

THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL ADVISORS IN THE CURSILLO MOVEMENT

Source: National Cursillo Center Mailing – August 2010

The Importance of Spiritual Direction in the Life of Cursillistas

“The Cursillo Movement is a movement of the Church. In the decade of the 1940’s, a new movement arose in the Church: the Cursillo Movement. Some Christians – priests, religious and lay people, in close communion with their bishop – came to share one same mentality and to experience one same apostolic restlessness. They set out to work with a single purpose in mind: to make a more Christian world, by making people more Christian. And with a minimum of organization they began their work, trying out a method designed to achieve the intended goal” (FI #86).

Like many other Christians’ groups in the Church, the Cursillo Movement has consecrated people who preach the Gospel and shepherd its members the Cursillistas as well as to celebrate divine worship, like celebrating the Eucharist and administering the Sacraments, and who work as spiritual advisors (inclusive of deacons and vowed religious people) in helping the entire Movement in its various aspects or elements. In particular, the spiritual advisors are available in order to offer advices from the Bible and saints, such as St. Paul, who wrote that we should be “imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over us as a sacrificial offering to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2). Whenever we tell someone about Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are performing a priestly work. We are offering them the life we have received, as if we were giving them communion. When we give food and clothes to the poor, when we care for the sick, when we visit the elderly, we are following Jesus, who sacrificed his life for us. As we intercede for other people, whether in our homes, in a hospital room, or outside an abortion clinic, we are mirroring the great high priest who ‘lives forever to make intercession’ (Hebrews 7:25). Sacrifices like these are more than just kind, charitable acts. When we do all these things in union with the Lord, relying on the Spirit’s power and wisdom and not just our own, we are actually sanctifying the world! We are making God present to his people, bringing Jesus into the corner of the world that an ordained priest cannot normally reach (A Living Sacrifice * WAU Easter 2010 * Vol. 29, # 4).

The above acts, commonly known as Cursillistas’ Action, obviously result from their daily practices of Piety and Study with the strong support of their weekly Friendship Group Reunion and Ultreya. When Cursillistas encounter the living Christ, they can gracefully overcome the thousands of obstacles of each day. There is born in Christians a sense of wonder that gives them the courage to be saints and the humility to not consider ourselves heroes, but only working to make the world a better place. Such are the workings of God’s graces that the Cursillistas constantly receive through living a Life in Grace. Father François-Louis de Blois (+1566) has written, “Yet even ignorant and uneducated people can attain to the very highest wisdom of mystical theology and union. For in this matter no unusual powers of mind are required, but purity and humility of heart, liberty and detachment of mind, with fervent love, are the only qualities necessary.

Certainly, a humble and ardent affection will bring people to this union better than a subtle and critical mind” (Magnificat, Mediation, July 14, 2010).

Mr. Joe Difato, Publisher of ‘The Word Among Us’, wrote in his editorial of the WAU Easter 2010 issue, “In my life, I have benefited from the help of doctors, lawyers, accountants, plumbers, and electricians. But I have always had to pay for their services. That was never the case with the priests in my life. I can’t imagine what my life would be like if I didn’t have the benefit of their wisdom, their kindness, and their dedication to the Lord.”

The Role of Spiritual Advisors in the Cursillo Movement

It is well known that most individuals who attend a Cursillo Weekend come away with a dramatic increase in their spirituality. This aspect is just one of the dynamics of the Cursillo method. It is through our spiritual growth that we find the strength and determination to set out into the world and willingly bring Christ into that world. The spiritual presentations, especially on the 3-Day Weekend, provide us with the opportunity to understand God’s love for each one of us and subsequently, to accept God’s love. There should be no distinction between lay functions and clergy/vowed religious functions since spirituality is something that knows no class boundaries. All of us – laity, clergy and vowed religious – need to continually strive to improve our individual spirituality.

We took the liberty to use Father Syd Mifflin’s Rollo on “The Role as Spiritual Advisor” for its condensed comprehensiveness and clarity. Fr. Mifflin serves in Canada and at the time of this rollo, was the Spiritual Advisor for the NACG, (North American Caribbean Group of the World Cursillo Movement). This rollo was part of the Cursillo de Cursillos Workshop held in Waterloo, Canada, in July 2009, in which the writer had the pleasure of attending. Below is Fr. Mifflin’s talk with slight modifications by Gail Terrana (currently NACG President) including the removal of his personal witness.

“To be an effective Spiritual Advisor, the priest must be familiar with the nature of Cursillo and the history of the Movement. This is especially important because through the years, in many parts of the world, distortions have crept into the way in which Cursillo operates. It is therefore important for the priest to read the Cursillo materials, particularly the writings of Eduardo Bonnín and others from the Mallorcan community. It is important also to attend the regional and national conferences as often as he can.

