

Cursillo: learning to live a Christian life

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Six middle aged men, wearing shorts and golf shirts, jeans and T-shirts, sit in a small office in Brentwood early on a Saturday morning. They talk about their troubles, about their successes, about God. They laugh at good-natured ribbing, and they sit quietly, listening intently, while their friends share the latest challenges at work or at home.

After an hour or so, they all lean forward into a circle with their heads bowed and their hands clasped together and they pray. They pray for each other, they pray for their families. They pray for God's help to live their faith every day in every thing that they do.

They leave each other with a strong hug and a warm smile. Until next Saturday.

They're like countless Cursillo groups meeting weekly in the Diocese of Nashville as well as 60 nations around the world.

"My whole life is better by coming here on Saturday mornings," said Mike Schlacter, a member of the Cursillo group that meets at Joe McLaughlin's office in Maryland Farms. Saturday mornings are the time Schlacter and the others in the group stop to reflect on how they see God in their everyday lives, how they can bring God to everyone they meet simply by living a Christian life.

"One of the main purposes of the Cursillo movement ... (is) to Christianize our environment, to live our Christian lives wherever we are, in our families, in our work environment, in our neighborhoods, in our church, in our social life," said Deacon Marty Deschenes, the spiritual advisor of the Cursillo movement in the Diocese of Nashville.

He's been a part of the Cursillo movement since 1974, when he attended a three-day weekend retreat. Co-workers and friends had been inviting him to attend for years promising that "it would be a life-changing experience."

"I did everything I was supposed to do, but there was something missing in my life. And it was that thing in my life," Deschenes said of Cursillo. "It was a life-changing experience for me. ... I don't think I would have ever become a deacon if I hadn't made Cursillo."

Course in Christianity

The movement began in Majorca, Spain, in 1944, when a group of lay Catholic men, inspired by the earlier Catholic Action movement, met for a weekend retreat to train leaders for a planned pilgrimage from Majorca to Compostello in Spain.

A group of people who made that first pilgrimage continued to meet to study together, Deschenes explained, and decided to develop a program "that would try to change people's lives." The name they gave the program is Cursillo de Cristiandad, Spanish for Short Course in Christianity.

The program begins with a weekend retreat that begins at 7 p.m. Thursday and ends about 7 p.m. Sunday. The weekend includes time for prayer and private meditation and the Eucharist is celebrated every day. But the core of the weekend is a series of talks by clergy and lay people. The topics of the talks and the order they are presented is always the same: Ideal, Grace, Laity, Faith, Piety, Study, Sacraments, Obstacles to Life of Grace, Action, Leaders, Study of the Environ-



Photo by Andy Telli

Joe McLaughlin, left, and Rich McGee pray with other members of their Cursillo group, which meets every Saturday morning. The small group meetings are an important part of the Cursillo experience, reinforcing the commitment to live a more fully Christian life that people make while attending a Cursillo weekend retreat.

ment, Christianity in Action, Christian Life and Total Security. The participants at the weekend, typically 25 to 30 people, are divided into small groups that have a discussion after each talk.

The focus of the Friday talks is on the individual relationship with God, on Saturday building and maintaining a Christian life, and Sunday on persevering in this new life as a Christian, explained Amy Staples, the lay director of the Cursillo movement in the Nashville Diocese.

The talks include a lot of personal witness, Deschenes said. "It's not just theory but it's practical stuff about how to live your faith."

"At the beginning of the weekend all the people will be at different places in their faith journey," said Staples. "By the end they'll all have moved farther along in that journey. Everyone gets something out of it, but it's not the same thing."

"The weekend is when it hits you that God's in your life," said Joe McLaughlin, who made the weekend 12 years ago. "I experienced at the weekend that God loves me, not in a general sense but me personally."

That message can be the hardest to accept, "because we don't believe we're worthy of God's love," added Tom Wright, who made the weekend with McLaughlin and has been meeting in the same weekly group with him ever since.

The weekend can be a deeply emotional experience, Staples said. "The bonding that takes place on that weekend is very intense, and so I think those bonds last a long time."

The Fourth Day

It's what comes after the weekend that gives Cursillo its staying power, Deschenes said. Cursillistas call it the Fourth Day, and there are three elements designed to reinforce and continue the experience of the weekend:

- Groups of four to 10 people meet weekly for discussion and prayer, reinforcing the commitments they made during the weekend about their prayer life, Christian study and action.

