

THE HOW AND THE WHY

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In the front of the Pilgrim's Guide is a little verse, which, while very short, sets the tone for what we do in Cursillo. Let me quote it here, although I'm sure most of you are familiar with it:

To be on pilgrimage
is to journey
through Christ to the
Father under the guidance
of the Holy Spirit, with
the help of Mary and all
of the saints as you
bring your brothers and sisters
along with you.

Pilgrimage has been a metaphor for Cursillo from its earliest days. We know the connection between the preparation for and carrying out of the pilgrimage to the Shrine of St. James in Compostela and the beginnings of Cursillo. The 'short courses' that were used to help the members of Catholic Action prepare for that pilgrimage evolved for some into the 'short courses' that we know as the Cursillo weekend. But we know also that the weekend is not the be-all and end-all of Cursillo. Cursillo is a continuing journey – truly a pilgrimage – of those who experience conversion, through the weekend, to the goal of all God's creatures, eternal happiness with God in heaven. So, even before the first Cursillo weekend, what we now know as Group Reunion had begun as a regular meeting of Eduardo Bonnín and his friends, discussing how they might affect the many Catholics in Spain who had drifted from their faith as a result of the Spanish Civil War and other secularizing influences.

I believe that most Cursillistas in Canada, and in other countries as well, once having been introduced to Cursillo, become preoccupied with **how it works**, and fail to understand **why** it began and continues to grow in the world today. I confess to having been one of those who earlier on was so preoccupied, and I should have known better. Regardless, the efforts of the Canadian Cursillo to return to the Foundational Charism have helped me and many others to shift focus and study the **why** of Cursillo. I have also seen that what needs to be understood about the **how** falls into place much more easily once the why is understood.

I also confess that I am still on the way to understanding the why of Cursillo, and therefore do not suggest that what I have to say today is the last word about it!

To help illustrate what I am about to say, I want to use an analogy that I found in the book *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. He recalls a story about a man who had begun to wear a mask and, after wearing it for a while, took it off only to find that his face had shaped itself to the figure of the mask. In other words, in pretending to disguise himself, he had become the very disguise. Lewis likens this to what happens, in a more positive way, to us when we do what St. Paul calls "putting on Christ." We may feel that we don't look at all like Christ, but with our initial conversion – in fact, with our baptism – we "put on Christ" and in a sense pretend to be him. When we pray the Our Father, we are indeed saying that we are sons and daughters of God. Yet we know that the only true Son of God is Jesus Christ. So we "put on Christ" – pretend to be him. But that means we have to strive to be like him, and we know how difficult that can be. What Lewis says is that when we arrive before God the Father, He will be looking for the image

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of His Son – not the perfect image, because that is unique, but the results of our efforts to try to be like him, to “put on Christ.”

I think this illustration at least begins to show us that our conversion is a gradual and ongoing process, never complete in this world.

But another point has to be made if we are to understand Lewis' illustration. We might think that it is up to us to so shape ourselves so that we look like Christ. Well, certainly our efforts are necessary. But it is the Father Himself, through the Spirit, who forms Christ in you and me. But we don't see Him doing this. The major influences in our growth seem to come through our brothers and sisters. Exactly! It is God working through those around us and providing through them and the events in which we are all involved the opportunities for our growth that bring about our formation in Christ. Obviously we have to respond to the opportunities, but even that is the work of God's grace in us.

Let's leave this illustration for the moment and turn to the principal theme of this presentation. There are two questions: 1. Why do we have – need – Cursillo? And 2. Why does Cursillo use the method it uses? I will refer to the answers to these two questions as the external and internal dynamics of Cursillo.

Why do we have Cursillo in the first place? Doesn't the Church give us enough means, even without Cursillo, to progress on our pilgrimage to the Father? Aren't there more than enough movements in the Church? What is unique about Cursillo?

To respond to this, first we must recall that Cursillo wasn't founded first of all to nourish those who are already faithful Christians. It was founded principally to reach out to and bring to Christ those whom the founders called the “faraway.” They could be persons, who were entirely alienated from the Church and their childhood faith, or people who were simply angry with the Church, or God, or even those whom we call ‘practising Catholics’ but for whom their religious practice is routine and has little meaning. That is the first thing to remember – Cursillo is first of all for the faraway. Before anyone objects, let me say that it does not exclude anyone; just that its principal purpose is to reach the faraway and bring them to Christ.

