

## CONVERSION IN THE CURSILLO

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The spread of the *Cursillos de Cristianidad* in the world has been extremely rapid. Together with this spread are the marvelous conversions of the participants. After an overnight retreat and three days of studying and living Christian doctrine in a closed community, hardened sinners are transformed into apostles. Likewise practising Catholics who join the Cursillo become more zealous and typically say: "I always thought I was a good Christian because I have been an active Catholic Actionist for years. But the Cursillo has opened my eyes... I wish I had known it earlier."

Religious conversion is a natural phenomenon in the Cursillo, where it is common experience to see practical unbelievers return to religion, where lax Christians turn fervent, and the fervent still more so. But a problem arises from this phenomenon: are the conversions effected by the Cursillo the result of a religious brainwashing? In other words, are the Cursillistas not tricked psychologically, so that they lack genuine liberty in embracing God? Are those conversions the temporary product

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<sup>1</sup> Already in 1964 reports *Christ to the World* IX, 475: "These Cursillos are having an extraordinary development; in Spain, where they began in 1949 after several years of research and study, they have 65 diocesan secretariates...; in the United States, there are 77 centers in 34 States; in Canada, in Latin America: the Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chili, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Porto-Rico, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela; in Europe: Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Portugal, Switzerland; in Asia: Ceylon, Japan, the Philippines; in Africa: Angola, Fernando Poo, Guinea, Morocco."

of sentimentalism and dubious motives as in the manner of sectarian religious revivals? This article is an attempt to analyze the problem.

In solving the problem, however, several restrictions have been made. The following considerations are limited to the actual three days of the men's Cursillo, although some accidental remarks may point to the follow-up or the post-Cursillo. Since conversion is a psychological process, that is, a process which involves the whole man (from his unconscious to his thinking, willing, and feeling), and since the process does not follow the same pattern in every case, the following exposition is rather arranged arbitrarily so that elements of conversion may not be chronological. This arrangement would also cut out the needless repetition about the history and nature of this movement of apostolic and ascetical formation, of which enough has been written elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Obviously the Cursillista will understand better the article. Finally, the writer merely expresses his observations from experience and readings, especially from the works of the Cursillo founder, the Most Reverend Juan Hervas y Benet.<sup>3</sup>

#### ELEMENTS OF CONVERSION IN THE CURSILLO

It must be remarked in the first place that every detail in the Cursillo plays a part in bringing about metanoia. The Cursillo is a clever, happy synthesis of philosophy and theology, the product of years of ex-

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<sup>2</sup> Among the numerous articles about the Cursillo would be the following: Most Rev. Juan Hervas, "The 'Cursillos de Cristianidad', Magnificent Instrument of Christian Renewal and Apostolic Conquest", in *Christ to the World* VII (1962) 161-178; 312-324. A. Petru, "The Cursillos de Cristianidad. Their Structure", in *Christ to the World* IX (1964) 475-484. A layman's view is given by M. Carlos Calatayud Maldonado, "I Went to a Cursillo", in *Christ to the World* IX (1964) 485-499. See also *Time* (March 13, 1964), 61.

<sup>3</sup> To be used extensively are the following works of Bishop Juan Hervas: *Los Cursillos de Cristianidad, Instrumento de Renovación Cristiana* (Madrid: Euramerica, 1962), 4a ed., 522 pp. Henceforth to be cited as *LCdC*.

*Manual de Dirigentes de Cursillos de Cristianidad* (Madrid: Euramerica, 1962), 3a ed., 438 pp. To be cited as *MdD*.

*Interrogantes y Problemas Sobre Cursillos de Cristianidad* (Madrid: Euramerica, 1963), 2a ed., 443 pp. To be cited as *IyP*.

perimentation by Bishop Hervas and his associates. Since conversion is a gift of God, the Cursillo harnesses the best psychological, pedagogical and didactic means in imparting a compendium of doctrine, so as to prepare the way to the grace of conversion. In Scholastic terms, since "grace presupposes nature", conversion in the Cursillo is the effect of God's grace through human instrumentality and cooperation.

Let us expand the above statements.

### Truth

One of the main features of the Cursillo is its doctrinal stress, which is in line with the principle that willing to be good flows from knowledge of high motives. So after the closed retreat of one night follow a series of conferences (*rollos*) which implant supernatural motives or values.<sup>4</sup> The five daily conferences cover quite a representative portion of doctrine and morals. Despite the heavy topics the way of imparting them is made interesting. The various clerical and lay lecturers deliver their spirited talks in a meaningful style which is adapted to the language of the hearers.

