



The Theology, Psychology and Pedagogy of Cursillo

Presented by Fr. David A. Smith, Region VII Spiritual Advisor, at the 28th National Cursillo Encounter held at Seattle University in the Archdiocese of Seattle – August 17, 2018.

The title assigned for this talk is “The Theology, Psychology and Pedagogy of Cursillo”. Approximately 150 Cursillistas in the United States participated in the World Ultreya on May 6, 2017 at Fatima, Portugal. The theme of the Ultreya was, “E Hora Dos Cursillos” (“It is the Hour of Cursillo”). The logo incorporated three figures representing “Christ”, “Person”, and “Friendship”. By way of the three fundamental human encounters, through the means of community, solidarity, and friendship, the outcome is a world becoming more human, and, thus, more divine, where we can be “at times” with God, others, and ourselves.

Based on this time, the Fall Region 7 Encounter at Macon, Georgia took as its theme “Now is the time for Cursillo”. For these reasons, which I hope to make more evident in this talk, I would like to substitute it “Cursillo-Now More Than Ever”.

Many of us are now eligible for Social Security, were schooled in the question and answer format of the Baltimore Catechism. (Bear in mind that inclusive language was not yet a concern.)

Question #3: What is man?

“Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made in the image and likeness of God”.

Thus, we are, by our very nature, relational being.

Question 6: “Why did God make you?”

“God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world and to be happy with him in heaven”.

The **THEOLOGY** of the Movement will flesh these out.

What is probably the central distinguishing feature of the Christiana faith is the doctrine of the Trinity – three distinct divine persons, co-equal, united in love, in the inner life of the Trinity there are no hierarchies of Persons, no “turf battles” or “jockeying for positions”, nor “one-upmanship”, neither superiority, nor inferiority of person.

The Trinity is a communion of Persons immersed in disinterested. The love of the Persons of the Trinity does not exist at the expense of any of the three.

“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him. Male and female he created them”. The human person is created in the image of God, who is: good, free, eternal and a communion of persons.

In 2004, the International Theological Commission presented “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God.” This citation is from section #64 + 65. (The person) “Created in the image of God, cannot be subordinated as a pure means or instrument....

As a person created in the image of God, he is capable of forming a relationship of communion with other persons and with its Triune God, partakers of the divine nature.

(This is) the revealed truth of the fundamentally relational or personal understanding of God and human nature.”

Without neglecting the traditional understanding of the person of Jesus Christ in theology, Cursillo emphasizes that Jesus is living, normal, and near to us, or as Vatican II reminds us “he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin”. Quoting Mark 3:13 (“Jesus chose twelve as his companions”). Pope John Paul II wrote, “The aim of this time is to develop a relationship of deep **communion** and **friendship** with himself”. In a similar way Cursillo seeks to initiate, nurture, and deepen this communion and friendship in order to understand the theology underpinning of the Cursillo method, knowledge of two related phrases in Latin are useful:

Theology is understood by Saints Augustine and Anselm as “FIDES QUAERENS INTELLECTUM INTELLIGENTIAM” (“Faith seeking understanding”). We begin with the **experience** of a faithful God who empowers our faith **response** and then we seek to understand and communicate what we have experienced.

“LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI”. “As we pray, we believe”. We **experience** God in prayer (especially in the Liturgy), and then reflect on how we have experienced God’s action, leading to an assent to faith, “to our creed”.

That is, “experience precedes understanding and communication”. With this in mind, how do we understand the human person in the light of faith? Again, there are three Latin phrases:

- (1) “IMAGO DEI” –We are created in the image of our God, a divine communion of Persons
- (2) “CAPAX DEI” –We have an intimate capacity to be open to receiving God’s Trinitarian life, the life of grace
- (3) “EXITUS ET REDITUS –We have our origins from God and our destiny to return to God, to contemplate God eternally in the Beatific Vision.

Numbers 1 and 2 form the basis of a famous saying of St. Irenaeus, “the glory of God is the person **fully alive**” that is flourishing in grace. St. Augustine declared, “our hearts are restless until they rest in you”. We are never fully ourselves, “at home”, except in the Lord.

