

## GOD'S PRISON CURSILLO AT RAIFORD

by  
Greg Steele (Cursillo #6 Table of Matthew)

This is an account of the first ecumenical prison Cursillo in Christianity held at UCI (Union Correctional Institute) Raiford, Florida, September 30 - October 3, 1976. It is an attempt to share much of that experience with our brothers and sisters in the Christian community that made the weekend a success through their prayers and sacrifice. It is a testimony to the Love of Jesus Christ, the power of His Holy Spirit and the Glory of the Gracefull Father.

### The Send Off

Raiford Cursillo #1 began in bright sunshine on the Wednesday morning of September 30, 1976. As we arrived at Grace Lutheran Church in Miami Springs at 8:30 a.m., the place was buzzing with excitement. Luggage was being stored in the Greyhound bus that had been chartered for the weekend, and the team and family, plus friends, were greeting each other in joyous Christian love. We gathered in the beautiful surliit worship center at Grace for a celebration of praise and communion. Pastors Ed Simonson and Ron Qualley served the meal which was seasoned with prayer, fellowship and song. Following the worship service coffee was served in the fellowship hall and goodbyes and blessings were abundant. The team boarded the bus at 9:20 and were serenaded with "De Colores" as the bus pulled away.

As we left with the tune of "De Colores" ringing in our ears, the Lord reminded me of how similar this was to a normal Cursillo send off. Although we were a seasoned team, most of us still did not know where we were going or what we were getting into. We had no idea of the Raiford facilities or our schedule for the weekend . . . we had alot to learn.

As we headed north on the Palmetto Expressway, I thought about the past weeks of team preparation, of how the Lord thru our Rector Tom Johnson had built this Christian community that we called a team. I remembered how the weekly team meetings had differed from what we were used to with all of the emphasis on Bible studies. This study of God's word had led us into some beautiful sharing sessions. Very little time had been spent on the actual planning or the dynamics of the weekend during these weekly team meetings. I also recalled how well the different denominations on the team had blended together and the various opportunities for prayer, praise and fellowship we had experienced. I remembered the Christian community that was supporting God's Cursillo at Raiford. That group of giving, loving Christians who had provided the candidates at Raiford with books, letters, love, banners, posters, prayers, money and us. It had been a big community effort that put that bus on the Palmetto Expressway that Wednesday morning and we knew it.

### The Trip

As we headed north on the Sunshine State Parkway some of the team took out books they had brought along to read. It was an impossible task. The team's spirits were high and conversation flowed. Our bus driver, Paul Arro, was a cursillistia and a member of the palanca team. (The palanca team was the title used for the members of the support crew.) There seemed to be no one place to sit, everyone moved about, and the community continued to build. The team clergy on the bus included Reverends Ed Simonsen, Ron Qualley, Jon Coffey, Frank O'Laughlin and Harry Keith.

About noon, we pulled into a turnpike restaurant just south of Orlando for a pit stop and lunch. The restaurant was being remodeled and it was full, so we went on into South Orlando and had a buffet lunch at a Holiday Inn. As we left Orlando on the second leg of our trip, Bob and Al Pacitti led us in singing. Some of the songs we knew, and some were new to us. Bob directed and Al played the guitar. The team was obviously excited as we got closer to Starke, Florida. Assistant Rector Sam Gillett had a couple of surprises for us. First, he handed out a weekend schedule to all of the palanca team. Finally, we could see just how tight the weekend would be. Rollos were cut to the minimum. Pastor Ed's "Gracefull Life" talk was cut to 90 minutes. Besides the schedules, Sam had also teamed us up with "bunk mates" for the weekend. Al Pacitti was lucky--he got me. It was 5:15 p.m. and we were arriving at Starke.

### The Arrival

The bus pulled into the Best Western motel in beautiful downtown Starke, and a slight misty rain was falling. We checked in and got our rooms and moved our luggage in. Next, the entire team helped unload the bus and we moved everything except the foodstuff into one of the rooms assigned to the Panama City part of the team. (They were not to arrive until later.) Ross Gelfo and some of the team took the bus and foodstuff to the Episcopal Church in Starke, where Ross was to do the cooking.

