

## GROWING IN HOLINESS THROUGH THE CURSILLO

Presentation by Deacon Ben Agustin at the 24th National Cursillo Encounter on Saturday, August 2, 2014 at Chapman University in Orange, CA

It's such a joy to see all of you today. Part of what was not read in my biography is that I retired about a year and a half ago after working for a decade in the health and fitness industry as a Master Trainer for 24 Hour Fitness. So I'm very attuned to not only spiritual health but also physical health. What I'd like us to do is now please stand... (now I led the audience through a minute of stretching exercises, then asked them to sit as we prayed the Prayer to the Holy Spirit from the Pilgrim's Guide).

When Hoang Tran called me about two months ago and asked me to be a speaker, my first reaction was one of elation and joy. "Oh, thank you Lord for the blessing!" But then I realized, "Who am I to speak before such an august group?" And I was reminded of this story.

Once upon a time a bishop, a priest, and a deacon were sent into a country that was ruled by a military dictatorship to spread the Gospel and give people a sense of hope and liberation. Of course the dictator was not too happy about this so he sent out his troops to find them. He captured them, imprisoned them, tortured them, and then decided that he was going to execute them.

He had a firing squad march the bishop, the priest, and the deacon out through the forest. When they came to a clearing he first took the bishop and took him to the edge of the clearing. He had the firing squad get ready. Then the sergeant said, "Ready. Aim..." The bishop suddenly yelled out, "Hurricane!" The soldiers all fell down because they didn't want to get blown away. With that the bishop ran off into the forest and escaped. Now the priest and the deacon looked at that, and the priest said, "Hmmm..."

And so the sergeant then got the priest and marched the Father to the edge of the clearing, then went back to give the order, "Ready. Aim...." Right then the priest yelled out, "Earthquake!", and everyone fell down to avoid the shaking. With that the priest ran off into the forest and escaped. Now the deacon had seen what happened twice. The sergeant marched the deacon out to the edge of the clearing, had the firing squad get ready, and gave the commands, "Ready. Aim..." And then the deacon yelled out, "Fire!"

I just wanted to make sure that we set our expectations appropriately for this talk. I'm going to talk to you today about a subject that is crucial in living our 4th Day: "Holiness". How do we grow in holiness? By a show of hands, how many people here have gone through a Cursillo? So you're all familiar with topics like Piety, Study, and Action. So, let's see if we can go a little bit deeper.

What does God want for us? Does He want us to be wealthy? Have huge personal influence? Fame? Health? Power? What do you say? No? Not quite? His ultimate wish for us - the dearest dream He has for us - is that all of His children be with Him forever in heaven. So that is the goal. That is the grand prize. God wants nothing more than for all of us, after we've lived in faithfulness in this life, to join Him and all of the people who've passed on before us, in eternal joy in heaven.

So to do this, God wants all of us to be holy. We see it in Sacred Scripture in many different places. These are just a few. In Leviticus 11:45, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." In Numbers 15:40, "You shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God." In the Gospel of Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect." And in 1 Peter 1:15: "But as He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in your conduct."

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church we can read in paragraph 2030, "From the Church (the Christian) learns the example of holiness and recognizes its model and source in the all-holy Virgin Mary; he discerns it in the authentic witness of those who live it; he discovers it in the spiritual tradition and long history of the saints who have gone before him and whom the liturgy celebrates."

So, God wants us to grow in our personal holiness. But that's not enough. As we grow He wants us to bring everyone else along with us, because He has given us a very special grace to be called to attend our Cursillo weekend. By a show of hands here, how many of you would say that the Cursillo weekend changed your life? Yes? Amen to that. God is good...all the time! God is good all the time. He's always trying to help us grow in holiness because His ultimate wish, again, is for us to join Him in heaven, and bring along our friends and relatives as well.

The Cursillo vision is one of transformation of the world to become holy by teaching and providing individuals what is fundamental to being Christian. If we just boil it down, we can see that Jesus said it many times. It's simple. Love God and love one another. This was the final commandment that Jesus gave to His Apostles before His Ascension. Love God and love one another. Now, we have means to do it in the particular charism that we call the Cursillo.

There are so many different spiritualities in the Catholic Church. But in the Cursillo's particular methodology we have:

1. the Precursillo where we select our candidates prayerfully and we prepare our Weekend team well.
2. the Cursillo Weekend, which is the initial formation of all these neophytes, these new candidates who said "Yes" to the Lord just as you did.
3. and then we have the Post-Cursillo, which is the deepening process through the Friendship Group Reunions, the Ultreyas, and the School of Leaders.