The poet John Donne wrote, “No man is an island”, referring to Gen. 2:18 – “It is not good for the man to be alone”. In Vatican II’s declaration on “the Church in the modern world” (Gaudium Et Spes) we find: “God did not create ‘man’ as a solitary...by his innermost nature, he is a social being and, unless he relates to others, he can neither live nor develop his potential”.

In a similar way, Pope John Paul II in his first encyclical, *“Redemptoris Hominis”* stated, “man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless unless love is revealed to him”. We recall the fundamental proclamation of Cursillo, the BEST NEWS, that “God in Jesus Christ loves me/us”.

As persons created, in God’s image and likeness to fully respond to the invitation to communion with God and others, we are capable of wounding or totally disrupting communion with God and others. We know this as “Sin”. “Obstacles to Grace” impede our capacity for communion, for relationship and disfigure the “IMAGO DEI”. In his 2009 encyclical *“Caritas in Veritate”*, Pope Benedict reflected that “the person closed in on self is the consequence of original sin”. In the aforementioned *“Gaudium Et Spes”*, meditating on the situation of the person in the world states that “after refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others as well as all created things [N.B, the weakening of the three encounters]. Therefore, man is Split within himself”. Genesis 11 presents Babel as a radical disruption of communication and communion.

Hell, seen from this perspective, is total alienation, isolation and selfishness. God in effect, says, “Misusing your freedom, you consistently choose to live your life as “It’s all about me!” You are now stuck with yourself, alone for eternity. [For me, **that** is the suffering of Hell – knowing that we have been created for communion with God and others and have definitively opted against it].

A frustrated St. Paul, after crying out “The good that I do, I don’t do the evil that I **don’t** want to do, is what I do”. But, he continues “what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord”. Jesus is the light at the end of the tunnel of relationships, of communion. Redemption is the liberation from everything that conspires to isolate us, to imprison us in ourselves. It is the restoration of Shalom, of the original beauty and goodness of creation.

The focus of Cursillo is the promotion of the integral flourishing of the human person. Likewise, the person is the focus of all of the Church’s activity. Ecclesiastical structures and institutions prioritize the person. A medieval dictum of theology was “Sacramenta propter homines, non homines propter sacramentum”. (“The sacraments are for the people, NOT people for the sacraments”). We might recall Jesus in the temple (Mark 2:27) “The Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath”. Both, Popes, Pius XI and John Paul II, insisted that all institutions are structures, ecclesiastical and secular, exist for the person and not vice-versa.

Pedagogy

Given the centrality of the person in Cursillo, we begin with the rollo of Eduardo that generated the mentality, the method and the movement- “Study of the Environment”. Environment is herein defined as “the person and his/her circumstances, that is “the moveable square meter” in which each person’s life unfolds at a given time and place.

The methodology is experimented and kerygmatic. We experience life in our circumstances and then seek to understand the experience of our interactions. The fundamental proclamation (“kerygma”), the **best news** that God loves me/us and that, in this love, he empowers us to come our fullness as persons (“fully alive” according to St. Irenaeus) in the life of grace. Eduardo

Bonnín always taught that, “the purpose of Cursillo is that every **person** live in grace”. The focus is always on the PERSON, contrasting the Cursillo method with Marxist “messianic utopianism”, Eduardo insisted was the reason why “Christ been a PERSON, **not** a structure (institution). He understood that Christ came to save, not “the world”, but PERSONS **in** the world. It is thus, that the world is changed.

In accord with the traditional theological insight, that “GRACE BUILDS ON NATURE”, the sequence of the “3 Days” follows the pattern. Because of the primary, but not exclusive, focus of Cursillo directed to the “alejados” (“outsiders”), these estranged from faith/religious practice or even for the “practicing” who have never experienced the Gospel as **Good** news, the meditations and rollos begin with the human and the proceed to “the divine”. For example, the first meditation reflects on the individual’s human situation, followed by “Prodigal Son” which is God’s response to the same situation. The same sequence, human to divine, continues with “Ideal” and “Habitual Grace”, the latter in the fulfillment of the aspirations of the former. This dialogue between the human and divine continues as the day and spiritual advisors rollos are interspersed.

