

Cursillos in Christianity - The Laity Fulfilling the Mission of the Church  
As the Image of the Mystical Body of Christ.  
By Joe LaRussa, University of San Diego 12/9/08

Imagine the scene; one hundred men gathered for three days, praising Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, giving testimony to the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and supporting each other through service and agape love. Now imagine that event under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church. What you have is a Cursillos in Christianity weekend, a lay apostolate movement within the Church. The organization is a prime example of the laity fulfilling the mission of the Church as the image of the Mystical Body of Christ.

### **Function of the Movement**

The Cursillo Movement functions within the realm of the Roman Catholic Church; therefore it has an explicit function in the Church's mission. The Mission of the Church can be simply described as a people who believe in Jesus Christ and are commissioned to continue His work by spreading the Gospel to all nations. This is the essence of discipleship—to build the Kingdom of God among all human beings.

This is accomplished in two basic ways; first, by the building up of the Church herself, a society within the greater humankind, an example of justice and love to the world, concerned with the salvation of all humans; second, by a dynamic presence in the world, a living testimony to the activity of God in human history; as salt, light and leaven in all environments.<sup>1</sup>

These metaphors are used by Jesus to describe discipleship in the Kingdom of God; in Matthew 13:21, "It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened." It is with the third simile of yeast that Cursillo identifies its mission, as leaven to the diverse environments of the world.

Integral and unique to the identity of Cursillo is the understanding that the Christian individual has a vocation to create a Christian environment and community wherever he may live or work, and call that community into action. The founders and early participants seemed to take seriously the charge of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." Heeded also were the sentiments in 1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

Just as the Church itself can be described as a sacrament of Jesus—as a sign and instrument of union with God and unity within the human community<sup>2</sup>—it is also characteristically portrayed as a part of the Mystical Body of Christ. A dominant theme of Cursillo is this idea of the Mystical Body—that the members are guided and directed by Christ as the head of the body and therefore of the Church. This supernatural element distinguishes the Church, integrally fueled by the grace of the Holy Spirit, from an externally defined society of disciples.<sup>3</sup> The supernatural components, defined by Cursillo as those qualities derived from God—a living faith, humility, hope and agape love—are instilled through the Church in the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

Relying on the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17—"Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all

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<sup>1</sup> OMCC, *The Fundamental Ideas of the Cursillo Movement*, National Secretariat, Dallas, TX, 2001, p. 230

<sup>2</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, 1964, article 1

<sup>3</sup> The Church. (n.d.) In *Catholic Encyclopedia* online. Retrieved November 26, 2008, from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen//03744a.htm>

partake of the one bread”—the Paschal meal is of particular focus in the Cursillo movement as the source of spiritual nourishment and physical union with Jesus.

Through the activity of Cursillo the Mystical Body of the Church, like a physical body, grows and increases in two ways: the Christian individual grows towards full humanity in the image of Jesus the incarnate; and the whole body of the Church increases and multiplies to spread the Kingdom of God to all nations of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

### **Theological Basis of Cursillo**

We can look at the theologies of St. John the Evangelist, St. Paul the Apostle, Johann Adam Mohler, and the Second Vatican Council as they support the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ. With this base of theologies we will evaluate the purpose and method of Cursillo and consider its sustinment as God’s hand in the world.

St. John the Evangelist describes the relationship of God to humans, referring to the vine and the branches. In John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing,” and 15:8, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” He makes the connection from God to the disciples to the fruit of their works.

St. Paul develops his theology of the Church as the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians, specifically in verses 12, “For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ,” and 18, “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.” Paul understood the complexity of the world and its reflection in the Church as a microcosm of society. He recognized the various manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, from God, and the interrelationship and interdependence of the numerous parts towards the function of the entire body of the Church.

