

Cursillo...the Early years

The beginning years of Cursillo in Oklahoma reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit...and the diligence and perseverance of people that were truly believers in the movement.

It all started with a declaration by Archbishop Salatka upon his arrival in Oklahoma City. The Tulsa and Oklahoma City Archdiocese had been formed in 1972. When Archbishop Charles Salatka arrived in 1978, he had stated that one of his wishes was to bring an active Cursillo movement to Oklahoma. It was Father Denis Statham's, OSB from St. Gregory's in Shawnee, solicitation in the *Sooner Catholic* that anyone that was interested in helping to start Cursillo should contact him. Father Statham served the Tulsa diocese as their Spiritual Director.

Soon after, at a Mass at Ft. Sill, Father Statham was approached by two lay people, LTC George Fasching and Dr. Bob Krebsbaugh. They had both lived Cursillo outside of Oklahoma, but were interested in doing their part to get it started here. It was obvious to many that Dr. Bob was living his fourth day...he was energetic, full of Christ in his actions, had adopted children, and was instrumental in the resettlement of Vietnamese that had entered the US through the Ft. Chaffee refugee program. After the initial meeting of these 3 men, Dr. Krebsbaugh went to work. Part of his fourth day of "making a friend, being a friend, and bringing that friend to Christ," included stopping by St. Patrick's in Anadarko and meeting Father Mike Chapman. A new activity center had been built at the Anadarko church...and Dr. Bob wanted to use that activity center for the first Cursillo. He was also adamant that Father Chapman live the first Oklahoma Cursillo. The plans all came together, and the first Cursillo in Oklahoma happened in April of 1979. Father Mott, a hospital chaplain and friend of Dr. Krebsbaugh, came from Washington State to be the Spiritual Director. LTC Fasching had cots and other materials shipped in from Ft. Sill to accommodate the candidates. Dr. Krebsbaugh was the first Rector, with 20-30 men served on the first weekend. The first women's weekend was two weeks later. The rectora was Mary Ann Fasching. Many of the men and women's team were from the Tulsa diocese. Weekends after that were served mainly by the Cursillistas that lived #1.

The first Spanish weekend was held in 1982 in Duncan, OK. Father Joseph Kolb and Father Chapman were slated as spiritual directors. The rector was Rafael Golf-Smith and the women's rectora was Eliza Padilla. Most of the team was from Guymon. When Father Chapman found out that Father Basil Keenan, OSB (presently in Seminole) wanted to live the Spanish Cursillo...he made a deal with him. Father Chapman would cover Father Keenan's wedding obligation in Lawton...and Father Keenan would live the weekend...and give the talks that Father Mike was scheduled to give. Yes, I said live the weekend and give the SD's talks. Another noted detail of the first men's weekend was that a woman, Eliza Padilla from Guymon, gave one of the rollos...and made it clear to all the men that they needed to take care of their families. It sounded like an emotionally charged talk...and to think...a woman giving a talk at a men's weekend!

In the early days of Cursillo, a candidate could show up the first night and would be accepted...no sponsor, no palanca...just their \$50 and a bedroll. Focus of the movement at that time was about weekends. In the beginning, the weekends were focused on the fundamental elements; things like "joke night," the "little people," etc

were brought in over the next few years. Formation of leaders was a void concept. Since Spiritual Directors were not present on the Team Formation weekends, there was very little outside Spiritual influence. The team meetings were all that existed for forming the teams in their knowledge of Cursillo. The center of the leader base of Cursillo moved around the diocese. It started rural, basically in Guymon and Boise City and moved to Lawton, Shawnee, Enid, and Edmond. By the end of 1989, there had been 33 Cursillo weekends.

Soon after the first weekends, the Secretariat was formed. There was a large focus on having weekends, so 2 English weekends and 1 Spanish weekend were held each year. Someone donated a small camping trailer. Round tables, folding chairs, air mattresses, and other supplies were loaded on this little trailer. It had De Colores and a rooster painted on the side. I remember seeing it...looked like something right out of Woodstock!

