

THE AUTHENTIC THREE-DAY WEEKEND OF VIA DE CRISTO

Introduction

“Renewal movement,” is the description most often assigned to the Via de Cristo. Christianity can be viewed as a renewal of the Jewish faith and Judaism the renewal of “Creation’s faith.” Life in this world brings changes and it is normal and natural to practice renewal in order to elicit healing from the many and varied wounds caused by hostile changes. Healthy renewal is not going back, it is bringing forward that which is good and sane. It encourages those ideals that will make a good tomorrow possible.

Via de Cristo is a Christian renewal effort, inspired by God that works faith and renewal within the Church. While those who participate in the Via de Cristo would never claim singular rights to renewal, there is a solid confidence in its ability to provide healing, strength, and an effective guide for Christian living.

Wordsmyth[®] has two definitions for “authentic”. First, real, genuine, veritable; and second, conformance with the known facts, authoritatively valid, approved, accepted, and substantiated. When speaking of an Authentic 3-Day Weekend we are clearly referring to the second definition. It is requisite to keep a Via de Cristo Weekend “authoritatively valid” in order to protect its renewal benefits. “The more you know of Via de Cristo the less you want to change it,” is often repeated. This phrase has evolved from years of observing new additions, which, while well meaning, actually detracted from the overall impact.

This pamphlet has been written in an effort to protect the authenticity of the Via de Cristo renewal. It is designed to quiet possible human presumption and discourage unnecessary conflict among those using the method while recognizing the necessity for openness in the evaluation process. Through the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, this pamphlet outlines “best practices” and can be of practical assistance to all Via de Cristo secretariats. In good Christian style it is a presentation not a legislation. An open and loving dialogue within these established guidelines is wholeheartedly encouraged.

Essentials

An authentic 3-day weekend requires an authentic 4th-day movement. The business of Via de Cristo is *not* to put on weekends but to help build and equip participants in a 4th-day community. Responsible leaders will look at their 4th-day program soberly, cautious not to over-plan weekends. The weekend will be authentic only to the degree that group reunion, ultreya and true apostolic witness complete it. This is often the most overlooked truth. In the warmth and enthusiasm that surrounds a Via de Cristo Weekend, it is easy to pursue that experience for its own sake. Such emotionalism must be resisted. A balanced approach with proper emphasis on each dimension of the Via de Cristo method will more effectively accomplish the movements purpose.*

* For more detail on the strategy and purpose of the Via de Cristo see chapters 2 & 3 of The Essentials of the Via de Cristo published by the National Lutheran Secretariat of Via de Cristo

Each authentic weekend has a number of activities that are essential, and others that are subject to individual secretariat initiative. We will first make clear the distinction between those items that are essential and those that may not be. Then, we will look more closely at those essentials that are structural in nature and quite visible. Finally, we will review the dynamics that may be less apparent but are equally essential.

Essential Structural Elements

For the weekend, we have a plan and a general awareness of what needs to be done. We know what normally happens so that, at any given moment, what should happen and how it should happen, may in fact, happen. In outlining this, we draw a clear distinction between what is essential and what is adiaborous. Webster's New World Dictionary defines essential as: (1) of or constituting the intrinsic fundamental nature of something: basic, inherent... (2) absolute; complete; perfect; pure... (3) necessary to make a thing what it is; indispensable; requisite. And, Webster's defines adiaborous as: (1) morally neutral or indifferent; neither wrong nor right. (2) in medicine, neither harmful nor helpful.

The following items are essential for an authentic Three Day Weekend: palanca, retreat, 72 hours, 5 meditations, 15 talks, note taking, discussions, posters, decuria sharing, celebration of repentance, Holy Communion daily, closing and crosses. There may be some debate within the Via de Cristo about a specific individual item, but as a rule these are all and each present during an authentic weekend.*

Through the years many other activities have been used on the weekends. To name just a few, we have: skits, send-offs, foot washings, singing for meals, trinkets, and serenades. These optional activities are neither wrong nor right, but they are not considered essential to the purpose of the weekend. It is not our intention to have a weekend full of "good things" only to miss what is essential. More is NOT better!

