

FROM MEN TO WOMEN TO CHILDREN: SOME CHANGING PARADIGMS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

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Abstract – Like many anthropologists children have always been present in my ethnography, but it is only in recent years that they have moved from the margins to near the centre of my anthropological thinking. Again, like most anthropologists of my generation (PhD in 1964), I was not only convinced that our subject matter was either culture or society, or perhaps some kind of intersection of the two, but that it also seemed pretty self-evident that both of these wondrous creations of the human imagination were first and foremost the work of adults, and most especially male adults. It was not until I was almost in my dotage (1988) that I finally moved my focus directly onto children. In this paper I record how some young Catholic girls in southern Ireland have in recent years made a significant contribution to both the creation and the transformation of religious belief.

Keywords – Ireland, children, imagination, fantasy, sign, religious belief, Catholicism

Résumé – Comme c'est le cas pour de nombreux anthropologues, les enfants ont toujours été présents dans mon ethnographie, mais ce n'est que récemment qu'ils se sont déplacés des marges au centre de ma pensée anthropologique. De même, comme la plupart des anthropologues de ma génération (PhD obtenu en 1964), j'étais non seulement convaincu que nous travaillions sur la culture ou sur la société, voire sur une sorte de croisement entre les deux, mais il me semblait aussi aller de soi que ces deux merveilleuses créations de l'imagination humaine étaient avant tout le fruit du travail des adultes, et plus spécifiquement des adultes de sexe masculin. Ce n'est qu'en vieillissant (1988) que j'ai fini par déplacer ma perspective sur les enfants eux-mêmes. Dans cet article, je m'intéresse à la contribution significative de jeunes filles catholiques du sud de l'Irlande à la création et à la transformation de la croyance religieuse.

Mots-clés – Irlande, enfants, imagination, fantaisie, signe, croyance religieuse, catholicisme

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my now rather long academic career the relationship between religion and children has figured in varying ways in much of my research. Initially, in the late 1950s and 1960s, when I carried out a comparative study of male cults in Melanesia (M. Allen 1967, 1984, 1988, 1998), the focus was on the ritual transformation of boys into men in the context of elaborate male initiation

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ceremonies. However, in conformity with the then predominant anthropological paradigms, I was more concerned with the role of the adult men as the initiators than with the boys as the initiands. In other words, I took it as axiomatic that culture, and most especially religion, was first and foremost the creation and the business of adult men. But then, by the early 1970s, I became increasingly attracted by the feminist-inspired determination to accord equal importance to the study of culture as both created and experienced by women. Initially, this led to my study of the worship of young virgin girls as divine beings in Nepal (M. Allen 1975, 1976), though with the focus once again somewhat more on those who worshipped the girls than on the girls themselves.

It was not until I began research in 1988 on a remarkable outbreak of Marian visionary cults that had suddenly taken off in Ireland in 1985, in which the great majority of the principal visionaries were again young girls, that the shift from men to women and finally to children became of critical importance in my anthropological thinking (M. Allen 2000a, 2000b)¹. That girls were indeed prominent in these cults is evident in that of the 18 principal visionaries 10 were girls aged between 10 and 14, 6 were women aged 19 to 40 and just two were boys aged 11 and 12. There were no adult men though a small number were prominent as priests who became spiritual advisers to the visionaries and as lay prayer-leaders at the Lourdes-type grottoes where most of the visions occurred.

In what follows, I want then to explore some of the ways in which the initial claims made by these young Irish visionaries that they had seen and communicated with the Blessed Virgin Mary were subsequently elevated to the status of religious belief subscribed to by a significant number of adults². I focus attention on two components of this complex transformation that I regard as of critical importance - first, the initial intensification of sensation or feeling, at times accompanied by strong emotion and, second, the role of narrative elaboration (C. Eipper 1996 and 2001). These two processes, though closely intertwined with one another, constitute discernible stages in the transformation of intense personal experiences

¹ The research on which the paper is based consists of fieldwork carried out in Inchigeela and surrounding areas in the southern counties of Ireland for six months in 1988/89, seven months in 1990/91, six months in 1992/92, six weeks in 1996 and ten weeks in 2011. During the first two periods I also made short visits to the following major Marian pilgrimage sites on the continent – Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal, Garabandal in Spain and Medjugorje in Croatia. All of these places are frequently visited by Irish pilgrims and their experiences in each, especially Medjugorje and Garabandal, have had a direct impact on the events described in this paper.