Cursillo leadership continued to change over the years. Guidelines from National Secretariat continued to change as National's leadership's interpretation of the movement changed. Talk outlines were conveyed to us through small talk books. The guidance seemed disjointed at times...came to us in pieces and many times we were left to our own interpretation. And who would have ever thought of reading the Leader's manual and agreeing on a common direction? At one time, we had a lay leader and a Spiritual Director enter the Archdiocese from out of state, and make every effort possible to turn the apple cart upside down. Again, perseverance strengthened the movement through these trying times.

Efforts through these first twenty years to unite the English and Spanish speaking elements of Cursillo were met with a variety of reactions and results. Many times, it seemed better just to not try to bring them together. It would be in the late 1990s that this effort would begin to bring the fruits that were intended.

Spiritual Directors within the movement during this time were cornerstones that would keep us on the right path. Father Joseph Kolb, Father Don Wolf, and Sister Elsa Galdeano...to mention a few, were there for the Spanish...while Father Lafferty, Father Mike Chapman, Father Wade Darnell plus a variety of deacons were the Spiritual Leaders for English.

Cursillo in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City had many ups and downs through the first 20 years...but the power of the Holy Spirit has remained constant. I feel we can all agree that this movement is a plan of God...and we are the hands, feet and mouths that do his work through Cursillo.

Father Don Wolf recently reminisced about some of his early experiences. Father Wolf lived his Cursillo in 1981 in Ada, OK. Here is an excerpt from his notes:

"I was invited to be spiritual director for a Cursillo for the first time in 1982. The Spanish Women's Cursillo was in Okeene that spring and I arrived on Thursday afternoon to begin my very first contact with the movement as spiritual director. But there's more to a 3-Day Weekend than mere spiritual concerns; the practical and mundane are as important as the lofty and soulful. Arriving at the Knights of Columbus Hall I was quickly put to work addressing the most pressing spiritual need of that day, lighting the hot water heater.

This work involved removing the cover from the bottom of the tank, finding the pilot light, pushing in the pilot valve and then holding a lighted match over the

thermocouple and pilot valve as it caught fire. Well, those were the steps involved; had it been that simple it would have already been lit. Like so many things in life, in fact, like so many things in the whole movement, following instructions does not usually address the matter. Something more was required.

Which was why I proceeded to lie on the floor, face up to better look into the tubal intricacies under the tank. The pilot just wouldn't stay lit, no matter how often we tried. I thought we might be missing a valve turned in the right direction, or even just the right level of dedication. Maybe if I just focused more, and more intently, I could make something happen.

As I was on the floor, one of the participants came into the kitchen. Taking one look at my Anglo eyes, she turned to her companion and yelled, in Spanish, "What is this guy doing here? This retreat is for women. Who does he think he is, coming here when the hall is supposed to be for us?" It was delicious.

Most of the time in life you wait for the one great moment, the beautiful *bon mot* that you can deliver with all of the wickedly clever timing it deserves. Mostly they occur to you the day after you could have said them, or worse, they turn out to be truly wicked but not clever. On this day, however, I could hardly wait to jump up from the floor, extend my hand and rush into my introductions. "Yo soy Padre Wolf, el nuevo director espiritual." She 'tenia verguenza' (became embarrassed) with just the right hint of red on her cheeks. "Oh my God!" she said, in English.

Father Wolf goes on to share his perspective on men and women having separate weekends:

"Dividing Cursillo weekends into men's and women's makes great practical sense. Women are free to act differently around one another when men are not present, and men are free from the watchful eyes of women. At least that is one of the dynamics at work.

For the women's weekend, of course, they are not exactly free of men; spiritual directors still observe and interact. It's never just a time 'for the girls.' Men's weekends are different in that they are always exclusively male. One could make many comments on what this difference actually produces, and how much it is expressive of the Church in our time. But one thing it does produce is a curiosity among women about the men's weekend. They have no window into what 'really goes on' there since it is not tempered with any woman's presence. Just what do they do there? And is it different from what women do?