So let me ask, "How are we doing?" Now, our good Bishop Elizondo spoke to us on Thursday night about the fact that numbers are not important. That's very true. Quality is what we're looking for. But the measure of whether we're being effective can be quantified. But it's not the end-all and be-all. First, it's quality.

Then the secondary measure is quantity. So let's look at each of our own dioceses: 1. What is the number of Cursillo weekends we hold each year for men and for women?

2. What is the number of candidates that we're actually successful in recruiting and persuading to actually join us on a Cursillo weekend?

3. What is the number of weekly Friendship Group Reunions taking place as a result of all of us having gone through a Cursillo weekend?

4. What is the number of weekly Ultreyas and their attendance?

5. What is the frequency of the School of Leaders and the attendance?

6. Now this is most telling. Out of all the Cursillo weekends you've held in your Diocese, and the innumerable number of candidates who have gone through, what percentage of them are active in actually meeting in weekly Group Reunions?

Now, I'll tell you this story. A year ago I went to the National Encounter in Hempstead, NY. How many went to that last year? Yeah, it was great! And what really impressed me last year, as it has in this National Encounter, was the hospitality

of the hosting diocese. When I got off the plane at JFK I was met by a very courteous Hispanic driver. During the 20-minute ride to the campus we were engaged in conversation, and I had to ask these kinds of quantitative questions.

So I asked, "How many Group Reunions do you have in your Cursillo Movement?" And he said, "30" I said, "That's a goodly number." But he did not quite understand, so he asked, "In the whole diocese?" I said, "Yeah." And he said, "In the whole diocese we have three major centers where we have Ultreyas, and each one of these is based in a parish. And people come into the parish so that each parish actually has 30 Group Reunions." They have 90 Group Reunions in their movement. I said, "Wow, that's pretty good that they would meet every month." And he said, "On no, we meet every week." I said, "Oh my God, I have never heard that! Really?" He said, "Yeah." I then said, "Well, how many attend the Ultreya out of these 90 Groups?" He said, "500 to 600" I said, "That's amazing! Once a month people will come together" He said, "Oh no, weekly!" I said, "Oh my God, Eduardo Bonnin is rolling in his grave, saying "Yes!" I said, "

OK, tell me now about your School of Leaders. Now how many people attend your School of Leaders?" And he said, "About 200." I said, "Wow, that great. Once a month, 200 people." He said, "No, weekly!" Oh my God, I've seen paradise!

Now, I just tell you that because I think the Lord wanted me to hear that. I serve as the Regional Spiritual Advisor for the Filipino communities in Region XI and the numbers I'm used to hearing are much smaller, and the frequency is definitely more like monthly, if not quarterly. I don't know how it is with the other Movements. Wow, the potential. We can step up our game here! So I thank God for that, and I realize that because they're meeting so often, because they have inculcated within their group the sense that being a Cursillista is your primary apostolate: reaching out to others, inviting them to come not only to a Cursillo but especially your Friendship Group Reunion, your Ultreya, etc. You can see the fruit of it. Total commitment. People are actually committed. I give a shout out to the Hispanic community out in New York for doing a wonderful job.

Let's move now from just looking at the Cursillo to expanding our view of the world. . There are 1.2 billion Catholics world-wide, . and in the United States Catholics are the largest denomination; there are about 77 million Catholics. . But only about 23% attend Mass regularly on Sunday. That's about 17 million out of 77 million. . And the other 77% attend Mass rarely; that's about 60 million Catholics.

On average in any given parish about only 7% is really active in parish ministry or any other ministries of the Church. And they are the providers of more than 80% of the financial resources in the parish. So that number is 5.4 million out of the 77 million Catholics in the U.S.

Let's see what do these active 7% accomplish. . Well, a lot of them send their children to Catholic schools. o There are 2.6 million students in Catholic schools from grade school all the way up to university. Parents are spending about \$10 billion annually on tuition. o We now have about 230 colleges and universities that are Catholic in the United States.

There are, did you know, 637 hospitals that are Catholic in the nation. That's amazing. . Catholic Charities exist in almost every diocese and they provide much needed housing, food, clothing, and social services to our brothers and sisters who are poor or in times of great need. So all of this exercises a very powerful influence in the United States on business, the economy, the arts, politics, society and culture. We have a lot to be proud of about our faith. But we also know that we have some work to do.