As Spiritual Advisor, the priest is the link between the Cursillo and the hierarchy. Cursillo is a movement in the Church, but not for the Church, in the sense that it is for the whole world and not simply to be an extension of those who are concerned with parish or diocesan affairs. Hear the words of our founder, Eduardo Bonnín: “*The Cursillo Movement is a movement in the Church, not for the Church, but rather for 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.*” (*Signs of Hope*, an interview with Eduardo

Bonnín conducted by Bishop Josef Cordes, President of the Pontifical Council, Cor Unum, 1997.)

As a lay movement, it has its own leadership and charism; as a movement of the Church, it is subordinate to the hierarchy. Therefore in a diocese, the diocesan spiritual advisor has the responsibility of keeping the bishop informed about Cursillo within the diocese. But because Cursillo is a lay movement, the Spiritual Advisor does not direct its affairs; his role is principally to provide sacramental ministry and spiritual guidance and to teach.

It is in the context of the Secretariat and the School of Leaders that the Spiritual Advisor must be especially conscious of the lay nature of Cursillo. The responsibility for the functioning of Cursillo lies first with the lay leaders, and the priest is a co-worker with them, working alongside them and contributing in a specific manner. He must always avoid anything that appears autocratic.

In the Secretariat, if there are matters of theology or spirituality on which he may advise the leaders, or if there is something to be done with respect to relations with other Spiritual Advisors, he should be available to help. He may also lead in prayer before and after the meetings, although this may also be done by a lay leader.

At the School of Leaders, the priest is another Cursillista, exploring the meaning of Cursillo in the light of common experience and the writings of Eduardo and others who have written about Cursillo concepts. He should see this as a means of education for himself as for the lay leaders, and he may find that he can contribute in the same ways as they do, whether by giving rollos or by follow-up witness or discussion. Again, there may be a special opportunity for him to contribute from his knowledge of theology or spirituality.

The Spiritual Advisor on the 3-Day Cursillo

Since Cursillo is preferentially intended to the “faraway” (as stated by Eduardo Bonnín), then there will be persons on the Weekend who have had little contact with priests in their lives, or even those whose contact with priests has been less than positive. It is important therefore, that the Spiritual Advisor is seen as a good man, one who respects the dignity of the person, one who cares for others, listens well and presents a wholesome image that elicits respect from others.

The priest-Spiritual Advisor is seen as representing the institutional Church. To do this well he must be seen as a servant. Availability to the candidates is key to this.

Obviously, the Spiritual Advisor is responsible for providing the meditations and the spiritual rollos. This is not just a matter of speaking to the topics given in the schedule of the Weekend, but of understanding the relationship that these elements have to one another, to the lay rollos, and to the Weekend as a whole. One needs to understand the sequence that is built into the Weekend, how each element leads to the next, and how important it is to respect this sequence.

While the lay rollos provide the witness to the life of grace in the lived experience of the rollistas, the spiritual rollos emphasize the catechetical/doctrinal substance of Catholic teaching. At the same time, the better these are integrated with the lay rollos, the better they will be understood. The Spiritual Advisor must also show how this substance is lived in his own life; it is insufficient to give simply a theological teaching.

One of the major roles of the Spiritual Advisor on the Weekend is that of counseling and, in some cases, the offering of sacramental reconciliation to the candidates. This requires real sensitivity on his part, so as to know what the candidate needs and to respond appropriately to that need. One of the distortions that has happened on our Weekends, is the scheduling of a specific time for reconciliation. The process of conversion in the candidate is the work of the Holy Spirit. If the candidate is to come to that point in his or her conversion where he or she desires sacramental reconciliation, he or she must be allowed to do that at the time when the Holy Spirit prompts him/her. What the Spiritual Advisor can do is simply be available when needed.

The Spiritual Advisor will also preside at Eucharist with the team prior to the opening of the Weekend, and with both team and candidates on the days of the Weekend. Some sensitivity is required here also when it is known that some candidates may have been away from the sacraments for some time and may not at this time be disposed to receive Holy Communion.

It will also be the Spiritual Advisor's responsibility to work with the team in assessing the progress of the Weekend, judging what special needs must be attended to for the candidates, engaging in the "corridor work," and praying with the team when they meet at the end of the day.

The Priest on the Fourth Day

Since the Spiritual Advisor is himself a Cursillista, the Fourth Day should have for him all the elements of meaning that it has for the lay Cursillista. This means that he should be engaged in Group Reunion, attend Ultreya, and be part of the School of Leaders.

Group Reunion: While it might seem that the natural grouping for a priest would be with other priest friends, this is not always possible. In my view, it may not even be the most desirable from the perspective of the spiritual development of the priest, which is not to deny the importance of the priest having other priest friends. In any case, if the priest/Spiritual Advisor is to grow in his attention to piety, study and action, Group Reunion is not only helpful but very important.

Ultreya: As a Cursillista, the Spiritual Advisor will want to gather with his Cursillista friends in a regular Ultreya. As Spiritual Advisor, it is important that he do so, and that he continue there his work of guiding, teaching and providing spiritual leadership. His formal responsibilities at the Ultreya, however, are not extensive, and may be limited to leading in prayer at the end of the evening. He may also be called upon to do a follow-up witness to the Fourth Day witness.