We priests are the only ones who know.

The truth is surprising. Generally, the experience among men is more emotional. I don't mean men cry or hug or hold onto one another more often or more deeply than women do. I do mean that behind the closed windows of the three-day weekend, away from the watching eyes of the rest of the world, men have a chance to experience emotions more intensely.

Of course, I am not a neutral observer. I'm one of the guys and can never be one of the gals. And because I am, I am not able to see how women act when they are only among women. But in the movement, as it is and as I have seen it, men experience these days as something deeply liberating and powerfully moving. It has touched them at a depth they have not gotten to before. Cursillo is a men's movement.

It's a women's movement too. Maybe it's been a good idea to keep things separate. I wonder if we might not learn something more from this. That is, I suppose, a story for another day."

Both Father Mike Chapman and Father Wolf spoke fondly of a man that lived the first Cursillo....Jesse Gonzalez. Their comments brought to mind a man that truly understood piety, study and action...and lived them in his daily life. I'm sure there are many examples of men and women throughout the years that equal Jesse's journey, but for today, let me share a couple of their memories.

Father Wolf remembers Jesse's impact on him this way:

"It was when Jesse Gonzalez stood up and spoke about his son. Well, what he spoke about was his faith. Jesse held on to the faith he had been given with the same desperation a drowning man hangs on to his last breath. Except in Jesse's case, he had found the surface and knew when he could breathe. I was stunned. I had never in my life heard anyone talk with such conviction about what believing in God meant to him. I had been surrounded by believers my whole life; I had never heard anyone who had been surrounded by the power of belief like Jesse had been. His words weren't information; they were spirit and life.

When I think about all of my weekends and my words, I still remained judged by Jesse's. I can't speak with the same power as he did; I haven't lived the same life he lived. I have always thought that if I could pull back the veil of other men's minds, perhaps they could have the same special experience I had. Maybe they could hear Jesse on their weekend and find the same glowing presence there that I had found on mine."

He goes on to say, "In this movement there is the promise that God will act. None of us get to predict how. We only have our parts to do and our roles to perform. I had always thought it was up to me to make something of the weekend for all of those who were there. Since the Spiritual Directors at my weekend had not been at the center of what I experienced, I thought I should make up the difference of their absence. But it turns out not to be so. Some of the most powerful moments happen away from us, but they have power because they are away from us. It gives me great hope that over this time I may have contributed to a moment of another's conversion.

Father Chapman's recollection of Jesse goes like this:

"Jesse stood out at the first weekend with his conviction to his parish at Binger. Binger was challenged with a small church community...therefore, the fear of closing of that mission always lingered. Jesse was convinced that if they had an activity center, that more parishioners would be attracted to the little community. At the end of that first Cursillo weekend, the men all donated money to Jesse to begin building his dream at his parish. Over the next few years, Jesse almost single handedly built what is now the Activity Center at Binger. Years later, the structural integrity of the structure was questioned, so a structural engineer was brought in to evaluate. His conclusion...."the building was way overbuilt...and would be able to withstand almost any force of nature that southwestern Oklahoma could experience. Jesse had committed to do God's work in everything he did...and the activity center was no exception." It is still there...and the Binger mission is still active. Jesse's work continues to touch many that don't even know him.

Sister Elsa Galdeano commented on the early help from the Laredo, Texas regional team that came to OKC to help the Spanish find their way. She was also so

grateful to the many vocations that came out of living a Cursillo weekend...priests, deacons, and religious.

The stories could go on and on, but our time today cannot. In conclusion to reflecting on the Early Years of Cursillo, it is safe to say that many men and women laid the groundwork for the movement that the rest of us would later enjoy. Perseverance plus a true love for doing God's work were the foundation of a movement that we would later celebrate 30 years of existence. Our personal thanks to those that have gone before us to their eternal reward with our Lord and Savior...and those that are still with us in our journey on this Earth.