² This paper was first read at a colloquium on the topic of “Children and Religion” at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University (Copenhagen Campus) on May 18-19, 2011. The colloquium was organized by Sally Anderson, Danish School of Education, Aarhus University and Christian Kordt Højbjerg, Department of Anthropology, MindLab, Aarhus University. I am much indebted to Sally and Christian for granting me permission to publish it online in *AnthropoChildren*. I am also grateful to the Australian Research Grants Committee for having made a substantial contribution to the fieldwork costs.

into images, images into ideas and, in a few instances, ideas into collective representations in the form of shared religious beliefs. At each stage in the process the imaginative product may meet with derision, disbelief or total indifference and hence at best make but a marginal and fleeting contribution to the total cultural corpus, or, to go the opposite extreme, it may succeed in taking a form that so grips the imagination of a substantial population of others that it can be said to have attained the status of a truly collective representation. It is then my hope that by focusing on such processes we may begin to gain some understanding of the creation, maintenance and transformation of culture, in this instance in the form of religious belief.

INCHIGEELA

I will now attempt to contextualize these processes by examining some of the relevant events that occurred in the west Cork village of Inchigeela during the heady days of 1985-1990, when literally the whole of the Republic of Ireland became possessed by a veritable visionary mania with hundreds of thousands of people visiting Marian shrines throughout the country, many claiming that they saw statues of the Blessed Virgin move or become transformed in some strange way, whilst others reported lights in the sky, a dancing sun or, very occasionally, visions of a complex biblical kind. Some of the more famous shrines, most especially Ballinspittle, a tiny village situated some 25 miles southwest of Cork city, became nationally, indeed even internationally, famous, with extensive TV and other media coverage of exceptionally “big” days. By the end of September almost half-a-million people had visited this tiny grotto. And it was during this heady period that at least 200 individuals reported that they had unusual experiences at one or other of Inchigeela’s two grottoes³.

Inchigeela is a small and pretty village located some ten miles south of Macroom on the road to Bantry. Though once an important overnight stop for those travelling west from Cork city to Killarney, it is today off the main tourist routes and its three-hundred or so residents mostly rely on a mix of small-scale farming and the supply of both hotel and modest shopping facilities for the scattered farms in the surrounding countryside. The population is wholly Catholic and almost everyone attends mass once a week in a substantial church that caters to a parish of some 1500 persons. It boasts two modest hotels that stand opposite to one another in the centre of the village, one, the Lake Hotel, owned by a family that has been prominent in the religious events that I am concerned with and the other by one of three brothers who collectively dominate the commercial life of the village. There are two Lourdes-type grottoes owned by villagers, one, called

³ The published sources that I have found most useful for this early period of visionary activity, some of it local hagiography, include the following: O’Sullivan 1989; Ryan and Kirakowski 1985; Tóibin 1985; Vose 1986; Zimdars-Swartz 1989. There are also numerous newspaper reports in *The Irish Times*, *The Cork Examiner*, *The Independent*.

Gortaneadin, is located about two miles east and the other, Rossmore, about the same distance north on the Macroom road.

The Gortaneadin grotto was built in 1969 by an elderly couple called MacCarthy as a memorial to their twenty-year-old daughter who had died a few years earlier of an illness that began when she was four years old. The grotto remained in relative obscurity and of little importance to anyone bar the MacCarthy family and the occasional devout passer-by until August the 5th, 1985. On that day two Inchigeela girls, one Rosemary O'Sullivan, the then eleven-year-old daughter of the Lake Hotel's owners and the other Marie Vaughan, the ten-year-old daughter of a nearby farmer, visited the grotto in order to say a prayer and see some repairs and alterations recently carried out by the MacCarthy family.

In the following account of the girls' experiences at the grotto, both then and in the subsequent two years prior to the commencement of my field research in 1988, I have had to rely on a mix of informants' memories and a few hagiographic written accounts. When I began my six months of initial fieldwork I took up long-term residence in the Lake Hotel. Not only did I have immediate access to the ready supply of detailed information from both Rosemary's older sister Mary and her mother Mrs Lill O'Sullivan, but Rosemary herself, by then 14 years old, regularly served me breakfast every morning prior to going to school in nearby Macroom, while in the evening the bar was a source of constant village gossip. Though Rosemary was understandably rather reserved in the presence of a former Dublin Protestant and now an elderly Australian professor of anthropology, we did manage to have some productive discussions concerning both her recent past experiences and her present beliefs. I also interviewed many of Inchigeela's residents who were present at visionary episodes when huge crowds came to the villages two grottoes to see both Rosemary and Marie go into trances and publicly recount their experiences. There were also continuing visionary episodes at the villages two grottoes which I regularly attended, though the visionaries no longer included either Rosemary or Marie. Many of those present at such events were eager to not only describe their own experiences but to also comment on their impressions of both the behaviour and the pronouncements of the visionaries present.

