

# Possession of the Spirit: Contested Discourse and the Construction of Identity among Lay Catholic Devotional Groups in and around the City of Cork

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This essay explores the relationship between the use of language and the construction of identity and worldview among lay Catholic groups in Cork, Ireland.<sup>1</sup> En route, I consider the key concepts of “group” and “folk religion.” This research is situated in a contemporary academic movement in Ireland (both North and South) which focuses the ethnographer’s gaze upon Irish urban settings. The editors of *Irish Urban Cultures*, for example, argue that “ethnographers of Ireland should shake off the fetters of their anthropological traditions and training, and immerse themselves in the actuality of an Ireland entering the twenty-first century” (Curtin 1993:13). In this essay, I examine the contested nature of devotional language—the “verbal wrestling” that takes place within and between members of lay Catholic groups—rather than the urban character of said groups. My point of departure is an Irish ethnography of the most “traditional” kind—Lawrence Taylor’s examination of the Catholic faith in an Irish-speaking, northwest coastal fishing and farming community.

Writing about a weekly Charismatic prayer meeting, Taylor comments on one member of the group who “seemed...to straddle the divide between charismatic fervour and a more ‘old fashioned’ Catholicism built upon a familiarity with, and devotion to, the ‘Blessed Virgin Mother.’” Taylor identifies this divide as a “fault line” upon which future tensions in the group would rest (1995:217).

Like Taylor, I have noted time and again the tense negotiation which seems to characterize the relationship between the devotees of Marian and Charismatic traditions. The phrase “Marian traditions” refers to the myriad forms of devotion to Our Lady which include pilgrimages, recitations,

rosaries,<sup>2</sup> and maintaining or visiting grottos. I use the term “Charismatic traditions” to refer to a semi-organized international movement (the Catholic Charismatic Renewal), to those individuals and groups who affiliate themselves with it, and to those forms of devotion which emphasize the spontaneous, active union of the devotee with the Holy Spirit of God. The Charismatic Renewal is characterized by free-form prayer, contemplative silence, free-form singing and musical worship, spontaneous sermons, prophecy, and glossolalia (speaking in tongues). Marian and Charismatic traditions are not mutually exclusive. Rather, these represent groups along a continuum that possess flexible membership. Consequently, there are individuals within each tradition who, like Taylor’s informant, “straddle the divide.”

The following analysis is based primarily on multiple, in-depth interviews with six individuals. Two informants identify themselves primarily with Marian traditions, two with Charismatic traditions, and two place themselves in *both* or *between* these categories. These interviews were supplemented by participant-observation and by the ethnographic work of Taylor in Donegal (1995) and of Bodhan Szuchewycz in Galway (1989).

### Understanding “Groups”

In a recent collection of definitive essays in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Dorothy Noyes discusses the idea of “group.” Weighing the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of related terms, she concludes that:

[The] community of the social imaginary coexists in a dialectical tension with the empirical world of day to day network contacts....This productive tension is the complex object we denote with the word *group*. (1995:471)

Noyes offers a useful definition, for it addresses both questions of center (networks drawn by social scientists around individuals) and questions of periphery (the inclusive/exclusive boundaries drawn by the social imagination of the “folk”). In dealing with devotional groups among whom this “productive tension” exists, questions of center and periphery are begged at every turn. If Pascal’s metaphor is accurate, if God can be conceived of as a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, then surely these devotional groups were made in the image of their creator.

In observing the discourse and behavior of the various devotional groups, it is easy to identify core individuals or subgroups. Exclusionary and definitive boundaries, on the other hand, are often blurry or invisible due to the constant engagement between group members and non-empirical realities. Because a devotional group interacts on a very fundamental level

with Our Lady, Our Lord, saints, angels, and spirits of the human dead, it is difficult to draw clear lines between and around group members.

Perhaps it is best to illustrate the point ethnographically. Upon arrival at an open-air, street level Rosary meeting, it is easy and tempting to draw geographic lines around the tiny cobblestoned meeting square, temporal lines around the noon hour or the five decades,<sup>3</sup> and social lines around the bodies in the circle. I could also include a variety of nominal group members such as those who slow down or stop in passing to bless themselves or to say one prayer or a full decade before moving on. Further, I could include those who are merely absent for the week.

