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A nation preferring visions: Moving Statues, Apparitions and Vernacular Religion in Contemporary Ireland

by

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PhD Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the Study of Religions Department, Faculty of Arts, National University of Ireland, Cork.

Under the supervision of

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(Head of Study of Religions)



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Table of Contents

Declaration p. iii

Acknowledgements p. iv

List of Illustrations p. vi

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction p.1

Outlines how the moving statue phenomenon has been previously understood by academics, journalists, the Catholic Church and everyday believers and discusses the theory and characteristics of vernacular religion.

CHAPTER TWO: Knock: from vernacular shrine to institutional sanctuary p. 41

Chapter Two discusses Ireland's first prominent Marian apparition at Knock, Co. Mayo and the pursuit of ecclesiastical approval by The Knock Shrine Society and the socio-economic context to contextualise the later reception of the moving statues and apparitions of 1980s-2000s.

CHAPTER THREE: Ballinspittle's Moving Statue p. 73

Chapter Three examines the moving statue of Ballinspittle, its vernacular cult, the creativity of vernacular Marian devotion, the material dimension and the response of the Catholic Church.

CHAPTER FOUR: The ‘mystic grotto’: Mount Melleray p. 121

Chapter Four examines the series of Marian apparitions claimed at Mount Melleray Grotto, Co. Waterford in August 1985 and the annual anniversary celebrations, the vernacular cult of Our Lady of Melleray, the shrine’s topophilia, the material dimension and the response of the Catholic Church.

CHAPTER FIVE: The ‘apparition grottoes’ and the houses of prayer:

Inchigeela and Doon p.165

Chapter Five examines the apparitions claimed in the West Cork village of Inchigeela, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present and the subsequent rise of the attached houses of prayer, the charismatic appeal of the visionaries and the response of the Catholic Church.

CHAPTER SIX: Lacking Continuity: Mitchelstown and

the other moving statues p. 218

Chapter Six considers the missing factors in the case of the moving statues which prevented them from becoming shrines of significant pilgrimage and Marian devotion by examining the case study of the apparitions and moving statue claimed at Mitchelstown in North Cork.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Conclusion p. 238

Appendix p. 250

Bibliography p. 265

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

_____

William Allen

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It has been my joy and pleasure to be the beneficiary of many wonderful stories and experiences in connection to Ireland's moving statues phenomenon. Each shrine of the moving statues phenomenon bares its own incarnation of Mary and has its own story to tell. Alas, for the purposes of my research I was confined to the better known cases of Irish moving statues and apparitions, but along the way I was told of many others which are no less interesting and alluring to the researcher as the famous Ballinspittle is. As I traversed the Irish countryside and visited numerous shrines, and filed through the mass press reports, it seemed unquestionable that there was no part of Ireland untouched or unaffected by the moving statues phenomenon. It takes an individual of an extraordinary and genuine faith to believe that statues can move or come alive, and it takes a very courageous individual indeed to share that faith openly with the wider world. In composing this thesis I have been privileged to work with several such individuals. And so, first and foremost, I owe them the greatest debt of gratitude and acknowledgement, for without them this thesis would have been a mere pipedream. To all those who shared their beliefs, experiences, and stories – both the believer and the sceptic alike – I offer you my sincere thanks. Sincere gratitude also to the Ballinspittle and Mount Melleray grotto committees and *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*, for welcoming me to your shrines and houses of prayer. I especially wish to thank Patricia Bowen, Sean Murray, Muckey, Jimmy Buckley, Margaret Boland and Canon Michael Fitzgerald for the singular kindness they have all shown me in their own ways. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Sr. Karen Kent, for giving me that all important first introduction.

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William Allen
8 September 2014
Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary

List of Illustrations

Figure 1.1: Bowman's Tri-component model

Figure 1.2: Map of grottoes and apparition shrines

Figure 2.1: Knock Apparition (*History Ireland* Issue 4, Winter 1996)

Figure 2.2: Knock Shrine Apparition Chapel (Photo reproduced with photographer's permission, 2014)

Figure 3.1: Article from *The Evening Echo* 1 August 1985

Figure 3.2: Damaged Ballinspittle Statue *The Irish Press* 1985 ©

Figure 3.3: Photo of Ballinspittle Statue by Martin O' Carroll, *The Cork Examiner* September 1985 ©

Figure 3.4: Parish Priest's Plaque at Ballinspittle Grotto (Photo by author)

Figure 4.1: Melleray Grotto (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 4.2: Melleray anniversary ceremonies advert in *The Avondhu* August 2013

Figure 4.3: Melleray Holy Water Well (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 4.4: Chris King 'Melleray Grotto Icons'© (16 February 2007) (http://www.flickr.com/photos/totheking/)

Figure 4.5: Pilgrim's candles at Melleray Grotto (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 4.6: Melleray Grotto Committee Pamphlet © (Photo by author)

Figure 4.7: Mount Melleray Holy Water Bottle (photo by author)

Figure 5.1: Kelley Noonan, Rosemary O'Sullivan, and Marie Vaughan at Gortaneadin

Figure 5.2: Map showing location of Inchigeela's grottoes, the village and the surrounding hinterland.

Figure 5.3: Rossmore grotto, Inchigeela (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 5.4: Oratory of The Blessed Virgin Mary, Immaculate Heart House of Prayer, Doon. (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 5.5: 'Mother of Love', Immaculate Heart House of Prayer, Doon (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 5.6: 'Oh Divine Love' © (*The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*)

Figure 5.7: 'Our Lady of Orsk' © (*The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*)

Figure 5.8: 'The Medal of Truth' and Prayer © (*The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*)

Figure 5.9: Medals worn by a *Servant of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 5.10: Marcia and Fiona at Doon in their monastic robes

Figure 5.11: Fiona wearing a scarf at Rossmore grotto

Figure 6.1: Mitchelstown grotto (*The Avondhu*©, 1985)

Figure 6.2: Mitchelstown grotto (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 6.3: St Fanahan's Well (2012) (http://liminalentwinings.com/st-fanahans-well-2012/)

Figure 6.4: Flagstone of Original Mitchelstown grotto (1954) (Photo by author, 2013)

Figure 6.5: 'Entrusting Our Parish to Our Lady, 31st October 2008' (Commemorative Image)

Figure 7.1: The Rathkeale Holy Tree Stump (*The Irish Independent* © July 2009

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

> *Stories of statues bleeding, moving, transforming into other saints, holding out hands, opening and closing their eyes, were encountered as the summer of 1985 became known as the summer of the moving statues.*[1]

Stories such as moving statues, or tortillas bearing the impression of Christ's face or aubergines whose seeds reveal Arabic script when split, writes Marion Bowman, 'frequently attract derision and dismissal from religious officials, the media and scholars alike'.[2] The sites of moving statues and Marian apparitions and other like phenomena habitually become the medium of mass devotion, pilgrimage and simple curiosity much to the chagrin of religious functionaries within institutional religions. They are dismissed out of hand as 'popular', 'superstitious', 'folksy', 'primitive' or 'unorthodox'. Yet for scores for ordinary people such phenomena are hieorphanies; literally the revelation of a supernatural power in the natural world. Scholars of religion often follow the lead of institutional religions in dismissing belief in such phenomena as unimportant or a bastardised form of 'real religion' at best. But as Bowman points out; 'to dismiss such phenomena as simply trivial or amusing is to underestimate the importance of the sacralisation of everyday life and personal experience in the religious lives of individuals'.[3] And to use the words of *Irish Independent* journalist, Kim Bielenberg, Ireland's moving statues phenomenon 'triggered an outpouring' of devotion,[4] as thousands gathered each evening before roadside grottoes when thirty-nine cases of moving statues and apparitions were reported in the Republic of Ireland in the summer and autumn months of 1985.

This thesis uses the example of the moving statue phenomenon to explore religion as it is lived and put into practice in the Irish context at the grassroots level, which is where the phenomenon has made its biggest, most visible and most lasting impact. To do this, I am going to employ the term vernacular religion coined by Leonard N. Primiano. I will

[1] 'Summer of the moving statues', RTÉ *Nationwide* (Broadcast: 2000)
[2] Marion Bowman, 'Vernacular Religion and Nature: The "Bible of the Folk" Tradition in Newfoundland', *Folklore* vol. 114 no. 3 (Dec., 2003) (pp. 285-95) p. 285
[3] Ibid
[4] Kim Bielenberg, 'The moving summer of '85', *The Irish Independent* 2 July 2005 p. 31

explore the origins of the term and the implications of its use and its suitability to categorise and analyse the moving statues phenomenon. Beforehand, I first wish to explore how the phenomenon has been received since 1985 to set the scene.

The moving statues phenomenon perplexed both the Catholic Church and the media. It seemed to have come out of nowhere, and with remarkable force. Journalists saw in it a prodigious opportunity to boost paper sales. Yet on the whole the press coverage was derisive and rather patronising. Initially the Catholic Church tried simply to ignore the attraction of shrines such as Ballinspittle in West Cork and consistently dodged the media's request for comments until the Church was forced to acknowledge what was happening. They disappointed many believers by calling, as the Bishop of Cork and Ross did, for 'extreme caution'.[5] As more and more apparitions and moving statues appeared the Church's attitude hardened. The greater majority of Catholic priests regarded the phenomenon as a distracting and potentially dangerous 'superstition', penning letters to the media in a vain attempt to curb the flow of pilgrims. A good example of what constituted a thinly veiled clerical disgust can be found in *The Sunday Independent* of 1 September 1985, when one dismayed priest boldly wrote that God did not need to 'communicate with his flock' through the medium of a moving statue and if so he would make his people 'uncivilised' and 'superstitious'. For him 'true religion' could be found only in the Mass, Communion and Confession in one's own local Church. These were far more beneficial than visiting shrines in the hopes of glimpsing something supernatural. The omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent God could hear the prayers of the true hearted and genuine anywhere and so kneeling before 'lumps of stone' was pointless. As a final blow he added his hypothesis as to what was truly behind the 'miracle' of moving statues. In a wet 'tourist shy summer' the people of Ballinspittle were perhaps inventing a 'miracle' for their own ends.[6]

For sceptics beyond the fold of the Catholic Church, the moving statues were equally embarrassing. Well known Irish politician, writer, historian and academic Conor Cruise O'Brien is noted as one of the most ardent critics of the moving statues. As the phenomenon was peaking in the early autumn, O'Brien wrote in *The Irish Times* that the whole thing was dangerous because it did not demonstrate a strong faith but 'a weak grasp on reality', while the Church watched on in silence. It was, he blasted, 'in the spirit' of the