On arrival at the Gortaneadin grotto on a shared bicycle Rosemary and Marie were met by Mr. MacCarthy, the elderly owner and curator, and spoke briefly with him. He told them that many years ago he himself had once seen the statue move. He also told them that just a week earlier two young men of the parish had seen the statue cry and that when they touched its neck it had felt warm and alive. Mr. MacCarthy then left the girls at the grotto, both of them by now clearly in a state of heightened anticipation and with their minds full of vivid images. According to the account that they gave to Rosemary's elder sister Mary a few hours later they knelt for a while and after saying a few prayers went to stand beside the statue of St. Bernadette where they began looking intently upwards to the statue of Our Lady, some four or five metres away. As they looked they felt their eyes get very heavy

and close momentarily and they also began to feel dizzy and light. When they eventually managed to get their eyes open again they noticed that the statue was changing. Then, instead of the statue Rosemary said that she saw a full-length, glowing and alive figure, which she immediately assumed to be the Blessed Virgin.

Both girls reported that they were stunned and immobilized, so terrified that they wanted to run away but could not. Rosemary recalled, "I felt as if I were locked and suddenly the lock was free." While looking at the figure, both girls felt light and weightless but, when released, they felt strangely heavy again. The "unlocking" was experienced by the girls as a kind of shock or similar sensation of force. At this point the girls became scared and ran for their bicycle and at the same moment a violent wind blew up which yet further terrified them. When they looked back again, they could see neither the statue nor the figure and promptly pedalled as fast as they could back to Inchigeela.

According both to themselves and their parents their story was initially dismissed as mere childish fantasy. Rosemary's mother, Mrs Lill O'Sullivan, a devout Catholic and an intelligent woman who both managed the hotel and successfully brought up eleven children, ten of whom went on to tertiary education, commented as follows "It was just after Ballinspittle, and we thought they were having a laugh at the locals. No way did we believe it at all" (Brown 1992: 276). But from the very beginning at least some members of the family had in fact begun to take Rosemary seriously, most notably her older sister Mary and not long after her mother Lill also. Mary recollected the girls' initial emotional state as follows:

"The first I knew of the occurrences was when Rosemary said she wanted to talk to me. It was the August Bank Holiday Monday and business in the hotel was rather brisk. I was helping at the bar so I couldn't talk to them at that moment but they seemed so agitated I agreed to hear them out in the privacy they requested. As they described the incident at the grotto they became quite excited, so much so that they had difficulty in speaking. Their little jaws almost seized up, their speech slurred, they seemed to be tied in knots as they relived the events of the previous two hours or so".

Rosemary's parents shared Mary's recollection of the emotional intensity of the girls' initial reaction to the events at the grotto. And indeed, both they and others who knew the girls well attached considerable importance to what they regarded as the authenticity of the girls' emotional agitation in concluding that regardless of what had in fact occurred at the grotto they were most certainly not just "having a laugh at the locals" - that is to say, they were persuaded that the girls quite truly believed that they had indeed seen Our Lady. The first vital stage in establishing authenticity had then been reached.

But heightened emotion was simply the starting point for the subsequent development of belief that underpinned the growth and elaboration of the cult. In attempting to make sense of the girls' initially somewhat incoherent account Mary and other family members had to interpret it and in doing so to reconcile it with what they knew both of the girls themselves and of Marian apparitions elsewhere.

And in this initial task of interpretation Mary's role was pivotal. She was at the time of her sister's visions a young woman of about 25 who, after a period of tutoring in Italian studies at University College Cork, was working in a bank in Cork city. Deeply religious, she had spent considerable periods in Italy, especially in Rome, and had visited a number of the major Marian shrines in Europe, including Medjugorje in Bosnia. Her knowledge of Marian apparitions was both personal and scholarly and from the very beginning of Rosemary's visions Mary became the principal recorder, interpreter and publicist of the long sequence of visionary events that occurred at Inchigeela over an eighteen-month period. Throughout that period she attended the great majority of visionary episodes at the village's two grottoes. On each occasion she tape-recorded her conversations with the principal visionaries both during the experiences themselves and in subsequent interviews. She also kept copious hand-written notes and when the biggest crowds and the greatest excitement occurred during August 1986 she arranged for a number of local film crews to record events. Long segments were subsequently broadcast on television from Cork city and a documentary film company from Galway made an hour-long video (*Our Lady of Inchigeela*) that was broadcast nationally. By 1989 Mary had also written and published a small illustrated book in which she described the main events that occurred during the initial visionary period (O'Sullivan 1989).