Defining the person as a “being for love”, Cursillo understands that the human person flourishes by means of the “3 Encounters”, (with oneself, with God and with others). In God’s grace, the person becomes even more fully alive through friendship. All of the “structures” of Cursillo, “Pre-Cursillo”, “3 Days”, “Post-Cursillo”, “Schools of Leaders”, Secretariat have primary purpose –to enable each person to live friendships in each of the 3 Encounters, “Group Reunion” and “Ultreya” make it possible for us to live day-by-day in friendships.

In Group Reunion and Ultreya, we spur each other on in Piety, Study, and Action. “Piety” facilitates our living in friendship with God through Jesus Christ. “Study” enables us to grow in **knowledge** of ourselves, God, and others, so that we can befriend ourselves, and **be** friends with God and others. “Action” is the process of making friends, being friends, and bringing friends to Christ; we become infectious bearing the fruits of friendships.

Psychology (of Cursillo)

There is a book, “Evidencias Olvidadas”, whose primary author is Eduardo Bonnín (with the cooperation of Francisco Forteza), which is, as yet, unavailable in English. In its first chapter, it presents the psychology of the movement, which leads us to understand the motivations of the human person. We are attracted by our **aspirations** and are assaulted by our fears. Aspirations and fears are common to all humanity. We attempt to flee from our fears and journey toward our aspirations of intimacy. We **seek** to be “more & better”; economically, and in spirituality. We **fear** poverty, illness, death, being judged, being insignificant. We flee from our brokenness and our sinfulness.

In 1957, the journalist and social critic Vance Packard, exposed in “The Hidden Persuaders”, how the advertising industry appeals to the fears and psychological weakness of consumers. He identified 8 “*desires*” which mask these fears: *emotional security, reassurance of personal worth, ego gratification, creative outlets, love objects and the search for peace, roots, and immortality*. On the other hand, in 2015 Gregory Popcak (“Broken Gods; Hope, Healing and the 7 longings of the Human Heart”) identified these divine longings for abundance, dignity, justice, peace, trust, well-being and communion and proposes how God can satisfy these aspirations. When Pope

Benedict XVI addressed the U.S. Bishops in Washington in 2008 he said: “It is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can, by our own efforts, achieve the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion, without God who alone bestows on us what we cannot attain, our lives are ultimately empty”. That is, God alone is the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations. In 2012, the same Pope Benedict declares: “The fundamental questions of the meaning of human existence (Who am I?) “What can I know?” “What ought I to do?” “What can I hope?”) find in the mystery of Christ an answer capable of bringing peace to the restless heart”.

Study of the Collective Environment

This was inspired by a “Laity” rollo given by Joe Terranova.

Created in the image and likeness of our Trinitarian God, we are called to communion, to relationship. Why, then, are we more isolated than ever?

Our society is becoming more individualistic and, as a result more likely to suffer from an epidemic of meaninglessness. Feeling that life is meaningless is a risk factor for depression, anxiety, problem drinking, drug abuse, and suicide. Pope John Paul II in “*Evangelium Vitae*” (1975) devoted a section to and extended meditation to Cain’s response to God after killing his brother Abel. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:8) “God entrusts us to one another”. It is in view of this entrusting that God gives everyone freedom, a freedom which processes an inherently relational dimension.

Sociologists document that people are more isolated than ever before. We may be more connected virtually through social media, but that is not the same as face-to-face relationships and friendships. We don’t even know many of our neighbors (“They’re into their thing and we’re into ours”). Mother Teresa observed “The most terrible poverty is **loneliness** and the feeling of being involved.

