

Cursillo Movement

(Catholic Cursillo, Walk to Emmaus, Via De Cristo, Tres Dias, etc.)

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: “An intense, three-day experience of Christian renewal” originating in the Roman Catholic Church and “involving community living, presentations on Christian doctrine by lay persons and priests, participation in groups discussions, liturgical prayer, and the like.”¹ “Cursillo” is the shortened form of the Spanish *cursilo de cristianidad*, which means “little course in Christianity, “a three-day [72 hour] period of spiritual renewal or of spirit awakening that attempts to convey a new sense of the dynamic personalistic aspects of Christian faith.”² Its purpose is “the Christianization of the world through apostolic action of Christian leaders in all areas of human activity.”³ The Cursillo program has been duplicated in some Protestant denominations, with changes made to reflect doctrinal perspectives of the sponsoring churches.

History: The origin of the Cursillo Movement in the Roman Catholic Church can be traced to spiritual renewal activities on the Spanish island of Majorca. Leaders of Catholic Action, the official organization of the lay apostolate in Spain, founded the movement as a way of preparing young men for pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James at Compostela. This preparation took the form of “little courses” in Christianity, hence the word “cursillo.” As a defined movement, Cursillo was officially constituted in 1949. Instrumental in founding the movement were Father Juan Capo and Eduardo Bonnin. The “Cursillo Movement” came to the United States in the 1950s, with the first cursillo weekend held in Waco, Texas in 1957. Key figures in its formation in the U.S. were Father Gabriel Fernandez and two airmen from Spain training with the U.S. Air Force, Bernardo Vadell and Agustin Palomino. The movement spread rapidly in the 1960s throughout the U.S. The Cursillo Movement in the United States was organized nationally in 1965 with the founding of a National Secretariat and a National Cursillo Office (currently in Dallas, TX). By 1981 nearly all of the 160 Roman Catholic dioceses in the U.S. had introduced the movement. Cursillo is joined to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops through an official liaison. It is now international in scope and is a member of the International Catholic Organizations of the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome.⁴ According to one source, “Although the Cursillo movement is not formally linked to the Catholic charismatic movement, the Cursillo movement—especially the National Cursillo Convention held in 1966—was an important catalyst in the growth of the Catholic charismatic renewal in the U.S.”⁵

A number of U.S. denominations have adapted the Roman Catholic Cursillo Movement to fit their needs and reflect their own theological emphases or perspectives. For example, in 1978 the Upper Room of the Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church adapted the program for a primarily Protestant audience, and after further revisions gave it the name in 1981 “Walk to Emmaus.” A Lutheran expression of Cursillo began in the 1970s and in 1986 adopted the name “Via De Cristo” (<http://www.viadechristo.org/who.htm>).⁶ Presbyterians have developed the “Presbyterian Cursillo” (see <http://www.cursillo.com/>), and the Episcopalian churches

¹Daniel Lowery, *A Basic Catholic Dictionary* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 1985), 36-37.

²G. P. Hughes and J. F. Byron, “Cursillo Movement,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale Group Inc., 2003), 4:443.

³*Ibid.*

⁴The information in this paragraph is taken largely from the web site of the National Cursillo Center:

<http://www.cursillo.org/whatis.html>

⁵*Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 333.

⁶Most leaders and participants of Via De Cristo have been and are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

the “Episcopal Cursillo” (see e.g., <http://www.olympia.anglican.org/min/cursillo/>). An inter-denominational version of Cursillo is called “Tres Dias” (<http://www.tresdias.org/>). The basic format for Cursillo is followed also by non-Catholic expressions, with the content altered to reflect the theological perspectives of denominational affiliations.