[5] Vincent Power, 'Moving' statue: Bishop urges caution', *The Cork Examiner* 31 July 1985 p. 1
[6] W. G. A. Scott, 'Doubts about moving statues: letter to the editor', *The Sunday Independent* 1 September 1985 p. 12

current pontificate, (John Paul II), which made 'popular piety' acceptable again; anything that encouraged prayer. People were more ready to see a 'vision' than attach 'any serious importance' to it, as demonstrated in the bland 'matter of fact way' people described what they had seen. They spoke, he claimed, with no emotion but in a detached and cool manner. As O'Brien left the Ballinspittle grotto he was haunted by another grotto, where in the recent past a teenage girl had died in childbirth, a reference to the Anne Lovett case; the unwed teenager who had tragically died giving birth at her local grotto on 31 January 1984. She had been sent, he clarified, to the one person she was told to go to for help; the Virgin Mary. But 'that chunk of painted plaster' could not help her. It was as 'blind and heartless' as the people who had let the teenager and her child die. An obsession with 'miraculous' religious statues was dangerous and distracting from more real pressing issues of a social and economic nature. As the phenomenon raged the Irish people, he concluded, had learned nothing from the tragic story of Anne Lovett.[7]

These are just a sample of the ways that the Irish Catholic Church, academics, journalists, politicians and others attempted to label the moving statues as 'superstitious', 'pagan', 'primitive' and 'popular'. All of these labels conveyed one message; that this phenomenon and the devotion it inspired was that of the ignorant, backward, credulous, gullible and downright foolish. It was a mutation of 'real' or 'official' religion and they were certain that it would collapse, leaving no significant lasting trace other than a trail of embarrassed and disappointed souls when it was exposed for the absurdity it was. Yet amongst the hard-line sceptics who went to shrines such as Ballinspittle, Inchigeela and Melleray there were some who saw the potential they had to meet the needs and wants of the pilgrims who believed in them. Reporting for *The Irish Independent* Kevin D. O'Connor offered an interesting insight into the frame of mind that members of the media took with them. He had gone to Ballinspittle with the assumption that the phenomenon was merely 'a boost to the tourist season' or just 'the superstitious Irish'. The producer of the Pat Kenny Radio show had chosen him because she believed he could be relied upon to be 'objective' and that was proving difficult to find as passions regarding the phenomenon ran high. Before arriving at Ballinspittle he made a visit to nearby Courtmacsherry and believed that the moving statue there was due to the power of suggestion or mass hysteria.

[7] Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Waiting for the church leaders to move', *The Irish Times* 24 September 1985 p. 8

What he would experience at Ballinspittle was, however, to use his own words 'unexpected and different'.[8]

He was amazed to see pilgrims kneeling deep in the mud as they prayed before the statue. Swept up in the 'emotional atmosphere' O'Connor confessed that he felt tears come to his eyes as he too saw the statue become 'animated', feeling empathy with the 'quiet sadness' of the Virgin Mary appearing in the grotto. After a while O'Connor was aware that he had let himself get too 'caught up in the emotion of the place' and decided to break his concentration on the statue. 'Look after your job' he mumbled to himself; he was there to report on it not to become a part of 'the experience'. It is rather telling that O'Connor felt the need to remain rational and withdrawn from the phenomenon if he wanted to be taken seriously and not as it would seem endanger his career. As he left he spoke to a family whom he overheard describing what they had seen 'in a matter of fact way'. They were not, he stressed, 'the kind of people to readily believe' in a phenomenon like a moving statue and yet they had just witnessed one, rather like O'Connor himself. The article ends with an admission that his 'bias' was towards scepticism but an open minded one and a strong conclusion that he was making no attempt to 'analyse or understand' what he had seen at Ballinspittle.[9]

O'Connor's article is a fascinating example as it reveals the journalist's need to be seen as detached from the phenomenon and ready to label it as silly 'superstition'. Yet once he arrived on the scene he was by his own admission clearly struck by the genuine expression of piety he was seeing all around him. In the end he was caught between a rock and hard place; unable to simply denounce the phenomenon as others had but also unable to deny that it represented a genuine spirituality. Even Conor Cruise O'Brien later had to admit in *The Irish Press* that what he found at Ballinspittle was a mixture of 'those who believed and those who come for a gawk'. Moreover, contrary to his initial belief that the phenomenon was only attracting the uneducated and backward of society, the self-proclaimed agnostic was astonished to find that it represented a 'middle-class manifestation'.[10] What these journalists and academics were seeing and experiencing at these shrines was religion *as it is lived*. That the phenomenon was something outside of mainstream religion, in the Irish context Roman Catholicism, was not lost upon them and hence they labelled it as 'superstitious', 'pagan', 'primitive' and 'popular'. Yet despite

[8] Kevin D. O'Connor, 'I saw the Virgin's statue move', *The Irish Independent* 20 August 1985 p. 6
[9] Ibid
[10] 'Statue, O'Brien unmoved', *The Irish Press* 23 September 1985 p. 4

attempts by some journalists such as O'Connor to take the beliefs and the devotional practices of the thousands more seriously, the moving statues phenomenon has become synonymous with labels which attempt to show it as an 'unofficial' and even a base mutation of a purer religion.

Uncertainty as to what exactly the moving statues phenomenon represents continues to reign. This was pointed out by Kim Bielenberg when she examined the Ballinspittle phenomenon at distance of twenty years for *The Sunday Independent*:

> Uncontrolled by a rigid hierarchy, this phenomenon triggered an outpouring of popular, and some would say primitive, piety that has remained with us…Books have been written; countless documentary camera crews have been and gone; psychologists have even carried out experiments to recreate Ballinspittle in laboratories; and eminent theologians have had their say. But all those years later, the moving statue and its dozen of copycat shimmering Madonnas across the country still pose as many questions as they did two decades ago.[11]

I suggest that Ireland's ongoing moving statues and Marian apparition phenomenon would be better understood through the lens of scholarship on vernacular religion. All scholars of religion are faced with a choice of terminology. I have chosen to employ vernacular religion as coined and defined by Leonard N. Primiano; 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it'.[12] I have made a determined choice to use the terminology of vernacular religion. Others would make the argument for using 'folk religion' or 'popular religion'. There is an ongoing dialectical debate between scholars of religion regarding how best to label, define and categorise grass-roots religion such as belief in Marian apparitions and miraculous statues. As necessary it is necessary to discuss it, the terminological debate is not the focus of this thesis. This thesis will elaborate the moving statue phenomenon as vernacular religion and what can be said about religion as lived on this basis, and ultimately what can be added to the understanding of the moving statues, which has been clouded by other approaches. By employing the use of vernacular religion, I hope to bring greater clarity to the academic interpretation of the phenomenon and a more nuanced appreciation of it. Before I discuss this debate and voice my arguments for choosing the terminology of vernacular religion, I wish to first briefly

[11] Kim Bielenberg, 'The moving summer of '85', *The Irish Independent* 2 July 2005 p. 31
[12] Leonard Norman Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife', *Western Folklore* vol. 54 no. 1 (Jan., 1995) (pp.37-55) p. 44

explore the existing literature on the moving statues phenomenon and some of the conclusions drawn by various academic disciplines and devotional texts to contextualise why, to my line of thinking, Ireland's moving statues represent vernacular religion; religion as it is lived and practiced by the people.

'Moving statues and faith': literature view

There is no shortage of literature on the Irish moving statues; much ink and paper has been spent on the phenomenon, both academic and devotional. Of necessity I will not review all of it here but will focus on a sample of the most influential accounts and hypothesises. I shall begin with the academic texts and articles and then assess the devotional literature. Academics took an immediate interest in the moving statues and leading them was a team of psychologists from University College Cork. Led by Jurek Kirakowski, the team concluded that the movements in the statue at Ballinspittle were an optical illusion, caused by staring at it in twilight hours. Their results were published in both *The Cork Examiner*[13] and *The Irish Times*.[14] Their experiments were later republished in the small book, *Ballinspittle: Moving Statues and Faith*, co-authored by Kirakowski and *Cork Examiner* journalist, Tim Ryan. Their book was proffered as summarising the facts, the testimonies and the theories 'in a way that is both objective and sympathetic.' To both Ryan and Kirakowski's credit the beliefs of the local community regarding the moving statue were treated with respect and the authors shied away from the more sensationalised tendencies of the journalists.[15] The book espoused the optical illusion theory and the power of suggestion as the rational explanation for the moving statues phenomenon. This has become the most popular explanation in the academic community, with other scholars and journalists citing it regularly. Published in October 1985, Ryan and Kirakowski's book offers an invaluable window into the Ballinspittle phenomenon as it encompasses first-hand interviews with Ballinspittle locals, pilgrims and contextualised the phenomenon in the wider socio-economic setting of the time.

Economic recession and political instability dogged Ireland throughout the 1980s. The economic boom of the previous decade was long gone and the 1980s witnessed large scale unemployment and emigration, as successive Irish governments failed to address the

[13] Tim Ryan, 'UCC team discounts belief that statue moves', *The Cork Examiner* 3 August 1985 p. 1
[14] Dick Hogan, 'Statue studied by UCC team' *The Irish Times* 8 August 1985 p. 13
[15] Tim Ryan and Jurek Kirakowski, *Ballinspittle: Moving Statues And Faith* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1985) p. 9

country's socioeconomic issues.[16] This economic and political crisis was coupled with prevalent social and cultural changes, as Gerardine Meaney writes in *Gender: Ireland and Cultural Change*, the 1980s was a time when 'bitter constitutional campaigns to control the domains of reproduction and the family and ferocious divisions over sexual, familial and religious values' dominated in the Republic of Ireland.[17] James Donnelly Jr. has written a fascinating and illuminating article regarding the link between socio-cultural change and the decline of Marian devotion in Ireland from the 1960s onwards, but especially in the early 1980s. Cultural changes and Vatican reforms sounded the death peal for the nationwide 'Marianism' which had prevailed from the 1930s-60s. But traditional Marian enthusiasts would not go down without a fight. Donnelly writes that 'a strong sense of moral and political crisis' was predominant 'among Catholic conservatives in the mid-1980s, especially in 1985 and 1986', as lay Marian organisations dwindled and the family rosary with them. Issues such as divorce, abortion and homosexuality were an anathema for those who clung to traditional Marian piety. Consequently, they sought to counter these threats to morality by promoting devotion to the Virgin Mary, with lay organisations promoting the recitation of the rosary and apparition messages against proposed legalisation on divorce and abortion. 'This then', says Donnelly, 'was the religious and political context for the "moving statues" of 1985, a phenomenon which ought to be seen as a response to a widespread perception of crisis on the part of religious right'. Traditionalists and conservative Catholics found solace at Ballinspittle and all those other shrines; 'Now, when Irish circumstances seemed to them to cry out for such visitations'.[18]

And the moving statues and apparitions, it seemed, had the desired effect. John D. Vose noted that thanks to the 'great upsurgence of prayer and devotion to the Mother of God' many had joined the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima.[19] Contemporary press reports describe a significant increase at mass attendance where moving statues and apparitions were claimed. Those who wished to keep Mary Queen and Mother of Ireland found solace at shrines where moving statues and apparitions have been more or less

[16] Brian Girvin, *Between Two Worlds: Politics and Economy in Independent Ireland* (Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1989) p. 202
[17] Gerardine Meaney, *Gender: Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2010) p. 4
[18] James S. Donnelly Jr., 'Opposing the "Modern World": The Cult of The Virgin Mary in Ireland, 1965-85', *Éire – Ireland* vol. 39 no. 1&2 (Spring/Summer 2004) (pp. 183-245) pp. 244-5
[19] John D. Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* (Cornwall: United Writers, 1986) (Photo of Blue Army Procession)

continuously claimed since the 1980s and this is reflected in their messages, particularly so in the case of Mt. Melleray, (see pp.134-7).