Imagine the possibilities. I said that 7% of all Catholics that you see in the Church are active. What if that number were doubled? What if it wasn't 7%, it was 14%? What if we had another 5.4 million Catholics who were really charged up about their faith who want to make a commitment of their time and energy to do good in the world as well as in their

parish. A couple of things... . There'd be more people involved in ministry of all kinds. . There'd be more financial support for necessary programs. . Inactive Catholics would return to God and His Church. . And we would have a real hard time finding parking!

So, what's the solution? How do we get the ball rolling in that direction? Let me ask you by the show of hands, and be honest. If you feel a little bit uncomfortable answering this question, just close your eyes, but I want you to raise your hand if among your family members, either close or extended family, you know they're not going to Church. OK, raise your hands. Yeah, it's a common story. I hear it all the time. This is nothing new to us. We know that we have work to do in our families as well as in the outside world.

So the solution is to grow in your personal holiness; to be the very best version of yourself possible. When God created each and every one of us from nothing, He did it from a sense of great hope about the potential that we would have in our lives, as long as He wants us to live on this planet, to be Jesus. Each of us is called to be Christ in the world, to extend the work of Christ by our devotion, by our dedication, through our sacrifice.

I'm reminded of a story. There was this father who had to babysit his young daughter one Saturday afternoon. He really wanted to watch sports on ESPN, but his four-year-old daughter was always wanting to play with him. So he had this idea. He said to his daughter, "I'm going to give you, Darling, this picture from the newspaper and I'm going to tear it all up. Then I want you to put all back together. When you put it back together, then I'm going to play with you." So he found a page in the newspaper that had a picture of the world on it, and he thought, "Good, she'd doesn't know anything about geography." He tore it all up in many, many small pieces and he gave it to her and said, "Honey, you come back and see me when you put the whole world back together." It took a little while, but in 10 minutes she was back. He said, "How did you do that? How did you know where Afghanistan was, where Micronesia was?" The young daughter said, "Well, Daddy, on the back side of the newspaper was a picture of a man. I put the man together, then turned it all over, and the world was whole." So, when we put human beings back together, starting with ourselves, we make ourselves whole and then we have the ability to make the rest of the world whole. Person by person. One at a time. Through our friendship, through our testimony, through our camaraderie, through our accompanying them in their own spiritual journey.

Now in the Cursillo we talk a lot about Piety, Study, and Action. That is a fool-proof method to grow in holiness. That methodology, that vocabulary, that theology has been around for a long time: 71 years. A long time. And we've read all the books, haven't we, huh? You've read all the Cursillo books. You don't need to buy anything anymore from the Cursillo bookstore because you've read it all. Is that right? No. Hoang's going to be happy to know that you're going to buy some more books. But maybe we need to update the vocabulary, the lingo. There are some books that are out there that might help us.

Before Lent this year I got an email from DynamicCatholics.com. They said if you call us we will be happy to send you some free books. So of course, "free" is my favorite word. So I called and said, "Sure, send me what you got. This sounds good. Free Catholic books. I'm always reading." So they send me two books: "Rediscovering Catholicism" and another one called "The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic". How many of you have read or have these books? Whoa, that is good!

A lot of you already have them. So I read the books and I thought, "Oh my God. This is understandable. This is really easy to understand, and I think I want to share this with others." My wife and I both read the books, and we thought for Lent, "I think what we're going to give up is money. We are going to buy these books for everybody in our parish of St. Jerome Church in El Cerrito, CA." And not only that whenever I get a call to give a retreat or give a talk somewhere, because I'm always being given these invitations, I'm going to buy books for everybody who attends. And so when I had

to give a talk in San Bernardino or Los Angeles, I gave books to everyone who attended that. When I gave a retreat in San Jose which the San Francisco Cursillo attended as well, I bought books for everybody who attended that. When I went to the Regional Encounter in Fresno, I bought books for everybody who attended. The good news about that first book, "Rediscovering Catholicism" is that's in Spanish, too. How many of you received that book, anybody here? Oh yeah, some of you got that book. Excellent!

The reason I'm so wild about this book is because it explains concepts in such a way that Cursillistas and anybody else can readily grab onto. Here are some of them. They have a PSA-equivalent approach to growing in holiness, and it's very similar.

They say: 1. Prayer 2. Study And then they break Action into two things: 3. Generosity, and 4. Evangelization So, I like to talk to you about these four signs one at a time.