Paul again in Ephesians writes of this association in chapter 4:15-16: “we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

Johann Adam Mohler explained the Church as the ongoing Incarnation of God. The union of divinity and humanity in Christ is the paradigm for their union in the Church.<sup>5</sup> In his work, *Symbolik*, Mohler writes, “the visible church is the Son of God appearing within mankind in human form in a continuous fashion, constantly renewed, eternally rejuvenated, his ongoing incarnation, just as the faithful are also called in holy scripture the body of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> His argument concludes that if Christ had merely immersed himself into the human spirit without becoming a man, he would have created an internal and invisible church. However, by the Incarnation, Jesus established a visible church which communicates to humans as humans. “Since divinity had shown itself active in Christ in an *ordinary* human way, so with this the form was likewise designated in which his work should be carried forward.”<sup>7</sup> For Mohler, the moment of the Incarnation was the origin of the Church, and the visible Church is the extension of the Incarnation.<sup>8</sup> He presents the Church as the body of the Lord, through which Christ acts to reconcile humanity, while constantly renewing and rejuvenating himself.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Church. (n.d.) In *Catholic Encyclopedia* online. Retrieved November 26, 2008, from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen//03744a.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Himes, Michael J, *Ongoing Incarnation, Johann Adam Mohler and the Beginnings of Modern Ecclesiology*, Crossroad Publishing Co, NY, NY, 1997, p. 257

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 259

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 258

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 259

<sup>9</sup> Prusak, Bernard P, *The Church Unfinished, Ecclesiology Through the Centuries*, Paulist Press, Mahwah ,NJ, 2004, p. 252

The Roman Catholic Church incorporates all of these theologies in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church declared in Vatican II. In the decree known as *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is the means by which humans may attain fuller unity with Christ. The decree clearly explains that “the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”<sup>10</sup> This constitution explicitly mentions that “Christ made his brothers...mystically the components of His own Body.”<sup>11</sup> Through the sacraments, humans are united with Christ, and particularly through the Eucharist are “taken into communion with Him and one another.”<sup>12</sup> The analogy continues with describing Christ as the Head of the Church (Body). His Spirit gives life to and moves through the whole body.

Another component of *Lumen Gentium* is the commission of the laity. It specifically proposes the laity as “sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ” who “carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church *and in the world*.”<sup>13</sup> They are defined primarily by the secular nature of their environments. This document defines the role of the laity and Church hierarchy as complementary and their primary environments as particular. The hierarchy serves to maintain the structure of the Church, sustain its body of dogma and tradition, and feed its constituents; the laity’s task is to take that fare and feed the world. The analogy of leaven is used as in Matthew’s Gospel to describe the action of lay people’s effect as they meld into their ordinary surroundings.

The decree relies heavily on the theology of St. Paul in understanding and describing the Church as the Body of Christ. The diversity of its members, as “the work of one and the same Spirit,”<sup>14</sup> witnesses to the activity of God through the Church. The faithful are called to assist each other to live holy lives and promote justice, charity and peace in order to repair and restore harmony in the world.

### **The roots of Cursillo**

The roots of Cursillo began two decades before the Second Vatican Council convened, yet they share many common themes. What originally inspired the founders of the Cursillo Movement over fifty years ago was the realization that the contemporary life of the world had ceased to be Christian. Despite the plethora of subscribers to and claimants of Christianity, their influence on real life was negligible. The founders saw that individual conversion would be ineffectual; the transformation of entire environments, the world if you will, would be necessary to have any lasting impact.<sup>15</sup> The popes during this era called for the solution to the problem of this Christian void. St. Pius X’s motto was “To restore all things in Christ;” St. Pius XI proclaimed “it is not enough to be counted in the Church of Christ, it is necessary to be in the spirit and in truth living members of this Church;” and Pius XII urged the church “to bring Christ into life again; to our daily life, our private and public life.”<sup>16</sup> The Cursillos in Christianity sought to rectify this by giving “structure” to Christianity, referring to the vertebration of the Mystical Body, by placing humans at the service of the divine so that the mind of Christ penetrates society, by seeking out and molding Christians, preaching to them a living and personal Christ, and personifying the incarnation of Christian values and ideals.<sup>17</sup> This concept of vertebration, just as the vertebrae gives support to one’s physiological structure, is a key analogy used by founding father Edward Bonnín in referring to both the method and the participants.