The U.K. and other nations have declared that loneliness is an urgent public health issue. This promoted Britain’s Prime Minister Teresa May to appoint Tracey Couch to head the Ministry of Loneliness in January of this year. Cigna, a global insurance company, commissioned a study on the health of Americans. They reported that, “most Americans regularly experience loneliness and lack of meaningful connection with others”. This is especially true of the younger generation, despite being highly “connected” through technology and social media. There is a PANDEMIC of loneliness with the consequent correlation between loneliness and poor physical health. NPR notes that loneliness is associated with higher risks of coronary heart disease, stroke, and premature mortality. It is said that loneliness is as harmful to health as smoking fifteen (15) cigarettes a day. Loneliness also increases the risk of female mortality from colorectal cancer and, for the general population, increase in the incidence of diabetes, arthritis, dementia, and suicide. Those who suffer from chronic loneliness experience a 50% chance of premature death.

Many factors have converged to generate the “Loneliest Generation”, among them, transient populations, excessive pursuit of wealth, power and prestige, depression, narcissism, depression, amount of screen time and over use of social media, religious non-affiliation, addictions, pornography, and a lower birth rate.

TRANSIENCE – One third of the U.S. population relocates annually, disrupting bonds with extended family and with neighbors

EXCESSIVE PURSUIT OF WEALTH (AND POWER AND PRESTIGE)

Many executives have begun to reorder their priorities reflecting on the cost of their relationship with the families and friends. Some have opted to downsize their commandments, others to pursue different careers.

DEPRESSION/ANXIETY

Those who suffer from depression tend to isolate from meaningful relationships – a form of self-imposed captivity. 25% of U.S. adults are treated annually for clinical depression. The **average** high school student today has a same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient had in the 1950's.

NARCISSIM

With our cultural promotion of radical individualistic personal autonomy, we have seen a marked increase in narcissistic behaviors (“It’s all about **ME!**”) I consider that a variation of this is “Peter Pan Syndrome” (also referred to as “failure to launch”, “failure to ‘adult-[to “adult” is now a verb]. It is a refusal to “leave the nest”, the comfort zone of the parental house, and a refusal to accept independence and adult responsibility. Very often the “under 30’s”, living “at home” are isolated and sedentary, transfixed by “glowing rectangles”.

EXCESSIVE SCREENTIME

The average youth spends 60 hours a week (8 ½ hrs. daily) before what I have already referred to as “glowing rectangles”. These include laptops, cell phones, television, and video games, and other hand-held and headset devices. It has been observed that the transition from PC’s (personal computers) to laptops has deepened the temptation to have a “virtual world”, with the consequent crippling of social skills for interpersonal relationships. 2007 is considered a milestone year in on-line technology (with its positives and negatives); it was the debut of smartphones, Facebook, and Skype.

[An aside on the decision for the Fundamental Ideas revision committee’s decision to “meet”, via Skype.]

The downside of social media’s burgeoning growth is the incidence of ‘sexting’ and cyber bullying, facilitated by textual or visual exhibitionism and its companion narcissism. Instead of “**Know Yourself**”, we are urged “Show Yourself”. Irreparable is the harm done by on-line “inappropriate disclosure”. Joseph Epstein declares that “social networking sites speak to the vast LONELINESS in the world – “If I’m not on-line, I’m missing something”. Rob Nyland adds that heavy users of social networking sites “feel less socially involved with the community around them. The sites become surrogates for off-line friendship and community and lessen the capacity for genuine connection. I would call them “junk-food” substitutes for the banquet of real relationships”.

The phenomenon of “virtual friendships” was a concern for Pope Benedict XVI. In his 2009 World Day of Communications he said the following: “*It would be sad for our desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families,*

our neighbors and those we meet in the daily activity of our places of work, education, and recreation. If the desire for virtual connectedness becomes obsessive, it may in fact function to isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development.”

The explosion of video games has been particularly destructive. In June of this year, the World Health Organization declared video games addiction to be a mental health disorder. These addictions entail physical neglect (lack of proper rest, nourishment, and exercise), abandonment of responsibilities (work and family), **withdrawal from relationships**, and “acting out” (as a factor in the perpetration of violent acts with multiple victims, and even neglect of the spiritual life. The problem is what the video addict is **not** doing. “Parents are even hiring video game coaches and tutors to improve their children’s performance”.