As we sorted out the palanca in the spare room, we were overwhelmed. Herb Frazier and about six other members of the team got busy with the books that had been donated. There must have been over 25 cartons of Christian material. Assistant Rector Art De Nunzio and I started to sort posters, general letters, out-of-state mail, out-of-country mail and tons of cookies and cakes. We must have had over 200 dozen cookies alone. There were two large boxes filled with individual letters to the candidates. Then there were other boxes with individual items (45 each) for each candidate. These included bookmarks, pocket-sized new testaments, books (Prison to Praise), stick-on roses and rainbows, special cards and individual banners. We estimated there were about 3,500 pieces of general palanca from around the world. Here are some samples:

- A letter from a cursillistia in a Vienna prison telling about his Cursillo experience and his walk with the Lord.
- A letter from a cursillistia in a New York State prison with 20 carbon copies to share with the Raiford candidates.



- Twenty-two letters from cursillistas in Iowa State prison, each one sharing his personal encounter with the Lord.
- A greeting from cursillista Frank Borman.
- Letters and telegrams from around the world in all languages.

There was so much more that it's hard to describe our feelings. We had never seen that much palanca.

After we got the letters, banners, posters, cookies, etc., sorted out, we went to dinner together at the Holiday Inn across the street from our motel. During our meal, the team from Panama City arrived. After a round of embraces, greetings, and introductions, they joined us for dinner. We also learned that we would be leaving for Raiford around noon on Thursday, but we weren't sure what we could take in with us. Maybe, we learned, we wouldn't be able to get in with the coffee pots or other metal objects. It would depend on the attitude of the guards when we got there. (It would depend on the Lord.) After dinner, we went back to the motel and most of us got to bed. It was kind of a change to be on a Cursillo and have showers, double beds and color T.V.

#### On Our Way

Thursday morning after breakfast, we loaded the bus with all of the cookies, books, and banners that we would need to set up the Rollo room. We also loaded coffee pots, dutch ovens, amplifiers, speakers, guitars, cables, freezer chests, drink coolers filled with Best Western ice, etc.

A call from Father Joe LeSage (the Catholic Chaplain at Raiford, and the only clergy candidate, as well as the Lord's instrument for Raiford #1) informed us that we could get in for the setup by 1:00 p.m. We knew the candidates would arrive at 5:00 p.m., so that would leave us four hours to set up a yet unseen area into a Cursillo environment. We boarded the bus at around 12:30 p.m. and started our first 16 mile trip to U.C.I. (Union Correctional Institution) at Raiford, Florida. On our way out to U.C.I. the team broke into song. But it was evident that the singing was strained and not free like we had sung the preceeding day. No one talked much and there was alot of silence. My first sight of Raiford reminded me of the many Navy barracks I have seen and how lonely they always look the first time you see them. The fence was chain link topped with barbed wire. There were towers every so often and they were manned. A second chain-link fence, also topped with barbed wire, ran about ten feet inside the first. Paul pulled the bus into the parking lot, and Sam and Tom went to see about getting us in.

#### The Set-Up

When Sam returned to the bus, he instructed Paul to pull up to the main gate where we got out. Each one of us took some of the load from the bus through an iron-barred door into an inspection room. When we had everything in the room, the guards began to look through the boxes of books, each roll of banners, each box of cookies, into the coffee pots, etc., etc. As the guards were looking at the cookies, I said,

"Hey, if you guys want a couple of cookies, go ahead and take them. It's O.K." Someone behind me said, "What do you call that, a bribe?" I replied, "No, I call it love." The guards had some cookies. Next, the backs of our right hands were stamped with an invisible, infra-red sensitive stamp. This was our only identification to get out that evening. Father O'Laughlin noted that the stamp looked like a lightening bolt and it reminded him of the "Sons of Thunder" James and John.

After everything was inspected, searched and O.K.'d, the team carried it through a second barred door, down a long corridor to a 3-wheeled "donkey cart" kind of vehicle that they use in the prison to move things from place to place. We loaded up the books, banners, cookies, etc., onto the cart and everyone had his arms full as well. I couldn't get over how quickly we had passed through the inspection. Over 20 men and what seemed like a ton of material in a matter of minutes. Now I was beginning to see how Peter had walked out of the prison in Acts 12:10--the Lord was surely with us.