It is clear, however, that these lines are inadequate. Some individuals who are housebound *never* attend, but they are nevertheless considered part of the group. Furthermore, the members of this Cork Rosary meeting express a solidarity and a shared identity with a wider global network of individuals praying the Rosary. Lastly, there are members of the group who have passed away yet are felt to still play an active role in the proceedings. And, of course, there is Our Lady whose statue is placed physically in the center of the meeting and who must be spiritually present for the activity to have any meaning at all.

Leaving many of the questions raised by the term “group” only partially answered, I will turn to a temporary solution. The members of the Charismatic, Marian, and “mixed” traditions can be distinguished as “speech communities,” which Malcolm Coulthard defines (after Hymes) as “any group which shares both linguistic resources and rules for interaction and interpretation” (1977:32). This definition is germane to my analysis of the discursive similarities and differences (agreements and contestations) within and between these speech communities, particularly their uses of idioms, or special vocabulary, of the International Charismatic Renewal.

### **Folk Religion and the Analysis of Folk Religious Discourse**

Theories of discourse analysis are as contested as the texts and events on which they focus. Ruth Finnegan notes the recent move *away* from studying discourse as a dialogue between hegemonic and disputed cultures and *toward* a definition (quoting Tannen) of “language in context across all forms and modes,” thus eliminating the traditional political connotations of terms like “folklore” (Finnegan 1992:14–15).

In many ways, however, the study of “folk religion” receives value and meaning from the dichotomization of official and unofficial culture (see Ó Giolláin 1990 and Taylor 1995). I hold that folk and popular religious events emerge from the dialogue between orthodoxy, popular traditions, and personal religious creativity. Therefore, I do not seek to identify minor

traditions as somehow isolated from the world's great faiths. Rather, I focus on those traditions which exist within official religious traditions, noting the dynamic tensions that constantly define and redefine the religious climate of a group.

My fieldwork focuses almost exclusively on groups that are lay organized and on instances of activity beyond the orthodox boundaries of the Church (e.g., visiting unapproved Marian apparition sites or preaching well-developed folk theologies). My goal is to better understand the realities of popularly expressed and popularly accessible religion—what “goes on” outside of the Mass. In this essay, eliminating the political connotations of discourse would be self-defeating. I define discourse, therefore, as the active, contextual use of language in fundamentally ideological terms: “a systematic use of ideas, organized from a particular view” (Hodge and Kress 1979:6). It is this ideological discourse which contributes largely to the identity building process for Irish Catholic laity.

### **The International Movement**

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal was based on Protestant Pentecostal theology concerned with the presence and fruit of the Holy Spirit among worship communities. It was brought to Dublin in 1972 through the literature and voices of American visitors and returning “pilgrims.” Two years later, the movement was organized under a National Service Committee and given voice in an Irish-based newsletter, *New Creation*. That year the first national conference convened drawing 1,200 people, a figure which tripled in 1975. With full papal approval and the support of many (though not all) of the national clergy, the movement peaked and then fell, leveling off over the following decades (Szuchewycz 1989:49–52). In the nineties, the clergy and laity moderately support the movement. This year's convention drew approximately 3,000 people; the movement continues to meet the needs of many.

Taylor asserts that the Charismatic Renewal gave its participants a language which “maintained their new field of religious experience,” a language which he describes as “an amalgam of liberal, person-centered therapeutics and revived appreciations of the miraculous character of the Catholic sacraments” (1995:237). Upon examining some of the terms associated with the Renewal, however, I have discovered that the terms are not the exclusive property of Renewal participants, but are used and contested by those who place themselves outside of, or even against, the movement.

### The Holy Spirit<sup>4</sup>

The Holy Spirit is perhaps the most widely used and passionately contested phrase among both Charismatics and non-Charismatics. It is not the phrase as symbol they dispute, but rather what it signifies: the description of and access to the Divine Person. This phrase is at the heart of the Renewal, for only the constant intercession of the Holy Spirit gives the movement meaning. Not surprisingly, the phrase is found in nearly all texts used by the Charismatic speech community: prayers, legends, personal narratives, sermons, songs, and even gossip and jokes.

One person, B, recalls the Irish word *ruath*, or wind, and says that *ruath* is a symbol both for the Holy Spirit and for the historical process of the Charismatic Renewal of the Church. Below, B, a bachelor in his fifties, describes his encounter with the exposed Host in the Adoration Chapel near his flat (about a three minute walk). Adoration of the Host<sup>5</sup> is a devotion common to both Marian and Charismatic traditions:<sup>6</sup>

- B: Well I think/what we/I get what we call the “Unction of the Spirit.”
- JF: Right.
- B: Inside.
- JF: Right.
- B: Uh...say to come to me, you know? Come and sit with me.
- JF: I see.
- B: It’s like Jesus with his two arms outstretched saying come and sit with me...and I answer that call.

