

VII World Encounter Cursillos in Christianity

THROUGH HIM, WITH HIM AND IN HIM

When we began planning this VII WE, I told the members of the OMCC executive that I'd bet \$50 we would not have more than 100 come because of the remoteness of Australia from other parts of the world. With 177 registered I am pleased, no delighted, I was proven wrong. I have given \$50 to the St Vincent de Paul Society who do much in our society providing assistance to people in need.

As I thought of your journeying to this country, many perhaps for the first time (please raise your hands if this is your first visit – I hope you can see something of the rugged beauty of this vast land), I thought of what Pope Francis said about his election as bishop of Rome, that the cardinals had to go to the ends of the earth to find the one they wanted in this office in the Church. I pray that this Encounter will be what the Cursillo three days focuses on; an encounter with self, with Christ and with others.

The title of this presentation: “Through Him, with Him and in Him” takes us to the heart of our faith, our identity and how our world, the environments we live in and influence will only find happiness and fulfilment they long for. Our movement is a movement of the Church and the Church operates like a sacrament making Christ present. What we say in prayer expresses how we conform ourselves more and more to Christ. I want to unpack the words of the title to see more clearly who a Christian is and in doing that, who a Cursillista is.

The words “Through Him, with Him and in Him” in Latin “per ipsum, et cum ipso et in ipso” are very familiar as they are words we hear at every celebration of the Eucharist. The setting is the conclusion of the Eucharistic prayer. The presider holds the sacred elements before us, the consecrated bread and wine and makes a profession of faith speaking to us of Jesus present in our midst. Christ's faithful affirm the faith with the Amen they proclaim. The intensity of the proclamation by the people can vary but we need to ensure that this is a “great Amen” and sounds like a great Amen. We are affirming what has been said in the prayer and our commitment to live it. At the invitation to Holy Communion the presider will be even more explicit when he says once again, holding the food and drink transformed by the Spirit before our eyes: Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world, blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb. We Catholics need to be more fervent than many of our more fundamentalist brothers and sisters who are very fervent in their proclamation of Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour in our profession of the presence of Christ in our midst.

The presider is not saying think about Christ. He is saying: “here in our midst is Christ, Ecce, agnus dei.” If ever people ask us where can we find Christ, invite them to Mass and say “here he is”. This is the one who, after the resurrection, cooked breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Lake Tiberias; come and have breakfast. This reality, of course, has profound implications for us who celebrate Eucharist, how we act, think, speak, sing but more of that later.

Blessed John Paul II at the third World Ultreya in Rome in July 2000 saw in us, Cursillistas, an answer to the question asked by Pope Paul VI at the first World Ultreya: “Can the Gospel

still win over the mature person in urban and rural cultures?” Our presence in the world is a resounding “Yes” to that question. The Pope continued by saying that we transform the world by becoming new men and women. We know that experientially as we recall our own transformation which happened perhaps when we lived our three days or at some other time. When we have been won over by Christ, when we change, the environments in which we live, by necessity, have to contend with us transformed. Our primary focus is always each person. They are loved by God but may not be aware of that reality, or been touched deeply by it. Whenever an individual realizes in the depth of their being that God loves them then they change.

Pope Francis when Archbishop of Buenos Aires said in a letter he wrote to Cursillistas: “I am well aware of the difficulties that present themselves while trying to insert the Gospel into our society and also very well aware of your boldness and apostolic fervour, born of that personal encounter between yourselves and Christ which you leads you forward to make history, for the good of many; and that the many, whether they are on the fringes of society or not, feel the loving embrace of Christ.”

With the words “through, with and in Him” we are speaking of the risen Lord present in our midst and what our lives are about. In the Eucharistic prayer the presider continues: “... in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours Almighty Father, for ever and ever.” Here in a few words is the fundamental dynamic of our life. United in the Spirit, we find ourselves as we give the Father Almighty all glory and honour.

The risen Lord wants every Christian, each person he has chosen (remember “you have not chosen me, I have chosen you. We are always “responding” people, responding to an initiative that begins we could say on the other side of the fence. This initiative begins with God not with us.) The risen Lord wants each Christian to have the same mind as he had. Jesus was always oriented to the Father. He always acted in accordance with the will of the Father. This was the fundamental configuration of his personality, of his life. This configuration is to be ours as well.

