



National Cursillo® Movement

National Cursillo® Center • P.O. Box 799 • Jarrell, TX 76537 • 512-746-2020 • Fax 512-746-2030 • www.natl-cursillo.org

History of Cursillo in the USA

Source: Presented by Louis C. Salinas at the 27th National Cursillo Encounter held at Trinity University in the Archdiocese of San Antonio – July 28, 2017.

Your Excellency's, Bishops, Priests, Religious Sisters, Mr. Juan Ruiz, Cursillistas ... A GRAND DE COLORES TO ALL !!

Before I start, I'd like to do two things; first, although he was already introduced, to introduce one of my friends who went to cursillo with me when we were very young . . . “a long time ago” Mr. Gregorio Concha of Catholic Action. And then I'll talk a little about Catholic Action. Those who came to cursillo were sixteen youth, there were three of us and another thirteen. A young man named Lorenzo Hernández of New Jersey; Juan invited him and spoke with him, and he was planning on coming, but he could not attend due to family difficulties. But, I'll read his letter.

I am very grateful to be here with you to celebrate these 60 years of cursillos. When Mr. Juan Ruiz spoke to me and invited me to come talk about the birth and the history of cursillos here in Texas, and therefore in the United States, more than half a century ago (60 years and two months to be exact), I felt very honored and proud that I have been invited, but at the same time a little scared for the great responsibility, and also a little scared to see so many people, but then I said, “I'm a cursillista and I can't back out, I cannot cave in”. Of course, I said “yes”.

And I started thinking, how to start this talk. I think the best way is to explain a little about when I was born, my youth, and how I came to meet the young people of Catholic Action; including those who were already introduced and then about the cursillo. I am the eldest of eleven children. I was born in Texas, north of Abilene in Aspermont, TX; a place for Cowboys. Cowboys, but I think my father thought that I was too short and said, “This boy will not grow” and brought us over near Waco to work in the fields picking cotton. So, we grew up on a ranch in an agricultural area. There was no Catholic church there. The two churches that were close were in Waco, TX nearly forty miles from where we lived. We had no method of transportation since this was in the forties. My father had a Model A Truck but, I could ride my bicycle a lot faster than the truck. Although he was 35 years old when he got married, he still managed to have eleven children; he did not waste much time.

Some of you might remember the times of the “braceros” (Mexican laborers) who came in to harvest the crops. Some of you are too young to remember this. Some of the workers who picked cotton would ask my father, “Don Gregorio, how many children did God give you?” and he would say, “Eleven and all alive. Well, some are alive and some are foolish, but they all eat.” I never knew if I was one of the alive or one of the foolish, but I do know that I ate.

Well, as I was saying, there was no Catholic church so we didn't go to church. But we did pray. My father taught us to pray before meals at night and we always had faith. He had been orphaned of father and mother when he was very young. He lost his father at the age of four, he lost his

mother at the age of twelve in Mexico. They moved near San Antonio when he was a teenager, at about age sixteen. He worked all his life. But he did teach us many things, such as how to be a family.

One thing I remember is that the Catholic priest would arrive at our house in a pickup truck with a “homemade camper” made from wood that he himself built. Father’s name was Frank Ubernowski. I realized this was his name later because I was very young and did not remember his name. Father’s truck had a chapel, an altar, a little bed where he slept, his books to for teaching catechism and a motorcycle which he used to visit all the ranches in the area to invite the families to come to mass. We lived in a poor house. There were three rooms: the kitchen, the bedroom and the portal area. Father kept his truck in the portal area. At night he would take out the motorcycle in order to use the alter for mass. I remember him doing this two or three times.

We went to make the first cursillo in Houston and after that is when the cursillos began. The first cursillo was in Pasadena, TX, not exactly in Houston. We saw the priest’s house filled with photos of places where he had traveled. There was only one diocese at that time; the Diocese of Galveston. The priest traveled throughout Central Texas and the panhandle teaching catechism and things about God.