Dynamic Catholic Sign #1: Prayer. Obviously. Getting our marching instructions from God every day. Understanding whether we're in sync with the Lord. Developing our spiritual health so that we become peaceful, confident, and we have a very compassionate view of the world. It's important to begin each day in conversation with God, and that we have a routine time, place, and type of prayer each day. How many of you have that? Good. Excellent. I'm just preaching to the choir today. It's also important to realize that prayer allows us something that society robs us of, and that is silence. Our world bombards us with all kinds of noise and distractions, and we easily get our spiritual lives all frazzled and fragmented.

What prayer allows us to do is take some time out and just be quiet with the Lord and realize I'm loved. Everything's right with the world. God is in charge. If He needs me to do something, He's going to empower me to do the things that are absolutely necessary this day. With God's grace, I'm going to be able to go do it. And then you march out after your prayer and you go do what you have discerned needs to be done.

There are many possible daily prayer routines. Here are a couple. Some of you are probably already doing this: . You can attend daily Mass. My wife just retired a month ago; I retired a year-and-a-half ago. We love going to the 7:30 AM Mass everyday at St. Joseph Church in Pinole. Then we go to the gym. Then we do everything else that we're going to go do that day. That's a routine that you could have.

o If you don't have the ability to go to morning Mass because you're working, there are some parishes that actually have evening Masses. So on your way home from work, you can stop by the parish. It doesn't have to be yours. You can go anywhere. And some parishes have noon Masses. So instead of going out at lunch to buy a big hamburger at McDonald's, go to Mass. Go to Mass for 20 minutes and receive the real precious Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus, and then the rest of your day and afternoon will be so energized. Try to go to Mass everyday if you can.

Or If you can't, the next best thing is read the daily Mass readings. You can find them on the USCCB.org (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) website.

How many of you have an iPhone, raise your hands? Or any kind of smartphone, raise your hands? Good. There's an app called Laudate. Look it up in your App Store. Wonderful. You get the daily readings and meditations. You can carry in on your hip pocket every day.

Liturgy of the Hours: Deacons and priests have to pray this every day. There's even an app for that: the Divine Office iPhone app. I use that every day.

The Rosary: there's even an app for that. There are so many I didn't even list them. There are many.

Examination of Conscience: believe it or not, there's an app for that. It's called Mea Culpa. It's great! It's a good thing to run through it in about five minutes every night. It even allows you to keep score. When you go into the confessional you pop that thing open so you can say, "Father, I did this many times of this, and this many times of that." Technology is wonderful!

OK, an easy way to teach prayer. The KISS Principle. How many of you are in sales, anybody? You know KISS? Keep It Simple, Saint! The 7-Step Prayer Process: . Simple to remember. . Easily repeatable. Deepens your relationship with God. Helps you become the best-version -of-yourself (holy).

What is it? When you call [www.DynamicCatholic.com](http://www.DynamicCatholic.com) and get your free book, "4 Signs of a Dynamic Catholic", on page 61 you'll see these 7 steps:

1. Gratitude: Begin by thinking God in a personal dialogue for whatever you are most grateful for today.
2. Awareness: Revisit the times in the past 24 hours when you were and were not the-best-version-of-yourself. Talk to God about these situations and what you learned from them.
3. Significant Moments: Identify something you experienced in the last 24 hours and explore what God might be trying to say to you through that event (or person).
4. Peace: Ask God to forgive you for any wrong you have committed (against yourself, another person, or Him) and to fill you with a deep and abiding peace.
5. Freedom: Speak with God about how He is inviting you to change your life, so that you can experience the freedom to be the-best-version-of-yourself.
6. Others: Lift up to God anyone you feel called to pray for today, asking God to bless and guide them.
7. Close with the Our Father.

Let's look now at Dynamic Catholic Sign #2: Study. Many Catholics feel an inferiority complex about explaining their faith to others. Maybe that's why when we look at that Cursillo tripod of Piety, Study, and Action, the Action leg is kind of short. If you don't know or feel comfortable talking to other people about God, that tripod is kind of leaning over a little bit. We see that sometimes in the numbers of people who have difficulty recruiting candidates for the Cursillo Weekend, do we not? So, what we have to do is realize that lack of knowledge causes disengagement with faith.

The world's goal for you is to be a consumer. Right? We just came out of a recession. Why did that recession happen? People stopped buying stuff: homes and everything else. They have no money. They have no credit. So the world is always bombarding you with the message that you have to buy things. What you own and what you have makes you who you are. Now we all know that that is false.