As a child the religious sisters who taught me instructed us to put the letters AMDG on the top of each page of the exercise books in which we did our school work. Ad maiorem Dei gloriam – for the greater glory of God – we were told the acronym stood for. Without telling us, or at least I cannot remember their informing us, they took the phrase from St Ignatius Loyola who instructed his fellow Jesuits and fellow travellers to seek God in all things. Only with God always in mind do we have a true perspective on ourselves, our lives and our world.

So now come with me as we journey into some of the realities behind these six words.

Through Him: the reality of mediation. All our prayers end with “Through Christ, our Lord”. Our relationship with the Father is mediated. Some will reject that and affirm they go directly to the Father. It is the Father they pray to, communicate with. They are not focussing on Jesus. That may be true in one sense in the sense their attention is on the Father, but in another it is not. John the Evangelist says “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (Jn 1:2). With words like these we are deep into the reality of the Trinity, the inter-relationship of the persons of the godhead, the amazing revelation by God of the true identity of the divine. We do not have the Trinity as a brain-teaser. It is the action of one wanting to be known by those outside. This is who I am. The divine equivalent of what we do when we tell those we love who we really are.

Creation is divine activity and not just the work of the Father as the words of the creed could lead you to believe. The Trinity creates. The Word of God is woven into the whole fabric of creation. There is nothing in creation foreign to Christ. John portrays Jesus saying “no one can come to the Father except through me”. We speak of Christ as the mediator, the go between, the one through whom we go to the Father. We come into the presence of the Father through Jesus even when we are not focussing on Jesus. Because of our union with Jesus we have connection with the Father. We shall have more to say on this when we consider the words “in Him”.

At times when we deliver something to another, for instance a letter or package, we write on the item: John Brown per (through) Fred Smith. The designated person undertakes to ensure the item is delivered. The deliverer takes responsibility for the delivery. St Stephen the first follower of Jesus to be killed for believing in Jesus said “I see heaven thrown open and the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Father”. Jesus takes responsibility for us coming to the Father. Jesus takes us to the Father. We are the item being delivered.

May I make something of an aside here and then return to the words under consideration.

Have you ever stood back in awe at the speed with which the first followers of Jesus spoke of Jesus as divine, or that is what their words implied and that he was the way to the Father? The first disciples were all devout Jews and monotheists yet here they are speaking of Jesus in terms previously reserved for God alone.

John’s gospel was written toward the end of the first century that is 60 years after the Lord’s death and resurrection. Possibly by that time the eyewitnesses were all dead but with the earlier gospels some would still have been alive.

Can you imagine yourself being one of the eyewitnesses? You have been invited by this man to follow him? What do you know of him? My reading of the gospels has me seeing the connecting point of Jesus and the disciples who became like an inner circle, to be John the Baptist. I say this because the criteria for eligibility for inclusion in the twelve after the departure/defection of Judas is: being present from the time of the baptism to the Resurrection.

Before Jesus called them to follow him he already knew them or they knew him. These men and women (perhaps had a profound interest in God’s business. At first this was interest in the mission and message of the Baptist. We know Jesus not only was baptised by John but worked with him. Only when John was arrested and executed did Jesus begin his own public work.

But before Jesus called them from their various occupations there was already a network among these men. After the call they then lived with Jesus, worked with him, were formed by him. They heard him speak, watched him pray, heal the sick and free people from the powers of darkness. They saw him tortured and killed and had their hopes of the kingdom coming in power dashed. They were scared and cowardly abandoned him. But then they changed. They spoke of Jesus being alive, breathing his spirit on them (the coming of the Holy Spirit in John) or firing them for mission (the Pentecost experience of Luke).

However the Holy Spirit manifested itself, gentle breath inhaled or spectacular flame that overcame language barriers, the transformation of the disciples and their emergence onto the world stage is an undeniable fact. What appeared was the reality of the Church itself.

As world history attests, as world statistics record, the Church exists and is active throughout the world. In 2000 years it has touched people in every country on earth. The Church looks to Jesus, not as an historical figure providing believers with an example of how to live a virtuous life. If that is all he is, then we are a sad group of people. If, however, in Jesus people encountered the divine in human reality, then what he said and did is something of another category of importance.

