

The Prison Story

[Reprinted from Emmaus International Newsletter, July- Sept., 1992]

All of us who are active in Emmaus know that our ministry emerged from the Roman Catholic Cursillo movement. The 3-day model developed by our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters has been used by God in mighty ways through both the Catholic and Protestant versions. Literally millions of persons have been challenged during the three days to dedicate ourselves to lives marked by the disciplines of piety, study and action. Countless congregations have been influenced and workplaces Christianized by the presence of those who have attended a three-day weekend.

We have heard some of the stories from our heritage. We know about the broken down bus, the rainbow and the rooster that led to the writing of the song De Colores. And perhaps we know a little about the Spanish Action Movement that led to the development of the Cursillo model. But recently I learned of another story of our history. Ike Griffin, the Executive Director of the prison ministry called Kairos, shared with me a story from the days before Cursillo. It is a moving story of two laymen acting in faith and charity. See what you think.

Reverend K. Cherie Jones

This story takes place in Palma, Majorca (a Spanish Mediterranean island) over 30 years ago. A group of young men, of the Spanish Action Movement, were attempting to launch, what they believed would be a wonderful apostolic work to counter the unchristian world they were living in.

They had worked long and hard, but all their dreams had been futile. Each day seemed worse than the last. They had become desperate, and were on the point of giving the whole idea up when, one evening as they sat around in their headquarters, the phone rang. It was the Chaplain of the local prison, asking for a couple of volunteers to come to the prison to help him with a difficult problem.

Two young men in the condemned cell would have nothing to do with him, and his only hope was to try and approach them through laymen.

While their companions went to the chapel to pray, or kneel outside the gates of the prison, the two men went inside to join the Chaplain. He took them to the condemned cell where the prisoners sat, half drunk, playing cards with their guards, who, as prison rules laid down, must stay in the cell with the condemned men on the last night before execution.

Their cell was littered with pornographic magazines, and the walls plastered with salacious pin-ups. The condemned men seemed bent only on swapping dirty stories and gambling the night away.

One of the two laymen, Eduardo Bonnin, told how they first asked the governor's permission to take the place of the guards and when this had been granted, they started talking to the two prisoners, gradually winning them around, and sobering them up- until eventually, Eduardo said to them, "We came here to ask a favor of you." At this the two men laugh loud and long. "A favor!?! Don't you realize that later this morning we....," And he made a gesture of garroting the other.

"But this is something you can do," said Bonnin. "We only want you to recommend something to the Lord for us. You are the only people we have met who know when they will be going to meet the Lord, face to face. We want you to say something to Him. We feel it is so urgent. Neither the Pope, or Kings, nor rich or poor men, know when they will have to meet the Lord, yet you do. In the morning you know exactly when you will be appearing before the Throne of God. We have this wonderful apostolic project, from which we expect great fruits, but we have failed miserably, so far, to get it going. We want you to ask the Lord to help us." - and Bonnin proceeded to explain their apostolic hopes and anxieties.

As the night wore on they spoke of Christ, of his love and mercy. They spoke of the Good Thief and of forgiveness.

In the early hours of the morning, the Chaplain heard their confessions, and gave them Communion.

A short while later, they were led to the scaffold; but one of them cried out for Eduardo Bonnin, and Eduardo told of how that man died, holding Eduardo's crucifix in one hand, and clasping Eduardo's hand with the other, as he knelt beside him praying for him.

One of those men wrote to his family that night, and this is a translation from the Spanish- preserving, as far as possible, the grammar and simplicity of the original.

Palma, Majorca

1:00 a.m., January 28th, 1949

Dearest Parents and Brothers, so close to my heart,

These lines I am writing, are the last you will receive from your son and brother. I am writing them, more with my heart than my pen. They are dictated by filial love, and in the hope you will keep them all the days of your life.

I am in the condemned cell, and only a few hours remain before I leave this life of misery and tears. But God has given me the great mercy of letting me put my soul in order, and to prepare myself for a happiness that has no end.

After my life of ill-luck, and having been a victim of my surroundings, God has granted me the extraordinary grace of enabling me to recognize my past faults, and of making my peace with him - for he has given me this opportunity to put a full-stop at the end of my sins with a sincere confession, which has opened, little by little, the Gates of Heaven.

It only remains for me to ask your pardon, for all the heartaches I have given you during my life, with my straying- and to recommend to my brothers, whom I love with all my heart, never to stray from the path of duty which you, my parents, taught us to follow with your good advice.

I never remembered you with such affection as at this moment, and I hope that these lines, written at the culminating moment of my life, to ask your pardon for all the displeasure I had given you during my life, and also to serve as advice for my brothers, which I hope they will keep before them all their lives - that they may serve God as he expects his most faithful servants to do.

The end of my career has arrived. Praise be to God, who gave me these moments to ransom my life, and to die as do those men who have faith. Only faith gives strength and energy to triumph over so great a difficulty as this.

If you want news of my last moments, write to our Chaplain, who is called father Jose Maria Fabian Rubio. He will tell you about the last hour spent by me in this world. Be sure I am going to heaven to pray for you, my dearest parents and brothers.

I await you in heaven - there we will live happily for all eternity. Sacred heart of Jesus, I trust you. Signed with my own hand. My last thoughts on Earth are with you. Adios! Till eternity, your son and brother who awaits you in heaven.

These two lads were executed on the morning of January 28th 1949. The apostolic work which Eduardo Bonnin and his companions had in hand, and which they had been successful in launching, despite all their trials and efforts, was, *Cursillo in Christianity*.

The first Cursillo, as we know it, took place on the 18th of February, 1949, just 20 days after the deaths of those two poor men.

Surely, Jesus said to them, as He said to the thief who was crucified with Him, *Today you will be with me in Paradise*.

[This reprint first appeared in a Shenandoah Valley Emmaus Community Newsletter, Feb. 1995, 3 years after we organized to share Christ through Emmaus.]