Mary's role as recorder and interpreter was thus of vital importance in the initial task of constructing a narrative from her understanding of the visionaries' experiences that might lead others, initially close family members, then other villagers and finally a growing body of visiting pilgrims, to believe that Our Lady had indeed appeared and had something of import to say to the people of Ireland. But first, Mary herself needed to be convinced. An important part of her initial conviction clearly came from her prior acceptance of the established Catholic belief that the Blessed Virgin does indeed at times appear to visionaries and imparts to them messages of import. A further predisposition for belief no doubt came from the national publicity that had recently been accorded to the moving statues phenomenon at Ballinspittle.

But in addition to such predispositions Mary needed to be persuaded that her sister and her friend Marie were not only not "having them on" but also that they were not suffering from some kind of delusion or fantasy. For Mary, with her extensive knowledge of church-approved Marian apparitions elsewhere, details provided by the girls concerning initially, the physical appearance of Our Lady and, at later stages, her actions, messages and general behaviour, assumed critical importance. On many occasions when I was talking to Mary about various reputed visionaries in other parts of Ireland she would either approve or disapprove according to how she judged the veracity of their various statements. Errors or inconsistencies in descriptions regarding Our Lady's physical appearance, the clothes she wore, the kind of things she said could lead to instant and curt dismissal. In other words, movement towards either belief or disbelief depended very largely on the extent to which the visionaries' narrative accounts or "stories"

cohered with the listeners' pre-existing body of relevant religious knowledge. And this method of testing for authenticity assumed ever-increasing importance as the process snowballed from family, to local religious personnel, and to a rapidly increasing body of ardent lay followers, both national and international.

Yet another highly valued form of authenticity testing was to seek for evidence as to the neuro-physiological condition of the visionaries whilst supposedly in trance and either "seeing" Our Lady or "listening" to her speak. The usual procedure leading to a claimed vision was for the devotees to first gather at the grotto some hours prior to the advertized time for the apparition. The crowd would then begin a long sequence of prayers led by prominent lay participants. When the visionaries arrive, which might be any time during these prayers, they would usually kneel at the front of the crowd and close to the statue of Saint Bernadette. They would join in the prayers and eventually, perhaps after half-an-hour or so, they would visibly fall into what might be understood to be a trance. Whilst in this condition, which could last anything from five to fifteen minutes, they were at times tested by someone, usually a doctor, who might be expected to have the knowledge to determine whether they were truly in an unusual physical condition or not.

At Mary's request a Cork doctor examined Rosemary and Marie in such a manner on June 4, 1986. The doctor's published report (O'Sullivan 1989: 37-8) stated that their gaze became fixed on the area of the statue. Blinking became either non-existent or infrequent and rapid. Their eyes did not react to torchlight, to sudden movement or to touching. They could be pushed, pulled, have pins touch their flesh, be pinched, at times even gently kicked - all apparently unnoticed. And finally, efforts to move their heads proved futile through extreme rigidity of the neck.

Evidence of this kind not only helped remove any lingering suspicion that the girls were simply pretending to be in a trance, but also directly contributed towards the formation of belief - for if they were not pretending then surely it was reasonable enough to believe in the veracity of their claims as to what they say that they saw and heard during their trances?

Running parallel with the beginnings of belief amongst close family and some friends was a process of increasing visionary elaboration at the grotto itself. On the second day the beautiful lady reappeared and after smiling radiantly at the two girls while they were reciting the rosary pronounced her first word "peace" (O'Sullivan 1989: 7). This subsequently proved to be the first of a long sequence of almost daily apparitions and messages experienced by these two girls over the next nine months with one of them, Marie, continuing for yet a further twelve months, that is, until March 1987. Meanwhile, huge crowds, at times almost as great as at Ballinspittle, came in cars and buses to the grotto to witness the two girls have their visions. Some hundreds of these visitors also received messages and saw strange sights during these sessions. The formal messages to all of them, though mostly

brief and generally confined to making just one or two simple points, together constitute a reasonably coherent set of inter-related propositions which I summarize as follows: “The world is full of sin and unless you all pray, fast and perform penances, a great catastrophe will shortly occur. Beware of the devil - who is trying to take over the world - he will constantly fight for you with temptations, but I shall be with you always”.

POST-1988 DEVELOPMENTS IN INCHIGEELA

Thus far, the events that I have referred to occurred prior to the commencement of my fieldwork in 1988. I would now like to briefly outline some of the main developments that have since taken place. Though the heady days of the early years have long since gone, both of the Inchigeela grottoes nevertheless continue to attract small numbers of pilgrims, most of them reportedly hoping for something miraculous to occur while they prayed to the statue of Our Lady. So far as I am aware all bar two of the original visionaries, including both Rosemary and Marie, have long since ceased to see Our Lady, though some continue both to receive what devotees describe as inner locutions, and to prominently participate in regular prayer groups which they themselves set-up on instruction from Our Lady. Furthermore, at both grottoes many pilgrims periodically report having seen Our Lady and other divine personages, such as various saints, guardian angels and at times even Jesus himself - though the last is but rarely reported.