Irish author and journalist, Colm Tóibín's edited collection; *Seeing Is Believing: Moving Statues in Ireland* was the second contemporary account. A press interview revealed that the collection was produced in just fifteen days and the publisher, Pilgrim Press, printed a ten thousand run. Tóibín stressed that the collection treated the moving statues 'seriously looking at their sociological, religious and cultural significance'.[20] The book was a mixture of journalistic and academic contributions. *Seeing Is Believing* is a collection of contradictions. The contribution from journalists discusses the phenomenon in a sensationalised tone, whereas that of the academics is more grounded. Divided into three sections, the first focuses on Ballinspittle exclusively, the second examines the phenomenon at various other sites and the third 'attempts to rationalise the significance of the whole thing', as one contemporary review states.[21] The most interesting and valuable contribution was made by UCD Folklorist Dáthí Ó hÓgáin, who saw the phenomenon as 'a manifestation of popular religion', a grassroots phenomenon, whilst avoiding the more sardonic tone usually implied by journalists and scholars when their referred to the moving statues as 'popular religion'.[22] The remainder attributed the phenomenon as a response to social issues, outlined above.[23]

A number of scholars also penned articles on the Ballinspittle phenomenon for *The Furrow*, instigating what has become the dominant theological response. Werner G. Jeanrond, a lecturer in Theological Studies in Trinity College Dublin, took the lead with 'Apparitions or Christian witness?' in 1985 as the phenomenon was slowly losing its initial momentum.[24] Jeanrond pondered what had failed the people in the liturgy of the Catholic Church that forced them to 'the fields of Sligo or Cork, but not into the parishes of the Roman Catholic Church'. His conclusion was that while some people would always look for the supernatural, the majority went to Ballinspittle and other places because the priests had failed to satisfy the people with their delivery of the gospel and thus they were bored and seeking spiritual nourishment elsewhere. A somewhat disheartened Jeanrond

[20] Helen Shaw, 'Tóibín hopes book can move', *The Irish Times* 4 October 1985 p. 9
[21] Mary Leland, 'Signs of the Times? Mary Leland on the moving statues', *The Irish Times* 16 November p. 17
[22] Dáthí Ó hÓgáin, 'A Manifestation Of Popular Religion', Colm Tóbín (ed.), *Seeing Is Believing: Moving Statues in Ireland* (Dublin: Pilgrim Press, 1985) (pp. 67-77) p. 67
[23] Leland, 'Sings of the Times?' p. 17
[24] Werner G. Jeanrond, 'Apparitions or Christian witness?', *The Furrow* vol. 36 no. 10 October 1985 pp 645-6 p.645

concluded that the Church had neglected its people who found solace in bogus 'miracles'.[25] Cork based priest Joseph S. O'Leary's article, 'Thoughts after Ballinspittle', took up where Jeanrond left off, believing that the moving statues was a delayed reaction to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.[26]

The next significant theological publication came from Margaret Mac Curtain, 'Moving statues and Irish women', in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*.[27] Mac Curtain examines the position of Irish women in the 1980s and sees the mass numbers of women visiting the sites of the phenomenon as 'the search for feminist spirituality'. Her point, while interesting is, however, somewhat vague. She questioned why Irish women needed the moving statues without ever providing an adequate explanation or theory. Captivatingly if ultimately unconvincingly, she linked the moving statues to a 'Celtic', that is pre-Romanised, Irish Christianity.[28] In the early years following the phenomenon, there was a Ballinspittle bias in academic scholarship, with few other sites receiving attention. In 1989 Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz corrected this trend with her article detailing her fieldwork on the Mount Melleray apparitions of August 1985 at the small wayside shrine in county Waterford. Her article is based on her own interviews with the locals, the committee's leaflets and the media reports. She recounts in detail the events at the grotto and the local and national clergy's reactions, interestingly noting that the local Cistercian monks were open to the apparition claims. Overall, Zimdars-Swartz fits Melleray into the overall patterns of Marian apparitions and again sees it as a response to socio-political situations but notes a sense of millennialism in the 'messages' of Melleray.[29] She later returned to the Melleray apparitions in her highly respected and influential account of modern Marian apparitions, *Encountering Mary*.[30] Zimdars-Swartz has provided some of the most valuable acumens into the Marian apparition phenomenon in the modern context and her contribution on Melleray stands out as one of the most insightful academic contributions on apparitions in the Irish context.

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[25] Ibid
[26] Joseph S. O'Leary, 'Thoughts after Ballinspittle', *The Furrow*, vol. 37 no. 5 May 1986 (pp. 285-94) p. 285
[27] Margaret Mac Curtain, 'Moving statues and Irish women', Aibhe Smyth (ed.) *Irish women's studies reader* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1993) p.139
[28] Ibid pp. 140-5
[29] Sandra L. Zimbars-Swartz, 'Popular devotion to the Virgin: The Marian Phenomenon at Melleray, Republic of Ireland', *Archives des sciences des religions* N. 67/1, 1989 (pp. 125-144) p. 142 (Http://persee.fr/, 4 February 2012)
[30] Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: from La Salette to Medjugorje* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991)

Anthropologist Michael Allen's *Ritual, Power and Gender* greatly added to the cannon of academic scholarship on the subject by detailing his on-going fieldwork at the West Cork village of Inchigeela, where apparitions have been reported from 1985 to the present. Allen concludes that that the phenomenon was an attempt to stop 'the moral disintegration of Irish society through the growing popularity of secular values.[31] Allen suggested that the phenomenon was a quest for 'empowerment' and that it took a 'Marian form' because of a psychological response to the 'visionaries' own desire for power and a merciful mother figure interceding on their behalf. [32] Chris Eipper was one of the first scholars to consider the material dimension of the phenomenon in an in-depth analysis. He uses a comparative method to explain the origins of the phenomenon and focuses on the sensory and the imaginative power of the image. His article, 'Moving statues & moving images', makes the interesting point; that 'the spiritualisation of materiality (is) integral to the expression of religious experience by devotees' and apparitions and moving statues represent 'emotion imbued faith'.[33]

The most recent full-scale article study came from Peter Mulholland in 2009 who argued the phenomenon:

> was largely a media centred one; that only a relatively small number of people ever took the apparitions seriously; and that understanding why they did so requires a synthesis of sociological, historical, theological, and psychological approaches and insights.[34]

While not adding anything substantially new to the existing scholarship on the phenomenon, Mulholland's article contextualises the phenomenon well and provides a good review of previous studies. He also makes a point worth noting. Frequently authors have suggested that the entire country was 'gripped' by the moving statues phenomenon and paint a picture of the country coming to a complete halt. Mulholland has argued that this is something of an overstatement and while thousands were descending on places like Ballinspittle and Mt. Melleray, to say that the entire country was engrossed is somewhat of

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[31] Michael Allen, *Ritual, Power and Gender: Explorations in the Ethnography of Vanuata, Nepal and Ireland* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000) p.341
[32] Ibid p. 307
[33] Chris Eipper, 'Moving statues & moving images: religious artefacts & the spiritualization of materiality, sociology & anthropology, La Trobe university', *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, (December 2007) , (pp. 1-12) p. 253
[34] Peter Mulholland, 'Moving statues and concrete thinking', *Quaderns de l'Institut Català d'Antropologia: sèrie monogràfics* (23) (2009)(pp159-79) p. 179

an exaggeration. He believes that 'it would be reasonable to assume' that the moving statues also drew followers from 'a certain pool of religious enthusiasts', adding that many repeatedly visited at one or more sites and this accounts for a certain proportion of the numbers.[35] This does not undermine the significant numbers who did turn out at the grottoes but it puts it in its proper context and is a point worth bearing in mind.

Running parallel to the academic scholarship on the moving statues phenomenon is the devotional literature which has arisen out of two apparition cases whose origins lay in the 1985 phenomena; Melleray in Waterford and Inchigeela in Cork. Unsatisfied with the media and academic portrayal and assessments of their apparitions, the visionaries with the support of their families and local grotto committees, decided to write their own accounts of the phenomena attached to their shrines. The Mt. Melleray grotto committee were the first to do so. With the support of local man William Deevy, the parents of the child visionaries (see pp.126-32) at Melleray published the small booklet *Our Blessed Lady Is Speaking To You: Are You Listening? Her Messages From Melleray Grotto* detailing the apparitions at the grotto from 16-24 August 1985 and the messages imparted by the Virgin Mary.[36] First published in 1986, the booklet has gone through no less than seven editions, the latest being reprinted in 2009 and is still sold in the local Cistercian abbey. An abridged version is freely available in pamphlet format at the grotto. *The Irish Independent* reported that more than four thousand copies had been sold within a year of the Melleray apparitions.[37] In addition to the visionaries' testimonies, the booklet includes letters detailing pilgrims' experiences at the grotto as requested by the shrine's committee and oral testimonies collected in 1985.