I'll tell you a quick little story from my family. My Mom died of cancer a year-and-a-half ago. She was 90 years old. She and my Dad were married for 60 years and lived in the same house for 60 years in San Francisco. And by the time she died that house was just chock-full of stuff. My Mom was great, and I'll tell you a little bit more about her later. She was a very saintly person, but one thing she had learned (I think from the Great Depression since she was born back in the 1920's) was to hold onto stuff. I think that everything she had ever owned, she had in that three-story house. When she died I had to move my Dad over to Hercules, CA where I lived, and we had to sell the house.

I kid you not, I did my utmost to give everything of value to St. Vincent de Paul Society, Goodwill, Salvation Army. But at the end I had to call 1-800-GOT-JUNK to haul stuff out. Have you seen the 1-800-GOT-JUNK trucks? Big, huh? It took seven trucks to haul out everything. I thought it was like the Winchester Mystery House. I thought this was a good thing to do, to call these guys, because I had seen the TV show, "Hoarders". Even though I can't recycle or give all this stuff away, they will. Well, what they actually did was they opened up the big bay windows at the top floor of this three-story house, then they promptly started to take all of the furniture and other belongings and heave it down to the truck below parked in front of the garage. I stopped them and said, "Wait a minute! This is good stuff. Why aren't you saving this to give away? The supervisor said, "Sir, I'm sorry but, you know, dozens of people die every day in the San Francisco area. And, honest to God, people don't want your old stuff. We just haul it all to the dump." Oh my God, everything that my parents had basically went to the dump. Now think for yourselves, how does your house look? How does your garage look? How does your attic look? When you die where is it going to go? To the dump. Oh my God. Oh no. I should have saved my money!

We live in a world that has so many competing ideologies, and are not of God. One of those is "relativism". The sense that you do what I do, I do what I do, and it's OK. Everybody has their own thing to do. God has a slightly different view. If we get seduced by that attitude that "God's OK with just anything I do", then that results in a lack of wisdom in living life. And we ultimately have no joy. We can seemingly have joy for a while until we get the curve ball in life. Maybe it's the loss of a job. Maybe it's a life-threatening illness. Maybe it's the Recession again.

Then we realize, "I have no joy." And relativism also results in too much drama. Have you ever known someone who was "drama queen" or a "drama king"? Oh my God, high maintenance! I can't stand this. Maybe it's me. So, that's what happens when we don't put our lives in God's hands and trust, and try to live our lives as simply as possible. Relativism results in selfishness and high-maintenance living, and that simply cannot be sustained.

What's the cure? Be a continuous learner. There's an old saying, "Those who do not read are no better than those who cannot read." Strive for daily small amounts of incremental growth in knowledge. You don't have to read the whole Encyclopedia Britannica in one weekend. You don't have to read the whole Old Testament in one Sunday. Read a little section, a little bit. Strive at least 5 pages of a good Catholic book every day. How long would that take? Let's check.

When I was in college at U.C. Berkeley I remember reading about President John F. Kennedy. He was an avid reader. A prodigious reader. He taken an Evelyn Woods Reading Dynamics Course. So I thought, "Here I am embarking on college. I have so much to read. I'll take that course." So, I did. So after 14 weeks, man, I was reading up a storm. I could finish a book in an hour. Just don't ask me what I read!

So, just take five minutes. We're going to do a little test. I'm going to demonstrate something to you. Everybody pull out your program. This is a timed exercise. You won't be graded. You'll be fine. I want you to open up to the back inside cover. It says, "\$3/Year Donation Campaign..." I know Hoang loves me!

OK, when I say go, I want you to start reading. When you finish, I want you to raise your hand, as soon as you finish reading the two paragraphs. Ready? Go. (After two minutes have elapsed).OK, stop. Now, everybody who finished reading, raise your hand. Alright, very good! So, that was about two pages in two minutes. So you were reading a page a minute.

What does that mean? If you read 5 pages per day that would take 5 minutes. If you read for a year, 5 minutes a day, you would read 9 books. A total investment in time of 30 hours, for just reading 5 minutes daily. Over a decade that would be 90 books. Over a quarter century - 25 years - that would be a phenomenal 228 books! All because you invested 5 minutes. How many of us could do that?

Yeah. Right. We'd all be scholars. Right? We'd all be post-doctoral students! To those of us who say, "My life is so busy, I'm not even sure I can do 5 minutes.", how many hours of TV viewing do you do in a day? In a week? In a month? How much closer to God does all that time watching TV do for you? Yeah.