This sensory-rich, very *human* account of the Holy Spirit (and Jesus, God the Son) typifies Charismatic discourse. Images and metaphors of calling, seeing, and yearning toward communion are part and parcel of a worldview which focuses on personal interaction with the divine and/or experiences of prophecy.

As mentioned above, the members of self-defined Charismatic groups are not the only people using the phrase “the Holy Spirit.” A sampling of uses from members of Marian groups, who may be actively wary or even anti-Charismatic, yields interesting results. First, the Marian discourse contests Charismatic descriptions of the effect of encounters with the Holy Spirit. One man—a husband, father, and retired police officer in his mid-fifties—takes issue with the Charismatic phrase “slain in the Spirit” when used as an excuse to legitimate kinesthetically extreme worship:

F: I was witness to the Holy Spirit. A little/dove coming down on me...I didn't hit the ground/at/all.

Although this individual has had many visions, his attitude and language is not uncommon among his fellows. Others in the same Rosary group have said that "the Holy Spirit is to be experienced [presumably silently], not articulated" and that the Spirit stimulates "humble and moderate prayer" rather than religious activity that is "full of hype" or "tied to emotion."

Second, Marian discourse contests Charismatic devotional access to the Holy Spirit, asserting that the Holy Spirit visits in the context of devotion to Our Lady, rather than in spontaneous Charismatic prayer:

F: Where Our Lady is/Jesus is there...and Holy Spirit...and God the/Father of course.

And later:

F: She said, "I am Our Lady of the Rosary, not Our Lady of the Charismatics."

Just as the Holy Spirit is used differently by members at either end of the Marian/Charismatic continuum, it has still other meanings and uses for those in the middle. For these people, it reconciles the two extremes. On a one-day pilgrimage to the Mt. Melleray Grotto,<sup>7</sup> I observed a woman, a retired nurse and returned emigrant, invite an older man to visit her weekly Charismatic prayer meeting. His response was negative and hostile (see below). For her, the Holy Spirit was the bridge across which she tried to establish a continuity between his devotional world and her own. She used the term to establish both a Biblical (i.e., legitimately Catholic) basis for the prayer group and also to point out a factor common to both the Marian and Charismatic traditions.

Another middle-of-the-roader, a fifty-year-old bachelor, divides his evening devotional time between the Legion of Mary and a Charismatic prayer meeting. For him, the Holy Spirit is not a rhetorical tool for creating solidarity but a personal reality in which God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, demands solidarity. He has often received "inner locution" in which he was told to spread the word that Ireland's salvation depended on a dramatic turn toward both the Holy Spirit and Our Lady.

He speaks of his activity in both groups as unacceptable to the majority of people around him who go by the "rule of thumb that you are either one or the other." He considers himself to be an example of the desired solidarity between the two groups. Interestingly, he says it is not his dual-devotion

that gets him into trouble, but rather forgetting himself by telling Marian stories to Charismatics and vice-versa. This statement suggests an insider's awareness of two radically different pools of linguistic resources.

### Prophecy

Prophecy is another important focus in the discourse of various lay devotional groups. A discussion of prophecy is a discussion of the "voice" of the Spirit—or the voice of God through the Spirit—directed either at an individual or at a group through an individual. Discourse on prophecy is almost always accompanied by discourse on its compliment, silence.

Previously, I mentioned that members of the Marian group criticize members of the Charismatic Renewal for being overly emotional and not responding properly to the Holy Spirit with "humble and moderate prayer." Szuchewycz's examination of the role of silence in Charismatic prayer meetings in Galway indicates that this criticism may be growing less and less legitimate. She contends that traditional Irish Catholic religiosity has influenced the Renewal significantly, pushing it dramatically away from demonstrative worship and toward silence (1989:47).

Nonetheless, prophecy and silence, both in the form of inner locution of and channeling to a wider group, remain important aspects of Charismatic practice and discourse. In Galway, an informant commented that "silence often brought myself up to say something," which Szuchewycz glosses: "Silence often provides the motivation which leads individuals to vocalize their thoughts and thus to actively contribute to the meeting" (1989:56). I have heard similar statements, for example, in (relatively) secular, conversational settings: "Joe, I don't know why, but the Spirit moved me to tell you this...." In one Cork-based prayer meeting, the leader phrased this very explicitly in his introduction to the service:

D: Then we sit silently, and listen, and if the Spirit moves ye/  
gives ye the courage, you can speak up.