After each rollo, the candidates (who are limited to adults numbering ideally between 30 and 35) are broken into teams called *decurias*. Each team must pool their insights and applications of the rollo just given in a concrete drawing. Then a representative of each team must explain the drawing to the entire assembly. The above-mentioned process utilizes the excellent active method of instruction.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, because each team is seeded by various kinds of professions of different social standing, goodness and talents, and since each team has an assigned president and secretary, the whole interaction promotes a new we-feeling, practice of leadership and public speaking, and above all charity. This interaction is not only in the lecture hall but also done on a larger scale in the dining room, the chapel, and during breaks. Psychology approves the dosages of small accomplishments as already mentioned.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *IyP*, p. 408.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *LCdC*, pp. 361-370.

Because the candidates are told to pocket their watches during the entire course and are kept ignorant of what is next until the last moment, they lose a sense of time and are always expectant for the next surprise or activity.

### Joy

In order to prevent mental fatigue due to the extensive lectures, they sing lively songs (especially *De Colores*, the unofficial Cursillo theme) and exchange jokes. Already St. Thomas Aquinas writes that just as physical tiredness is cured by rest, spiritual fatigue gets its rest in the form of delight (*delectatio*) in what is joyful (*ludicra vel iocosa*).<sup>6</sup> He even goes further to name this a virtue called wittiness (*eutrapelia*), which stands between the extreme of clownishness and dryness.<sup>7</sup> As a virtue this mental recreation is kept within bounds and by no means destroys the seriousness of the Cursillo.<sup>8</sup> This spirit of joy, a particular mark of the Cursillo, further cements lasting camaraderie.

Joyfulness in the Cursillo rings of the proto-Christian spirit. It refutes the popular stereotyped religion as a sad one. St. Paul exhorted, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you abundantly. . . singing in your hearts to God by his grace" (Col. 3, 16). "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4, 4; I Thes. 5, 18), "for the kingdom of God does not consist in food and drink, but in justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14, 17). "Though you do not see him [Christ], yet believing, you exult with a joy unspeakable and triumphant" (I Pet. 1, 8). "Do not be sad, for joy of the Lord is our strength" (Neh. 8, 10).

### Ideals and Response

Ideals are some of the main values on which the Cursillo hammers. Catchwords like "charity", "surrender", "idealism" center on the figure of Christ. He is proposed already in the short retreat as the father of the prodigal son and the Good Shepherd. The first rollo is on Ideal. Christ

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2, q. 168, a. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, a. 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *IyP*, pp. 427-428; *LCdC*, pp. 367-370; *MdD*, pp. 39-45.

holds the center during daily Mass, and especially in the meaningful visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

Here the example of the faculty-leaders is contagious, such as visits close to the tabernacle, sincerely begging for grace for the Cursillo, sometimes praying with outstretched arms. Thus particular visits are done en masse by the candidates, after enough preparation in the lecture hall. Short meaningful prayers come from the heart to the Ideal in terms of I-Thou relationship.<sup>9</sup> Because they are all men of the new in-group and alone by themselves, religious inhibitions often get unleashed in such occasions. Intense sorrow for past ungratefulness to the Ideal can make the tears flow. Such visits, together with the team visits, "is one of the fundamental factors in the psychological evolution of the Cursillista."<sup>10</sup> Psychologists bear out the fact that prayer affects the strengthening of the religious sense, and disposes the person to arrive at metanoia and authentic resolutions.<sup>11</sup>

Spontaneous reconciliation with Christ through the sacrament of penance can easily follow. Would not the occasional, spontaneous, non-sacramental public confessions uttered freely in the lecture hall or those blurted out in prayer form in the chapel be a realization of what St. James (5, 16) said, "Confess, therefore, your sins to one another"?

