



Cursillo ~ *Our Story*

RELATIONSHIP ■ EVANGELISM ■ RECONCILIATION

CURSILLO'S MINISTRY IN TIME

THE BEGINNINGS

The first Cursillos were developed in Mallorca, Spain, under the leadership of Eduardo Bonin and other young men involved in "Spanish Catholic Action." Groups of active, zealous Christian laymen sought ways to christianize their environments – the real-life situations in which they found themselves. They initially sought to bring young men in their cities to a deeper faith in Christ. They wanted to provide a "backbone" for Christianity – leaders who embraced and embodied the apostolic faith. They knew that in their daily work they had many opportunities to witness to Christ, and they believed that such witness could change the character of their workplaces, their communities, and society itself.

Not knowing exactly how to begin to tackle such a big task, they began meeting weekly in small groups. They prayed together and began to plan ways to bring Christ into the everyday settings in which they lived. They drew strength and encouragement from each other as they carried out their plans. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they experienced new excitement and depth of commitment among themselves.

WEEKENDS AND THEIR STRUCTURE

Others began to be drawn into this circle of friends. As the circle grew, the expressed desire and need for training others in Christian witness developed. The leaders decided to hold weekends as training sessions. Such weekends focused on what was fundamental for being "*Christian*". They also emphasized the practical aspects of witness.

The leadership believed a central tenet to apostolic witness was the necessity to link Christians together in small groups. This was borne out in their own experience, and it also followed the Biblical pattern which the Lord Himself emphasized. Linkage provided the foundation for Christian witness. Training started with, and worked toward, effective linkage.

The study of environments was also identified as crucial. Christians were, therefore, trained to look at their living situations with a new focus and seek ways to permeate their living situations with the Good News. This required a new sense of active, intentional involvement rather than just being a "good Christian" and passively waiting for opportunities to speak a word or two of faith.

Next came a concern to articulate the dimensions of the mature Christian leader. The first Cursillos were quite militant in their conception of what the world and Church needed. They needed Christians who knew what they believed and were willing and able to serve as the vanguard of a dynamic Christianity. The weekends were designed to form leaders who were not ashamed of the Gospel but were willing to talk about it with their friends and others.

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It was also recognized that such groups of active Christians could not survive in isolation. Groups themselves would need to be linked. Celebrating and encouraging the groups in their witness would be made possible through regular gatherings called Ultreyas. The word "Ultreya" emphasized the need to persevere in the overwhelming task of apostolic witness. It also contained a sense of hope. The word was drawn from pilgrimages and represented the call pilgrim groups to each other to finish their course. Linked together by common commitment to Christian action, the groups inspired each other to "keep on keeping on!"

Finally, prayer and sacrifice were the natural and indispensable means to bind the whole effort together. Christians were reminded of the need to grow individually through the sacraments, daily prayer, and spiritual direction. At the same time, mutual prayer and sacrifice, called PALANCA, was first offered for the success of their witness. Palanca was also offered for the support of the weekend sessions and, equally as important, supported the work of the groups in their respective environments.

This was the core of the weekend. The weekends were not oriented to presenting lectures but rather were conceived as workshops in which the truth of the Christian faith could be proclaimed out of lived experience and apostolic action could be modeled.

Cursillo means a course, such as a path. Cristiandad means Christian life and is distinct from Cristianidad, which means Christianity or Christian ideas. The weekends became known as Cursillos in Cristiandad; not "a short curriculum in Christian principals/ideas" but a "course" in how to live as Christian witnesses.

CURSILLO EXPANDS

As these first Cursillo Three-day Weekends progressed, more and more people were drawn to them because they were effective and spiritually awakening. In time, they reached beyond their native soil and began to be exported to other places. They quickly caught on in the United States.

Those who first became acquainted with Cursillo in this country did so through the vehicle of the Weekend and not through the Fourth Day. They did not have the extensive background in struggling through the problems concerning Christian witness which inspired the original Weekends. Instead they were drawn to the joyous renewal which permeated the Weekends. Soon Weekends began to be held without the understanding of the purpose of Cursillo and the part the Weekends were supposed to play in that purpose.

This situation became very apparent when the Three-day Weekends were first shared with the Episcopalians in the late 1960s. Episcopalians took readily to the renewal aspect of the Weekends. The result came to be identified as *'weekend-itis,'* an infectious emphasis on "putting on the Weekends" without a mature grounding on the focus of the Cursillo Method. Although the Weekends still reflected their original shape with talks on piety, study, and action along with the ideas of Group Reunion, Ultreya and Palanca, the purpose of the Weekends remained for the most part narrow in scope. For most participants, the Three-day Weekend meant "renewal" only — a vague sense of rediscovering the joy and spontaneity of the Christian life.

