

The Prison Story



Kairos was born out of the Catholic Cursillo movement. Our roots spread into denominational Cursillos and the numerous ecumenical three-day short-courses derived from that beginning. Many are drawn to this ministry because of a burning desire for apostolic action, a fire ignited in their souls while attending one of these weekends.

We satisfy our desire for apostolic action in diverse ways. Each finds his own avenue apostolic action. We were wooed into prison ministry, into Kairos. Kairos volunteers represent only a small percentage of those who attend these "short-courses in Christianity", but we feel particularly blessed. All who work in Kairos testify to the fact that God's presence is felt prison as nowhere else. God seems to reserve a special gift of warmth for us as we attempt to His will among the incarcerated. The Holy Spirit moves our hearts and minds on these Kairos weekends more profoundly than at other times in our experience. Each Kairos event is a new growth experience in love and union with Christ. Kairos volunteers have long pondered the holy mysteries which make this phenomenon so pervasive.., and so dependable. A story recently came to Kairos which perhaps reveals something of the special connection we have inherited.

This story takes place in Palma, Majorca in 1949.

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 un-Christian world they were living in. They had worked long and hard, but all their efforts 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 of the laymen received an unexpected call. It was the Chaplain of the local prison, asking for a couple of volunteers to come to the prison and 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. The young man hastily called a friend and after prayer to overcome their fear of entering the prison, the two men went inside to join the Chaplain. He took them to the condemned where the prisoners sat playing cards with their guards, who as prison rules laid down, must stay in cell with the condemned men on the last night before execution.

Their cell was littered with pornographic magazines, and the wall plastered 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 until eventually, Eduardo said to them, "we came here to ask a favor of you." At this the two laughed loud and long. "*A favor*"? Don't you realize later this morning ...,"

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 urgent. Neither the Pope, or Kings, nor rich or poor men, know 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 how the Good Thief had "stolen heaven" and of forgiveness.

In the early hours of the morning, the Chaplain heard their confessions, and held a private mass for the two inmates, Bonnin and his friend, all receiving Eucharist. When invited to have breakfast with the condemned men, Bonnin could not eat. He was too nervous. A short while later they were led to the garroting post. 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. The executioners placed the hood over the man's head and affixed the chain which would break his neck with a sudden jerk.

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. Jan. 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 gave 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 you pardon for all the displeasure I have 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 hours 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 in you.

Signed with my own hand, Your Son and Brother who awaits you in heaven,

s/s

These two lads were executed on the morning of January 28, 1949. The Apostolic work which Eduardo Bonnin and his companions had in hand, and which they had been unsuccessful in launching, despite all their trials and efforts dating back to 1944, was the 'Cursillo in Christianity'. (Walk to Emmaus, Via de Cristo, and others modeled after this)

The first Cursillo, as we know it, took place in January of 1949. After the death of those two poor men the Cursillo movement took off to virtually cover the earth. Surely, Jesus said to them, as He said to the thief who was crucified with Him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise".

In the Summer of 1992, the National Cursillo Encounter took place in Detroit, Michigan. Eduardo Bonnin was scheduled to attend as a featured speaker and participant.

Joe Guitis, one of the Roman Catholic founders of Kairos, notified the Kairos national office that he planned to attend and wanted to ask Eduardo about the "Prison Story". He also wanted to present Bonnin with a Kairos Manual and thank him for his contributions to what has become a powerful ministry in prisons.

Joe was received by Bonnin and read him our version of the story, using the two accompanying priests as interpreters. Bonnin verified every part of the story, making only minor changes. During his commentary on the story, Bonnin mentioned that he still wore the cross the young condemned man held at his execution. Joe asked permission to kiss that cross and the permission was very knowingly granted.

Thank You Jesus for the forgiveness you died for