A number of visiting pilgrims have also received messages and seen strange sights during these sessions, and as the narrative accounts of their visions, personalities, achievements and reputed miracles accumulated and were circulated both by word of mouth and through the press, pamphlets, videos, TV programs, notices displayed at grottoes and in a few instances even published books (see especially, Brown 1992: 276-8), so too did the credibility accorded to all of the events associated with the Inchigeela grottoes increase, at least for the next ten or so years. In other words, emotions, moods and experiences were transformed, principally by means of narrative elaboration, to become matters of faith and belief.

Though Rosemary was in no way prepared to express any doubt whatsoever regarding the veracity of her encounters with Our Lady, she was equally adamant that she no longer had any direct contact with her, whether in the form of visions or inner locutions. It seemed to me quite clear that she would much prefer that our conversations would steer clear of her visionary past. Nevertheless, a few months after my arrival her sister Mary told me that a small group of young people from Inchigeela had decided to go on a pilgrimage to the internationally famous Marian visionary site in the small village of Medjugorje in the mountains of Bosnia. Five young Medjugorje children had had dramatic visions of Our Lady in 1980 on a nearby rocky hill and three of them, by then young adults, were continuing to have public visions every evening at precisely 6 pm in the village church. By 1988 over 10 million Catholics from all over the world had visited this tiny village, and indeed

they still pour in with the numbers by now reputedly well over 25 million⁴. Clearly in the hope that Rosemary might resume her visions in Medjugorje Mary and her parents had purchased a ticket for her. I too had already purchased my own ticket for I wanted to gain some understanding of just how important such overseas pilgrimages were in understanding the events in Ireland. Obviously enough, I was also more than mildly curious as to how the two-week visit would impact on Rosemary. She did all of the expected things in company with her Inchigeela friends which mostly consisted of many hours a day attending Mass, visiting the two then resident visionaries at their homes to hear them speak of their visions, to witness them every evening have their public visions at the church and announce their latest messages from Our Lady, and in the evenings climb the high hill, [accompanied by many hundreds of other pilgrims], on which the original visions had occurred. If Rosemary was going to have a vision it would most likely have been on this hill for on each occasion dozens of pilgrims claimed either to see Our Lady, have an inner locution or see something miraculous, most commonly a spinning sun. But none of these desirable experiences occurred for Rosemary - on the contrary, on one such occasion when descending the mountain she suddenly became quite hysterical claiming that she saw the devil in a nearby bush where he was calling on her to abandon Our Lady and instead follow him. It took Rosemary a full half-hour to recover enough to be able to walk back with her friends to their accommodation. Unfortunately, I was not witness to this critical event, but when I spoke to Rosemary and one of her friends about it the following day it was quite evident that it had deeply disturbed her.

On our return to Inchigeela a few days later Rosemary joined myself and Mary while we were having our luncheon sandwich in the hotel lounge and after recounting her own experience of the devil she described yet another disturbing incident also involving the devil which she witnessed in Medjugorje, though on this occasion she did not herself see him. It occurred when the whole of the west Cork pilgrim group, including both Rosemary and the group's Irish priest as their spiritual guide, were attending a prayer meeting in the graveyard close to the Medjugorje church. Two girls, both aged about 18, suddenly began screaming and making what Rosemary described as "horrible animal noises". The priest, evidently convinced that the girls had been possessed by the devil, promptly attempted exorcism, but when this had no effect he went to the office attached to the church and returned accompanied by a Franciscan priest. This man, whom Rosemary thought was "great", in part seemingly because of his spectacular drooping moustache, but also because he eventually got the girls to calm down, a result which he interpreted as due to his successful exorcism. However, the girls told the priest that it was not the devil but rather the Holy Ghost that had possessed them – an assertion which Rosemary dismissed as "totally pathetic, do they think the Holy Ghost goes about making terrible animal-like noises of a kind not normally heard,

⁴ For anthropological data and analyses on Medjugorje see Bax 1995 and Zimdars-Swartz 1991. For good hagiography on the same see Laurentin & Joyeux 1987; Laurentin 1990; Weible 1989.

really evil noises – they pierce right into you. Lots of people like to see scenes like this but I hate them. I wanted to leave Medjugorje straight away but when I learnt that the girls were members of our West Cork group I decided to stay till the end. I hear that they are now claiming that the Holy Ghost gave them the ability to heal. I don't like this at all".