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<sup>10</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, article 1

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, article 7

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, article 7

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, article 31

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, article 32

<sup>15</sup> Bonnín, Eduardo, *The How and Why*, National Ultreya Publications, Dallas, TX, 1981, p. 14

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20

The Founding Fathers, recognized today as Dr. Eduardo Bonnin, Bishop Juan Hervas Benet, and Father Sebastian Gaya Riera, conceived the Movement around five concepts; first, the life-giving character of Christianity, that one's faith must be led by the Spirit rather than intellectualized; second, the liberation that emerges from whatever may be enslaving a person from a total surrender to God; third, the religious experience that occurs in a heart filled with the desire to live a life of grace; fourth, the vertebration of the Mystical Body of Christ, where leaders are properly linked together so that grace can flow through them; and finally, the triumphal nature of Christianity in the power of the Gospel and grace of Christ to overcome evil.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, Bonnin uses martial language to describe the activity of the Cursillista, particularly the term "militant" which refers to the fifth formational concept of the triumphant nature of the life mission of Christ. To better understand his perspective, one must be aware of the political and social environment of Spain in the mid twentieth century. The alliance of the Catholic Church to the Spanish government, the rise and fall of the Spanish Empire, and the influence of Jewish and Moorish culture all greatly affected the mentality of the Spaniards and therefore, their religious attitudes.<sup>19</sup>

A group of men in Mallorca, Spain, living after the Spanish Civil War under the reign of the triumphant dictator Francisco Franco, sought to revive the Catholic Christian influence on the Spanish nation. This group of men began their mission through the institution of Catholic Action, prompted by the vision of Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* as a "network of clerically led Catholic associations for social, benevolent, economic and political purposes."<sup>20</sup> Catholic Action took on various forms depending on the episcopate; in Spain the focus was on the revival of Christian piety. Every group understood themselves to be an extension of the parochial priest, but this is where the Cursillo Movement saw their role differently. Specifically, the participants—known as Cursillistas—saw their mandate coming directly from Christ, through the sacraments, in union with the Mystical Body of Christ, *apart* from the Church hierarchy.<sup>21</sup>

### **Origin of Cursillos in Christianity**

In 1939, Catholic Action leaders in Spain and Latin America began to plan a pilgrimage to take place in 1948 to Santiago de Compostela, a national shrine, with the hopes of a national spiritual renewal for all Spanish speaking countries. In preparation for this mission, on the small island of Mallorca, a group of Civil War veterans began to educate lay men on the basics of Catholicism by giving Cursillos—short courses in Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Mallorca was isolated from mainland Spain and enjoyed a unique spirituality and mysticism, along with a strong spirit of apostleship and mission, exemplified by its native son Father Junipero Serra, the great Franciscan missionary to the New World.<sup>23</sup>

Between 1942 and 1946, five Cursillos were held. What manifested was threefold: a renewed intensity for Christ by its participants, an escalating attraction of young men to the cause, and a certain apostolic restlessness among all involved. This prompted the founders to develop what would become known as the School of Leaders, to study the phenomenon and create a program that could be exported to other men and nations. After 700 men from the Diocese of Mallorca made the pilgrimage to Compostela, the modern Cursillo Movement was born in 1949. What distinguished this group from

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<sup>18</sup> Lackner, Msgr. Paul M, *The Theology of the Laity in the Cursillo movement*, Typecraft Press, Pittsburg, PN, 1995, p. 17

<sup>19</sup> Rohloff, Ivan, *The Origins and Development of Cursillo*, National Ultreya Publications, Dallas, TX, 1976, p. 25

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 22

<sup>22</sup> Lackner, *The Theology of the Laity in the Cursillo movement*, pp. 16-17

<sup>23</sup> Rohloff, *The Origins and Development of Cursillo*, p. 22

Catholic Action was the concept of vertebration, which defined a layman as an apostle by virtue of his Christian vocation, not as an extension of the episcopate.<sup>24</sup>

The process that evolved has been true to form even until today. It is a well developed curriculum based on sound, theological doctrine of the Catholic Church. But the method is not a series of lectures or teachings, but rather a dynamic preaching of theological truths in an enthusiastic atmosphere. It assumes that dogma can only acquire its full meaning in relation to life. In Dr. Bonnin's own words, "A Cursillo is the preaching of a living and personal Christ."<sup>25</sup> Its purpose is truly to create a personal experience of the life of grace as manifested in fellow Christians. Its goal is conversion, as opposed to catechesis.