Now, I'll tell you another story from my family. When my Mom was dying, it took about four-and-half months for the cancer to finally kill her, my Dad was taking care of her and I was taking care of her. I could see my Dad was getting stressed out. He was 89 and he had been married to my Mom for 60 years. I thought it would be really helpful if he started reading the Bible. So I gave him a Bible and he actually read through it. The whole Bible. So I thought, one of the books I studied when I was at GTU working on my Master's degree was Barclay's Daily Bible Study series. It's 17 volumes, all New Testament, a wonderful series of commentaries on the New Testament. So I bought him a set, and said, "Dad, I want you to start reading this." He stopped watching TV, and he would spend hours and hours every day reading through Barclay's Daily Bible Study series. He read every single one of those 17 books before my Mom died four-and-half months later.

Then when I moved him over to Hercules to a place where he would be comfortable, I said, "Well, Dad, why don't you just keep reading it since you seem to be enjoying it. He just continued reading it over and over again for a year. I asked him, "How many times have you read that?" He said, "15 times." Holy mackerel! That's equal to 45,000 pages! I said, "You need to be reading something else. You know more about the Bible than I do."

My Mom was an avid reader. She was a scholar. When she died she had 600 books on religion, I took all that. I didn't care about all the furnishings and other things in the house. I told my Mom that when she died, all I wanted were her books. So I brought all the books to my house. I told my Dad, "Dad, why don't you start reading Mom's books?" I gave him half - 300 books, and said to him, "Why don't you see how you like them?" That was a year ago. To date he has read 189 of those books. He doesn't watch TV. He reads six hours a day. He just turned 91 this last Friday. Not bad for a 91-year old guy.

OK, so what should you read? I'm going to encourage you to email or text me your email address. Because every day, for the last year and a half, I have been emailing the daily readings from the USCCB website and the meditations from the Daily Meditations website and the biographies of the saint of the day from many different websites to everybody who has given me their email address. How many of you are on my list? Raise your hands. Whoa. Very Good. So write down my phone number if you want to text me, or write down my email address, and after this I will put you on my list. But wait, as they say on infomercials, there's more! I will also send you a list of what I call my favorite book recommendations. Things like The New American Bible, the Vatican II Documents, Lives of the Saints, and Barclay's Daily Bible Study Series. And if you send me your email address now, I will send you this wonderful questionnaire that I was given when I went through my five-year diaconate formation program called, "Discover Your Spiritual Motivational Gifts". It will show you what are your key gifts that God has given you in terms of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. It will allow you to focus on what you need to be doing in your ministry and your work for maximum effectiveness. That's basically what God has given you to work with. And finally, I love to take photos. I must have thousands of photos of different Cursillo activities. I'll send you the link so that you can see yourselves and all of your bright, smiling faces. My email address is [benagustin@juno.com](mailto:benagustin@juno.com) and my cell phone number is (510) 388-1551. So text me, email me, send me your email address and you will start getting all this Monday morning.

Next, Dynamic Catholic Sign #3: Generosity. The happiest people in the world are the most generous people. Really generous. Dynamic Catholics - that's all of you - are filled with gratitude and a sense of being blessed. How many of you, right now, are filled with a sense that you are blessed? Raise your hands. Absolutely! God has given us everything. Even when we didn't deserve it. Even when you didn't work for it. God has given us everything. I was talking with someone



this morning about how he came to America as an immigrant from another country and I thought, "Holy mackerel, what a struggle! And he made it, and his life is good now." God has given us so much, and we didn't have an inkling that that was part of His grand design. So with that awareness our hearts are just naturally filled with a sense of gratitude that cannot be repaid. I need to show my gratitude to God in not only spiritual, but also material ways.

So here's the Generosity Challenge: Tithe! Catholics might say, "That's a Protestant thing." But you know, the Old Testament is the Old Testament for all of us. In the Old Testament it says to give ten percent of your produce, your goods, whatever it was that God has blessed you with, back to God, back to the Temple so that it could be redistributed to those in need. But that's something, I'm afraid, that we as Catholics just don't do that well. The one dollar bill is the most common denomination we find in the church collection basket on Sundays. So I encourage you to think about that.

So what is tithing? Set a goal to give 10% of your monthly income and/or annual wealth accumulation to charities that serve the needs of the poor and also the Church. Calculate what percentage you gave away last year and that try then to raise that percentage each year if you can't give 10%. Now I'll tell you a story from my life. Twenty years ago I heard the talk about stewardship of our time, talent, and money. I had made my Cursillo back in 1979, about 35 years ago, and it had changed my life. Honest to God. I got so fired up, so involved with the Church.