We have become an addictive society. Addiction is self-medication and a flight from relationships. One of the early histories of the 12-Steps recovery movements bore the title “Not God”. The early recovering alcoholics realized that what they were seeking in a drink, other substance, relationships, or process was a caricature, a counterfeit God, in reality an idol. Idolatry is defined in the Catechism as “driving what is not God, a perversion of humanity is innate religious sense”. One of the definitions of addiction is “a pathological relationship with a substance, process, or relationships which, if allowed to follow its trajectory INEVITABLY leads you to **death**” (**physical**, as evidenced by the opioid epidemic; **spiritual**, or **relational**). One of the key sayings heard in 12-Step meetings is “you are only as sick as your secrets”. The genius of the 12 Steps of Recovery is the key component of a sponsor | confidant | mentor | companion.

A particularly pernicious and ubiquitous addiction, nearly always solitary and anonymous, is pornography. 60% of professed Christian men and 40% of all women are consumers of this drug. Because it isolates individuals, it causes what some call “affective sterility”. I consider it to be a diabolical caricature of the Beatific Vision. It proceeds from and generates loneliness. Both, Utah and Florida have declared porn to be a public health crisis.

“BIRTH DEATH”

A factor that is not often considered in analyzing the causes of isolation and loneliness is what is called the “population IMPLOSION” or “demographic winter”. The worldwide birth rate is dropping precipitously. As fewer children are born, there will be a diminishing supply of potential friends. Intentionally childless couples tend to be less sociable. Animals (“for babies”) and vegetation (“plant parents”) have become the “child” of choice, for many.

PRESENCE OR LACK OF MEANING

Co-existing with growing isolation is a surge of people suffering from “a lack of meaning”, often leads to despair. The psychologist Viktor Frankl captive in a Nazi concentration camp, observed that despair is “suffering without **meaning**”. According to David Von Drehle in a June article in the Washington Post: “Research shows that *belongingness* increases a sense of meaning whereas loneliness and social alienation undermine it. People who believe they have an important purpose in life tend to be motivated to take care of their physical, mental and social health and are better able to manage the challenges and stresses of life.

The cumulative effect of individualism, isolation, loneliness, depression, addictions, pseudo-friendships, and lack of sense of meaning has generated an epidemic of suicides. Death by despair has increased dramatically. It is a significant reason why life expectancy in the U.S. has dropped in the last three years. Between 1999-2016, 49 of 50 states have seen an upsurge of suicide (the exception was Nevada, which was already very high). Alaska has the highest incidence, possibly because of isolation and long periods of darkness. Annually, there are 45,000 suicides in the U.S., an increase of 25% since 1999. The residual effect of suicide is “complicated grief”, leading surviving family members to isolate. Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death in our nation and the 10th leading cause (123 daily) among the general population.

This study of the environment has not painted a pretty picture; however, there **is** a light at the end of the tunnel: **“Cursillo, Now, More than Ever”!**

“The Solution”

Confronted with a fragmented world of isolated individuals and the myriad related problems and dysfunction, the Cursillo solution is simple: *“Make a friend; Be a friend; Bring a friend to Christ”*. As I mentioned earlier, each of the “3 Encounters” (with oneself, God, and others), each of the three phases of the Movement (Precursillo, 3-Day Cursillo, and Postcursillo), and all the organizational and operational structures of Cursillo serve to facilitate friendships. In fact, *Cursillo spirituality is a spirituality of friendship*.

Cursillo teaches that friendship is the authentically human form of communication between persons. This presupposes that the communication in friendship is authentic and sincere. In authentic friendships, persons don’t have to “photoshop”, falsify, or embellish their images. Elbert Hubbard, a writer and philosopher at the beginning of the last century, declared that “a friend is someone who knows everything about you and still loves you”. This truth touched home at the clausura of my Cursillo in 1976. I received a scroll in the handout packet that read “Always Be Just Yourself”. For the first time in 26 years, I encountered friends who loved me and accepted me as I am.