A most fundamental element is the significance of the human element in the process of the communication of God's message of grace and salvation. The human being is the conscious and deliberate instrument who personifies the incarnation of Christian values and beliefs. Cursillo leaders are characteristically humble, holy, spiritually noble, vigorous, and engaged; they are living witnesses of their Christianity in everyday life. Importantly, they understand that they are mere channels of God's grace and love, and that every person is capable of being that same medium.

The other element of the Cursillo psyche is the jubilant nature of the true Christian as a product of the triumphant outlook discussed earlier. It is characterized by an unshakeable faith and supernatural optimism convinced of God's vision for human fulfillment.<sup>26</sup> It is an expression of realized eschatology; a living belief in the power of the Gospel and Christ's triumph over evil. Neither spurious nor contrived, but authentic and natural, the Cursillista brings to the world a divine boldness and confidence not rooted in human ego. This attitude is used by Father William G. Most in his article "The Holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints" where he describes "the Church militant, (whose) members struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil."

These elements are obvious in the execution of a Cursillos in Christianity. The authority of grace within the apostolic action of Cursillo is paramount. However, there is an emphasis on the Cursillo technique, or method, as "an orderly set of human things at the service of divine things."<sup>27</sup> The belief is not that the technique is sufficient without grace, but that grace makes the system most effective. Coupled with an appropriate atmosphere and exemplary leaders and servers, the success of each Cursillo, measured by its impact on the candidates, is always the result of a proven formula in practice.

### **The Cursillo Method and Organization**

The method remains much the same as since its inception. There are four basic elements to the method; precursillo, cursillo, post-cursillo and secretariats. The format is strictly followed in every locality and typically during the same calendar period.

Precursillo involves the selection of the candidates and preparation for the three-day cursillo. A candidate for Cursillista is selected on two basic typologies; one type is already an effective "vertebrae" in their environment. They are not necessarily the apparent leaders but those with deep character and express humility. The other type is "in the fold," engaged but not necessarily leaders, open to a metanoia that can convert them into vertebrae. Both types, in their respective environments, have decisions that matter, opinions that carry weight, and activities that exert influence.

The actual Cursillo is a three-day weekend consisting of living experience, rollos or talks, prayers, and collective acts. They are conducted separately for men and women.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.22

<sup>25</sup> Bonnin, Eduardo, *The How and Why*, pp. 24-26

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 32

The weekend is a living experience of others in a charitable and apostolic atmosphere. Those who have already “made their weekend”—the team—are there to serve the candidates by cooking and cleaning, and also by entertaining and embracing them. The team has spiritual directors—priests and deacons—who are there to celebrate Mass and Reconciliation, and also for spiritual and psychological support as needed.

Rollos are presentations of doctrine and testimony, given by religious and lay persons. There are fifteen topics: Ideal, Habitual Grace, the Layperson in the Church, Actual Grace, Piety, Study, Sacraments, Action, Obstacles to Grace, Leaders, the Study of the Environment, Life in Grace, Christianity in Action, the Cursillista Beyond Cursillo, and Total Security. Each rollo builds on the previous to present a comprehensive presentation of church dogma and its practical, living application. The rollos of Piety, Study, and Action establish what is called the tripod of Cursillo, the means by which the Cursillista carries out their Christianity in everyday life.

Prayer consists of celebration of the Mass, offers of Thanksgiving, recital of the Rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and the Examination of Conscience and Reconciliation. The collective acts include group meditations, reflections on the rollos (Decurias), and reception by the community (Clausura).

Post-Cursillo is probably the most important element, if only one must be distinguished. This is where the Cursillo experience becomes lasting and Christianity in action becomes consistent. Its components are Individual Sanctity and Group Reunion. Individual Sanctity is simply the pursuit of a saintly life through Piety, Study, and Action. The Group Reunion is basically a core support group of friends who meet regularly to pray for, consult with, advise, and hold each other accountable to the Christian calling. This is achieved on a larger basis in the Ultreya, a meeting of all groups within a region, where men and women come together to witness to the Cursillo way of life.

The Secretariat is the administrative arm of a Cursillo community, responsible for the administrative needs of the movement, including finances, team selection, scheduling, event planning, and continued education of the leaders. Composed of spiritual directors and lay persons, it is clearly not intended to be authoritative or bureaucratic, reaching back to the intention of the founders to be viewed separately from the Church hierarchy.