After the silent period, one of the leaders of the group, who has written down the various prophecies, reads out a cohesive summary, assessing the overall tone or quality of the messages:

R: We asked for a strong word tonight... we got a very strong word.

Szuchewycz contends that silence is used as a controlling device, enforcing conformity to "the traditional forms of Irish Catholicism" and reducing the demonstrative level of worship (1989:64). In my experience, I

have found silence-as-control to be a dramatic example of intra-group negotiation over the character and accessibility of the Holy Spirit. To illustrate the point, I will return to D's introduction above. It was followed by approximately one hour of silence and barely audible prayer. Every few minutes, the silence was punctuated when individuals spoke out. They spoke in first person making authoritative, short statements:

"Hold Fast."

"Know I love you."

"You are my children, come back to me."

Some people, rather than adding a prophecy, would simply support a previous one, saying, "I confirm that."

One elderly man, however, sitting on the physical periphery of the group, began to preach in the third person and in didactic tones. He was quickly silenced by D who gently said, "Brother, this is a time for listening, not for talking."

There are dramatic parallels in the discourse of non-Charismatics. The visionary discussed earlier, F, for example, told the following story regarding an experience on a Marian retreat:

F: And then we had a silent hour...in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

JF: Mmm-hmm.

F: And then/priest called us into an inner room...and he said the Rosary...and then he came out with something/he said "Now let the Holy Spirit speak through you." ...So I got this compulsion to speak/anyway about Our Lady of Fatima/I said....

Even though there are certainly different understandings of the Holy Spirit, the event and appreciation of prophecy seem to be shared features of groups at both ends of the spectrum. In between, we find similar experiences such as "inner locution" and the "conversational prophecies."

### **Identities**

When I discuss the identity of lay Catholic groups in Ireland, I refer to several different types of identity, the three most obvious being Irish/non-Irish, Catholic/non-Catholic, and lay/clergy. To consider active expressions of identity, I will turn to the uses and meanings of the word "Charismatic." The foreign (i.e., American) origin of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is an important feature of the discourse I examine. Individuals

(perhaps a third of those with whom I spoke) also blame international powers (most frequently the European Union) for the recent decline of the Church's role in Irish society. These people identify abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and divorce as not only "works of the Devil" in their religious discourse, but also as works of the European Union and of the "global community" in secular contexts. Church doctrine and moral practice are often closely tied with an individual's Irish identity. Subsequently, many informants who consider the Charismatic Renewal to be "non-Catholic" also find it to be "un-Irish." The man who was invited to the prayer meeting while on the Mt. Mellerey pilgrimage is known for going on "every [Rosary] walk and pilgrimage...he can." In response to the invitation, he said:

M: I wo/wouldn't put much faith in that type thing...it/it comes from America, doesn't it?

This informant is what Szuchewycz calls an "over-conformer" (1989:52) or what Taylor colorfully terms a "super-Catholic" (1995:230). However, although this informant (like many others) attends several masses a week and participates in adorations, novenas, rosaries, and pilgrimages, he chooses not to participate in (nor even learn details about) the Charismatic Renewal. His discourse clearly indicates his belief that the Renewal is neither Irish nor Catholic.

Where did this opinion originate? It certainly did not come from the orthodox statements of the Church. Although many individual clergy do not approve of the Renewal, it enjoys full papal approval. In addition, this informant has always been more concerned with personal experience and local tradition than with official sanction. He makes pilgrimages, for example, to "unapproved" Marian apparition sites. I am inclined to believe, therefore, that he disapproves of the Renewal not because it is heterodox to Roman Catholicism, but because it differs from popular Irish devotional traditions and his personal understanding of Irish Catholicism.

Among the members of the Renewal, the international character of the movement is seen as a testimony to its strength and importance, not as a threat to Irish identity. Many Marian groups have a similar attitude illustrated through their devotion to international apparitions, hosting of foreign visionaries, and what one informant calls "the union of individuals" who promote the Rosary internationally.

Questions of Catholic identity should not be defined in terms of Catholic/Protestant dynamics or in any denominational terms. From the insider's perspective, the dichotomy between Catholic and non-Catholic is reconciled in the sober language of the Apostle's Creed that envisions

“One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.” It is defined in terms of vision and divine guidance.