A number of booklets detailing the Inchigeela apparitions have been penned by visionary Fiona Tierney and her followers *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* (see pp. 170-4), too many in fact to recount them all here. These booklets are available from *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* shops which are attached to their houses of prayer. Additionally, Fiona's apparition messages are published in a monthly or bi-monthly newsletter. The earlier Inchigeela based apparitions of 1985-87 are detailed in the booklet *Inchigeela…A Call to Prayer*, which was intended as 'a handy source of reliable information' serving 'a need' that was the 'local and national interest' in Inchigeela. The booklet was comprised by the elder sister of one of the 1985-87

[35] Ibid p. 168
[36] W. Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady Is Speaking To You: Are You Listening? Her Messages From Melleray Grotto* (published by author, 1986)
[37] 'Grotto pilgrims report visions', *The Irish Independent* 20 August 1986 p. 9

visionaries.[38] The apparition messages of visionary Mrs Mary Casey (deceased) are freely available in a small two page pamphlet at Inchigeela's Gortaneadin grotto. These booklets and pamphlets are one of the mediums by which the visionaries and devotees of these Irish apparitions have found their voice, express their faith and attempt to present their own accounts and interpretations of their own experiences in connection with these apparition shrines. Such devotional literature is often overlooked or neglected by scholars but is an important window into how religion is lived, believed and practiced by the advocate. In her examination of the apparitions of Mary Ann Van Hoof in Wisconsin in the 1950s, Zimdars-Swartz makes an important point regarding visionaries; 'People who report apparitions of the Virgin Mary have usually had little to say about their experiences beyond a simple reporting of the messages and a recitation of the basic events'.[39]

This aptly describes the format of the devotional literature on the Melleray and Inchigeela apparitions, which are written in a clear and chronological pattern calling upon the reader to both acknowledge and adhere to the Virgin Mary's requests. To date a devotional account of the Ballinspittle phenomenon has not been produced. I shall make reference to these devotional texts where beneficial in chapters 4 and 5, where I discuss the Melleray and Inchigeela apparitions respectively. There is one final book on the moving statues phenomenon which falls roughly between devotional and academic; John D. Vose's 1986 *The Statues That Moved A Nation*. Vose felt the need to pen the book, he told *The City Tribune* newspaper, because the phenomenon of moving statues and apparitions had been talked of in similar 'derisive' tones as subjects such as UFOs and the Loch Ness Monster in previous publications. But he believed that no one could deny that it demonstrated the fact that thousands in Ireland had returned to daily prayer believing that 'true Peace' could only be found through devotion to Mary.[40]

As an author, Vose's account is not as amateur as the tone is in the devotional accounts but he makes virtually the same arguments they employ to make the case that the apparitions were genuine manifestations of Marian intervention. For the scholar, the principal value of Vose's book is the testimony he collected at sixteen shrines, many of which do not feature elsewhere and all of which offer valuable insight into the frame of

[38] Mary B. O'Sullivan, *Inchigeela…A Call to Prayer: An Account of Apparitions Experienced in Inchigeela, Co. Cork, Ireland, since August '85* (Published by the Inchigeela Queen of Peace Group in association with Religious Promotions and Publications, 1989) p. 1
[39] Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, 'Religious Experience and Public Cult: The Case of Mary Ann Van Hoof', *Journal of Religion and Health* vol. 28 no. 1 (Spring, 1989) (pp. 36-57) p. 39
[40] 'The statues that moved a nation, John D. Vose: book review', *The City Tribune* 29 August 1986 p. 8

mind devotees and sceptics took when describing the phenomenon to Vose.[41] The general consensus of the academic scholarship can be summed up as an attempt to find a rational explanation for why Ireland's statues 'appeared' to move, speak and come alive in 1985. The devotional, on the other hand, seeks to provide undeniable proof that the Virgin Mary has appeared and continues to appear at certain times and in certain places to issue warnings and offer guidance to the world. This thesis makes no attempt to convince the reader of either the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the phenomenon either way. Rather it focuses on the beliefs which such phenomena have produced and how people have lived and practiced these beliefs as a result. As noted I have chosen to employ the concept of vernacular religion to do this. I will now assess the origins of this concept, the academic debates surrounding it and the particular features of vernacular religiosity.

'Religion as it is lived': the search for terminology

If one were to go to Ballinspittle, Melleray or Inchigeela and ask the people involved in the grotto committees and religious affiliations there to describe their religion, they would simply say that they are practicing Catholics. This is an important point. It is scholars rather than believers who feel the need to draw a distinction between how religion is lived and put into practice daily by the everyday adherent and how it is preached and prescribed by the religious functionary. Until relatively recently there has been a textual and institutional bias in academic scholarship concerning religion. Traditionally, religious beliefs and practices which did not accord with the teachings and doctrines of institutional religions were dismissed by theologians and scholars alike as 'popular', 'folk', 'superstitious', 'pagan', 'primitive' or 'unorthodox' as opposed to what constituted 'real' or 'official' religion. From the 1970s forward, scholars began to attempt to redress the derogative tendency to dismiss the beliefs and practices of the everyday believer that are beyond the pale of institutionally endorsed belief and practice.

In his analysis of devotion at Irish holy wells, Michael P. Carroll affirms that it was from the early 1970s that a number of scholars started to question 'the conceptual dichotomies that had structured perceptions of popular religion since the Enlightenment'. In particular they challenged 'the sharp distinctions' which scholars traditionally drew

[41] Vose, *The statues that moved a nation*

between ‘magic and religion, between official religion and popular religion, between reasoned faith and superstition, and between the religious elites who actively promoted true religion and the peasant masses who passively clung to inherited tradition’. Such distinctions, Carroll contends, were found to be ‘misleading’ because they ‘obscure the dynamic and creative processes that so often give rise to the beliefs and practices that constituted popular religion’.[42] The concept of vernacular religion originates in an ongoing debate between scholars from various disciplines about how best to describe and approach phenomena such as Marian apparitions. The term was coined by folklorist and religions scholar Leonard N. Primiano in the mid-1990s.

In his afterword for the recent volume *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life* (2012), Primiano suggests that there was at that time a ‘text-based bias’ within the study of religions and that the contributions of folklorists and ethnologists were underused, undervalued and largely unappreciated and remain so to a certain extent. There was, however, a growing interest in ‘lived religion’ and it was as a result of that interest that Primiano sought to coin a term that would do justice to studying ‘religion as it is *lived*’.[43] This was something he felt that the existing terminology, such as ‘folk’ and ‘popular religion’ was incapable of doing; ‘every time a folklorist encounters religion and designates it “folk religion” he or she has done that religiosity an extreme disservice’. Despite the scholar’s best intentions, he says, categories such as ‘folk religion’ do ‘violence to the emic perspectives which have been expressed by informants’.[44] Primiano stresses the need for scholars to ‘appreciate the variety and creativity of people’s religion’.[45]

It is important to note that vernacular religion, if not carefully employed, by the scholar has the same power to do ‘violence to the emic perspectives which have been expressed by informants’. The choice of terminology is debated but it is essential to be clear that many respected scholars continue to use the terms ‘folk’ and ‘popular’ when discussing religion in insightful and meaningful ways. Even Primiano has acknowledged that the use of vernacular religion need not result in a deathblow to the use of ‘folk

[42] Michael P. Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) p. 11
[43] Leonard Norman Primiano, ‘Afterword: Manifestations of the religious vernacular: ambiguity, power, and creativity’, Ülo Valk & Marian Bowman (eds.), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (Equinox; London, 2012) pp. 382-3
[44] Leonard Norman Primiano, ‘Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife’, *Western Folklore* vol. 54 no. 1 (Jan., 1995) (pp.37-55) p. 38
[45] Leonard Norman Primiano, ‘From “Folk Religion” to the “Search for Meaning”: Teaching Folklore outside the Discipline’, *Ethnologies* vol. 23 no. 2 (2001) (pp.35-59) p. 36

religion' as analytical tool.[46] The problem with the use of 'folk' which Primiano identifies is that its previous use has created a 'two-tiered' model of 'official' religion as opposed to 'folk' religion, which essentially became a byword for 'unofficial', despite the best intention of scholars not to make it so. This 'two-tiered' model, though, is not merely a scholarly production; James Kapaló argues that it is too the product of authority and power that the clergy hold in trying to monopolise the religious field. In 'Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice', Kapaló argues that Bowman and Primiano's discomfort with the term 'folk religion' stems from its origins in the Christian churches as used by religious 'officials' to distance 'official' religion from ideas, beliefs and practices of the laity which did not resonate with the institutional churches. For him 'folk religion' is not the 'residualistic' term Primiano sees it as, but 'a site of contested meanings with multiple chains of associations, some of which valorise and others of which devalue its objects depending on the context'.[47]

Unlike Primiano, Kapaló argues that 'objects of discourse cannot be 'liberated' by scholars of religion from 'the deeply rooted categories that others use to describe them'. He argues that 'studies that go under the name 'folk religion' are the site of conflicting interests, ideologies and identities'. Kapaló does not challenge the fact that the term 'folk religion' has connotations, both positive and negative, -and has been used in ways to devalue certain sets of beliefs and practices but that this is a reflection of the power politics of religion.[48] While I favour the use of vernacular over folk, I take Kapaló's point. The way in which institutionalised religions have attempted to devalue the beliefs and practices which do not correspond with their theologies/doctrines invariably shapes the way that religion is lived, understood, experienced and interpreted by the people and to ignore or downplay this fact would result in as inaccurate a representation of religion as it is lived as previous studies which focused solely on the institutional or depicting the people's practices as 'unofficial' in relation to the 'official'. Throughout this thesis I will demonstrate the key role which such power politics has on the shaping of everyday religious belief and practice.