Together with the Ideal Christ necessarily goes along the Ideal of his Mystical Body. This fundamental truth is driven home more by experiencing it than by learning it through lecture. The staff (which is composed of the spiritual director, the lay rector and his associates) not only watches at the individual progress of the candidates but also practices charity for the Mystical Body by waiting at table, stimulating fraternal joy, sacrificing and praying for all.<sup>12</sup>

The Communion of Saints is actualized by *palancas*, namely, prayers and sacrifices for the candidates. Before and during the Cursillo, alerted

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mt. 6, 7; 18, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *MdD*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>12</sup> Of course the quality of the staff, on which depends much of the success of the Cursillo, will vary from place to place.

convents, seminaries, parishes, Cursillo centers of the country — and sometimes from other countries—pray and sacrifice for the success of the Cursillo. This is similar to the early Christians praying for the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1, 12-14). These palancas are written down and sent to the Cursillo in progress. When the candidates come to know about this form of charity, they are profoundly moved. The lesson of togetherness in Christ's Mystical Body becomes a living part of themselves. They will repay this love by making palancas for others in the future. A certain parish priest remarked that since palancas are self-imposed those who make them improve his Cursillo-minded parish.

### **Fundamental Option and Conversion**

As the Cursillo progresses the candidate generally feels an ineffable religious experience which he never had before. He has "tasted that the Lord is sweet" (1 Pet. 2, 3). Many admit that those days lived in the Cursillo are among the happiest of their lives. Instead of putting himself and false ideals as the center of gravity of his strivings, the candidate realizes through the illative sense—to use Newman's expression—that God is the magnet of higher value. The good candidates are strengthened with maturer faith and thereby pledge stronger dedication to God. After one's whole being has been shaken by the techniques and best disposed to receive grace, after having received countless palancas, after having been exposed to the whole Cursillo which itself is one gigantic actual grace,<sup>13</sup> what sincere man cannot make a total surrender of himself to Christ?<sup>14</sup> St. Paul, the convert, could say: "I count everything loss because of the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I count them as dung that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3, 8). With such a disposition, resolutions in prac-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *IyP*, pp. 307-337.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pierre Fransen, "Towards a Psychology of Divine Grace", in *Research in Religious Psychology, Speculative and Positive* (Brussels: Lumen Vitae Press, 1957), pp. 7-36. M. Flick and Z. Alszeghy, "L'Opzione Fondamentale della Vita Morale e la Grazia", in *Gregorianum* XLI (1960) 593-610. This second article offers a sufficient bibliography on fundamental option.

ting religion can easily follow. There is nothing pelagianistic about the whole process.

The closing ceremony serves as a clincher for conversion, a stimulator for the lukewarm, and promotes perseverance.<sup>15</sup> Here the candidates talk about their impressions which freely praise the Cursillo. These impressions also confirm the views of the other candidates. Even veteran Cursillistas who attend such graduations derive further strength of spiritual renewal.

In short the Cursillo is an unforgettable religious experience. As Bishop Hervas sums it up:

The exposition of doctrine, the participation of priests and lay directors, the quality of the assistants, the manner how prayer is taught and practiced, the amusements, the climate of moderate joy, sincerity, charity, prayer, the closing. . . a quantity of details, in short, some true pleasant insights, which, with a deep psychology, active pedagogy, a normal use of the intuitive method and an adequate adaptation in language and action, normally obtain some results which leave a profound imprint in the mind and heart of man, and which has nothing of a suggestion in the pejorative sense [namely, brainwashing] . . .<sup>16</sup>

When the new Cursillistas go home, they are changed men, apostles burning to change the world. As in the biographies of famous converts, it is not rare that cold, hardened sinners go to the other extreme of fervid religious fanaticism.

Is conversion in the Cursillo the result of a religious brainwashing? The answer is no. Although this spiritual laboratory is similar to a group therapy, the candidates enjoy full liberty. They have not been drugged or hypnotized or brainwashed in the Communistic sense. God is the cause of conversion through the instrumentality of the Cursillo and the cooperation of the candidates.<sup>17</sup>

### **Action of the Holy Spirit**

If God is the author of conversion, the pentecostal transformation of the candidates should be attributed to the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *LCdC*, p. 393; 495-498; *MdD*, pp. 369-370.

<sup>16</sup> *IyP*, pp. 405-406; see *LCdC*, pp. 364-370.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *IyP*, pp. 340-341; 390-398.

(Gal. 5, 22-23). No wonder the Cursillo has an intense devotion to this Divine Person.<sup>18</sup> His action on the community gathered in Christ's name seems different from his individual interventions.

Of the many similarities which the Cursillo has in primitive Christianity, another would be the charisms as element for conversion. That the Holy Spirit grants his gifts for the building up of the Mystical Body still holds today, although the charisms are less than before. Among the charisms which St. Paul enumerates (Rom. 12, 6-8; Eph. 4, 11; I Cor. 12, 8-11 and 28 ff), several can still be feasible today, such as the gifts of ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, presiding, acts of mercy, of pastors, of exposition, knowledge, faith, discernment, administration, assistance, direction. If charisms can be passing gifts, could the Finger of God sometimes not grant his gifts to those involved in the Cursillo for the sake of conversion? After all, "the manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit" (I Cor. 12, 7).

#### FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Conversion must be a continuous process, lest "after the unclean spirit has gone out of a man . . . it brings seven other spirits more wicked than itself . . . and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first" (Lk. 11, 24-26). The Cursillo is only the turning point for most candidates and the beginning of a new life. Because not everything can be taught in the three days, the Cursillista must continue his Christian formation. What matters extremely is the post-Cursillo period of weekly meetings called *ultreyas*.<sup>19</sup> To evolve this, however, is outside the scope of the article. Bishop Hervas assures perseverance if the *ultreya* method is strictly observed. There is always the danger of adulterating the tested Cursillo techniques.<sup>20</sup>

Is the Cursillo a suitable instrument for evangelization? Bishop Hervas thinks normally not, because pre-evangelization should precede

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *LCdC*, pp. 226-231.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-79.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *MdD*, pp. 77-79.



it.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the Cursillo has proven itself by its fruits to be the instrument of numberless conversions, of apostolic renewal of dioceses, the teacher of an apostolic spirituality. As a lay movement it has anticipated much of the pronouncements of Vatican Council II concerning the laity. The fact that the Cursillo has taken roots in most parts of the world proves how its general techniques have a universal appeal.<sup>22</sup>

But is the Cursillo not over-emotional and suited to the Latin temperament? Christ did not found a rationalistic religion. As a human being he manifested his intense love for his Father and fellowmen when he rejoiced, was angry, was grieved, sad, and wept. And perfectly virtuous act must both be passionate as well as rational. When this balance is upset, the normal tendency is to seek compensation. So when Immanuel Kant's influence made religion purely rationalistic, the people had to channel their unfulfilled religious instincts and sentiments to other forms of piety. The life of faith requires a personal commitment of total autodonation to God. By no means is it an isolated departmentalized way of thinking. If religion should involve mind and body, this integration is wonderfully harmonized by the Cursillo.<sup>23</sup>

### **Masculine Piety and the Cursillo**

Karl Rahner observes that the European brand of Christianity has a feminine appeal, although it is essentially masculine.<sup>24</sup> This is not the case with Greek Christianity, or take the masculine piety of Buddhism and Mohammedanism. The fact could explain why men of developing countries seem to find the western brand of Christianity handed over by western missionaries as repulsive and fit only for women. To accept this "emasculated" religion is something which goes against their manly grain. Male saints are often stereotyped as lacking in genuine manliness. Why more women go to Sunday masses than men lies in the same line of ex-

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *IyP*, pp. 381-389.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, *Sendung und Gnade*, *Beiträge zur Pastoraltheologie* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1959), ss. 286-311.

planation. A typical virile remark would be like this: "My father was a good man although he did not go to church. Me too!" Consequently men take pride of their "irreligion" as a masculine value.

What is the root of this attitude? It must be remembered that man is the active leader, the brain of the family, the breadwinner who must be strong, and that woman is psychologically passive. Now the old Latin liturgy had grown to be an exclusive clerical affair, where the laity had no more active participation. Since that liturgy was passive, it appealed more to women. On the other hand, when religion actively challenges the masculine nature, it appeals to men. For example, in the times of religious persecution non-churchgoing Mexicans risked their lives in defending the churches from demolition by anti-Catholics.

The Cursillo as a lay movement of leaders has tapped the psychological well-spring of masculine piety. Because the male Cursillista is a crusading leader, he is not ashamed of his religiousness. Thanks to the new active liturgy and other decrees of Vatican Council II for letting men do active leadership in the Church.

The task of making religion appeal more to men seems to go into the direction of sublimating and satisfying their nature. By stressing this more, one automatically destroys the wide-spread error that religion is only for women.

## CONCLUSION

The Cursillo has actuated many vital points, although its founder claims no originality. It must avoid the dangers of becoming a status symbol and of forming gnostic cliques of those who pride themselves to be the only authentic Christians. This dynamic movement is meant to penetrate all phases of life and be the leaven to ferment the entire dough of Christianity. As it continues to shape more apostles through genuine conversions in its world-wide expansion the Cursillo rightly deserves the name of a "New Pentecost".