School of Leaders: This has already been mentioned above, and is repeated here only to say that participation in the School is a normal part of the priest's Fourth Day activities, designed to help him go deeper into the understanding of the charism of Cursillo and the dynamics of its operation.

Dangers to be avoided

Given the decreasing availability of priests as Spiritual Advisors, there are several dangers to effective ministry to Cursillo:

- a) **Short-cuts.** Often a priest will commit to working a Weekend when he knows he cannot attend the whole time. He has to go back and forth between the Cursillo and his parish, with the consequence that his presence to the candidates is inadequate, and sometimes the meditations of one or more of the spiritual rollos are given by a substitute.
- b) **Failure to integrate with the team.** If the priest sees his ministry as simply providing the “talks” for the Weekend, and doesn't really share in the formation of the team, his ministry will be inadequate. It is important to see himself as a member of the team, sharing in preparation for the Weekend and having a role which complements those of the lay leaders.
- c) **Personal Adaptation.** Sometimes the Spiritual Advisor, through failure to understand the Movement and the way in which its elements are integrated, will adapt his presentations in such a way that they distort the message or fail to support the direction taken by the lay rollos. It is important that the Spiritual rollos remain faithful to the substance and purpose of each rollo and meditation and its connection to the overall pattern of the Weekend.” (Fr. Syd Mifflin, *Spiritual Advisor, Canadian Catholic Cursillo Movement - Cursillo de Cursillos Workshop in English, July 2009*).

The paper entitled “Role of the Laity, Clergy and Vowed Religious” in the March 1996 National Mailing, has stated that the primary role of the priest in the Cursillo Movement and on the 3-Day Weekend is to provide a means for the Cursillistas and the candidates to be able to receive the Sacraments (primarily Reconciliation and Holy Eucharist). The priests should also be present for those individuals that seek spiritual direction. They are responsible for the spiritual presentations and meditations. It is important that the priests refrain from making “cameo” appearances at Cursillo functions as Fr. Mifflin has cautioned earlier. All the leaders of the Cursillo Movement need to give witness to the commitment aspect that is associated with the fulfillment of an apostolic mission.

The deacons are in a unique situation since they represent the Church as clergy, yet most deacons are also immersed in the secular world. Because of this fact, deacons can provide witness to evangelization within the secular world, however, they are still seen as being clergy (having been ordained) and as such it is easier for them to evangelize. While most of us realize that it is just as difficult (maybe even harder) for a deacon to evangelize in the secular world, this may not be the understanding of candidates on the Cursillo Weekend. For this reason it is more appropriate for deacons to serve only in their role as clergy. Just like the deacons, we find more vowed religious being immersed in the secular world environments. Still, it is imperative that the vowed religious are seen as representatives of the Church and as such they should strive to support, assist and complete the ministrations of the priest, as stated in the Decree on the Lay People. The

deacons and vowed religious should also be present for those individuals that seek spiritual direction.

In order to be realistic, we have to recognize the fact that we have fewer priests today, and those priests have more responsibilities to tend to. Subsequently, it is getting more difficult to obtain a priest for every Cursillo function that comes along. This being so, we need to consider effective utilization of the priests that the Lord has provided for us. It is important that we understand the role of the priest and focus our attention to fulfilling that role. Naturally, we want a Cursillista priest to fulfill this role, but, there will be exceptions. Moreover, we can seek out deacons and vowed religious to give the spiritual presentations and meditations for either the men's or women's 3-Day Weekends. We should not have a lay person present the spiritual presentations or meditations. (The National Mailing, March 1996 * 'Role of the Laity, Clergy and Vowed Religious')

CONCLUSION

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his address to the participants in the Bishops' seminar on Ecclesial Movements during the private audience on May 17, 2008, gave the bishops invaluable instructions concerning their attitude towards the charismatic gifts that the Spirit bestows on the Church in our times. He said, "The Ecclesial Movements are one of the most important innovations inspired by the Holy Spirit in the Church for the implementation of the Second Vatican Council." He went on to say, "How is it possible not to realize at the same time that such newness is still waiting to be properly understood in the light of God's plan and of the Church's mission in the context of our time? ... He continued, "Many prejudices, forms of resistance and tensions were overcome. The important task of promoting a more mature communion of all the ecclesial elements, so that all the charisms, with respect for their specificity, may freely and fully contribute to the edification of the one Body of Christ.

"I ask you to approach movements very lovingly... To meet the needs of the movements very lovingly, impels us to know their situation well, without superficial impressions or belittling judgments. It also helps us to understand that the ecclesial movements are not an additional problem or risk that comes to top our already difficult task. No! They are a gift of the Lord, a valuable resource for enriching the entire Christian community with their charism."

"Those who are called to a service of discernment and guidance should not claim to dominate charisms but rather to guard against the danger of suffocating them, resisting the temptation to standardize what the Holy Spirit desired to be multi-form to contribute to building and extending the one Body of Christ, which the same spirit renders firm in unity." (By Pope Benedict XVI)