A CAUTIONARY TURN

Thus, in time the real purpose of Cursillo was largely missing. The original Three-day Weekends developed out of meaningful Fourth Day relationships with Cursillistas mutually encouraging each other in living the Christian life and winning environments for Christ. In this country, Cursillo developed out of exciting Three-Day Weekends, while the Fourth Day relationships languished. Ultreyas were seen as attempts to rekindle the fervor of the Weekends. Singing, celebrating the Eucharist, and inspirational talks on religious themes became the norm. Group Reunions, where they existed, were merely small meetings which were dictated more by the interests of the individuals in them rather than by the consuming passion for active witness.

Those who were drawn to Cursillo in the Episcopal Church tended to be the active members of their parishes. Already involved in vestries and small groups, they tended not to have time for further meetings. Ultreyas were difficult to schedule, and it was hard to get people to attend. Many did not become members of Group Reunions. The enterprise of apostolic action was left to catch-as-catch-can witnessing on a largely individual basis.

In the meantime, the Three-Day Weekends continued at a feverish pitch. In many places, waiting lists of those who wanted to attend a Cursillo Weekend grew faster than the ability of the local community to support them. Involvement in Cursillo came to mean—almost exclusively—serving on a Three-Day Weekend team.

And, from the public point of view, Cursillo seemed to be a secret society where the initiated were always trying to enlist the non-initiated. Those who had completed a weekend seemed more interested in promoting the weekend than in changing the character of their workplaces and communities.

MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

The evolution of Cursillo in the Episcopal Church brought positive action, but over time it took a toll on the Cursillo Ministry. A loss of focus in many areas diluted the message of the Ministry. At the same time, other Christian ministries became the new “shiny toy” for action within parishes. This occurred at the same time that the social structure of America and the church’s role in it changed dramatically. Family norms shifted and more women worked outside the home. Church attendance dropped as church membership no longer was required to be accepted in the business or social community. The time requirements of the Cursillo Weekend became an often-cited barrier to attendance.

Concerned about the misconceptions about Cursillo, the weakness of the Fourth Day community, and the decline in numbers, leadership within the Episcopal Cursillo began to examine the modern Cursillo Ministry. As a result, they took several steps:

1. With the encouragement of Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, the name of Cursillo in The Episcopal Church was changed to Episcopal Cursillo Ministry. This was to reflect Cursillo’s international, church wide nature and its efforts to work as a ministry of the Church to bring Christ to the world and to serve His people.
2. After years of maintaining a strictly defined relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, a new understanding was developed. It was agreed that both bodies — the Catholic Cursillo and the Episcopal Cursillo Ministry — would remain in harmony with each other. However, Catholic Cursillo acknowledged that it had no authority to prevent and shape changes made by the Episcopal Cursillo Ministry. It strongly encouraged Episcopal Cursillo to continue to follow the Cursillo Method even if it made other changes.
3. Freed from what some considered outdated restrictions, Cursillo leadership examined which aspects of its ministry were essential and which might need revision. The format for Weekends and the language of Cursillo were considered first. From the “grassroots” across the country, other formats for conducting the Cursillo Weekend were being developed. At the same time, areas where the original format was still considered to be working well retained that format. Leadership of the Episcopal Cursillo Ministry encouraged prayerful consideration by each diocese in the selection of their preferred Weekend format.

The attitude of leadership shifted away from being prescriptive of the “only” way to proceed. Gratefully, they were no longer the “Cursillo police.” Their role came to emphasize being a resource and being supportive of ways that worked best for each communities’ needs.

Other components of Weekends were also considered for their relevance. Many of those choices were left to the individual community; however, moving to simpler schedules and eliminating traditions unrelated to the basic Cursillo vision was strongly encouraged. The emphasis became prayers rather than small gifts and fully presenting the Cursillo Method rather than filling the schedule with extra skits and distractions. Even the language of Cursillo was considered. The use of Spanish terms remained highly valued in many areas, but were abandoned or deemphasized in others.

4. With the encouragement of the Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, the Episcopal Cursillo Ministry aligned itself as an active part of the Jesus Movement — a call for Apostolic Action. This reaffirmed the need for active Fourth Day communities within the parish and the world. It emphasized that the process of modernizing language or formats to suit a younger generation did not change the importance of following the Cursillo Method or diminish the role of the Fourth Day. Without having the Fourth Day and its apostolic action as the focus of Cursillo, the Weekends are not much more than spiritual hype.



The crucial point about the Cursillo Method has remained — **Cursillo began with the Fourth Day.** Historically, Cursillo began with the intention of forming mature Christian witnesses, people who would take seriously the call of God to bring the living Christ into their living situations. Conceptually, this means that the whole Cursillo Method starts with the Fourth Day.

The examination and shifting process in the Episcopal Cursillo Ministry is still occurring. The ultimate outcome is still unknown, but as long as Cursillistas continue to work together from diocese to diocese the Ministry should become stronger. The vision, ministry, and heart of Cursillo remains. It continues to share the Cursillo message of using Christian love to develop relationships, encourage evangelism, and bring reconciliation as part of the Jesus Movement in God’s world.