The scriptures, the 73 pieces of writing we hold as definitive, are a creation of the Church. Not one of those writing knew Jesus personally. Like us, they knew him as the one they met in what would be known as the sacraments, the rituals and symbols of the Church in which Jesus was as alive and active as he was with the men and women whom he called to be disciples. Like Stephen at his death, Jesus sat at the right hand of the Father. It was he with the Father who sent the Holy Spirit to complete his work on earth and bring us to the fullness of grace. We acknowledge him as the Word incarnate – the Father spoke and Jesus, the only begotten Son, was heard clearly in the world. It is through him we give all honour and glory to the Father. As he was, so we too are, Father centred and obedient to the will of the Father.

With him: the reality of companioning presence. These are the next two of our six words. Jesus is one who is with us as companion, leader, rescuer, saviour, teacher, life-giver. “*With*” speaks to us of presence, not of remoteness; of intimacy, not aloofness. This companioning presence of Christ risen from the dead is so much part of our belief and outlook that we can forget the uniqueness of this belief in the experience of world religions. No other faith or religion makes this claim about the figure central to the religion or faith. Buddhists, Muslims, Confucianists would never dream of saying such things about the Buddha, Mohammed or Confucius. These men may be revered for their teaching, their insights but they are now dead. They are not an ongoing abiding presence.

In the profession of the Christian faith, it is stated the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. This is not some ethereal spiritual presence. We Catholics speak easily of his real presence in the blessed sacrament, the people assembled, the priest presiding, the word of God. In saying this we are at home with Jesus walking the Holy Land. He called individuals to come with him. This group of men and women travel with him in the north and then move south to Jerusalem and the temple, the constant reminder to the people of their being chosen and that God pitched his tent in their midst. With Jesus this presence is no more confined to a building but a temple that is a living person.

The companion presence remains after the Resurrection as the two disciples heading for the Emmaus and in all likelihood the Mediterranean are joined by an unrecognised Jesus who tackles the stumbling block of a suffering Messiah. When do the two of them see clearly and recognize him? When Jesus does what he did at the last supper they had with him on the eve of his execution. He took bread, prayer over it and broke it. It is as if he is saying: remember what happened to me on the cross – my life was poured out - not to dash the great task I initiated but to keep it going. Every time you do what I did then, know I am with you. You are not just tripping down memory lane with the help of a stage-play re-enactment of the upper room. I am with you keeping you in the most intimate contact you can ever have with the Father and with me.

The Risen Lord can and does confront people directly. Paul's Damascus experience stands testimony to this. The zealous young persecutor of this troublesome group of Jews hears a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Of this remarkable and again unique identification of Christ himself with an infant but fully operational Church, I shall say more in the next section "*In Him*". For now, just savour the encounter Paul has with Christ, an encounter that will mark Paul indelibly and from which will flow Paul's theology of the Church as the body of Christ.

Being with Christ is not always comfortable and easy. The disciples rejoiced in his presence even when confused and tempted to walk away as so many did when he spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Peter may not have understood, may have been revolted but where could he and the others go because Jesus had the words of everlasting life?

We can move into different situations in life, different environments and draw strength from knowing we are not alone. As a child going into dark places was frightening but if you went with an older brother or sister or Mum and Dad you were safe. The scary things who lived in the dark could not get you.

The same can be true as an adult. I was parish priest once of a country parish. In area it was one third the size of Ireland and had a Catholic population of about 900. I recall saying to Jesus one time after being promoted from the assistant priest to a senior priest, to being the parish priest but without an assistant, I said to our Lord, "You are the shepherd; you know all these people better than I. I shall do my priestly duties to the best of my ability. If you want something extra done, let me know and I shall do it". This is not talking to an imaginary friend but activating one's faith,

I do not think a devout Muslim, Buddhist would relate to Mohammed or Buddha in any way like this.

In him: the reality of identification. Of the three phrases in this familiar set of words, this last phrase is the most incredible. *In Him*. We are in Him. Paul's conversion experience seared this reality of unity into his brain so deeply that he developed teaching about the body of Christ to capture in some way what is reality for us. The words Paul heard were: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Not why are you persecuting these followers of Jesus the Nazarene but me. In response to his question "Who are you, Lord" came this, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting".

This identification by Jesus with the Church is a foundational reality. When people experience us, they experience Christ. Paul theologises about this reality as he speaks of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12, 12-25). He images a body with many parts and divided by the head. How we come into the body is through baptism. The Spirit we have is the spirit of Christ given to complete Christ's work on earth and bring us to the fullness of grace. As Paul's examination reveals we do not lose our individuality drawn into a collective that destroys all individuality. Each of us is a unique creation by a non-violent act of love but not created to be alone. We are called to communion, created for it and only fulfilled in it.