Is Cursillo the only movement that reaches out to those who do not practise their faith on a regular basis? No, it isn't. Well, why do we need it? Because Cursillo has a unique and continuing method of not only supporting those whom it has attracted to Christ, but of helping them grow in their conversion and turn around and bring others to Christ. That is one reason why it is so important to realize that Cursillo is not just a weekend thing; it is the Fourth Day that is most important. *There is no other movement in the Church whose method is designed to support its members in their continuing conversion without removing them from their natural environment.* That last phrase is very important – “without removing them from their natural environment.” In other words, Cursillo supports its members in their growth while they continue to work in the same place they worked before their weekend, live in the same place they lived, have the same friends with whom they enjoy the same recreation, and so on, with of course the proviso that there is nothing inherently un-Christian about their work, neighbourhoods or friends! Cursillo does not establish itself in any kind of artificial structure in order to do this, but respects the natural ways in which people's lives are organized in their families, workplaces, parishes, neighbourhoods and places of recreation.

One of the major implications of this is that Cursillo is not what is sometimes referred to as an *ecclesial* movement. Eduardo would say that Cursillo is not so much a movement **of** the Church as a movement **from** the Church. As a movement it does not try to enlist its members to engage

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in particular ministries in the Church. A Cursillista may become a Eucharistic Minister, a catechist, a lector, or take up any similar ministry, but this is not specifically because he is a Cursillista. Cursillo encourages its members to continue their conversion, to try to attract others to Christ, and provides a method of support for that, but *it does not tell the Cursillista how he should work that out in his place of work, family, neighbourhood or place of recreation*. In other words, the **how** of his continuing conversion, beyond the means of support provided by Group Reunion and Ultreya, is not dictated by the movement. It depends to a great extent on the circumstances of the individual person's life, and is a work of God's grace in him or her. At the same time, the Group Reunion and Ultreya are tremendously important in that they provide an anchor and as it were the glue that joins a Cursillista to his fellow Christians as together they grow in their conversion and make their pilgrimage.

To summarize to this point: The **why** of Cursillo from the point of view of external dynamics is that it is a unique movement from the Church with a Charism to reach out to the faraway and attract them to Christ, unique not simply in its purpose but in the method it uses to support its members in their continuing conversion and apostolic action, that is, their action towards others designed to draw them to Christ and encourage their own conversion.

Back to the illustration from C. S. Lewis. Recall that Lewis said that a person may not see God working on him to form Christ in him, and the reason for that is that God usually works through others. In the case of Cursillo, the 'others' are most often one's Cursillo friends with whom he meets on a regular basis, whether through Group Reunion or Ultreya. But it brings to mind another of the key concepts in Cursillo: the importance of friendship, not only for apostolic action (Make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ), but for support in one's own conversion. And recall also that conversion here can be understood – indeed perhaps best understood – as the gradual formation of Christ in the person. Remember also that Eduardo says that the principal stimulus that leads a faraway person back to Christ is the conversion he sees in his friend, which is so often instrumental in opening him to the grace of God. So whether we are talking about our own conversion, which is helped by the support of our friends, or the conversion of another person, which we ourselves may assist, the dynamic involved is the friendship of a person who already has a strong relationship with Christ.

Which leads us to another aspect of Cursillo. We often find ourselves concerned with sponsorship, whether its success or its failure. Sometimes we find that sponsors don't fulfill the role we say is necessary in their relationship with the candidate. We think of the sponsor as one who has developed a friendship with a prospective candidate, brings him or her to the weekend experience, assures afterwards that the new Cursillista has the opportunity to be part of a Group Reunion and is invited to Ultreya, and continues to walk with that person for the rest of his or her life. Given that description, one might understandably be shocked to know that sponsorship in the way we understand it *doesn't exist* in Mallorca, the birthplace of Cursillo. What? That's right, it simply is not part of the process. Why not? Well, again the key is friendship. One doesn't go out to make a friend of another so as to bring that person to Cursillo. One develops friendships in a natural way through natural associations. If one is truly Christian, that friendship will be marked by true Christian love, which will certainly be attractive to the friend. The joy of living in friendship with Christ will be something the Cursillista wants to share, and something that will appeal to his or her friend. The step of introducing one's friend to Cursillo will then come about quite naturally, and will not require what we call sponsorship. And certainly one's friendship will continue after the weekend, but by then the person will have gained new Cursillo friends as well. It will follow from the weekend that one or more of the leaders will assure that the person is introduced to Group Reunion Ultreya. Thus sponsorship as we know it is quite unnecessary, although its functions do come into play in a more natural way.