### **Sustainability of the Movement**

The movement’s ability to withstand the tests of time and shifting ecclesial climates may show evidence of divine guidance, with Jesus Christ as the head, as it continues to grow within and beyond the Roman Catholic Church.

On the occasion of the First World Ultreya in 1966, a gathering of Cursillista groups from around the globe, Pope Paul VI commented that the Cursillo Movement, having been “purified in the crucible of experience and made credible by its success, was now able to circulate freely through the streets of the global village.”<sup>28</sup> He sums up well the tenacity of the movement.

Today Cursillos are given in more than fifty countries across five continents, and an estimated two million people have participated in the experience. There are more than 600 Diocesan Secretariats, 30 National Secretariats, and two continental offices. Diverse communities have segregated Cursillos for Hispanic and Filipino parishioners, facilitated on the basis of cultural and language differences.

The spirit of the movement has expanded beyond the Roman Catholic Church. Other Christian denominations have adopted the Cursillo process into their own religion. Some examples are the Episcopal Cursillo, the Lutheran Via de Cristo, the Methodist Walk to Emmaus, and the non-denominational Tres Dias. The movement has even penetrated the prison system in the form of Kairos

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<sup>28</sup> OMCC, *The Fundamental Ideas of the Cursillo Movement*, p. 9

prison ministry. All of these groups formally give tribute and credit for their origin to the Roman Catholic Cursillos in Christianity movement, a truly ecumenical gesture, particularly across Protestant lines.

This ecumenical expansion reflects again the pervasive nature of the Church evidenced by the growth of the Mystical Body of Christ. The multi-denominational Cursillo movement with its Ecumenical Ultreyas—gatherings of Cursillo groups across institutional lines—speaks of the ecumenical imperative as expressed by George Tavard. Although historical circumstances and doctrinal divergences have occasioned separation in the Church, there is no biblical model that justifies continuing division and rivalry among people who profess to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and savior of all humanity.<sup>29</sup> Tavard insists that Christian institutions “may all be one” in the spirit of John 17:21 if doctrinal differences are respected and a commitment for mutual understanding is achieved. This opens up the possibility for shared ideas, projects, education and ultimately sacraments.<sup>30</sup> This same ecumenical unity was emphasized in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, in chapter II—On the People of God.

The growth of Cursillo was greatly facilitated by the doctrines of Vatican II. In light of Vatican II, the Cursillo Movement renewed itself in World Meetings in 1974 and again in 1988, in order to keep the Movement true to its origins while at the same time evaluating the validity of its method with respect to contemporary times. Although sanctioned by the Vatican, it still maintains itself as separate from the direction of the episcopate.

## Conclusion

By divine design, the Church will ultimately succeed in its mission because it is guided by the Holy Spirit. This is in accordance with Jesus’ final mandate in Matthew’s gospel; “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). It is the duty of the Christian community to continue to proclaim that Jesus is alive and present in the historical and sacramental Church.<sup>31</sup>

Cursillo is a prime example of the laity taking on the responsibility of priesthood, utilizing their shared knowledge as kin of Christ. The process of sanctification is facilitated by the encouragement, guidance and accountability found within group reunions, wherein the Cursillistas help each other grow in the Spirit as the body of Christ. Through the Mass, a central celebration during the Cursillo weekend, the members are nourished by the Eucharist and in that way strengthened to go out into their respective worlds and evangelize. This is a manifest example of Mohler’s concept of the ongoing incarnation.

Cursillistas see themselves as instruments of God’s grace; they avoid credit for the ongoing conversion that takes place on a weekend and throughout one’s association with the community, emphasizing only God’s work through them and the movement. The evidence suggests that Cursillos in Christianity is succeeding in its role as the laity fulfilling this mission as a component of the Mystical Body of Christ.

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<sup>29</sup> Tavard, GeorgeH, *The Church, Community of Salvation, An Ecumenical Ecclesiology*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1992, p.194

<sup>30</sup> Tavard, *The Church, Community of Salvation*,, p.197

<sup>31</sup> Prusak, *The Church Unfinished*, p. 63