Splitting religious practices into a 'two-tiered' approach was ultimately 'residualistic' in Primiano's opinion.[49] In their recent edited volume, *Vernacular Religion*

[46] Primiano, 'Afterword' p. 384
[47] James A. Kapaló, 'Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice', *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* vol. 7 no. 1 (2013) (pp.3-18) p. 7
[48] Ibid pp. 7-9
[49] Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife' pp. 39-40

in Everyday Life, Ülo Valk and Marion Bowman trace the origins of the term 'folk religion' to the 19th/20th century development of the folklore discipline. They cite Eric Sharpe's explanation that Folklore studies in Britain and Western Europe were founded as the de facto 'home missions department of anthropology'. Early folklorists believed that the 'peasant cultures of Europe' had maintained a considerable quantity of beliefs and practices 'with roots in pre-Christian religions'. The idea of the 'noble savage' was found at home amongst peasants, who were seen as 'backward' and as less rational than the educated and socio-political elite. As such folk beliefs, to use Sharpe's words, represented for them the 'elder faith of social groups' and folklore became 'an auxiliary science of the history of religion'. In this system, institutionalised Christianity was the benchmark by which all religious belief and practice was measured. It was hailed as the most 'enlightened', advanced and rational religion. Folklorists employed 'clerical terminology' and labelled some 'supernatural' beliefs as 'superstitions'. They were focusing on the opposition, as they saw it, between Christianity and 'folk beliefs as primitive survivals'. Thus, they envisioned that the practise and beliefs of the people which did not correspond to the institutional denominations in a given context as irrational superstitions and survivals of a pre-Christian and thus unenlightened religion. For them the 'folk' and the 'official' were automatically opposed.[50]

Given that the term 'folk religion', was as Primiano notes, coined by Lutheran minister Paul Drews in 1901 'to prepare young seminary graduates for the radically different religious ideas of their rural congregants' it perhaps is unsurprising that the term 'folk religion' has been employed in ways that devalue the beliefs and practices beyond the institutional level. The term was forged with the attitude of dismissive theologians who coined it with the purpose of casting doubt over the legitimacy of beliefs and practices which met with their disapproval.[51] Don Yoder's definition of folk religion has become one of the most widely used. Primiano himself credits Yoder, his mentor, for studying religion 'as it is lived and expressed'.[52] For Yoder the term 'folk religion' still possessed resonance if redefined and reimagined. It had been misused, but he believed it could be salvaged. In his 1974 definitional article, Yoder described folk religion as the 'totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and

[50] Valk & Bowman (eds.), 'Introduction: Vernacular Religion, Generic Expressions and the Dynamics of Belief', pp.3-4
[51] Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife' p. 39
[52] Leonard Norman Primiano, 'From "Folk Religion" to the "Search for Meaning": Teaching Folklore outside the Discipline', *Ethnologies* vol. 23 no. 2 (2001) (pp.35-59) p. 36

alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion'.[53] Yoder, however, continued to espouse a substantive and dualistic approach to the use of the term. The 'folk' juxtaposed the 'official'. Primiano criticised Yoder's definition for reinforcing the 'two-tiered model and remaining too 'closely aligned to the "official" church-centred orientation'. For Yoder 'folk religion' simply constitutes principally of 'unofficial religion' and thereby creating the idea that the beliefs and practices of the people which do not correspond to 'official' religion is illegitimate.[54] But there are aspects of Yoder's definition which scholars have been able to integrate in their use of Primiano's vernacular religion.

Prior to Primiano's coinage of the term, Bowman used Yoder's definition. Since she has changed terms and now is one of the foremost proponents of vernacular religion. It is important to note that scholars employ the same methodology and approach to studying religion but only differ in their choices of how they label and define it. Bowman advocates the use of a three components model to studying religion. She writes that scholars should 'view religion in terms of three basic, interacting components- the official, the folk and the individual'. In diagraph form:

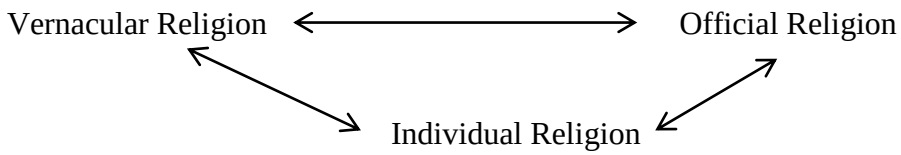


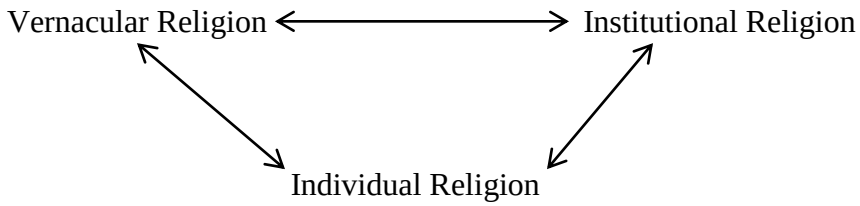
Figure 1.1: Bowman's Tri-component model

The official component Bowman clarifies is 'concerned primarily with theology/philosophy, doctrine and ritual'. It is this component that, she argues, continues 'to receive most scholarly attention'. When Bowman devised the three components model in 1992, she used Yoder's definition of folk religion for the 'folk component', which she states is 'a vast but neglected field'.[55] In her more recent articles, Bowman has since chosen to use vernacular religion but stills see merit in aspects of Yoder's definition. Finally, she defines the 'individual component' as 'basically each person's understanding of religion and the part it plays in her or his life, a mixture of a 'received' religious

[53] Don Yoder, 'Towards a definition of folk religion', *Western Folklore* vol. 33 no. 1 Symposium on Folk Religion (Jan. 1974) (pp. 2-15) p. 14
[54] Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife' pp. 39-40
[55] Marion Bowman, 'Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion', Steven Sutcliffe (ed.), *Religion: Empirical Studies* (Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004) (pp. 3-18)p. 6

tradition and a personal belief system'. The 'received tradition' is what a person learns and uses from a number of 'sources', ranging from official to vernacular. For Bowman these three components interact to 'produce what, for each person, constitutes religion'[56] Bowman contends that the components 'are rarely analysed or recognised in relation to each other'. Both believers and scholars, she argues, tend to be unaware 'of the extent to which these components are interrelated'. As a result imprecise and misrepresentative assessments of 'religious phenomena' are produced. In order 'to comprehend religion in its broadest sense', Bowman asserts, scholars must examine how the three components engage with each other.[57]

This model, I contend, is the best approach in choosing the appropriate terminology/methodology for studying and writing about religion. However, I favour the use of the term 'institutional' as opposed to 'official' religion. To say that there is an 'official' religion is to imply that there is an 'unofficial', and too often the folk/popular/vernacular has been described as if it constitutes 'unofficial' religion. Accordingly, I will use 'institutional' to refer to what has previously been defined as 'official' religion. It is also vital to remember that these three components represent actual people; they are more than just labels. These three interlocking components are the basis for discussing grassroots, organised and individual religious beliefs and practices. They represent actual people. As such the model I will apply through this thesis could be expressed thus:



The individual and communities of believers and their right to 'create and recreate their own religion' are at the centre of Primiano's methodology rather than 'religion' and 'belief' as 'abstractions'. Vernacular religion is about people and how they actually live

[56] Marion Bowman, 'Taking Stories Seriously: Vernacular Religion, Contemporary Spirituality and the Myth of Jesus in Glastonbury', *Temenos* vol. 39-40 (2003-2004) (pp.125-42) p. 126
[57] Bowman, 'Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion' p. 3

their lives becoming the focus of the scholar's attention.[58] When he coined the concept he envisioned 'an interdisciplinary approach' to studying the religious lives of people. Special attention was to be paid to 'the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioural and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief'.[59] For Primiano all religion regardless of its historical or contemporary context 'is living, is a process of interpretation, is creatively expressed, and is vernacular'.[60] This is something, he argues, that traditional methods of studying religion, preoccupied with written texts and downplaying if not outright ignoring oral sources, fail to take into account because of the 'two-tiered' model in which scholars have been weighed down. One must be, however, on one's guard from simply replacing 'folk' with 'vernacular' and continuing the old 'two-tiered' methodology. The use of 'vernacular' is more than a mere amendment to terminology. It constitutes a paradigm shift and a change in the mentality scholars bring to bear upon their work. This is a point raised by Robert A. Orisi in the preface to the second edition of his seminal book *The Madonna Of 115th Street*.

Orisi studied devotion to the Madonna of Mount Carmel amongst Italian immigrants in New York from 1880-1950, arguing that one cannot understand religion apart from understanding 'the lives of the people' who take part in it.[61] In other words no study of Catholicism would be complete or even accurate if it confined itself solely to its institutional forms. The scholar must account for variety in the institutional form as much as in the vernacular, as they too depend very much on location. Orisi found that the Catholicism practiced by Italian immigrants in the Harlem was markedly different from institutional Catholicism. He elegantly puts it this way: 'The people have their own ways, authentic and profound, of being Catholic'. He was not suggesting that their devotions were not completely independent and uninfluenced by the institution but that the people took what was preached to them and lived it out as they saw fit, often to undisguised discomfort of the institution. He calls this the 'theology of the streets'. Orisi's book, *The Madonna of 115th Street,* was published in 1985 and the author struggled to find the correct term that would do just to the distinct version of Catholicism practiced by the Madonna of

[58] Primiano, 'Afterword' p. 383
[59] Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife' p. 44
[60] Primiano, 'From "Folk Religion" to the "Search for Meaning" p. 36
[61] Robert A. Orisi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-90* (London: Yale University Press, 1985) p. xiii

Mount Carmel's devotees in the Italian Harlem. In the end he settled upon 'popular religion' but acceded that it was a term 'badly in need of definition'.[62]

In the preface to the second edition (2002) Orisi writes, with the benefit of hindsight, that the concept the he needed but which was not in parlance at the time of the first edition was 'lived religion'. For Orisi 'lived religion' is 'religious practice and imagination in ongoing, dynamic relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places'; in keeping with Primiano's definition of vernacular religion. This concept, he believes, is far more beneficial for accurate portrayals of religious life than 'popular religion'. The latter, he says, is 'unclear, misleading and tendentious'. Scholars were, and are, endlessly debating its definition and implications and Orisi notes that they have reached little to no consensus. Some scholars ponder if the term should relate exclusively to a grass-roots approach, referring only 'to religious practices and imaginings of the common folk'. Yet as Orisi comments such an approach would neglect the fact that 'social and religious elites' almost always participate in what is deemed 'popular religion'. Others question whether such devotional practices that were dubbed 'popular religion' were worthy of scholarly attention at all and simply see in them a 'misappropriation of authoritative teaching and ritual'. They question to what extent 'popular religion' is distinct from 'official religion'. These academic debates and the confusion they create, Orisi suggests, are emblematic of scholars' 'power issues'. The power of the scholars' 'theories of "religion" ' is to 'constitute some ideas and practices as religious and others not'. It creates the idea that only certain beliefs and practices are worthy of academic attention to understand a given religion and it thereby marginalises countless others. In other words the scholar, like the functionaries of institutional religion, the media, socio-political elites and the people themselves, all have the power to define what constitutes 'real' or 'proper' religion as they see fit. Terms such as 'popular religion', he argues, serve only 'to seal off certain expressions of religious life from an unspecified but obviously normative "religion" '. Terms like these, Orisi believes, institute 'unnecessary and confusing boundaries'. [63]

Orisi, like Bowman and Primiano perceives that the way out of such confusion is to study religions as one finds them; that is as they are *lived*. For Orisi the studies of religions done by historians, folklorists, and anthropologists since the 1990s 'began to clear way

[62] Ibid pp. xvii-xxii
[63] Robert A. Orisi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-90* 2nd edition (Yale University Press; London, 2002) pp. xiii-xiv

past the simple and defeating dualities' of the 'popular'/'folk' vs. the 'official' religion 'debate in the 1970s and 1980s'. By studying religion 'as it is lived', he believes that scholars have created 'an extraordinary body of compassionate, critical, closely observed, and richly textured ethnographic histories of religious practice and imagination in particular times and places'. This paradigm shift has, he comments, made 'a new, more capacious problematic of popular or vernacular religion possible'. Lived religion, as Orisi envisions it 'situates all religious creativity within culture and approaches, all religion as lived experience'.[64] Orisi raises another important point, one which proponents of vernacular religion have somewhat neglected. Religion as the everyday individual lives it does not exist in a vacuum. Like Kapaló, he argues that institutional functionaries are often supportive of certain vernacular beliefs, practices and traditions whilst being at odds with others, something which I will further demonstrate in this thesis. The same is true of the average believer; there are elements of the institutional teaching which they promote and elements which they oppose. The widespread criticism of certain Catholic teachings and reforms by some Catholics since Vatican II is a good example of this. For instance there are still pockets of Catholics who favour pre-Vatican liturgical rituals such as the Latin mass and have openly criticised the Catholic Church for switching to the vernacular mass.