Many involved in the Renewal view the Church like B views it:

B: It’s like a shell/I see it like a shell. And since Vatican II, it’s like a little chick within a shell trying to burst open/you see?

JF: I see.

B: And I think the cracks have come...and the Church...is going to blossom.

Individuals from groups all along the continuum have a similar attitude about change in the Church, yet details differ. Some, for example, see this time of change as a glorious era, while others see it as a time of imminent scourging. All feel that they are aligned with God’s will and with papal will, although they may question the “Catholic” identity of each other. Charismatics criticize Marian devotees for placing Mary above Jesus; Marian devotees accuse Charismatics of being “too modern,” “not authentic,” and “full of hype.”

Just as most groups feel aligned with the Pope, most feel misunderstood and unappreciated by many parish clergy. The power and importance of lay identity is expressed in narrative language time and again. Whether it is in stories about the slow moving bureaucracy which validates Marian appearances, of clergy who turn away in embarrassment from an open-street prayer group, or of parish priests who do not have the courage to step down and allow the Spirit of God to speak through a layman or laywoman, the hierarchy of the Church is a much talked about and worried over topic.

Taylor offers some insight into the matter discussing the liminal aspects of spiritually creative lay groups and their experiences (i.e., their access to Weberian charisma) (1995:235). Like the legendary drunken priest that Taylor discusses, “the *smacht* of the Church is off them” (1995:237). They are beyond the structure and control of the hierarchy.

### Concluding Thoughts

Taylor compares these groups, which I have been discussing as speech communities, to Victor Turner’s “communities of affliction” (1995:225). He identifies trauma, sickness, and despair as points of entry into a sub-community and as cultural vocabulary which is fundamentally therapeutic. Importantly, Taylor further notes the shift from seeking a cure (a one-time event) to seeking healing (a long-term process), whether physical, emotional, or otherwise (1995:226).

In many ways, the groups I discuss fit the profile of “communities of affliction.” Not only does trauma shape the conversion experiences of many of the individuals, but ongoing suffering is an expected and accepted part of the lay religious life. Sometimes affliction can be purely social. Groups may be marginalized when others perceive them as rival worship communities who pose a threat to clergy and the main body of believers. As individuals, they can be labeled “over-conformers” when participating in devotional activities, and egoists when leading groups.

Through their devotions and discourse, the groups discussed in this essay seek to reconcile a considerable body of religious experience with limited direction and explanation from the official Church. The discourse provides a resource from which individuals and groups can create their identities vis-à-vis Ireland, Catholicism, the clergy, and each other.

### Notes

A draft version of this paper was presented at Queen’s University, Belfast for the “Conference on Anthropological Understandings of the Politics of Identity” held December 15–17, 1995, under the title “Charismatic: Contested Discourse in the Construction of Identity among Irish Catholic Laity.” The essay is a result of long-term fieldwork undertaken to complete a Ph.D. in Folklore and Ethnology at University College, Cork.

1 Cork is the second most populous city in the Republic of Ireland and is situated on the River Laoi on the southern coast.

2 What Taylor rightly calls the “core of Marian devotion” (1995:249), the Rosary is a set of prayers counted off on a string of beads. The devotee focuses on fifteen events called mysteries in Our Lady’s life—five sorrowful, five joyful, five glorious.

3 Usually, only one set of mysteries—Joyful, Glorious, or Sorrowful—is recited, taking about thirty minutes.

4 In Roman Catholicism, the Holy Spirit, God the Father, and Jesus (God the Son), are the three persons who are one in the person of God.

5 The “Host” is the consecrated bread which becomes the sacramentally present body of Christ in the climax of the Catholic Mass. “Adoration of the Host” is done primarily in two settings: a special occasion in which the Host is exposed for a set period of time on top of the altar in a container called a monstrance, or in an “Adoration Chapel” where the Host is perpetually exposed, except for the hours between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday.

6 The following marks, adapted from the style used by Memorial University of Newfoundland, are used in transcription:

...	pause,
/	interruption/jump,
(italics)	aside or action,
[ ]	indistinct word or phrase.

7 Mt. Melleray is a grotto in County Waterford where Our Lady reportedly appeared over several days in 1985. Though not officially approved, it draws dozens of visitors a day who pray and take healing water from the font below the statue.

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