilgrims on the way to Compostela encouraged each other with the word 'Ultreya', which we know means "Onward". But it also means 'until we meet again', 'be seeing you'. If we keep the reality of a pilgrimage in mind, and how the pilgrims shared the experiences of the day's journey with each other as they stopped to rest each evening, the whole concept of the Ultreya and its purpose becomes clearer. It is where each one shares what the other has lived and it is where the work of building the community takes place, where the friendships are developed and nurtured, where each one comes for the sheer joy of being with friends who share a common goal, a common vision of life. This is where genuine friendship takes root. It is certainly not about structure and program, it is simply an oasis along the path, where we as pilgrims find rest and refreshment and encouragement to set forth again on the next step in the journey. When I come to the Ultreya, I need to be able to find friends who are interested in where my journey has led me, what I have experienced of God and a place where others share their own experiences and where I can learn from them.

Sometimes, often times, I feel abandoned, as if I have nowhere to turn, I want a shoulder to cry on, a pair of arms around me. But I am learning, just what friendship means in my life and it is so important that we understand Friendship from the perspective of the Foundational Charism that it too was a topic at the I Conversations.

I always liked to think that I didn't need anybody, that I could handle anything that life sent my way with an attitude of "Give your best shot, see if I care". I have had to learn about friendship in Cursillo, what it is and what it isn't.

It is unconditional love and support, but it isn't unquestioning endorsement of everything that I do or say. God knows, I'm very often wrong.

A true friend, desires only that you reach all the potential that they see in you, that you sometimes don't see yourself or that you are not using, and very often this requires a swift kick in the pants, another of those pinches from a loving Father who is using the love of a friend to get your attention. We need to have and be the kind of friend that takes Jesus as its model, one who loves and cares enough to tell us the truth.

If as individuals and as communities we are willing to make the journey across what might appear to be a desert of disillusionment, what was once a dream becomes the reality and we begin to live as friends and then we can really get down to the business of changing the world, for what we are proposing is now authentic. For how can we hope to share the Good News, that God loves each and every one of us when we act as if we ourselves are not sure that it is true. The method of Cursillo prescribes that we evangelize others by the witness of our own conversion. They have to see it being lived in order to want it for themselves.

So once we have committed ourselves to the journey, where do we start?

As we have said, much, much work has been done trying to understand the Foundational Charism of the Cursillo, and what is becoming ever more apparent is that its whole essence is simply finding a way to live the Gospel truths in our everyday lives and how to make the Good News attractive to the ordinary person who comes across our path. We don't have to be theologians, we just have to be real. We have to live what we say we are. In Fully Alive there was an answer to a question about our role as Evangelizers. "Are we not called to 'preach' the Good News?" The answer was quite simply, "No, we are called to become the Good News". Then we need to be able to give voice to our actions, to explain our beliefs. In scripture we read the words: "Don't worry about what you will say, for on that day, God's spirit will speak in your heart".

Bonnin has said that the Cursillo is not meant to satisfy the hunger for God, it is meant to create a hunger for Him. It is not meant to answer questions, it is more designed to provoke questions, the kind of questions that

will send each one of us on our own journey of discovery, to go deeper and deeper into all that is Cursillo, not in order to be a better Cursillista but to be better and better Christians for that is all the Founder envisioned since the very beginning.

The beauty of this Movement is that God sends us companions to journey with us, people whose paths would never have crossed ours had it not been for Cursillo, and yet they become so important to our journey that we wonder how we would make it without them.

I recently went back home to Vernon to attend the funeral of a very dear friend. She was a candidate on the table when I worked my very first weekend back in 1976. Over the years we remained the kind of friends who are always comfortable with each and who can always share although we no longer saw each other very often.