Texts: Lecture outlines and summaries for Cursillo sessions; monthly magazines and newsletters (e.g., *Ultreya* [Catholic]; *Connexiones* [Via De Cristo, Lutheran])

Beliefs and Practices

The Cursillo Movement, as such, does not profess adherence to a specific creedal statement. Theological emphases reflecting the doctrinal commitments and convictions of individual leaders are present in the meditations, lectures (*rollos*), and discussions of the Cursillo. The weekends to a large extent focus on 15 talks given by laymen and clergy (10 by laymen and 5 by clergy). Titles of the talks (Roman Catholic Cursillo), which are intentionally sequential and build on one another, are as follows: Ideal, Sanctifying grace, Piety, Study, the Sacraments, Action, Obstacles to Grace, Leadership, Study of Community in Action, Total Security, and After the Cursillo.⁷ In Catholic cursillo, *curisillitas* (participants) attend daily Mass, receive Communion, pray the rosary, and “visit the Blessed Sacrament daily.”⁸ The Cursillo weekends are followed by structured group reunions called *ultreyas* designed for sharing spiritual insights and experiences, thus providing opportunities to reinforce the Cursillo weekend experiences (sometimes called “The Fourth Day”).

The National Cursillo Center speaks of the Cursillo Movement as “a powerful instrument of renewal in the Church.” “Its aim,” says a brochure published by the Center, “is to concentrate closely on the Person and teachings of Jesus Christ” and to give those who attend “a living understanding of basic Christian truths and the desire to serve the Church.” The weekends, through the study and worship activities, are designed as an actual “encounter with Christ...a real meeting with Christ.” The ultimate goal is “the spiritual revitalization of the world, that is, “the Christianizing of environment” or providing “a Christian leaven in civic, social, and economic life.”

Protestant versions of Cursillo share similar aims. “The Walk to Emmaus” (Methodist), for example, aims “to inspire, challenge, and equip local church members for Christian action—in their homes, churches, workplaces, and communities.” Emmaus promises to strengthen a person’s “conscious union with Jesus Christ” and to offer participants an “opportunity to rediscover Christ’s presence in their lives, to gain fresh understanding of God’s transforming grace, and to form friendships that foster faith and support spiritual maturity.”⁹ Walk to Emmaus describes itself as “mainstream in theological outlook,” and is “for those who seek to follow Christ without regard to labels and camps.” It sees itself “fostering unity in Christ, not theological debate and arguments about denominations” and wants to develop an “appreciation and openness to the different faith-perspectives of the participants,” seeking to avoid defining Christianity “narrowly and legalistically.”¹⁰ Each day of the Emmaus weekend, Holy Communion is celebrated.

Via De Cristo describes itself as “a highly structured three day weekend designed to strengthen and renew the faith of Christian people and bring them to a new awareness of living in God’s grace.” It is “based on the fundamentals of Christianity, concentrating on

⁷In Via De Cristo (Lutheran expression), the talks are titled: Ideal, Means of Grace: Word and Sacrament, Grace Filled Days, Action, Obstacles to Grace, Leaders, Environment, Life in Grace, Christian Community in Action, Total Security, 4th Day. *Ideal: The Outline and Clarification of the Outline*, An Official Publication of the National Lutheran Secretariat, 1989, 3-10.

⁸Information brochure published by the National Cursillo Center.

⁹Stephen Bryant, *Walk to Emmaus: What is Emmaus?* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), 7, 12.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 19-20.

the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.”¹¹ Both Via De Cristo and Walk to Emmaus stress that their programs are for the spiritual renewal of professing Christians, and are not for non-Christians.

A Lutheran Response

An informed response to the Cursillo movement in the variety of its denominational expressions requires individual judgments based on the doctrinal content or perspective of the Cursillo weekend presentations and activities. Generally, Cursillo administrators and leaders are upfront about the content and nature of their programs, though an effort is made through a highly regimented schedule to remove outside distractions during the weekends themselves—giving the impression of secrecy. Those invited to Cursillo weekends are urged to exercise careful discernment based on advanced review of available materials and to seek counsel from their pastor(s).