At the time I was a U.S. Army Infantry officer. I had thought to myself ever since I was in high school, "I am going to be a career military officer. I am going to lead troops in battle. I'm going to be a General one day." That was my aspiration. That was my Ideal. And after my Cursillo I started to read the Bible. I went out to Ocean Beach and read every day, and it transformed me. I thought to myself, "Oh my God, I have a new Commander-in-Chief." And unlike our national Commander-in-Chief, when He (God) sends me out to battle, I know there's always going to be a good outcome, whether it's in this life or especially in the next life. So after a year of prayerful reflection I resigned my commission as a Captain. And then God led me on this fantastic journey of different kinds of careers in information technology, Church ministry, and the health & fitness industry. Looking back now after being retired for a year-and-a-half, I can only think, "Oh my God, I could never have scripted my life. This is amazing. I've had such a blast!" It hasn't always been comfortable, in terms of everything being "hunky-dory" (free of trouble or problems). But when I look back, even during the hard times, the disappointments, it was all for the formation of myself as a holy person. Not just for me, but so that I can affect other people.

And that's the way it is for each of you. To be a Christian does not mean to say your life is going to be easy. That you're going to be rich. That you're going to have a long life. It does not mean that. It means that God will always be with you. Your life will always have meaning. And that ultimately is what matters most in life: does your life, does my life, have ultimate meaning? When we know that, there's nothing we can't accomplish. The confidence that comes from knowing that God is my Savior, God is my Shepherd, God is my Commander-in-Chief allows us, allows me, to do miracles. Because we're doing it all for the Lord and never for ourselves. So out of this awareness it's possible then for us to go ahead and do that tithing.

Here's my story. I heard the talk about tithing when I was working in the computer field. I said to my wife, "You know, we make a lot of money. Dual income, no kids. So we should think about this." So we did the math. We looked at what our annual tax return. We saw what our combined income was - our gross income - and we took off a zero to get 10%. And we said, "Whoa, that's a big number to give away! Geez, are you kidding me? THAT number?" So we started with 5%.

At the end of year we saw how we did. And sure enough, we had changed our buying habits. We were a little more circumspect about impulse buying. And we had to think long and hard, "Do we really need this for the long term? Is this really going to help? Could we be happy without it?" So we thought, "This (monthly tithing of 5%) was no problem." So

the next year we raised it (our monthly tithe) by 1% to 6%. At the end of the year we did the same thing (analysis of our spending), and thought, "That wasn't so hard". So we raised it (our monthly tithing) to 7%. And we kept going and until now it's been 10%.

Now that we're retired, and I look back on all the investments that we made in our IRAs and 401K plans, I say, "Oh my God. You were preparing me and my wife for a wonderful retirement. That nest egg is huge. And so now, not only do we tithe the 10% that comes from our retirement pensions and Social Security, we also give 10% at the end of the year of whatever our wealth accumulation has been that year. So if my stocks have grown by a certain percentage or grown a certain amount, I take 10% of what that growth has been from last year, and I write out the big checks to different charities. We do things like buy thousands of books for people.

Here in America we have been blessed. The world is always telling us, "You are, we are, important by what you buy." God tells us, "You are important to Me by what you give away." Yeah. Think about it. "You are important to Me by what you give away." It's like what a funeral director told me once. He said, "You know, I've been in this business for 30 years, Ben. And I've never seen in those 30 years a U-Haul truck in a funeral procession." You can't take it with you. So you might as well give it away to other people while you're still alive. Give it away.

God will never be outdone in His generosity. It won't necessarily be monetary. You'll have so many friends. You'll have so many good opportunities to serve the Lord. And you'll have so much junk mail every day. Once you get on those charity mailing lists, everybody knows who you are! I'll tell you this other story. Three years ago I gave a talk at a Regional Encounter in Fresno. And I talked about this Stewardship thing. You know, as Cursillistas we get so involved in fundraising activities all the time, do we not? Yeah! It eats up so much time. Sometimes the profit, reward, or return is not that great for all the time that we've spent. And so really, we should be tithing. We should tell Cursillistas, "If God has really blessed you with the Cursillo, why don't you just give generously? Don't make me have to give you something to get something back. Just give!"