Joan had gone from her weekend and had put into practice what she had heard. She was a busy mother with five growing children and was also a business-woman. At her Cursillo she made her encounter with self and found within herself all her beauty, all her goodness, but also she shared with us those things that she found needed to be changed and with God's help, she set about changing them. She encountered Jesus everyday and her friendship with Him could be seen in the peace and tranquility that she brought to every activity that she was involved in. And she encountered others on a daily basis. She and her husband ran the Christian bookstore and so she had many opportunities to reach out to people who wandered in, looking for something without knowing what they were looking for but sensing the welcome that they would find. She treated each of them with dignity and respect and sometimes spoke to them of Jesus in her quiet and non-threatening way. At Ultreya one day she announced that she had sought out other store owners who were Christian or at least interested and they had begun to meet on a regular basis to pray for a change in the environment at the mall and to support each other in the small ways in which each of them felt they could have an impact. She had formed a Group Reunion in the mall and she could say that they were beginning to notice a change.

She brought her peace and her joy to her family and when they were grown and gone, and she had retired, she and her husband began to go further afield to encounter others. They spent their vacation times working in missions in third world countries, bringing not many words of great wisdom but love and friendship and the joy that was her gift. It was on one of these excursions abroad that her car went off a mountain road in Peru and she was killed.

As I walked into the Church I saw her daughters, smiling and peaceful. As they each spoke in turn about their mother, their faces were lit with the joy of knowing that hers was a life that had been well lived and their love and pride in her overcame their sorrow. And I heard that they knew that what had sustained Joan over the years was what she had brought from her Cursillo weekend, where she had encountered herself, had encountered her Lord and had befriended and allowed herself to be befriended by Him and had taken the fruit of those two encounters into the world as she opened her heart and her life in encountering others. The girls said, our mother did not do big things, but all the small things she did, she did them beautifully and well.

Cursillo in Vernon has been dead for many years but Joan had stayed in her Group Reunion since 1976 until she died. I have been talking to the Vernon Cursillistas about Cursillo and the possibility of reviving the Movement and I had the opportunity to talk to them about the Vision of Eduardo Bonnin, the Foundational Charism and what I have experienced in Mallorca.

At the funeral, one of the old Cursillistas turned to me and said, "Sheelagh, this is exactly what you have been talking about isn't it, Joan lived what you have been saying, this is wonderful, we want this in Vernon". You see, for Joan, life had been a perennial Cursillo and I have never before been so aware of the communion of saints as I have been in the days since her funeral. Joan has been doing Palanca for us as she walks with

the friend who walked with her in life and I have never been so convinced of the meaning and importance of the Three Encounters, which essentially, are what the Three Days are all about.

Where do the three encounters lead?

The journey onward is really just beginning, but though the way ahead may be difficult, let's all take heart from the fact that our feet are on the path, we have each other and as the pilgrims on the way to Compostela were guided by the stars shining in the Milky Way, we too have the guiding light of the Gospel and the support and encouragement of Cursillo Leaders who are committed to making the original vision for the Movement a reality and too, our Founder, Eduardo Bonnín who says:

"The Group Reunion facilitates and simplifies the continuation of the three encounters that the Cursillo has initiated and brought about: with ourselves, with Christ and with our brothers and sisters. Not only not forgetting, but highlighting and emphasizing that, of the three encounters, the one with self is the most important since it constitutes the indispensable structure that enables the other two to occur. The encounter with oneself is the axis, the pivot and the support of the whole Cursillo Movement. Moreover, whoever understands the Movement well, knows that there is a greater distance between the surface of a man to his innermost being, than there is from the surface of a man to the moon. To stir the spirit into action in order to travel inwards towards the centre of oneself, with optimism and joy creates a close friendship, sharing one's deep beliefs about the details of everyday life, is the main objective that the Group Reunion pursues and obtains, when using that same optimism and joy in adequate and specific measure, as a means to achieve it".

This really, is what we are all about as leaders, to help those whom God sends to us, to discover themselves, their God, and to help them find Him in those who share their lives so that they in turn can go into the world being the disciples to all nations that He has asked us to be. Christ is counting on Us.

De Colores