As we moved across the compound, led by Father Joe LaSage, we must have looked like a real rag-tag bunch of nomads. Kind of like the people of Israel leaving Egypt. After about five minute walk, we arrived at the Educational building we were to call "home" for the next three days. We moved down the hall of the building past machine shops, T.V. repair schools, etc., on our way to the auditorium that would be our Rollo room and chapel. As our wierd looking caravan passed the prisoners in the hall, I heard one prisoner remark to his buddy, "I don't know what it is, but if you find out, tell me!" That remark sparked a special prayer from me throughout the weekend. That prayer was, and is, that one of the candidates from Raiford #1 will tell that prisoner what we were all about that weekend--love in Jesus Christ.

We entered the auditorium and unloaded the "donkey cart" and ourselves, piling everything on the stage and surveying this large area with two sliding folding doors that didn't slide and no air conditioning. It was warm. One of the prisoners who was helping us unload our stuff smiled and stuck out his hand. "Hi, I'm Dave Keaton. I'm going to be with you for the Cursillo weekend." I had met my first candidate. Later I was to get to know Dave and his beautiful 24-year old singing voice much better. Some of the highlights of the setup were:

- Several of the team on a 20-foot ladder struggling for 2 hours to free a folding divider that had been stuck for years.
- Six tables set up by using a circle of wooden "arm chairs."
- Boxes of cookies being stored by stacking them on cans of cokes setting in plates of water to keep the armies of ants out.
- Several of us moving all over the prison compound, among the prisoners, gathering items such as podiums, fans, waste baskets, cokes, paper products, etc.
- Al and Bob Pacitti setting up the sound equipment. Al asking a prison electrician who went to get wire from a place he had never



been able to get it from before, only to have it handed him almost as soon as he got there. Someone offered this same electrician a cookie and a cup of coffee during set-up.

- Somehow procuring impossible-to-get items (at a maximum security prison) such as ash trays, two large floor fans, garbage cans, a can opener for the coffee etc.

Well, by 4:45 we had a full-blown Cursillo environment complete with six tables, coffee, cokes, cookies, speaker systems in both the Rollo room and the chapel and a team that was bound together in a Christian community of love.

### The Candidates Arrive

Rector Tom had another surprise for us. Throughout the weekend he planned to involve the entire team (including the cooks and kitchen crew) in active rolls in the Rollo room. As a starter, he selected Al Miller (from Panama City) and myself to work with assistant rectors Sam and Art greeting the candidates in the hall outside the Rollo room. Sam and Art made then temporary HELLO-MY NAME IS badges for the first night and signed them in. Al and I greeted them and escorted them into the Rollo room where the rest of the team (including Rector Tom) waited anxiously to offer them cookies, coffee, cokes and love. While we were waiting in the hall for the first candidates to get there, the classes in the educational building that we were in were dismissed for the day. All of a sudden we had wall-to-wall inmates all around us waiting to be dismissed from the hallway. We stood out like "sore thumbs" in our sport shirts and slacks amid the hundreds of uniforms blue shirt/pants sets. Various inmates pressed close to us asking, "what's going on here?", "what's happening?", "what are you guys doing here?" Our answer - "we are holding a Christian retreat weekend". It was kind of scary. I'll have to admit that even though the Rollo-room guard was standing in the doorway near us, I was still very aware that we were in a prison environment. And, I sure was glad when the bell rang and the hallway started to empty.

In a few minutes the candidates started to arrive. Some were by themselves. Some came in two's and threes. As Sam "tagged" them, Art registered them in, and Al and I greeted them and took them through the doors into the Rollo room. I would recall later on in the weekend that not one of those 42 candidates had any excess weight. They were all trim and slim. I also noted as I greeted them that they wanted to be there. Smiles and good nature was abundant with them. The scene in the Rollo room was something else! Every time a candidate entered, members of the team greeted him warmly and escorted him back to the cookies etc. Conversation flowed. Some of the highlights of that Thursday afternoon/evening were:

- A candidate arriving with a paper bag. As he entered the Rollo room he took the bag back to the cha-cha table and handed it to Ross Gelfo. Ross opened the bag in amazement. The candidate, who like all of the other inmates at UCI, is paid one pack of cigarettes a day had brought 14 packs of cigarettes to share on his Cursillo weekend. As Ross was telling me about this later on in the evening there were tears in our eyes. Not many people gave two-weeks pay toward Raiford Cursillo #1.
- Our first song session. What beautiful voices. We must have praised the Lord in song for 30 minutes, non-stop. Songs like Amazing Grace, How Great Thou Art, Hear O Lord, etc. The leading of Bob and Al Pacitti was super.
- The walk outside and the photographs. Even this early in the weekend we were all "hams" for the photographer. The photographer and his crew were members of UCI's photo department.
- The guard singing with us in the Rollo room.
- Watching the candidates eat, eat, eat cookies. They thought we would run out and we just kept stacking them on the plates. (We never ran out throughout the weekend).
- The introductions. I guess it was during this session that we really began to recognize the love of Jesus radiating from our candidates.
- As the candidates left to go back to their residencies at 8:00 p.m., each one of them had their hands full of cookies and many of them had a can of coke in their hip pocket. We formed a line from the door almost to the cha-cha table and each member of the team said goodnight to each candidate as they left. Pacitti's music continued until the last candidate left.

After we had cleaned up the Rollo room, sorted the cookies and had our team meeting we went to the gate to meet Paul and the bus. I noted as we left Raiford and I looked back at the same scene I had viewed some eight hours earlier I was seeing another side of Raiford. Jesus was there and we knew it. He had welcomed us through His candidates. Our bus was full of real joy - We sang the table blessing as our bus headed for a late dinner at Holiday Inn. Following dinner Art and I sorted the final palanca to be shared Friday with the actual Grace talk.

Most of us hit the double beds early as we were tired. We knew that the weekend was just underway and we had lots of work ahead.



## The Weekend

I tried to keep a log of the events of the weekend as the days went by. In doing so I found that by the time we got to the motel in the evening I was so "pooped" that I could hardly concentrate. However the following accounts summarize the three days:

Friday - This is taken directly from my log: "When I said lots of work last night, I didn't know the half of it. We got up in the dark this morning. It was cold outside. Bob Pacitti brought Al and I a cup of hot coffee. Had a good breakfast together and loaded the rest of the cookies on the bus along with the palanca for the Actual Grace talk. Also plenty of ice for the cokes. We arrived at the Rollo room at about 7:45 and the candidates were already eagerly awaiting "Friday" outside the Rollo room door. We hurried and got coffee on and then formed a line to greet them. Kind of like a send-off line. The line lead to the chapel at the rear of the Rollo room. While the candidates and table professors were in chapel, the palanca team made final plans and laid out the badges for the table assignments. While we were getting set up, the electrician from last night returned with the screwdriver for Al to adjust his audio equipment. He talked to Father Joe and is now a candidate. Other things that happened today!

- Blessing! I got to help seat the candidates at the tables.
- Blessing! I was honored to pray in the chapel for Ed Gieger's (Ideal) talk and Cleve Bell's (Piety) talk.
- Surprise! We found that even though the Rollo room and chapel are in the same large area, you can pray and praise and not hear the speaker giving his talk. (Miracle).
- For lunch Ross brought us sliced cheese, ham, pickles, olives, fesh rolls and the works. Including 10 more cases of soft drinks. Passed through the guards without a hitch. He has already contacted a bakery somewhere and is ordering fresh rolls daily. Somehow he got the Holiday Inn where we have been eating to slice the ham and cheezes - while he had a cup of coffee and watched - free.
- We also fed the guard in the Rollo room and the four at the gate. Bribe? No. - Love? Yes.
- Poster sessions are being held on the floor in the center of the ring of chairs. It's interesting to see the Clergy working at each table. Right down there on the floor with their table.