And so there was one Cursillista - they asked me not to say who yet - who took this to heart. He developed a program of Stewardship where they would actually meet with everybody in all of the different group reunions one-on-one, and give this kind of (Stewardship) education, then say, "Now what do you pledge? What can you commit to next year?" (This, by the way, is the same approach used by the bishops to raise money for cathedrals and the annual Bishop's Appeal.) "What is your pledge going to be to the Cursillo which has changed your life so much?" That first year they tried it, they got \$15,000. Just from talking to people and saying, "Let's stop the fundraising. Let's just have people pledge. Then we can do the Cursillos better. We can buy books for everyone. We can do better religious education programs." And then the second year - this is the second year - they raised \$17,000. Now I know they're not going to allow me to say who it is. They want to see three years of success. But just think about it. Some of you understand how to do this. Some of you are involved in development and fundraising. Run with it! God will bless you. You can make it happen. You don't have to spend an inordinate amount of time doing all of your fundraising activities anymore. Because you all have the means. You all have the means. It's like what the parish priest said to his flock when he was going to do some remodeling in the church. He said, "I've got good news and bad news for you. We have the money to totally renovate the church. The bad news: it's in your pocket!"

We're coming to end here. Dynamic Catholic Sign #4: Evangelization. God calls you to change yourself and the world for the better. Everything you do matters. Everything you think matters. Because from thinking comes action. It's so very important to approach our daily life with a keen sense of awareness of how much God wants us to be saints. Think about it. Everytime you walk down the street - we use that term "moveable square meter" - every time you move down the street you have the opportunity to change the world for the better, even when there's not another person in sight.

How many of you have ever walked down the street and seen litter on the street? What do you do? Walk by it! Oh, what if you picked it up? Carried it and threw it in the nearest trash can? I do that all the time. It's not because I have OCD. It's because I realize that God's world is beautiful. If I see anything that's out of order, that's not beautiful, I want to help.

I don't know how many times I didn't know it, but somebody was walking behind me and saw me do this. And that person may have been influenced to do the same, too. No decision you make is trivial in God's eyes. Either it helps you to become the best version of yourself ("holy") or it doesn't.

OK, so what's the best way to live? Are some ways better? Our individualistic, hedonistic, minimalistic, relativistic culture says, "No. There's no one better way. Every way is good. Do your thing. Whatever makes you happy. Whatever floats your boat. If it feels good, do it!" Have you heard that? Yeah. What does God say? "Yes, there's a better way." He says things like be, give, and do the best you can in all that you do. Die to yourself so that you can live for God.

So there are three basic principles: . God put you on this earth to become the best version of yourself - to become holy. . Living virtuously is a common aspiration for everyone. . Self-control and discipline is the key to achieving the best way to live.

The Cursillo answer to the best way to live is: . Love God with your whole mind, soul, and strength. . Love your neighbor as yourself. We evangelize by doing three things: we win, we build, and we send. . We evangelize by winning people over to God's way of thinking through our sincere friendship and concern. . We build them up to be stronger in understanding and living their faith through our mentoring and example. . Then we send them forth with us to repeat the process with others. You know, if it's done right, the Cursillo is more powerful than the Ebola virus. It will really spread like wildfire if we do these things well.

So, some practical ways to evangelize: . Set a goal of talking with one new person each week about your Catholic faith and learning about theirs. Learn about their faith journey. . Give them something to read and think about that pertains to their own spiritual journey. Buy them a book. Give them a gift. Spend some money. God will multiply that money that we spend for other people on you. . Invite them to meet with you weekly to further the discussion about their faith journey. Invite them to your Cursillo Friendship Group and Ultreya meetings.

Your homework: I want you to contact that website: [www.DynamicCatholic.com](http://www.DynamicCatholic.com) and ask for your free books ("Rediscover Catholicism" and "The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic"). They will send it to you. Read them. Think of ways that you implement these ideas in your Cursillo evangelization method of "making friends, being friends, and bringing your friends to Christ."

And finally, remember that you are not alone in your efforts to change the world for Christ. Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit bless you for all your efforts and sacrifice. Jesus sees what you are doing. So I want to leave you with a story so you will always remember that.

Once upon a time a burglar broke into a home while a family was away attending a National Cursillo Encounter. He broke into the home at night. He had a flashlight and went in through a window and looked around. And suddenly he froze because he heard a voice say, "Jesus see you!" "Holy mackerel, what was that?" thought the burglar. So he started scanning the room again with his flashlight. Again, he heard the voice say, "Jesus sees you!" He turned and saw there was a parrot up there as it said again, "Jesus sees you!" The burglar said to parrot, "You had me scared for a moment. Now, not only am I going to steal everything in the house, I'm going to go after you and have a parrot dinner." And then the burglar became aware of a presence in the room. He scanned his flashlight into the opposite corner of the room, and

there is saw a big black Doberman Pinscher baring it's teeth. The last thing that burglar ever heard in his life was, "Sic him, Jesus!"

Thank you, and God bless you!