Cursillo leaders are themselves aware of certain problems that arise during, and as a result of, the weekend retreats. For example, a Walk to Emmaus introductory booklet forthrightly warns against certain common “pitfalls” leaders and members can anticipate: “Walking to Emmaus and leaving” (a positive experience, but not moving beyond it); “Making Emmaus their church”; “Acting cliquish or elitist”; “Talking about Emmaus as though Emmaus were secretive”; “Viewing Emmaus as exclusive”; “Attending Emmaus for the wrong reasons” (e.g., dealing with psychological problems); “Failing to understand the potential of Emmaus”; “Getting off balance theologically.”¹² Members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod who have attended or are familiar with Cursillo weekends have reported some similar concerns. From the theological perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), additional concerns such as the following may be noted.

First, Cursillo leaders who dismiss doctrinal differences as necessarily divisive and who regard mention of them as evidence of narrowness and legalism should be encouraged to think more seriously about what the Scriptures teach regarding genuine and God-pleasing external unity among Christians (who are indeed one in the body of Christ). Genuine harmony among Christians is based on and deepened by agreement in the confession of the biblical faith, and is to be sought humbly and sincerely by Christians. St. Paul introduces his letter to the church at Corinth, which was troubled by divisions rooted in theological error, by stating: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). Indeed, Paul urged that his readers “maintain the unity of the Spirit,” but this is to be done “*in the bond of peace*”—which entailed agreement in the apostolic faith (Eph. 4:3; 2:11-21).

Second, the celebration of Holy Communion at Cursillo weekends presents difficulties for LCMS members. It has been the longstanding position of the LCMS that according to the Scriptures participation in the Sacrament is a testimony to the unity of the faith that is confessed (close[d] Communion).¹³ Failure to respect this position can lead to judgmental attitudes and disrespect for individual consciences.

Third, Cursillo literature often speaks of “experiencing the presence of Christ.” Some participants have reported that experiences at Cursillo weekends tend to become intensely, and even excessively, emotional. A danger inherent in over-emphasis on emotional experience is that the focus shifts away from the means of grace (Word and Sacrament). Through these vehicles alone God has promised to be present among us in His forgiving and renewing grace. Through them alone the Holy Spirit is operative (who not only produces joy in the heart, but also genuine sorrow for sin). No one can “encounter” the person of Christ today apart from the means of grace, through which He makes Himself known.

¹¹<http://www.viadecristo.org/who.htm>

¹²Bryant, *What Is Emmaus?*, 29-30.

¹³See the following reports of the LCMS’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations for the biblical and confessional rationale for the historic practice of close[d] Communion: *Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper* (1983; http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Theol_lord_supper1.pdf); *Admission to the Lord’s Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching* (1999; <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/admisup.pdf>)

Finally, we may observe that the predominant emphasis in the Cursillo talks is the sanctified life. Emphasis on sanctification within a proper context is certainly appropriate and necessary, and should be commended. We recall the exhortation of the writer to the Hebrews: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:23-25). However, it should be emphasized that true spiritual renewal does not take place through the performance of good works or through obedience of the Christian to God’s will (Law) or even through a spiritual experience of some kind. God renews people spiritually, says the Bible, through the Gospel of Christ in Word and sacrament (Rom. 10:17; Titus 3:1-11; 1 Pet. 1:3, 22-25; etc.). Efforts to keep this principle clear during the Cursillo weekends should be encouraged.¹⁴

For Further Reading

- Bryant, Stephen. *Walk to Emmaus: What Is Emmaus?* Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003.
- Campbell, D. “Cursillo,” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990 (333).
- Hughes, G. P. and J. F. Byron, “Cursillo Movement,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Detroit: Gale Group Inc., 2003 (4:443-44).
- Marcoux, Marcene. *Cursillo, Anatomy of a Movement: The Experience of Spiritual Renewal*. Lambeth Press, 1982.

Links and Websites

<http://www.viadecristo.org/who.htm>

<http://www.cursillo.com/>

<http://www.tresdias.org/>

¹⁴ Via De Cristo (Lutheran) has included a place in its outline of presentations for a specific discussion of God’s renewal through Word and sacrament.