From then on Rosemary wanted her family, friends and anthropologist to clearly understand that her visions belonged to her past and were to have no part in her future. After finishing school a short while later she first trained for some months as a hotel receptionist, then took a course in business management, got a well-paid job in a large company in Brussels and a short while later married a successful Belgian business man. She still lives in Brussels and has two children. Both her sister Mary and her mother Lill assure me that despite Rosemary's desire to transcend the past, she still firmly believes in the reality of her visions. Marie Vaughan I never met and all I know of her is that she too stopped having visions about 18 months after it all began and is currently married, also with children and after a few years in London is currently living somewhere in Ireland.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF BELIEF – THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE

The major visionary action in Inchigeela is currently located not at Gortaneadin grotto but rather at Rossmore on the Macroom road. Unlike the Gortaneadin visionaries, the principal two at Rossmore have continued not only to have personal visions right up to the present, but have also succeeded in establishing a flourishing religious organization both in Ireland and overseas.

During the exciting days of 1986, when large crowds were regularly coming to both of Inchigeela's grottoes, a 40-year-old Cork woman, a devout Catholic who claimed to have seen the Ballinspittle statue move, began to regularly attend the sessions at Gortaneadin with her two young nieces, Fiona and Marcia Bowen, then aged 10 and 12. When the older of these two girls, Fiona, talked to me some four years later about those early months at the grotto it was quite clear that she had been fascinated by the claims of the then principal visionaries, especially Rosemary O'Sullivan and Marie Vaughan, by the huge crowds present, by the many hours of prayers, and above all else by the profound belief of her aunt that Our Lady was indeed appearing and giving messages to the visionaries.

And sure enough, about two months after their first visit Fiona herself had a vision. It occurred on the 24 April, 1986 when the aunt took her and her sister Marcia to say a few prayers at Rossmore. After saying the rosary Fiona claimed that she saw the statue go up into the sky and down again, but looking very much alive and infinitely more beautiful than the statue. But when she tried to get closer Our Lady kept moving further away. She told me that during this experience she herself felt just as usual, but she was also aware that her aunt and some other onlookers knew that she was having a vision because they told her that she had gone into a

trance-like state and was walking dangerously about the grotto and twice nearly fell into its small stream.

For the first four years Fiona's experiences closely paralleled those of her predecessors. Her graphic early accounts portray her relationship with Our Lady as intimate and very personal - she became her best friend, her mother and her confidante. Throughout 1987 and 1988, every day while going to school Fiona saw Our Lady. She described one such vision in the following words:

"To get the school bus every morning I usually ran down the hill. I always loved my bed too much. To get out of it in the morning was torture for me and I would be running late. I passed the local graveyard and heard someone crying. I stopped and looked in the white double gates and there on the right, three or four rows down was a lady dressed in black, bent over, crying. I decided to go in to see if she was okay as there was nobody else in the graveyard at that hour of the morning. As I approached my heart started to beat fast and as I placed my hand on the woman's shoulder, what a surprise I got. It was Our Blessed Lady. 'What are you doing here Mama', I asked and 'why are you crying?' She replied 'I weep because very few pray for suffering souls and the souls in purgatory'. It was after this that Mama began to tell me to set up the First Saturday vigils, giving me the time and the prayers, as taken from different books" (The Mustard Seed, 2006: 7).

Again like Rosemary O'Sullivan, Fiona initially met with strong parental resistance, especially from her father who initially was so convinced that she was suffering from an overwrought imagination that he told his sister to stop taking her to the grottoes and to remove the numerous religious objects in the family home to the loft. However, this tactic soon backfired for the removal of the icons so distressed his wife that he was soon obliged to relent and replace them in their original positions. The unfortunate father knew he was beaten when his wife also began to see strange things right in the family home - including Our Lady. He too now proclaimed himself a believer and from then on all of the family regularly accompanied Fiona on her fortnightly visits to Rossmore grotto for her encounters with Our Lady. Word gradually spread that Fiona, by then aged 14, was having exceptionally powerful visions and the fortnightly crowd grew from an initial 50 or so, mostly from Cork city, to three to four hundred throughout most of 1988.

Amongst Fiona's early devotees was an elderly and wealthy widow called Delia who soon established herself as her chief patron and believer. This woman had apparently visited Russia briefly in 1971 and after the collapse of the communist regime became convinced that the Fatima prophesy concerning the ultimate conversion of Russia to Catholicism was on the verge of becoming a reality and she determined to contribute in some way to such an important event. She soon received confirmation for early in 1992 Fiona, now aged 18, was told by Our Lady that she must organize a group of Irish pilgrims to go to Russia to spread her messages in that country. Over the next few fortnightly sessions Fiona received an elaborate series of precise instructions from Our Lady as to how this was to be achieved. Twelve of her adult followers, three priests, four farmers and five women from various parts of Ireland, were recruited to form part of the missionary group.