“The Transition Years”

After the first 20 years of Cursillo in Oklahoma City diocese, the movement faced some new attention...and challenges in the mid 90s. It all started as we attempted to connect ourselves to the National Secretariat. Even though we had paid our annual dues to National each year, they knew very little of our efforts here. The National English representative, Lou Rubbio and the National Spanish representative, Jorge Barcello made a trip to Oklahoma City to visit our Secretariat. That was an evening that would bring us much consternation...as well as serve as an agent of change for the future.

We were told that night that without a School of Leaders and many changes to our Cursillo weekends...that they would petition National...and our Archbishop to close the movement down in Oklahoma City. Personally, I remember spikes in many persons' blood pressure...as well as some tears shed. I remember the night as if it happened yesterday.

A quick call to the Archbishop's office proved that they could not close us down without his approval...and we had him on our side. But the evening brought about some good questions.

- What about this “School of Leaders thing?”
- What about our weekends that wasn't authentic with the intentions of the movement?
- What about our leadership that needed to change?
- If we were so wrong...what are the other dioceses doing that we weren't?

That year, some of us from Secretariat attended the National Cursillo Encounter. We learned about all the elements of Cursillo...and also the many dioceses that struggled like we were. We came away enlightened...and re-charged to chart the course for our Cursillo movement to be as authentic as possible.

Our first effort was to clearly define what an “authentic movement” actually looked like. We looked at each element of Cursillo...the Pre-Cursillo...the 3 day weekend...and the Post Cursillo.

Our Pre-Cursillo efforts lacked good formation of candidates...basically...we weren't “making a friend, being a friend...before we brought that friend to Christ.” Much training was to be done on being a good sponsor.

The 3-day weekend held much room for improvement. We needed to move back to basics and make sure the weekend was about the candidate. Every aspect of the weekend was scrutinized. Extra activities that were “nice” but not additive...and sometimes

distractive to the weekend, were removed....some with great pain. The rectors/rectoras were to be formed to have a better understanding of the Cursillo movement. They would later be required to be attendees of the “not yet formed” School of Leaders. We really developed a call to “return to the basics of Cursillo.”

Post-Cursillo needed to be strengthened through our Group Reunions and Ultreyas. With a focus on Group Reunion and Ultreya...and the addition of a strong School of Leaders...the quality of our movement would greatly improve. We actually came to the conclusion that strong Group Reunions and Ultreyas were far more important than the 3-day weekend if we were to celebrate metanoia and change our environments to be centered on Christ. Again, we put the actions into place to return all of these elements to an “authentic position.” The outcome would be witnessed through productive Group Reunions and Ultreyas; converted environments, and improved candidate quality for the 3-day weekend.

In the mid 1990s, we developed a relationship of support to the local Vietnamese Cursillo community. They all traveled to Houston to make their 3-day weekends, but the Ultreya community in Oklahoma centered itself out of Andrew Dung Loc Church. Our visits there for Regional Ultreyas were always a Spirit filled experience. We are fortunate to have a faith filled group taking the journey with us.

As we enter our 30th year, we can all be thankful of our return to an authentic Cursillo movement. Our Pre-Cursillo efforts are producing well prepared candidates for the weekends. Our 3-day Weekends are simple and complete. They adequately prepare our Cursillistas for their mission in their environments. Our Post Cursillo is strengthened through a very well executed School of Leaders format, as well as a growing number of Group Reunions and Ultreyas. A great number of our Cursillistas have been living their 4th day through Group Reunion and Ultreya faithfully since they completed their weekend.

Praise be to God for the messages and directions that were sent to us through what seemed at the time, a very negative and difficult situation.

So, there you have it. I’m sure we missed reliving many events that might have been witnessed by you...but we captured the essence. A story that started 30 years ago, with 3 men who did nothing more than “make a friend, be a friend, bring that friend to Christ” and the perseverance and commitment of all those that followed.

De Colores!

ULTREYA!!!