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We have now passed to what I referred to earlier as the internal dynamics of Cursillo – the method itself. We know **how** Group Reunion and Ultreya operate, and we try to give the candidates on the weekend a bit of a sense of that in the Rollo on Total Security. But understanding **why** we have Group Reunion and Ultreya, and why they function in the way they do is another matter. Here again, friendship and, if I may extend that, friendship in Christ is the key.

We know, and it has been repeated often in our past national and regional gatherings, that Cursillo not only takes people where they are, but in a sense it leaves them where they are, although in the meantime they have been changed. Now they go back to their environments, which haven't changed, and try to live more fully the life of grace within those environments. It is the Group Reunion that enables the Cursillista *to practice piety, study and action precisely in his/her own environment*. Just to help us understand what this means, let's compare it with the situation of the monk. I know this will sound extreme, but the illustration will be valid. A monk experiences a kind of conversion and then withdraws from the environment that had been proper to him up to that time. He is no longer in a position to influence that former environment. Instead, he devotes himself to a life of prayer and work with his fellow monks, but in an environment that they create and that bears little resemblance to what we normally think of as "the world." His prayer life may be that of a contemplative, with opportunities for daily Mass and the Divine Office, not to mention private prayer; his work may be entirely devoted to God, and he may do an awful lot of good for the Church and the world. No one would suggest otherwise. But his apostolate is hardly to be compared with that of the person who continues to work in the factory, the mine, the retail store or the business office, who carries on normal family life, who goes to the hockey games or plays softball with his/her friends, who attends many social functions, and whose prayer life is much less sophisticated than is the monk's. Now, as I said, this is a rather extreme comparison, but the point I want to make is that what we do in Group Reunion is intended to help us live the life of grace **where we are**, just as what the monk does in his work and prayer are intended to help him live the life of grace where he is. If the *where* is different, so must be the means. The review of piety, study and action is a constant reminder and help to the Group members of the commitment they made for their fourth day, and helps them to continue to develop their encounters with self, Christ and others. That we examine not only our successes but also our failures recognizes the fact that we are only too human. Group Reunion is where we examine our own lives, where we measure them against the Gospel, where we learn to be more and be better, where we see ourselves as we really are, reflected back from the lives of our friends, where we become honest with self and others, where conversion is gradual but steady, where we feel loved, accepted, supported, encouraged. That we do these things together with friends means that we know we need their support to be able to grow in the life of grace, or at least that such support will make that growth easier. These are our fellow pilgrims *par excellence*, travelling the same road, heading for the same goal, rejoicing in the presence and action of the One Who has invited us to join the pilgrimage.

Allow me to speak a little here about my own experience in Group Reunion. I experienced the Cursillo weekend some twelve years ago. At the time, I was parish priest in Louisdale, a Cape Breton village, in a parish where there were many Cursillistas, although, to be honest, not many group reunions. Very shortly after my weekend, a number of us got together and began to meet regularly in Group. I can truly say that that group of friends inspired me in my Christian life, not simply as a support group but as people exemplifying the joy of living a life of grace, along with the attendant challenges. Sharing piety, study and action did not always come easily, but we persevered. We continued to meet all the years that I ministered in that parish. When I moved to another parish, I found the opportunity to join another Group Reunion immediately, and again I experienced the joy of developing friendships and sharing the experience of what it really means to be Church. The men with whom I met regularly in both parishes remain close friends. Now I

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am living in my own home in Antigonish, semi-retired if you will, and again I am a member of a Group Reunion that meets in my home. All through these experiences I have gained in ways that I doubt could have resulted from many, if any other events.