Let's reflect on some of the reasons for this. If too much is added to a weekend schedule, it crowds out important time for reflection and community-building. The real need is for regular, consistent breaks and "free time" to think, meditate, or get to know other participants. Sufficient rest is necessary for *all* participants so all can be alert and responsive. There also needs to be adequate opportunities to seek Spiritual Direction first for individual needs but also to create better understanding of Spiritual Direction in the 4th day.

An example of how an adiaborous activity crowds essentials is the way palanca is often mishandled. Genuine palanca is deep, intentional, and selfless prayer; in a word "sacrificial." It takes place before, during and after the weekend. It is second only to the Holy Spirit in importance. Palanca letters are written to the participants so they will be aware of the many efforts on their behalf. But, "palanca" is misapplied when the team spends inordinate time before and during the weekend doing "cutesy" name tags, bookmarks, book covers, envelopes, etc. It is especially sad when someone spends \$10 at a bookstore and calls it palanca (unless there was genuine sacrifice made to set aside that \$10). Gifts of love are nice, but they are not the essential palanca.

Whenever a weekend is being planned it is crucial that the essentials be emphasized and the adiaborous placed in such a way as to assist the essentials. In many movements these extras

* for definitions of these essentials see The Essentials of the Via de Cristo published by the National Lutheran Secretariat of Via de Cristo pages 31 & 32

have reached such a beloved status that they may be viewed as essential. Each movement must carefully evaluate each activity that takes place. Much prayer and conscious discussion must be used concerning the impact on the purpose and results of the weekend. Nothing should be added or discarded without clear and consistent reason. In each and every situation adiaphorous must be placed as secondary to essential. Please respect the significance of healthy tradition without violation of the less apparent essentials. It is advisable for a governing secretariat on a routine basis to dissect all its weekend practices; to examine each for its validity and contribution to an authentic weekend.

The following positions or roles can be considered essential:

Rector (An experienced layperson who will accept responsibility for calling, training, and leading the team for a weekend); Spiritual Director(s) (Ordained clergy who support and are trained in the Via de Cristo method and give the 5 Grace talks); Assistant Rector (or Head Cha, an experience layperson who will assist the Rector by organizing and directing the physical plant for the weekend); 10 Rollistas (Team members who will each deliver a 20-45 minute talk to stimulate discussion among those who participate); Auxiliary (Additional personnel who will perform the necessary labor of the weekend.).

Additional staff may be added as needs become apparent. But, all changes must again respect all essentials. Each weekend needs properly trained leadership including the rector, team and Secretariat members. Future leadership must be intentionally cultivated. Fundamental considerations include:

- Enthusiasm for the mission of Christ and His Church
- Understanding the purpose of the weekend
- Genuine desire to build community
- Ability to instill the method through personal example
- Humble attitudes with a spirit of cooperation
- Acceptance of the decisions of the secretariat without trying to change the process
- Knowing how vital grouping is and participating in their own 4th day group
- Actively serving Christ and His Church in their environments -- NOT using Via de Cristo as their church

It is essential that Spiritual Directors understand the purpose and vision of Via de Cristo and the vital role they play. They need to be committed to full participation in team preparation and in the weekend, owning responsibility to become an integral part of the community before the weekend ever begins. Their rollos need to stay within the flow of the weekend message. Spiritual Directors are not to be put into compromising positions at any part of the process. Please remember that spiritual direction is not in-depth counseling.

Sponsorship is a key to creating the authentic three-day weekend. Haphazard and /or random selection of participants is neither desirable nor wise. It takes prayer, time, and follow-through. Educating the community of the sponsor's responsibilities is one of the most critical tasks of the secretariat.*

The schedule established by the secretariat should be faithfully observed. The rector is given latitude in team selection and training methods but the weekend design is established by the secretariat. The greatest rector brings gifts of administration and will lead a weekend that most

* For more information see Chapter 7 of The Essentials of the Via de Cristo published by the National Lutheran Secretariat of Via de Cristo

closely resembles the secretariat's intention. Remember, the primary charge to the rector is to train the team, their reward is to preside over the weekend and watch it unfold.