So that was my introduction to catechism and I made my first communion with him. I also remember when I was sixteen in 1955 and the beginning of 1956, we began having Mass at a VFW hall in another community close to Waco, TX. We set up chairs and had Mass there. And it was on a Sunday when some young people who said they were from Catholic Action at the Church of San Francis in Waco, TX were introduced. They were nice guys when they talked to us, but I felt a little cheated because they knew that I loved to play baseball and they said, “let’s have a team to play baseball, come over here, we have some pool tables.” They never talked much about prayer or anything like that. But nonetheless, we actually could not go because we had no transportation, but that was in April of ’56. I remember this because I graduated from high school soon after and I was fortunate to get two scholarships for college. One was for a school in Brownwood to play baseball because I was more or less good at baseball, and it would pay the entire cost of college and the other scholarship was to go to Baylor University in Waco but it was not a full scholarship. And anyone with common sense would say, “go to the one that pays everything.” But for one reason or another I went to Waco. I reflect now as an adult, that it was God calling me elsewhere. If I had gone somewhere else, I might never have had the opportunity to meet my brothers cursillistas.

I remember they invited the youth, “Come every Tuesday at seven o’clock in the evening. Come and meet the youth of Catholic Action.” So, when I started school in September, after a few days of school, I received a letter saying, “There will be a meeting for young Catholics on Tuesday at 7 pm.” I immediately thought, “Okay, this has to be Catholic Action.” When I arrived, I look for Lorenzo, I thought he wrote the letter because I remembered when he visited. And I said, “Lorenzo, I’m here, you invited me to come to the meeting in your letter.” He said, “What letter, I never sent you a letter.” It turned out to be a letter from the Newman Club at Baylor, which is a Catholic organization, that had sent a letter to all students who were Catholic, I think the new ones; inviting them to a meeting, but it immediately reminded me of Lorenzo and the Catholic Action. And that

was Tuesday and I think I now know, that “The Lord was calling me to another place.” That’s what I believe!

Anyway, that’s where I ended up and it was there where I met Father Gabriel Fernández and Mr. Jasso who is now Father Jasso, my close friend, and all the young people; including Gregorio Concha from the town of Taylor, TX. When we did the first cursillo there were sixteen of us, but not all were from Waco; some came from Taylor and Temple and from other communities.

I became involved with Catholic Action. Father Gabriel told us that he had lived his cursillo when he was in the seminary and was already using the methods of the cursillo among the youth of Catholic Action. We had the Group Reunion and apostolic action, we prayed the Saturday Devotion, and we went to confession every Saturday to receive communion on Sundays. We already were doing many things that the Cursillistas did without having lived the cursillo. Father Gabriel, we could say, was already preparing the soil, preparing us for the cursillo.

Please allow me to fast-forward a little. I remember that Bernardo Vadell said to Father Gabriel after the first cursillo was over, “these young men were already cursillistas, the only thing missing was for them to go to school of leaders.” So, without us knowing, we were ready.

Then April came and so it was in the spring when Bernardo Vadell and Agustín Palomino, the two young airmen from Spain arrived in Texas. Augustine had made his cursillo in Madrid, Spain. Bernardo had lived his cursillo in Mallorca, Spain and the two were pilots who were stationed in the Air Force Base in Laredo, TX. They found out that Father Gabriel had lived his cursillo so they made contact with him. Perhaps you have already read about this in the history of cursillo, this was really over my head and I didn’t know what was happening at the time. But they got in touch and prepared the first cursillo. I remember those young men who came talking about Christianity and speaking with so much enthusiasm and we were left with our mouths open. We didn’t know what was going. We had never seen young men so excited talking about things that normally priests talk about. They were talking and living their Christianity. And so we asked, “What is a cursillo?” “Well, we cannot explain it to you Louis, you have to experience it to know what it is.”

The day arrived, and the first cursillo was made. Sixteen young men came out all excited, ready to conquer the world. We did the closing of the first cursillo. Do you know how many people were there at the closing of the first cursillo? Only sixteen. There was no one else. We encouraged each other. This was on May 27, 1957. Immediately in July, on July 28, they planned the second cursillo when Augustine and Bernardo came again to present the second cursillo. In the second cursillo, I took part as well as Father Jasso and others as auxiliaries; helping to see how the thing were done. We didn’t know what was going on but, we served the meals and served as auxiliaries. This was sixty years ago today. Sixty years to the date began the second cursillo in the United States with Bernardo, Augustine and Father Gabriel Fernández. Father Gabriel was a man who was dedicated to the youth. To any young man who had any problems, he told them, “you can talk to me, you can call me.” At that time there wasn’t all these smart phones, you had to put a “dime” (ten cents) or a “peseta” (quarter) in the phone to make a call. I remember Fr. Gabriel had a doorbell that went straight to his room and if there was a young man who had problems that wanted to speak with the priest, even though it might be twelve at night, they could ring the doorbell and father would get

up and talk to him. You no longer find this kind of attitude. Now I call a father and he says, “Why are you calling so late, call me tomorrow.” What's wrong with you?