Referred to by Our Lady as the “Twelve Apostles”, they spent some months travelling around Ireland visiting monasteries, convents and various other religious establishments where they collected donations of holy statues, vestments, rosaries and other religious objects to distribute in Russia in twelve cities, the names of which had also been supplied by Our Lady. The twelve apostles each purchased their own air tickets from Shannon to Moscow, whilst the wealthy widow purchased Fiona’s ticket. Finally, in August the group set off accompanied by over a ton of religious bric-a-brac, though sadly without the widow who had died of a heart attack only weeks prior to departure.

Unfortunately I don’t have time to present even a fraction of the remarkable account that I recorded from Fiona of the group’s adventures as they travelled extensively in Russia delivering their goods to most of the cities named by Our Lady. It was a truly astonishing tale of seemingly miraculous coincidences, good fortune, misadventure, and much discomfort. Suffice to say that Fiona continued to have visions of Our Lady in hotels, on trains and in buses, in which she received further detailed instructions concerning their travels and how to overcome obstacles. Statues, vestments and rosaries were delivered to astonished priests and laity from Moscow to Omsk and even more remote places in Siberia.

Needless to say, as news of these exploits spread amongst Marian devotees Fiona’s reputation as a visionary steadily increased. Back in Ireland she continued to meet Our Lady at the Rossmore grotto on a fortnightly basis up to August 1993, though from then on the meetings were reduced to just four times a year. The number of devotees attending varied greatly, though at times she drew some three to six busloads from various parts of Ireland, including Northern Ireland. And at many of such meetings, after the by now well-routinized succession of prayers, trance and the imparting of Our Lady’s message, Fiona would hold her audience enthralled with vivid accounts of her Russian exploits. For upwards of an hour she would talk of hardships, miracles, visions and conversions. In other words, belief in Fiona’s claims and powers steadily increased in tandem with her rapidly increasing skill in narrative elaboration.

But other major developments were afoot. In early 1994, Fiona, then aged 20, married Donal Tierney, a 30-year-old man who had been one of her followers for some years. A short while later Our Lady told Fiona that she wanted her to build a “House of Prayer” in County Limerick and guided her to a dilapidated farm house with extensive outhouses in a remote rural area close to the tiny village of Doon. An appeal was sent out to her followers and straight away a generous donor loaned her the £34,000 needed, the property was purchased and over the next six months or so Fiona, her sister Marcia, Donal and numerous volunteers transformed the outhouses and yards into a glittering House of Prayer, tea-room and toilets, stations of the cross, scattered holy statues, well with curative water, Calvary shrine, office and even a large store room for future overseas missions. They also renovated the farmhouse to comfortably accommodate Fiona, Marcia and Donal. When I visited them in September 1996 and again in both 2005 and 2010 the place was most

impressive and I was told that large groups of followers periodically visited for long prayer sessions.

But this was merely the first of a number of Houses of Prayer that Fiona has subsequently acquired in Ireland, Russia, the Ukraine, France and Portugal. She also decided, I think about 1995, again on instruction from Our Lady, to refer to those of her followers who accompanied her on her various overseas missions as Our Lady's "Mustard Seed". The Mustard Seed in turn became the inner *élite* of all of those who became Fiona's followers by regularly assisting in the organization of events held at the various Houses of Prayer. All of these followers in turn became known as the "Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Jesus" and when working for the order, for this, in effect, was what it had become, are required to wear a coarse wool garment not unlike the habit of some medieval monks. One could then say that in these and in other ways Fiona and Marcia have succeeded in establishing a complex religious organization that owns a considerable amount of real estate, maintains an effective bureaucratic structure and attracts a steadily increasing number of devotees and followers. Though as yet a long way from achieving formal recognition as a sect of the Roman Catholic Church, the early visionary experiences of Fiona and Marcia have nevertheless succeeded in laying the foundations for the subsequent creation of a religious order whose members subscribe to a shared body of religious beliefs and practices.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this rather meandering paper I will attempt to focus more closely on the simple though important fact that I began with - that the great majority of the Irish visionaries, most especially those that were taken seriously by a significant number of others, were female and almost all of these fell into one of two categories, young girls aged from about ten to fourteen and married women aged between about 19 and 40. When I asked informants for their opinion as to why this striking fact should be so the most common response that I got was to suggest that young children in general and girls in particular had far less opportunity than adults to have engaged in impure or sinful activities, and hence presumably were more likely to be favoured by Our Lady. Children were also deemed to be more trusting, hence perhaps more open to accept the real possibility of divine intervention in human affairs. Quite a few also felt that they found it much easier to believe a child than an adult.