The three-day community should be protected from outside influence as much as possible and enveloped in prayer. The entire outside community consciously needs to protect the participants' isolation.

Essential Socio-Spiritual Elements

It is not always easy to describe the less apparent essentials of a weekend. You know when they are there and you can sense when they are absent. The key to their presence lies in the spirit that is generated by the team as it gathers. Are they open and yielding to the Holy Spirit or are they filled with their own desires? Are they grateful for the privilege to serve their Lord or are they coming for a great experience? Is it God's will or my will that is most in charge? The following essentials are some of those that need to be generated during the weekend.

Keep it simple. If there is any admonition that *must be heard* it is this one. It must be clearly understood that the weekend is really a whole piece. One long talk broken down into 15 sections that are given by both lay and clergy and extending through the three days. Ideas build steadily, one on the other. The talks and meditations probe each person and in turn help each person to probe their "world" finding new ways to relate the gospel to everyday life.

There is a flow through the entire weekend that is consistent through the meditations, talks, music, and discussions. If the weekend contains gimmicks, hoopla, roosters, skits, etc. it can break the flow. The impression is created that Via de Cristo is really about all these "things" and the connected message is lost.

Listening is essential. It is not a technique so much as it is an attitude. It is showing respect to whoever might be sharing. Seek lovingly to understand not only what is said but also the feeling within the words.

Table discussion and posters are at the heart of the weekend; tried and true parts of the method. This is when and where the message most often takes root and becomes a part of a participant's thought process. They must never be "cut" due to rollo over-run.

These discussion groups around the tables are really group reunions. The gathering of the groups to share the meaning of each day in the evening is an image of the ultreya.

Free time contributes to mental and physical health by providing "breathing space" and growing time in the often-dense schedule. It helps the participants "pull back" from the message and internalize through reflection. It also increases the likelihood of personal contact with other participants, building community.

An overly controlled situation without freedom gives the impression of "brain-washing". Participants must feel the freedom to proceed at their own pace and not be intimidated into keeping up. For the participant not to "get it" in any prescribed fashion is okay!

Remember:

- Psychological and spiritual necessity is individualistic.
- It takes time to build trust -- trust in each other, trust in the message, trust in the method.
- Sleep is necessary so that all can be alert.

- Participants have come to the weekend freely. They are seeking a way to enrich their Christian life. We are here for them.
- We must trust the Holy Spirit.

The general atmosphere of the weekend is to be prayerful, reflective, and above all else sincere. All participants need to feel the openness and honesty, to experience an authentic Christian community! At the end of the day no one should doubt that what is being lived is true. Things that might be distracting from the true purpose of the weekend should be avoided, especially interruptions from outside the weekend.

Connection to community is the last essential that we teach the new participants. Their connection to community is not just the small one created on the weekend but the larger community as a whole – the Via de Cristo movement, the Church, the communion of saints, and the world in which we are to evangelize. This is not always accomplished on the weekend. Assimilation may take place through Ultreya and group reunion.

Evaluation

The following is a process a secretariat could employ to evaluate their weekends. It was developed in committee by the National Lutheran Secretariat (NLS) to assist in understanding the incredible diversity within the secretariats that compose the NLS.

First, a practice is run through a series of critical questions, the ones printed below were especially helpful. Then, based on the answers to the questions, it is assigned a designation. After the discussion and designation a brief summary is prepared so that others would benefit from the work. This summary provides a helpful record and should be kept available for future evaluations. Many hours of secretariat discussion can be saved by a simple review of these evaluations.

An authentic 3-day weekend will emphasize the essential, limit the adiaphorous and eliminate the detrimental. It is so easy for “neat” things to become part of the tradition and thereby alter the weekend.