In Him, we live and move and have our being. Said of the Father (Sunday preface VI) Jesus identifies with those before us in need – what you do or neglect to do to the least of these you do or neglect to do to me.

If we come alive to this reality of oneness with Christ, we will never be the same. Sin would be impossible because how could we make Jesus party to manipulation, cruelty, indifference, drunkenness, illicit and immoral actions and relationships. If we were aware in even the smallest way of his presence in those in need, how could we not respond?

This foundational reality of him being in us is not contradicted by our sin. The Church decided in the first centuries that the lack of holiness in the priest officiating at the Sacraments did not drain the Sacrament of its effectiveness. If the Sacrament was administered in accord with the intention of the Church, then it was effective. Baptism, absolution of sin, Eucharist, anointing of the sick, and the others are always effective because it is Christ at work in them.

When we say in the creed we believe in one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, we are focussing on Christ. In him, we are one, we are holy, we are in all places and we are on mission. We must say these things incredible as they sound especially in light of manifest sins of Christ's faithful because if we don't we deny the reality of Christ's presence in the Church. The early Church judges it correct and sound to call Mary, Mother of God even though no human being can be the Mother of a self-existent Trinitarian God. But if we denied Mary was the Mother of God, we destroy the unity of the divine and human nature in the person of Jesus. So we must say these things about the Church and even that we believe in it.

Conclusion

By exploring these words with you my hope is that you see more clearly how profound is the transformation that took place with your surrender to Christ and your experience of God's love. We live our fourth day in company with our fellow Cursillistas in Group Reunion and Ultreya but more often than not we witness as individuals. And we shall make a difference.

Much has happened in the Church since our last World Encounter. In 2005 Twitter did not exist. Facebook was not two years old. The first Apple iPad was released April 3, 2010. The world population is now just over 7 billion. Catholics number at about 1.2 billion. By 2011, the Americas accounted for 48.8% of the world's Catholic population, followed by Europe with 23.5%, Africa with 16%, Asia with 10.9% and Oceania with 0.8%. Reliable estimates show that two-thirds of the Catholics of the world were born after second Vatican Council in the mid 1960s. There are many of us and still a world to experience Christ through Christ face to face and through the social media so long as we project our true selves into cyberspace and not some work of personal fiction.

Of much more recent times we have experienced an upheaval in the Church at its highest level. On 11 February 2013 we heard these words:

Dear Brothers,

I have convoked you to this Consistory, not only for the three canonizations, but also to communicate to you a decision of great importance for the life of the Church. After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry. I am well aware that this ministry, due to its essential spiritual nature, must be carried out not only with words and deeds, but no less with prayer and suffering. However, in today's world, subject to so many rapid changes

and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me. For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005, in such a way, that as from 28 February 2013, at 20:00 hours, the See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant and a Conclave to elect the new Supreme Pontiff will have to be convoked by those whose competence it is.

As if the resignation of a Pope was something unexpected then so too was the election on 13 March 2013 of Cardinal Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires as Bishop of Rome by the college of Cardinals. He is the first Jesuit, the first from the Americas, the first from the southern hemisphere. He has held no positions in Rome. He does not have the attachment to some of the traditions that his predecessors had. He speaks to people not just in carefully crafted encyclicals but in his daily homilies and occasional interviews. I hear that the simple life style he has adopted has had its impact on the cardinals and other senior Vatican officials. The Pope is driven around not in a limousine but in a VW. I hear that some of the Cardinals are now driving VWs.

As Cursillistas seeing the impact of one person of faith, as we see with the Holy Father, living what he believes, comes as no surprise. We have seen the impact the previous Holy Fathers have had on our societies but this man's impact is different again. With a world with so many young people filled with dreams of a better world, alive to each other with the help of social networks, we have the world in which the Gospel is still good news.

We know from the time of the Clausura that Christ is counting on us. We see it in people great and small as we think of Popes, ourselves and our friends. As you reflect on what I have shared be even more convinced that not only is Christ counting on you, but that he is with you, and in you and that through him you are one with the Father whose will you always seek to do.

De colores
Rev Dr Adrian Farrelly