- Cookies still going like crazy.
- For supper, Ross brought out hot roast beef, scalloped potatoes and green beans. I thought the gate guards were going to drool in the gravey when they checked it, it smelled so good.
- We are finding a second ministry developing for the palanca team. Sam has established a rapport with the gate guards and they trust him. Every time we come through the gates they treat us with the same kindness that we show them. We fed the guards on the gate a hot supper also. They can't believe it.
- Don Rench has a special ministry with the Rollo room guard. Every time a new one comes on duty, Don goes over to him, gives him a big grin and asks how he likes his coffee. He tells them all they have to do is raise their hand and he will bring them coffee or a coke. Usually they don't believe that he means it but by the time they get their third cup served to them - grin and all - they believe.
- The Rollos today have been great. The poster session tonite was wonderful. Rector Tom assigned members of the palanca team to introduce each table for the poster session. More involvement for us.
- During our meals Rector Tom selected a candidate to give the table blessing and another palanca team member to choose the order that the tables would go through the serving line. The Pacitti's played during the meal serving time and everyone sang. They are having so much fun singing that there is no one worrying about who is going to get fed first. In fact, some tables do a "conga-line" kind of a singing dance to the serving line. What fellowship, what a display of love and grace.
- Closed at 7:45 by singing the Lords prayer. Then the candidates gathered up all the cookies (bless the cookies) and soda they could carry and left. Well it wasn't quite that simple. In order to leave, they had to pass that same line of Christian brothers on their way to the door, being greeted by each one, hugged by some, while everyone sang Hear-O-Lord and Sons-of-God spontaneously to Pacitti's music. On the way out, I saw Willie Williams, a six foot-four inch candidate coming through the line with a left hand full of cookies. As he got to five foot-six inch Art De Nunzio he reached down with his right arm and gave Art a hug that lifted him right off the floor. (Never dropped a cookie) (or Art). As the last candidate left, loaded down with love, the team was actually dancing and singing in Christian joy and exultation.



Just before the candidates left tonite, Rector Tom promised them that tomorrow would even be better. I believe him. Because God told me its true."

When we got back to the "Best Western" that Friday evening we were tired, excited, wound-up and jumpy. We were beginning to experience and understand the real meaning of Matthew 25:36 "When I was in prison you visited ME."

I decided to take a dip in the pool even if it was 58° outside. I had the pool to myself. The water was warm. Around ten o'clock, Doug Plumley his wife Angel and their two children (Scott and Mindy) arrived in their station wagon from Miami. Doug was a member of the palanca team and just before we left he found out he had to work Thursday and Friday. I think the Lord kept him in Miami those two days so he could collect some additional letters for the candidates as well as bring along about 50 dozen more homemade cookies. He also brought me another pair of shoes to ease my blister. (I hadn't walked so much in years.) After a visit with the Plumleys in my red and white polka dotted night gown, I hit the sack.

Saturday - This day went by so fast that even my notes were skimpy. Things were moving like wildfire. I remember that we greeted the candidates with the singing line once more and the Rollos began with Study. Herb Frazier presented the 25 cartons of donated books at the end of this talk. Don Rench and I spent the morning getting the candidates mail ready. What a fantastic demonstration of Christian love. The community had sent enough individual letters to each candidate to make up a package of some 80 letters each. We also got the brown envelopes stuffed with a photo and roster for each candidate as well as nearly 45 other items such as book-marks, tracts, prayer cards, etc. Doug Plumley cooked the lunch and brought it out. Once more we moved swiftly through the gates and passed the inspection station. After Pastor Ed's "Gracefull Life" talk we noticed a new element begin to emerge. Trust. From Saturday afternoon on. The Priests and Pastors were kept busy hearing confession and counseling on an individual basis. The Lord Jesus had won their trust for us and now they could really start being themselves. Some men went to confession for the first time in years. The evening meal of Lasagna and meat balls was a sensation! Ross, Doug and the kitchen crew had outdone themselves. We fed five gate guards and two Rollo room guards and had about fifteen wedges of Lasagna left over. John Wick fixed up fifteen individual paper plates for the candidates to take home later. They did. The poster session and sharing had to be cut short because of time and Rector Tom's final words to the candidates were "tomorrow will be even better". At eight o'clock the Pacittis were playing once again and we had formed our reception line to say good bye till Sunday morning. With hands full of cookies, smiles, joy and embraces we parted company for the night.

Sunday - The only way I can describe Sunday is from memory. There was no time for notes, and we were completely engulfed in a whirlwind of God's love all day long. Behind it all, we knew that when 8:00 p.m. came, we would be leaving. There was no way that we could change that.