- Ultreya, which are regular meetings open to all members of Cursillo groups who gather for Mass, sharing with members of other groups, and listening to speakers on how God has been work-

ing in their life. There are three regularly scheduled Ultreyas in the Diocese: at Christ the King Church in Nashville at 6 p.m. every Thursday; at St. Rose of Lima Church in Murfreesboro on the second Saturday of the month following the 5:30 p.m. Mass; and at St. Anthony Church in Fayetteville at 12:30 p.m. on the second Sunday of the month.

- Spiritual direction. Cursillistas are encouraged to find a spiritual director to meet with periodically to discuss and plan their spiritual development.

The Fourth Day program is "really what sets the Cursillo movement apart from other retreats," Staples said. "The goal is not that you just have a good retreat but that you have the tools you need to really change your life."

For Staples, Cursillo has provided a community to support her in her faith life.

"I didn't realize how lacking I was in community," said Staples. The talks during the weekend about the groups and Ultreya lead to a realization for her. "They talked about how the group had sustained them through crises in their lives. As I heard that, I recognized I didn't have that."

"I'm not really a grouper," Staples said, but "it's become very vital to my life very quickly."

When Rich McGee joined the group with McLaughlin and Wright after he made the weekend in 2000, it was the first men's group he ever belonged to, he said. And for the first time, he found "I can talk to men about God."

The years of weekly meetings have tightened the bonds of friendship with the other members of the group, McGee said. "We all experience ups and downs," he said, and if he has a problem "I know I can pick up the phone with all of these guys."

Hearing about the experiences of other people in the group allows a person to relate it to their own life, McLaughlin said.

"You find out you're not alone," Deschenes said. "You find out everyone is going through the same things in their life."

Living a Christian life

Cursillo weekends are segregated by gender and a weekend for men and another for women is held at Camp Hillmont, a Christian retreat center in

Cursillo booming in small parish

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St. Anthony Church Fayetteville is one of the smallest parishes in the Diocese of Nashville. But it's one of the places in the Diocese where the Cursillo movement is most vibrant.

"It's actually huge in Fayetteville," said Amy Staples, the lay director of the Nashville Cursillo movement. "They generally have between 20 and 40 people at their monthly Ultreya."

In the Cursillo movement, an Ultreya is a regular meeting open to all Cursillo members who gather for Mass and listen to speakers on how God has been working in their life. An Ultreya is held at 12:30 p.m. on the second Sunday of the month at St. Anthony.

The Cursillistas at St. Anthony hope soon to add a second Ultreya each month and to include people from neighboring parishes, said Dan Lear, the parish coordinator for Cursillo.

"We've had phenomenal growth in the last year," Lear said. "It's really exploded."

Cursillo starts with a three-day weekend retreat and is followed by weekly meetings of small groups where people reinforce the commitments they made during the weekend to life a fully Christian life.

About 50 people at St. Anthony have made the Cursillo weekend and are meeting regularly with their groups, Lear said. It's the ongoing meetings and reinforcement that are fueling the growth of the movement at St. Anthony, he added.

For Lear, the Cursillo experience brought "a profound change" in his life. "You come face to face with Christ, face to face with yourself," he said. "I'm a better father, a better husband, a better friend, a better Catholic, a better leader."

The growth of Cursillo at St. Anthony has affected the entire parish. "We are more of a community now," Lear said. "That infectious love based on Christ is starting to touch all areas." ✠

Dickson County, once in the fall and once in the spring. The next Cursillo weekend for men is scheduled Sept. 20-23 and for women Oct. 4-7.

Each person who makes the weekend has a sponsor who helps them prepare for the weekend, provides transportation to and from the weekend, and helps them find a group to meet with after the weekend. Anyone interested in making the weekend or in more information about Cursillo can visit the Nashville Cursillo movement's website at www.nashvillecursillo.org.

"If I were to summarize the Cursillo movement and the Cursillo experience," Deschenes said, "I think it is something that is intended for people who want to grow spiritually or just grow as human beings, people who are restless for a better Christian life. It's for people who want to live and experience life fully as a Christian." ✠