The critical questions are:

1. What details are involved in the practice? How is it done and what does it take in time and resources?
2. Does the practice assist the weekend’s purpose? How?
3. Is the practice historical? Did others find it useful? Why? Does the practice meet today’s needs?
4. Does it promote spiritual growth as opposed to emotionalism?
5. Is the practice ‘fluff’? Constructive? Necessary?
6. Does it teach and encourage change (spiritual growth) leading to a change in the environment?
7. Is it a natural fit to the progression of the weekend?
8. Does it crowd essentials or “cramp” the weekend? If time runs short can it be cut or shortened without damaging the integrity of the weekend?
9. Are there other practices that could be substituted?
10. Does it involve the Via de Cristo community in a healthy way?

The 5 possible designations are:

1. Essential - as defined in The Essentials of The Via de Cristo Manual published by the National Lutheran Secretariat.
2. Recommended - A practice that by its own internal integrity has demonstrated its usefulness in accomplishing the purpose of the weekend.
3. Adiaphorous – as defined in The Essentials of The Via de Cristo Manual.
4. Discouraged – a practice that may have gained the status of “tradition” but actually works against the purpose and intent of the weekend.
5. Detrimental – a practice that has become a part of the weekend but not only works against the purpose but could have devastating consequences for some participants.

Examples

The following evaluations were conducted at the NLS and are presented as examples.

Example (1)

The practice: SEND-OFF -- On the first night of a weekend the community gathers at a designated meeting site to welcome participants. Once all new participants have arrived they sit together with their sponsors in a large enough area for all to sit comfortably. An opening prayer is offered and a simple welcome is given to all. Then the name of each participant is read alternating between new participants and team members. When a name is called the person rises offers a quick goodbye and exits to get on a bus to the actual weekend site. The route from the door to the transportation is lined with community who will applaud and offer words of cheer and encouragement (ultreya). This line may involve several hundred feet of smiling happy faces, each person clapping and wishing the participants a wonderful weekend. In places where there is no travel involved the community will line the hallways as participants walk through on their way to the next meeting place (often the dining room).

Evaluation: ADIAPHOUOUS

Pluses

1. Name is called and person is warmly recognized. This begins a long succession of events in which the person gets called “by name” and warmly received by others. This is a powerful dynamic of the weekend and needs to begin as soon as possible.
2. It is historical. From the early days of the movement when weekends were held in monasteries and camps the participants would meet at a local church and have a bus ride together to the site. Cursillistas would come to give them a big positive sendoff.
3. There is community involvement. Following the departure of the weekend participants the community will usually remain to lift the weekend in prayer.
4. A bus ride can add to the feeling of getting away on retreat and offer an opportunity for a warm-up dialogue between team and new participants.

Minuses

- 1) A new participant may feel threatened. Most people are not accustomed to such strong recognition. It can feel overwhelming. Further, a walk down a narrow aisle of people may be extremely uncomfortable, if not frightening, for individuals who have experienced abuse.
- 2) There is an expense and potential logistics problem. What was once a helpful convenience to provide travel arrangements can become “gymnastics” to create the

appearance of “getting away”. The Transportation must provide room for all the participants. This could easily mean two buses.

3. For movements that like to use a slow progressive revelation of support staff, the large group of community for the send-off might be too much too soon.

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*Example (2)*

The practice: SERENADE – The community sings for the participants of the weekend. This is to be “music from the heart.” -- a gift of grace (not entertainment!). It is to focus attention on Jesus Christ and His great love for us. It also, in a subtle and powerful way, assures the participants that there is a whole community committed to assisting them in reaching out to change environments. This gift may be offered on Saturday night, Sunday morning, and/or Sunday afternoon. The singers may be seen or unseen. The placement and visibility will often depend on the facilities and logistics.

Evaluation: RECOMMENDED

Pluses

1. It shows God’s love and grace.
2. Music is a vital part of life and touches the heart – the angels sing!
3. It is a sacrificial gift in that many community members travel great distances to serenade the participants.
4. It passes all the critical questions for evaluation.