That's the kind of dedication Fr. Gabriel had for the youth. He was completely devoted to cursillos and the youth from the beginning. Father Jasso can speak about himself later. Father Jasso was in Catholic Action before I was but, I already knew him from Catholic Action. He had his vocation or at least knew what he wanted to do and I was someone who was lost, lost, “What am I doing here?” Everything was new to me when I started.

The second cursillo was over and they said, “we must present the third cursillo within three weeks, on August 23-26 and you will present this cursillo for us.” And by God's grace, I was selected to be the first native rector of Texas in the United States.

Jasso and Lorenzo had more experience, but they were already going to the seminary. The two were to go to the seminary in September on Labor Day weekend. We were asked to take them to the seminary when the cursillo was over. They could not stay and we had to find someone else. Bernardo and Agustin could not come to help me because I remember having written a letter to Agustin; half Spanish and half English because I did not speak much Spanish either. My Spanish was that of my work out in the cotton fields. I knew a little Spanish from college and I learned to speak a little more with the priests and I do not say I speak very well, but at least better. I wrote to Agustin to tell him, “Augustine, three weeks is not enough for us to learn the rollos.” We did not know how to speak Spanish well, we did not even read Spanish. I could speak a little Spanish, but didn't know how to read Spanish. None of the boys who were rollistas had gone to high school yet. Spanglish is what we knew. It was neither Spanish or English, it was half Spanish and half English and how are we going to do it. But with the Holy Spirit it could be done. Agustin replied, “We cannot go to help you. You have to do it” because on that same date they had the first cursillo in Mission, TX. When we made the third cursillo, Agustin and Bernardo were doing the first cursillo in Mission, TX with Father Valente. And so that is how the cursillo spread. Simultaneously, when they were there, we were doing the cursillo here. And it was not us who were doing it, it was the Holy Spirit, because the cursillo went very well, thanks to God.

I remember that we didn't know enough about the subject matter. We had to memorize the rollos. And so, finally, I learned and I memorized all the lay rollos, except Piety. And I knew all of them from one end to the other. And now my wife tells me, “bring me milk, eggs, and bring me this and that” and every time I forget something she told me. The mind no longer works as it worked before. But that is how the first cursillos were started.

The Lord made use of us and the youth of Catholic Action, and in reality, cursillos were born in the United States like they were born in Spain, all in Spanish. They had not yet been translated into English. And He used some young people to extend the Cursillo Movement, but it was not us. It was the Holy Spirit who was doing it because from what I can remember, not knowing almost anything we went from Waco to San Antonio and later gave the first cursillo in Fraga. I remember Ernesto Mendoza who told me “you did the first cursillo and I said yes, but I didn't even remember”. From Waco we went to give the first cursillo in San Antonio, Houston, San Angelo, Wichita Falls, New York, Puerto Rico, New Mexico, Ohio, and from there the seed was spread to many other places. And always, wherever we have gone; maybe we were the spark that started the

cursillos but all those who attended the cursillos and continued to work in them, gave their all so that others could live it. They were the reason why the cursillos took root and continued to grow. I remember there was a lot of sacrifices made.

When it was said that we would have a cursillo, cursillo number one, we said “Ok, we are going to have a short cursillo (course).” Gregorio Concha came from a different town, but we had no room for him to stay. Where is he going to stay? Where are those who come from out of town going to stay? We had no where they could stay, we had nothing prepared. Father Gabriel started calling families, “can you provide a place for Gregorio Concha to stay and a place for this other person and another ...” and that’s how the cursillos began. They stayed at people’s homes. And then we looked for transportation to take them at night and bring them back in the morning. That was one of the problems. The other problem was, there was no dining hall, “how are we going to feed all the men of the cursillo?” There was, thanks to God, a school that belonged to the church which and father spoke to the nuns to let us use the dining hall. We needed volunteers to cook the meals so we asked for help from the families who voluntarily gave what they could give. And so this was done for the first two or three cursillos.