The Catechism states that, “friendship is a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion”. Eduardo Bonnín declared, “When friendship with Christ exists between friends, the joy of friendship is multiplied”. Psalm 101 agrees; “He who walks in the way of perfection will be my friend”.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that, “Without friendship no one would choose to live, even if he had all other goods”. He continued: “Friendship is a single soul dwelling in two (2) bodies”. This is echoed in the annual January 2nd celebration of Saints Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, “We shared the same aspirations, and if we were two (2) bodies with one (1) soul in common.”

One of the reasons St. Teresa of Avila initiated her reform of the Carmelites, was her experience of the size of her original monastery (150 religious, segregated into three (3) different castes that had little communication with each other). She initially limited the number of sisters in a given monastery to 21, but finding even that number inflated, set the limit at 13. She saw that deep friendships were the essence of the spiritual life and of the life of a religious community. We have

many examples of saint-friends who spurred each other on to holiness, notably St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare, and St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. Aelred of Rievaulx was convinced that “friendships must begin in Christ, continue in Christ, and be perfected in Christ”,

Both, Cardinal John Newman and Chuck Colson, the late founder of Prison Fellowship, concurred that the world is changed, not by great schemes, but by friends, one relationship at a time. This is seconded by pro-life activists Stephanie Gray and Lila Rose. Even Mother Teresa declared, in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, stated: “the best way to change the world is to love your family; this will bring peace and happiness”. That is, “begin in your most basic moveable square meter, you family environment”.

In a Burger King near Fort Lauderdale, I once saw a sign taking a shot at the “golden arches” – “We don’t serve billions, we serve **PERSONS**, one a time”. Boston College professor and author, Peter Kreeft, once observed; “One person can make a million dollars but 3 can make **history**”. Mathew Franck contributed this observation: “One person at a time...is really the only way to do good in the world, for human beings are individual personas in communities, not statistics in a collective or part in a machine”. Eduardo in “Evangelization through Conversion” would agree. “**Persons** make and shape history and, thus, by transforming persons, history will be transformed in a visible form, thereby changing every environment and all of life’s circumstances. My translation of these statements is that, through Cursillo, we seek to change the world, not with the “long ball” (great pastoral plans and programs) but with the “small ball” of friendships.

One final observation before closing -

We need to set as a priority for Cursillo to return to our roots, emphasizing outreach to youth and the “alejados” (outsiders). Pope John Paul II in his preparatory document for the Jubilee Year (2000) wrote, addressing the youth: “You are thoughtful, seeking **meaning** and true **friendship** and eager to pray”. Eduardo, lamenting the situation of the “alejados” said; “No one should live without knowing that God loves him or her”. The “alejados” and the youth were the reasons why Cursillo was conceived, prayed for, and structured. Of course, everyone needs to grow in the shared awareness of God’s love.

I am convinced that the Cursillo Charism of friendship undoes the isolation and fragmentation caused by sin and forms **an** answer to Jesus’ prayer “May they all be one” on the way to “restoring all things in Christ”, which is ultimately, the fullness of salvation, the Kingdom of God. The “Communion of Saints is the key to and the goal of Christian friendships. Note that the “New Jerusalem” of Rev. 21:2 is a **city**, not an amalgamation of individuals praising the Lord. The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of relationships. Christian friendships, NOW MORE THAN EVER, are necessary to humanize and divinize the world. I believe that Cursillo is uniquely situated for the challenges that lie ahead.

Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter; whoever finds one finds a treasure. Faithful friends are beyond price, no amount can balance their worth. Faithful friends are life-saving medicine; those who fear God will find them. Those who fear the Lord enjoy stable friendship, for as they are, so will their neighbors be. (Sirach 6:14-17)

To borrow a phrase from the 12-Step meetings:
“Cursillo – Keep Coming Back. It Works When You Work it!”

¡De Colores!