In this thesis I will demonstrate that power politics between institutional and lived religion is an important element in how religious belief and practice is both shaped and observed. People cannot escape or even ignore the secular and religious forces which dominate their lives and this impacts how they put their religious beliefs into practice. If they wish to continue to identify as a member of a certain institutional religion or denomination, then they are forced to live their religious lives according to the structures imposed by power holders within their denomination. However, this is not to suggest that they do not test the boundaries and quite often when and where they do, clashes occur between the institutional and the vernacular. These clashes are the sites of contested meanings and symbolism between the institutional and the vernacular, between how religion is preached and how it is lived and they are important indicators for scholars of religion. If such clashes did not arise would scholars have incentive to draw a distinction between how religion is preached and how it is lived? I think not. But such clashes do arise and are perhaps the prime motivation for scholars to employ labels such as 'official' and 'folk', 'popular' or 'vernacular' in seeking to explain why they arise at all. Nor do I wish

[64] Ibid p. xix

to suggest that the vernacular and the institutional are constantly in a state of conflict and opposition, they are not. Religion is complex, in a continuous sate of motion, ebbing and flowing. In this, conflicts can arise and recede, the vernacular and institutional working in harmony and disagreement. As such I propose that there is an asymmetrical dialectical relationship between institutional and vernacular religion. They both feed off and do battle with one another. Throughout this thesis I hope to demonstrate that vernacular religion does not exist independently of institutionalised religion and vice versa. Thus, it is important that I pay sufficient attention to the power politics which is an integral part of all religion, be it institutional, vernacular or individual.

Kapaló argues that scholars of religion are themselves not separate from the power of politics of religion. Labelling, defining and naming are acts of power, in which scholars, religious functionaries, the media, socio-political elites and ordinary believers are all involved.[65] Orisi, for example, notes that the terms which have been employed by institutions and scholars alike are reflective of the power politics of the institutional religions' attempts to assert dominance and control; 'the designators magic, superstitious, and popular, among others, are also ways of policing religion'.[66] In his article, 'Superstition in Estonian Folklore', Ülo Valk demonstrates an example of this 'policing of religion' as employed by scholars. 'Superstition' was used by Estonian folklorists as an 'official category of reproach or accusation'. It was used, he explains, 'against those who resisted the regimes of institutionally produced truths'. In a highly politically charged context, Valk shows that the term 'connoted eternally dying folk beliefs and popular prejudices' which 'civilising powers, such as those of the Church, the system of education, and the Communist Party' sough to abolish. As such, he says, 'superstition' represented 'an official term that marked the discourse of power and a critical view from above'.[67] The three components model, with its three interlocking components, allows the scholar to acknowledge the politically charged world in which religion exits and how the vernacular beliefs and practices of the people engage with and can be shaped as a response to the mechanics of the political context in which they exist.

As such I see merit in the stance taken by Primiano. It is important, as Primiano stresses, to study the beliefs and practices of individuals on their own merit, but in so doing it is equally important not to neglect the dialogical relationship between lay

[65] Kapaló, 'Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice' p. 7
[66] Orisi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* 2nd edition p. xvi
[67] Ülo Valk, 'Superstition in Estonian Folklore: From Official Category to Vernacular Concept', *Folklore* vol. 119 no. 1 (Apr., 2008) (pp.14-28) p. 21

believers and power holders, be they religious, social, academic or economic. In his afterword to *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life* Primiano acknowledges the potential that the vernacular approach holds for both studying the beliefs and practices of individuals on their own merit *and* in relation to politics of institutions attempting to assert control over these beliefs and practices:

> vernacular religiosity has the potential to manifest dimensions of both confirmation and contestation of legitimization of the hegemonic as well as resistance to such societal and cultural manifestations of power…vernacular religion too can represent and express the interests of both the rich and the poor, the disenfranchised and the powerful. [68]

Ultimately the challenge for the scholar, regardless of how they choose to define and categorise religion, is to do as Orisi suggests; to 'approach religion as it is' and be on the guard against presenting 'religion as we want it to be or religion within the limits of our tolerance'. They must remember 'the history of the ways of seeing religion' that they bring to religious phenomena and recognise that 'theories of religion are grounded in broader social agendas'.[69]

The characteristics of 'vernacular religion'

There are a number of important and defining characteristics of vernacular religion; topophilia or sacred geography and location, localisation of global belief and practice, creativity, materiality, healing, and the idea of a 'Golden Age'. I will examine each characteristic in turn; however I first wish to draw attention to an important point raised by Bowman. Specifically that people do not always draw distinction between 'official' and 'the folk'. For them their belief or practice, be it institutional or vernacular, is just part and parcel of their religion.[70] In other words, for the believer vernacular religious beliefs and practices are as valid as anything preached by the institution, regardless of whether the institution rejects or acknowledges those beliefs and practices. People are often unaware

[68] Primiano, 'Afterword' pp. 387-8
[69] Orisi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* 2nd edition p. xviii
[70] Bowman, 'Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion' p. 13

whether if what they are practicing is endorsed by the institutional form of their religion or not. They are, however, keenly aware of their surroundings.

The geographical context where the individual practices their religion is of paramount importance. It impacts upon on how they behave and act, their emotions and even how they think. Each case study in this thesis will show the importance of topophilia in vernacular religion. Certain places are treated as special or 'holy' by people and they behave according to how they believe the sanctity of the place should be respected. Seng-Guan Yeoh offers an interesting example across denominations at the shrine of St Anne at Bukit Mertajam in Malaysia. He compared the 'bodily behaviour' of Catholic, Hindu and other pilgrims at the shrine. Catholics, for example, genuflected and traced the sign of the cross on their bodies. Indian Catholics also removed their shoes. Adherents of Chinese religions made the ritual of *pai-pai*; lighting a bundle of candles and moving them up and down three times or more. They also prostrated themselves before the shrine or bowed very low in the act of *kow tow*. Hindu pilgrims faced the statue of the saint, joined their hands and bowed their heads in a gesture of homage; *namaskara*. What is most interesting is that Yeoh notes that believers take the gestures used from an institutional liturgical setting and replicate them elsewhere, such as a saint's shrine. Yeoh concluded that people have their own specific ways of 'being' Catholic, Hindu and so on; they have their own way of being religious and they demonstrate this at certain places they believe to be sacred.[71]

Yeoh's assessment of the pilgrim's behaviour at St Anne's shrine is fascinating for how he points to the individual's distinct way of being religious; a mixture of institutional, vernacular and individual belief and how it highlights the powerful influence both a shrine's location and material culture exert over the believer's mind. When Primiano coined the concept of vernacular religion, he placed a key emphasis on the importance of location and cultural contexts in shaping vernacular religion. This is what he calls the 'bidirectional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing'.[72] Thus, the influence of geographical, socio-political and economic contexts shapes how the individual and groups of believers create their religious beliefs, practices and identities. Topophilia or sacred geography is a fundamental feature of both vernacular and institutional religion. Topophilia refers to the

[71] Seng-Guan Yeoh, 'Religious Pluralism, Kinship, and Gender in a Pilgrimage Shrine: The Roman Catholic Feast of St Anne in Bukit Mertajam, Malaysia', *Material Religion* issue. 2 no. 1 (March, 2006) (pp. 4-37) pp. 17-9

[72] Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife' p. 44

belief that particular locations are inherently and naturally powerful places, which radiate an intensified sense of place. In short, some places act as the point of contact between the natural and the supernatural worlds in the mind of the believer and are thus treated as special. In her extensive research on Glastonbury, a multi denominational site of pilgrimage, Bowman observes that devotees of particular shrines and sacred sites believe the landscape 'communicates its sacred character directly to those willing to see and understand'.[73] There is a rich tradition of topophilia attached to the sites of Marian apparitions such as Lourdes and Fatima, where millions have travelled to pray where Mary is believed to have physically appeared and work miracles.

Often firmly linked to topophilia is material religion. Usually a shrine or building is erected to mark the significance of a sacred site. Yet again Marian apparition shrines are a prime example of this. Statues of Mary are usually used to mark an apparition site. With an increasing emphasis placed upon examining religion as it is lived, scholars have come to appreciate in greater depth the importance of religious materiality and culture. The material artefacts people use in their daily devotions reveal much about how they engage with and understand religion. Amy Whitehead has conducted a fascinating study into the importance of material artefacts as referents in devotion to the goddess 'Our Lady of Avalon' at Glastonbury and the Virgin Mary in the Spanish village of Alcala. Whitehead found that 'materiality' plays a prominent role 'in vernacular, non-mainstream religious contexts in contemporary Western Europe'. Devotion of this kind, she argues, exemplifies 'the lived reality of religion in contexts where objects and offerings are subjective, rational participants in ceremony, rites, and ritual'. Moreover, Whitehead found that objects play central roles in the creation of beliefs and how 'relationships with the divine are maintained and negotiated'.[74] This thesis will aim to show the deep connection which exists between material artefacts and topophilia in the context of devotion to the Virgin Mary at her shrines.