Yet others further developed this line of thought by suggesting that perhaps Our Lady had a preference for pure young girls because of her concern for the amount of sinful behaviour currently present in Irish society. This suggestion certainly caught my attention for the mid-1980s was indeed a period in which Ireland was afflicted with a deluge of evidence as to just how widespread were new forms of behaviour that departed radically from the strict moral code promulgated

by the Catholic Church and which was still subscribed to by a significant, though rapidly declining, proportion of Ireland's population.

To elaborate briefly. You may recollect that Our Lady's principal injunction was the necessity for the Irish people to behave, and by behave it was undoubtedly understood that she meant a return to that strict code of conduct, above all, sexual conduct, that so dominated Irish social life from about the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In the period immediately prior to and during the major visionary outbreak in the mid-1980s, the three main topics of debate and conflict - those centring on contraception, abortion and divorce⁵ - shared in common the key issue of who should control female sexuality, above all whether it should be men through the agency of such male-dominated institutions as the church, the state, the judiciary and the medical profession, or women themselves. The intensity of these key debates in turn wrought major changes in prevailing attitudes to marriage and to sexual relationships, resulting most notably in a rapid increase in the extent to which sexual matters of all kinds, including homosexuality and the sexual behaviour of clergy, became matters of open discussion and debate. The extent of this moral upheaval (Inglis 1998) was evident not only in the seemingly endless series of referenda that were held, but also in its prominence in the media - most particularly in the hundreds of hours devoted to such discussion in popular talk-back radio shows.

Both the close and often ambiguous voting results, as well as the endless media reports of many thousands of Irish abortions carried out in the Republic and either "immorally" raising their children alone on state benefits, or, as was the case in a number of widely reported scandals (Beale 1986, McCafferty 1985, 1992, *Independent* 2003 and 2009), resorting to infanticide, of ever-increasingly large numbers of unmarried couples living in "sin" with new but necessarily unmarried partners, not to mention reports of various forms of sexual activity by priests and bishops, together ensured that everyone in the Republic was acutely aware of the alarming extent to which numerous Irish people no longer lived according to the tenets of orthodox Catholic sexual morality - and for many this has been a matter of considerable guilt, shame and anxiety. Beyond doubt, foremost amongst those who have felt the burden of conflicting moral values have been girls and young women, most notably young rural girls approaching sexual maturity and married women, especially those who having given birth to a number of children were denied access to contraceptives. It is, I suggest, no coincidence that the great majority of reported visionaries have been girls and young women who fall into these two categories. The messages of Our Lady may then, at least in part, represent the voices of such females seeking resolution to their moral problems by a conservative reaffirmation of the canons of traditional Catholic morality. They clearly hope that through such

⁵ The following are amongst the better published accounts of these debates and referenda: Beale 1986: 112-22; Hesketh 1990; Inglis 1998: 77-94; Jackson 1987: 203-23; McDonagh 1992; O'Reilly 1988; Smyth 1992; Solomons 1992.

reaffirmation they will, with the help of Our Lady, bring a halt to the moral disintegration of Irish society.

Participants, both the visionaries themselves and their followers, are acutely conscious of the fact that they are subscribing to a belief that is given scant credence, not only in the ever-increasingly secular community at large, but also by most of their bishops and priests. The visionaries themselves even go so far as to frequently pray, on instruction from Our Lady, for the salvation of all religious personnel. They feel quite strongly that many clergy have gone seriously astray, not only the obviously errant who have figured in the recent avalanche of media exposures, but also the vast majority of both brothers and priests. In short, both visionaries and their devotees mostly see themselves as a small band of true believers hopefully destined one day, perhaps very soon indeed, to save the whole world from horrendous catastrophe and in so doing to lead the faithful to heaven. In their own eyes they are truly empowered by Our Lady, though in fact they mostly remain disempowered and marginalized in a predominantly secular world.

Throughout the process of belief creation a key ingredient has been that of narrative elaboration, a process that usually begins with a child's fantasy whilst praying in a grotto in a state of heightened emotional expectation, and then moves on to the initial tale in response to the interrogation of family, community, devotees, clergy and sometimes even the press. I use the word fantasy not to imply anything about the truth or falsity of the children's claim that they have seen Our Lady, but rather to point to the key role of imagination in the formation of ideas, including religious beliefs.

In a few rare cases the narrative becomes yet further developed in the stories that circulate in connection with the success of visionaries and their supporters in establishing prayer houses and in organizing major pilgrimages, and finally reaches its peak in the production of pamphlets, books and even films. And beyond even that degree of objectification there is the yet further remote possibility that the Vatican may one day grant official status to their visions and associated miracles. By then, a child's idiosyncratic and emotion-charged belief has been truly transformed into a collective representation – a religious belief officially subscribed to by the whole Catholic Church. Thus far, no Irish visionary site has been elevated to such an exalted status.

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