Minuses

1. It may impact a “hurting” participant negatively (divorce, death of a loved one, etc.).
2. It can disrupt the integrity of the team through competition and jealousy.
3. There are opportunities for inappropriate contact and inappropriate responses on the part of all participants on the weekend.
4. Anticipation of the serenade by team members can distract and adversely affect the dynamics of the weekend.
5. Hurt feelings do occur when there is a large turnout from one church, spouse or family group and not from another. “There wasn’t anyone here for me.”

There are few dynamics within Via de Cristo that have evolved into more diverse practices. This speaks to its power in communication, but like any source of power, it needs to be used with care and understanding. It should lift up and engage the participants in the weekend. It should be placed to enhance the natural progression and not overshadow the essentials. It is **strongly** advised that any participation by spouses or people very close to first time participants be discouraged (in this case prayer out of sight is the best route for them). There are several additional factors to consider. Should serenaders be seen? Who can and/or should participate? What music will be used? When does it fit into the weekend? Below are some reflections on these factors.

SEEN

When serenaders are seen, it puts faces on the love being expressed. Participants feel that there is a tangible, visible connection. The disadvantages include the possibility of inappropriate contact, it is unnecessary for there to be any touching, hugging, etc. for the participants to experience the gift. Some serenaders feel the need to put on a production – this distorts the “gift from the heart.”

## UNSEEN

When singers are unseen there is a sense of mystery and wonder. Spouses can participate, but should not be encouraged. The fact that singers are unseen significantly reduces the temptation to entertain. A potential disadvantage is that not all facilities have space to hide the singers. Further, Americans are visual people, this channel is lost when the singers are hidden.

## WHOLE COMMUNITY SERENADES

More involvement by more people! The participants begin to sense the larger community that will be available to them for support. But, it invites outside influences into the weekend.

## TEAM ONLY SERENADES

Another channel to demonstrate love without the contamination of outside influences that disturbs the cloistered environment.

## OPPOSITE SEX SERENADES

“God created them male and female.” There is a natural impact that is created because of who we are as people.

## MUSIC

Singing songs familiar to participants can punctuate the progression of the weekend and enhances the theme. (Opposite sex voices can be very powerful)

## WHEN AND WHERE

Do not over do it. Strategic placement of serenades and songs for the serenade is always crucial. It is too easy to disrupt the flow of the weekend with inappropriate songs or to crowd the schedule for the serenade's sake. Be very cautious about ever invading private space (like sleeping rooms).

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Example (3)

The practice: FLOWERS – In addition to their role as table and altar decoration many movements will use flowers for distribution to participants on the weekend.

Evaluation: DISCOURAGED/DETRIMENTAL

Pluses

1. Love gift
2. Symbol of grace and beauty
3. Speaks from the heart of both Christ and the serenader
4. They are PRETTY!! Colorful –de colores!

Minuses

1. ALLERGIES!
2. Expense
3. Opens and even encourages favoritism
4. Logistics -- What do we do with them after?

The possibility of allergic reaction overshadows most benefits. A secretariat will want to be *extremely* careful about introducing flowers to any part of the weekend. Those who already do may want to revisit the practice.

Conclusion

Eduardo Bonnín was once asked by a well-meaning inquirer, “How did you develop the Cursillo®?” With a look of surprise and consternation he said “We never developed the Cursillo®? ... the Holy Spirit gave it to us!” In a similar fashion we can not create an authentic 3-day Weekend ... the Holy Spirit gives it to us! The whole Via de Cristo is a gift of God’s grace and we are truly blessed when we allow God to perform His work in our lives.

If pressed, we might say that The authentic Three-days will be realized when:

- At the end of the weekend, everyone will know a method of renewal that works
- Prayer is offered for the Church, the movement and all who are responsible in them
- Attention is turned from "doing" the Three-days to "living" its message
- Past participants seek more to serve Christ and His Church and less the Via de Cristo
- Via de Cristo leaders read widely and well in the literature of their movement
- Units are formed to live both the structure of Via de Cristo and the spirit of Via de Cristo
 - this is done through service to the Church
 - this is done by evaluating
 - this is done by the secretariat
- Leaders of the movement work with their clergy, bishops and church leaders developing a plan which gives the Via de Cristo its distinctive mission as a movement of the Church