Another striking aspect of vernacular religion, and especially Marian devotion, is the globalisation of the local and the localisation of the global. Global devotions, rituals and beliefs are often repackaged at the local level to incorporate local traditions and customs. Localisation is a key aspect of how religion is lived, as people reshape beliefs and

[73] Marion Bowman, 'More of the Same? Christianity, Vernacular Religion and Alternative Spirituality in Glastonbury', Steven Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman (eds.), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh University Press; Edinburgh, 2000) pp. 91-2

[74] Amy Whitehead, 'The Goddess and the Virgin: Materiality in Western Europe', *The Pomegranate* vol. 10 no.2 (2008) (pp. 163-83) p. 163

practices to suit their needs, wants and culture. A prime of example of the local going global and then becoming locally re-adapted around the world is the Lourdes apparitions of 1858. Bowman suggests that construction of replica Lourdes style shrines and grottoes around the world, and in the Irish context such shrines were fundamental to the moving statues phenomenon, is an example of how 'localisation has been inherent in the spread of global religion far beyond the simple addition of cultural trimmings'. Bowman believes this is one of the key features of vernacular religion. For her, vernacular religion is 'about locating religion in everyday life, about rooting religion not just in different cultural context but in myriad physical locations'.[75] As shall be seen throughout this thesis Lourdes devotion had taken on a distinctive localised character in Irish religiosity while still reflecting globalised Marian piety. There is again a rich a tradition of localised religious belief and practice being globalised in the cult of the Virgin Mary. Many famous Marian pilgrimage shrines, Lourdes and Fatima to name but two, began as localised Mary cults before the Catholic Church recognised them as worthy of Catholic belief and then were replicated in shrines and devotions all around the Catholic world. An interesting example is the so called 'Irish Lourdes' erected by the Oblate Fathers at Inchicore Dublin. It is an exact replica of the original shrine but it was intended to be a little bit of Lourdes specifically designed for Irish Catholics.

At the ceremonial unveiling of the Inchicore shrine in 1930, the Bishop of Ossory, Dr Collier, delivered a sermon to the thousands gathered there. He 'urged devotion to the Mother of God', which he believed 'an Irish Lourdes would help to inspire'. Here was a place for the Irish to gather at Mary's feet. The shrine was intended for invalids who could not make the trip to Lourdes itself and so the Oblates 'had brought a Lourdes to Ireland'.[76] This is a prime example of the global being re-localised to take on a new meaning in a new context. The 'Irish Lourdes' of Inchicore is also an example of religious creativity and re-creativity, which is another important characteristic of vernacular religiosity. Quite literally the Oblate Fathers recreated Lourdes in an Irish setting and quite fascinatingly the Inchicore Lourdes was recreated at Ballon in Co Carlow, where the village's website says their Lourdes grotto was erected in 1959 'based on the one in Inchicore, Dublin, which, in turn was based on the Grotto in Lourdes'.[77]

[75] Marion Bowman, 'Ancient Avalon, New Jerusalem, Heart Charka of Planet Earth: The Local and the Global in Glastonbury', *Numen* vol.52 no. 2 (2005) (pp. 157-90) pp. 165-6
[76] "Irish Lourdes": New shrine unveiled at Inchicore' *The Irish Times* 17 May 1930 p. 11
[77] (http://www.ballonvillage.com/the-grotto/)

From the outset Primiano placed emphasis on the creativity of believers in religion as it is lived. His approach pays attention 'to the "arts" manifested in the creativity and artistry expressed by the human drive to interpret religious experience'. The vernacular methodology would, Primiano hoped, allow the scholar to acknowledge 'personal religious interpretation' as well as 'original invention, unintentional innovation, and intentional adaption'.[78] In addition, Primiano's theory understands religion as the 'negotiation of any number of influential sources'. He calls upon scholars to recognise that 'tradition is a living process' displaying both 'conservative/passive' and 'dynamic/changing qualities'.[79] Put another way traditions are not fixed and are reimagined, refashioned and reused over time. Orisi found, for example, that the reasons believers prayed to the Madonna of Mount Carmel changed meaning when taken from Italy to New York. In the Harlem Italian immigrants prayed to the Virgin for her assistance as they adjusted to a new culture and social setting. As such Orisi argues that the meanings of signs and practices are not fixed and change constantly over time and context.[80] Thomas Tweed makes a similar point in relation to his study of devotion to Our Lady of the Exile amongst Cuban immigrants in Miami. There the little statue of the Madonna takes on a new meaning as it represents the exile's sense of displacement and their struggle to retain their religious identity in a new context and place around a cherish image and religious artefact brought with them from the mother country.[81] These two examples serve to show one aspect of the creativity found in vernacular religion and how devotion can take on new meanings in a new context. Hence the famous Lourdes shrine and miracle can be replicated across the Catholic world.

In 'Some reflections on theology and popular piety', Salvador Ryan defines 'popular religion' as 'doctrine responded to and appropriated by the people'. He argues the shift from institutional or 'official' religion 'occurs when doctrine is received and put into practice' by the everyday population.[82] In other words, he sees religion as it is lived as being a process where the institutional theology is recreated by the people to express their needs and wants. Bowman reasons that 'believers live according to their own perceptions' of the religious 'traditions to which they adhere'. Whether their beliefs and practices concur with the institutional religion does not make these beliefs and practices any less

[78] Primiano, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife' p. 43
[79] Primiano, 'Afterword' pp. 384-5
[80] Orisi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* 2nd edition p. xx
[81] Thomas Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shine in Miami* (Oxford University Press; New York, 1997) p. 93
[82] Salvador Ryan, 'Some reflections on theology & popular piety: a fruitful or fraught relationship', *The Heythrop Journal* (2012) vol. 53 (pp. 961-71) p. 961

religious in the eyes of the believer or any less worthy of the scholar's attention.[83] The people will recreate the tenets of their institutional religion to better express their worldviews.

One of the most interesting and amusing instances of vernacular creativity and the reclamation of the figure of Mary is offered by Miri Rubin in *Mother of God*. In the Larrivière in the Adour Valley in Southwest France, one will find the chapel of Notre Dame de Rugby. In stain glass window, together with her son, Mary is depicted playing a game of rugby against six men in sports apparel who are striving 'to reach the ball'.[84] It is hard to imagine any depiction which flouts the traditional representation of Mary in religious art more than this and yet to dismiss Notre Dame de Rugby as merely trivial would be to do a disservice to the religiosity of those who erected the chapel in her honour and who invoke her as the patroness of a favoured sport. The creativity of the everyday believer is, as the chapel's website suggests, to be found in the stained glass windows; 'with their unique mixture of religious and rugby imagery' in a place where 'sport has filled the vacuum for some of us, so that once a week we can assemble in our chosen "cathedral" to sing and chant our hearts out in the hope of a brief elevation to a higher plane'.[85] It may not be to everyone's taste, but here is a prime example of vernacular religious creativity at its best, where 'God and rugby' meet and it is an example of religious expression which deserves to be treated with as much respect as what one would afford pilgrims to the more traditional Marian shrine. There are two final characteristics of vernacular religion which are of importance to the context of this thesis; healing and nostalgia usually expressed in terms of a 'Golden Age'.

An interest in healing, Bowman argues, 'has traditionally been closely connected to vernacular religion'. She explains that 'packages' of 'complementary resources', ranging from prayer, charms, folk/traditional cures and even conventional medicine, are put together and offered to individuals 'in times of need'. Healing also is, as Bowman notes, closely tied to landscape of certain sacred sites, both for physical cures to illness and injuries as well as emotional and spiritual healing.[86] Once again Marian devotion and pilgrimage sites are fertile ground to explore the vernacular interest and belief in healing from divine forces. In her study of modern Marian apparitions, Zimdars-Swartz asserts that the stories of belief and healing at Marian pilgrimage sites created by apparition claims

[83] Bowman, 'Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion' p. 4
[84] Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: a history of the Virgin Mary* (Allen Lane; London, 2009) pp. 419-20
[85] (http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/ladyofrugby.html)
[86] Bowman, 'More of the Same?', p. 88

'testify to the Virgin's continuing presence and intervention at these special places to bring healing to troubled people and to a troubled world'.[87] One need only think of the famous Lourdes spring and baths where pilgrims have drunk and washed in the water believing that Mary will cure their aliments, as a reflection of the widespread belief in healing at the vernacular level. That is a fine example of vernacular religion in praxis.

Regarding the idea of a 'Golden Age', Bowman has found at Glastonbury a longing to return to a time when it is believed that people were more attuned to their spirituality and the spiritual world, a time when their ancestors were more religious.[88] This appears to have been a factor in the moving statues phenomenon from the outset, with many journalists positing that the grotto vigils sweeping the country represented a longing for pre-Vatican II Catholicism. The maker of the famous moving statue of Ballinspittle, Maurice O'Donnell, certainly looked upon the reforms of Vatican II with disdain. By 1985 he was Ireland's last statue maker. Lamenting that Vatican II 'ruined our way of life' as 'it threw the statues out of the churches and tore the altars down leaving them looking like barns', O'Donnell was giving voice to the opinion of many lay Catholics when he spoke to *The Evening Echo* newspaper. He remembered the 1950s, and in particular the Marian Year of 1954, as a booming time in his business, when he could hardly keep up with the demand for Catholic statuary. By 1985 he was barely making a living owing to the effects of Vatican II on Marian devotion twenty years earlier.[89] This longing for the 'Golden Age' of pre-Vatican II Catholic style devotion is something I shall explore in more depth in chapters 3 and 5.

In this introduction I have highlighted the key characteristics of vernacular religiosity which have a bearing upon this thesis but the list is of necessity incomplete. Scholars continue to add and embellish it as the need arises. To conclude I will briefly discuss some important points regarding Irish vernacular religion and Catholicism, and how scholars have approached it.