We got a phone call from either Sam or John Wick at around 6:00 a.m. that it was time to get up (who can distinguish voices that early in the morning?). We dressed for the day and loaded all of our baggage in our Greyhound bus for the trip home later in the day. After breakfast we headed on our way, for the last time, to UCI Raiford...through the now familiar gates, inspection and stamping, across the compound to the educational building. With coffee on and the chapel set up, the candidates arrived. We gave them the same musical/reception line greeting as before and the atmosphere was one of "Holy Joy." That Sunday morning worship service was a mountaintop experience for the team, as well as the candidates. Instead of the normal communion service, we broke bread together. Each man went to the altar, broke a piece of bread and offered a personal prayer. Those prayers were something else! I don't believe there was a dry eye in the place. After the prayers had been offered, Pastor Ed explained the significance of sharing this common food. He spoke of how we would all be leaving and going separate ways, but through the sharing, each time we had bread with our families or friends, we would remember one another. Then we passed the bread followed by the sharing of the peace of the Lord. So much joy abounded that by the time the morning worship service was over, we were already one hour behind schedule. Somehow, by noon we were back on schedule. The palanca team were in a frenzy most of the day. Let me illustrate a few items:

- First of all, we had to start cleaning up as much as we could so we would be prepared to move out later.
- As we were cleaning up, we found a box full of letters for the candidates that we had overlooked. We hurriedly went through the 45 packs of letters that we already had assembled and added the remaining letters.
- Sam took a crew of men over to the main chapel to set up for the closing schedule at 6:00 p.m.
- As discussions of the talks were going on, we slowly and quietly took down all of the banners and posters, letters, etc. that had been hanging in the Rollo room. The banners were moved to the main chapel to be hung for the closing.
- After the candidates got their letters and brown envelopes with the photographs in them, they had some time for coffee and cookies, (yes, there were still cookies). During this time, some of them took their photos out and started getting the team to sign them. Soon, the entire Rollo room was filled with pens and team members happily signing photos.
- One of the real high points of the weekend for all of us was when Art Nunzio started to give his talk on the Ultreya. By this time, the candidates knew we would be leaving them in a few hours.



Art began with, "This team did not just come up here for this weekend. Each member has committed himself to several visits in the coming year, as well as writing and praying for you throughout the year." The candidates leaped to their feet with an ovation of joy that just had to give glory to God and leave Jesus smiling.

That's about it from my memory bank on Sunday. At 6:00 p.m., right on schedule, we all left the Rollo room on our way to the main chapel for the closing. Rector Tom had instructed the team to get to the head of the line because we had one more surprise for the candidates. . .

### The Closing

As we walked across the compound toward the main chapel, we could see large groups of inmates standing around just watching us. They had witnessed the activity around the main chapel all day. Once more, we must have been a strange sight. Many of the candidates were wearing the special paper "dove" inscribed neckwear hanging on soft cords around their necks. (A handmade gift from some loving Christian brothers and sisters). Others had roses and rainbows stuck to their badges or clothing. As we approached the chapel, the doors swung open and the evening air exploded in what seemed like a thousand voices singing "De Colores." Bob and Al Pacitti were in the chapel and had been joined by 75 Christian brothers and sisters that had traveled from Atlanta, Panama City, Gainesville and Miami to share in the closing of God's Raiford Cursillo #1. From Miami they had traveled since 8:00 a.m. Sunday morning arriving just prior to the closing. Many of them, like my wife Ann, were supported by friends back in Miami. She had been given the \$25.00 bus fare by friends in her prayer group who had never made a Cursillo but the Lord had told them that Ann was to go to Raiford. The team moved down the receiving line and grouped near the altar to wait for the candidates. It took awhile for them to arrive as they had to wade through all of that love that was waiting for them. Finally, when all of the candidates were seated in the choir loft, we serenaded them with 15 minutes of singing. During this time, Val Murray sang "His Eye is on the Sparrow." Each candidate was presented with a cross and a bible. The bible was the gift of another group of Christians, each one had a special message inscribed in it. The candidates were also allowed time to share their thoughts of the weekend. That testimony was beyond words. I could not capture it here on paper. Maybe as a sample:

- "I've learned one thing this weekend. that they can never take away from me - I am a son of God"

And I guess that sums it up, we are "sons of God." The closing was wonderful, and somehow, the Lord gave us some more time. We didn't have to break up until 9:00 p.m. As the candidates were leaving, being met by the guards to be escorted back to their rooms, we could begin to feel an emptiness. We knew that the following day many of the Raiford inmates had planned a demonstration. Some of our new found friends were fearful of being caught up in it. We knew their anxiety. When the last man had gone, the doors were closed and the entire Christian community that had assembled there dropped to their knees in prayer, praise and Thanksgiving.