There was a lot of palanca because we had the whole church praying for the success of all the cursillos. After about three or four cursillos, we could no longer keep asking people, “Hey, we want to continue using your house as a hotel.” So what we did was to add showers to the bathrooms in the school. Once that was done, it was decided that the cursillistas that came from Waco and other towns could stay there. We did not have dorm rooms, but they stayed in the hall, it was the room where the rollos were given. They slept there at night with a blanket and pillow they brought, they used the showers at the school at night and in the morning they picked up their blankets and set up the tables so we could give the rollos there. Very different from how it is now, but it was the “pioneer” way in those years.

Once a man from Austin came and said, “Hey, it’s very hard to sleep on the floor.” And he donated enough cots and blankets for all future cursillistas and so they had their beds. Then Mr. Guerrero from Austin who had a produce company and sold other products would send boxes of groceries for the cursillos. God is great and in one way or another people helped out and one way or another cursillos were started. And it wasn’t until cursillos were moved to Round Rock, TX that there were the means to stay like it is now with dorm rooms and all that. First there was a lot of sacrifice to get started. I remember that St. Francis Church was three blocks from the river, it was a barrio (neighborhood) and the streets were very poor. Mr. Castillo was there with his store and cantina (bar). My God, there were many cantinas in the area. Cantinas were plenty, many bars. The shoemaker, the barber, they were all there. And the women complained to Father Gabriel, that their men, their husbands were spending too much time in bars. At night, right after eating they would go to the bar. Then the father began to recruit young men and entire families. The men no longer went to the bars, they went to cursillos and began coming to Ultreyas and praying rosaries and what not. And later the women complained that their men were no longer in bars but were in church. Then father went to visit a family and he said, “Hey, Mrs. Castillo, I come seeking Don Juan to invite him to come to cursillo.” “Oh, sorry father, Don Juan is already in Glory.” “Oh sorry, when did he die?” “No, no, in Glory, the bar at the corner. He just had dinner and left”.

Well, in about 1958 when the women complained that the men were spending too much time in church, something seemed balanced. So the priest decided to start doing cursillos for women. And at first, I was one of the first rectors for the cursillos for women too. The men gave the rollos, but that was the only contact we had with the women. We gave the rollos and we would leave. The priest and another assistant gave the first two or three cursillos. By the third cursillo there was a team of women, rectora and everything to do cursillos. But the first cursillos were like this. They also stayed with families at night and during the day attended the rollos and thus began the cursillo for women. And then the rectora and everything was just like the process of the other cursillos.

Once, it must have been about 1958, the first cursillo I think or second, I was with another young man that Juan Ruiz has spoken about, who lives in California, Raymond Gómez, he is one of the first Cursillistas as well. We were in a room studying for the next rollo and we saw two girls who were walking by and I said, “One of those girls . . . I'm going to meet her, the one on the right. I'm going to meet her and one day I'll marry her.” And it was true, after the cursillo I found out who she was. Her name is Nery González. I met her and five years later we were married. I met her at the cursillo. We have two children, a son and a daughter. So, when I got married, I said, “Nery, I'm the one who's going wear the pants in my family”. What I didn't know was that she would be the one to tell me which pants I would put on. When I opened the suitcase this morning, there was a paper that said “to wear on Friday”.

That was how the cursillos began and if the result of the cursillos has been fruitful, it is by the sacrifice from each one of you.

When we went to New York, one of the youth who was with us, did not hardly know how to read in Spanish, and after learning and having given his rollo, a doctor who was living his cursillo, went to Father Gabriel and said “how well this man speaks.” And from that we all left convinced that it is the Lord who puts effective words into our mouths. It is not us. I remember the first cursillo, when Agustin Palomino said, “one of these days there will be cursillistas worldwide.”

What could we at 15 and 16 know about cursillistas worldwide, we could not understand. Not long ago, when I left the military, I saw this magazine . . . “palanca for cursillos in Spain, Brazil and Florida . . .” Everywhere they are asking for palanca for cursillo. So it did become a reality that there would be cursillos all over the world. A few years ago I was in Spain to celebrate our 50 years of marriage with my wife and I had the joy of visiting Agustín Palomino and I said, “what you said, that there would be cursillos all over the world came true.” He said, “I already know” and he knew much more and began to talk about all the things that were happening in the movement of cursillos.

Everything we learn in the cursillos, we can go on living. First we must live it in our hearts and in our lives and we can continue living it. And thanks to you who give of yourselves so that others can continue living it and that others may live the cursillo.

And finally, I just want to say I'm proud to count on each of you as my cursillista brothers and sisters. I am proud and I give thanks that one day God invited me to a cursillo and proud to say, “I am Cursillista”.

De Colores!