I belonged to these Group Reunions not as a priest but as a Christian trying to live the life of grace. There is no doubt that the other members perceived me at first principally as a priest, but soon I became simply their friend who happened to be a priest. But there is also no doubt that my experience would have been different from that of the other members of the Group, since my environment was markedly different from theirs, and the actions that were appropriate to that environment were different. But it is simply the case that each of us strengthened the others in our ongoing conversion and in our desire to make Christ present within our environments. At the same time, even after belonging to three different Groups over twelve years, I know that I still have things to learn about this very effective tool of Cursillo. I also believe that one of the reasons that Group Reunion doesn't always flourish among those who try it is that they don't understand it well, and are put off by too much pressure to report on their acts of piety, study and action as if it were a shopping list to complete. In reality, the review of piety, study and action is principally to be a reminder of the commitment we made on our weekend, and to enable us to be aware of our growth.

Ultreya is, first of all and primarily, a gathering of friends, friends with whom we have shared Cursillo or who may in fact be attracted to the movement. It is not the same as Group Reunion, although it may encompass a kind of *ad hoc* group reunion when it happens. It is not primarily a devotional exercise, though it will normally include devotions. It is not the same as a School of Leaders, though the same persons may come to an Ultreya as attend a School of Leaders. The Why of the Ultreya is simply to provide an occasion for Cursillo friends and others they may invite to socialize in an atmosphere that reminds them who they are as Christians and enables them to share with one another what is most important to them in that context. It is inappropriate to turn an Ultreya into a teaching session or a mini-retreat, which is not to say that either of these is not something good in itself. Ultreya, as the name implies, is a reminder that as a group of friends we are joined together on a pilgrimage, and this is a kind of rest stop on the way.

I have spoken of Group Reunion and Ultreya. Which are two of our supports in living our fourth day. It may seem that I have taken for granted the **why** of the weekend itself. Without getting into the specifics of the weekend, let me say first of all that the weekend is not the core or most important element of Cursillo, even though it may sometimes seem that way. We can say that *the weekend takes place so that there may exist people to form Group Reunion*. Although there is a strong relationship between the fourth day and the weekend that has preceded it, the Fourth Day is clearly more important, since that is the period of growing conversion for the rest of our lives. The Group Reunion and Ultreya, therefore, are of primary importance. The weekend gets us started on our journey, our pilgrimage, as it were. Without Group Reunion and Ultreya, we can easily get off the path of that pilgrimage.

I would like to say a word here about a feature of the weekend that, at least in Canada, is often misunderstood, that is, Palanca. The practice has grown up in many areas of flooding the candidates with letters that speak to them of the prayers and sacrifices that are being offered for them, but also of many other things, intended mostly to affirm them as persons. This is what we call 'personal Palanca.' It is really a distortion of what Palanca is intended to be, which is the spiritual support of the community as a whole, whether local or world-wide, for the community that is now engaged in the weekend. When the emphasis is on personal Palanca, the result is often a personal 'high' for the candidate that in effect distracts him or her from the principal activities of the weekend. Palanca is intended to be community-to-community rather than person to person, though of course the community is made up of individuals who contribute to Palanca. This is an area that bears some study in our Schools of Leaders.

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Which leads us to another of what I have called the internal dynamics of Cursillo: the **School of Leaders**. Here in this Conference we constitute a School of Leaders. But so does any gathering of Cursillistas when they come together to deepen their understanding of the movement, of the Church, of Christianity. 'School' here is used not so much in the sense of an institution of formal education as of a gathering (school of fish!) of people united for a particular purpose – in our case a gathering of Cursillistas united for self-education, drawing on the experience, knowledge and intelligence of all present. Why do we have a School of Leaders? The answer should be simple enough. We need to understand more deeply this wonderful movement that helps us grow in grace, not independently of the Church but precisely as Christians who are the Church. We can never penetrate sufficiently the ways in which God's grace works among us, not only in us as individuals, but also in us as a movement. The School of Leaders as such helps us to continue to do this.

Those who are to be leaders on the weekends need to be deeply knowledgeable of and committed to the reality of Cursillo. That is why it is most desirable that they come out of the School of Leaders, that indeed they are people who are always learning, that they are leaders who think. If Cursillo has become in some way routine for them, they will not be able to inspire others to follow this path on their pilgrimage.

What I have just said implies that there is much more to be known about Cursillo than I have been able to present here, or that others who will speak will be able to present. I have gone far enough and taken enough time. So I will return to the two notions I started with: that we are pilgrims on our way to the Father, led by Jesus Christ, helped through the intercession of Mary, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit; and that as we travel, Christ is being formed in us (see Galatians 4:19) so that when we arrive before the Father, He will see in us the image of His Son and will welcome us home.

De Colores!