Vernacular Religion and Marian Devotion in the Irish Context

'Ireland', writes Michael P. Carroll, in *Irish Pilgrimage*, 'has the dubious distinction of being a case that is forever subverting patterns that are otherwise well established in the

[87] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary* p. xiii
[88] Bowman, 'More of the Same?', p. 88
[89] Tim Ryan 'Vatican Council 'ruined' life of statue makers', *The Evening Echo* 2 August 1985 p. 2

study of Catholic societies'. One of Carroll's central aims in writing the book was to debunk much of the way that academics, be they historians, anthropologists or folklorists, had approached 'popular religion' in Ireland. He lists three examples of how Ireland subverts the norms of 'popular' religion in the European context. The first is that while in the majority of Catholic societies Sunday mass attendance was markedly low there have been higher levels attending Sunday mass in Ireland since the 19th century, even to the present, despite the rise of secularisation. Secondly, during the 16th century Reformation countries adopted the religion of their rulers. Yet the Irish, ruled by a Protestant state remained predominately Catholic. Thirdly, Carroll argues, that the Irish had their own distinct ways of 'being Catholic'. On the Continent, he elaborates, 'popular Catholicism revolved around cults associated with saintly relics and miraculous images'. But such cults were 'less important in Ireland'. Rather in the Irish context holy wells and mass rocks were the most visual and experiential ways of 'being Catholic', at least until the 20th century. Thus Ireland is, Carroll argues, 'that troubling little fact that so often kills the grand theories relating to the history or psychology of European Catholicism'.[90]

It was not until the 19th century that Ireland began to fall more into line with how Catholicism was practised in Europe. Emmitt Larkin believed that Ireland underwent a 'devotional revolution' from the mid-19th century, thanks to efforts of Paul Cullen, Bishop of Armagh. Until Cullen's reforms, Larkin asserts that Irish Catholicism was unregulated and bore almost no resemblance to the Irish Catholic identity that is now so enmeshed in popular consciousness. It was Cullen who made the 'great mass of the Irish people' become practicing Catholics'.[91] Cullen sought to standardise Catholic practice and bring uniformity to Irish Catholicism, making use of devotions of 'Roman Origin', especially devotion to the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Conception, 'reinforced by the use of devotional tools and aids: beads, scapulars, medals, missals, prayer books, catechisms, holy pictures and *Angus Dei*'.[92] Some scholars, however, have questioned Larkin's 'devotional revolution' theory. Sociologist Eugene Hynes, for instance, argues that the Irish laity was 'selective in what they accepted from Church teachings' and that the greater attendance of mass from the 1870s onwards is more reflective of societal change than Church imposed reform. The impact of the Famine and 'land hunger among the tenant farmer class', Hynes argues, made the Irish more receptive to 'those teachings that

[90] Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* pp. 5-6
[91] Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-75', *The American Historical Review* vol. 77 no.3 (Jun., 1972) (pp. 625-652) p. 625
[92] pp. 644-45

emphasised the unity of family under one head', as the stem family structure was adopted in Ireland. Thus, the family became a reflection of the institution's hierarchical organisation; Catholics under their Bishops and families under their fathers. Besides, Hynes believes that the seeds of tighter Church discipline and reform can be traced to the 18th century and just gathered pace in post Famine Ireland.[93]

Furthermore, scholars have also been critical of what Carroll identifies as a near obsession which a 'pagan-survivals' model, which rose to prominence in 19th century scholarship. This model presents Irish Catholicism as a syncretic mix of what Carroll calls 'truly Catholic elements' such as the mass and sacraments and 'a variety of beliefs and practices inherited from a distant Celtic past'. This model, Carroll believes, has had a disastrous and distorting impact on how scholars approach 'Irish popular Catholicism', as it was dismissed as 'folklore' and 'something that can be safely ignored by scholars interested in "religion"'. What scholars believe are survivals of pre-Christian Irish paganism, Carroll argues, are in fact quite new to Irish Catholicism. He believes that the 'pagan survivals' model has dominated Irish scholarship on religion and culture for so long because Ireland has been seen as a nation on the 'fringes of European civilization'. As such in the 19th and 20th centuries this 'longstanding belief' led scholars to think of Ireland as a place where 'traditions that had long ago died out in the rest of Europe' could still be found. Even Ireland had its own periphery; the West of Ireland which was treated as the preserver of 'archaic traditions'. Historians and folklorists focused their attention there and wrongly assumed that their findings represented Ireland as a whole. What they saw as 'traditions' were in fact, Carroll contends, 'cultural inventions' and recent ones at that.[94]

David Miller on the other hand argues that 'canonically sanctioned Catholic practice', or 'official Catholicism', was supplemented by 'a wide variety of practices which had survived from the pre-Christian Celtic religion'.[95] Practices such as devotion to local saints feast or 'pattern' days, pilgrimage to holy wells, wakes and other 'folk customs' were in Miller's opinion part of 'the peasant's religious life because they performed some of the functions which sociologists attribute to religion'. Such practices, he suggests, had been 'Christianised' or at the very least had become disconnected from 'the belief structure' in which they formerly originated. As a result the clergy had

[93] Eugene Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin's apparition in Nineteenth-century Ireland* (Cork University Press; Cork, 2008) pp. 99-100
[94] Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* pp. 7-8
[95] David W. Miller, 'Irish Catholicism and the Great Famine', *Journal of Social History* vol. 9 no. 1 (Autumn, 1975) (pp. 81-98) p. 89

somewhat of an ambiguous relationship with such 'folk customs' operating within Catholicism. Miller posits that priests were hostile to the 'customary practice' where it was deemed too 'high-spirited' or in which they had no direct role to play. He offers several examples of the successful 'Christianising' of Irish 'folk customs' such as the traditional pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo, which was beforehand the Celtic harvest festival. The laity acquiesced themselves to the new wave of more rigid and disciplined Catholicism under the authority of the trained clergy because their beloved 'folk customs' were tolerated where the priest could take on a more active role. Miller uses the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage to demonstrate this, where he suggests pilgrims believed the priest had healing powers, even if the priests themselves remained silent on such beliefs.[96]

Scholars are divided as to the extent to which priests were tolerant of the 'folk customs' Miller discusses. In *Moral Monopoly*, for example, Tom Inglis asserts that the Irish clergy sought to weed out practices that were deemed out of keeping with orthodox Catholicism. Practices such as pilgrimages to holy wells and traditions surrounding wakes, he writes, came under criticism in the 19th century. What was incompatible was co-opted by the Church and re-organised. So the traditional wake, for example, was stripped of its 'explicit sexual elements' and party ethos into 'a ritual occasion of mourning'. As such Inglis believes that there are many 'pagan practices' which the Irish Catholic Church adapted into its own rituals, most obviously pilgrimage to holy wells. By adding the recitation of the rosary, Inglis argues, the Church de facto institutionalised the holy well based devotion. They had been contested in the 19th century not for their 'undoubtedly pre-Christian origins' but in Inglis's opinion because pilgrimages to them 'were occasions of passionate, drunken and often sexually immoral festivities'.[97] In *Sex In History* , G. Rattray Taylor notes that the Irish Catholic Church used the figure of the Virgin Mary to counter what Inglis describes at holy wells; 'movements mainly towards orgiastic, sex-imbued pagan practices'.[98] The asexual Virgin was used to regulate and reorganise vernacular practices to better suit the aims of the Catholic Church. Using the figure of Mary to do this, gave her an unrivalled ascendancy as the focus of veneration in Irish Catholicism from the 19th to the mid-20th century.

Donnelly argues that Marian devotion peaked in Ireland from the 1930s and 1960s. In fact, he says, it was so enthusiastic that 'it furnished the central symbols, values and

[96] Ibid pp. 89-90
[97] Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: the rise and fall of the Catholic Church in modern Ireland* (University College Dublin Press; Dublin, 1987) pp. 26-7
[98] G. Rattary Taylor, *Sex in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) p. 107

rituals of Irish Catholicism'.[99] In a 1981 interview with *Viewpoints*, the late Irish poet Seamus Heaney offered insight into just how central Mary was to the daily religious lives of Irish Catholics in this period:

> The attitude to life that was inculcated into me- not by priests, but by the active, lived thing of prayers and so on, in my house through my mother- was really patience…the generally Marian quality of devotion…the reality that was addressed was maternal, and the posture was one of supplication...in practice, the shrines, the rosary beads, all the devotions were centred towards a feminine presence.[100]

Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch argues that as Ireland was emerging from colonial rule in the twentieth century, the new Irish state wanted to quickly establish a 'distinctive national character' which was as different as possible from that of the British. The Irish perceived Great Britain as urban, English speaking and Protestant. Thus, the Irish sought to define themselves as the exact opposite; rural, Irish speaking and Catholic with a strong link to the 'Golden Age of Ireland's Celtic past'. Bhreathnach-Lynch argues that restoring and reconnecting that past became the basis of 'a sense of national self'.[101] One of the key defining differences between Catholic and Protestant Christianity is the veneration and understanding of the role of the Virgin Mary in Christian salvation. Catholics have traditionally placed an emphasis on Marian devotion, whereas Protestant churches in general downplay veneration of Mary and the saints. Small wonder then why the figure of the Virgin Mary became so enmeshed into Irish Catholicism and identity. It helped to define Catholic Ireland as opposed to Protestant Britain.

It is important to note, however, the 19th to the mid-20th century was a period when Marian devotion was at the forefront of universal Catholicism, thanks in part to the upsurge of Marian apparitions in this period and the promulgation of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the Assumption in 1950. Marian devotion has been somewhat side-lined within institutional Catholicism since the reforms of Vatican II, but has remained popular at the grassroots level. This is something that I will explore throughout this thesis. The glorification and romanticisation of Ireland's Celtic past since

[99] J.S. Donnelly, ' The Peak of Marianism in Ireland, 1930-60', S.J. Brown & D. W. Miller (eds.), *Piety and Power in Ireland: Essays in Honour of Emmet Larkin* (Queen's University Belfast; Belfast, 2000) p. 282
[100] John Haffenden, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Viewpoints* (1981) pp.60-1
[101] Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch, 'Commemorating the hero in newly independent Ireland; expressions of nationhood in bronze and stone', Lawrence W. McBride (ed.) *Images, Icons and the Irish Nationalist Imagination* (Four Courts Press; Dublin, 1999) p. 148

the 19th century in part explains the tendency for scholars to emphasis 'pagan survivals' within Irish Catholicism. In his explanation of the construction of Irish identity post British rule, Tom Garvin says the new government began to endorse 'the island of saints and scholars' and endorsed a fascination with the past.[102] Mícheál Briody asserts that the two most powerful ways in which the new Irish state attempted to 'reinvent' itself was through the revitalisation of the Irish language and by 'giving expression to the Catholic faith of the majority of the population': 'On the one hand, the state was now proclaiming, or at least implying, that Irishness was on the secular level to be equated with the Gaelic tradition and on the religious level with Catholicism'. This is why Briody believes the Church had 'an undue say in certain matters of social policy' and had such extensive power in Independent Ireland. The Irish were openly proud of their Catholic majority and saw themselves as one of the most 'Catholic' countries in the world. In a manner of speaking, Briody argues, Catholicism as a result 'became a surrogate for national identity'. The Church also had a hand, he asserts, in deciding what aspects of Irish folklore and culture were worthy of perseveration by the Irish Folklore Commission and for the attention of scholars. Both the Church and Irish folklorists played a key role in what Briody terms 'a nation moulded to a particular image'.[103] And the image very much was Catholic Ireland; 'the island of saints and scholars'.

Finally, Gearóid Ó Crualaoich offers a good explanation of why Irish folklorists and historians remained pre-occupied with Ireland's Celtic past, because preoccupation in national cultural ideology diverted 'official and scholarly attention away from the lived popular culture of the Irish people', from the 1930s onwards, 'in favour of a concern for the preservation of the record of past cultural forms'.[104] Carroll argues that as a result scholars have ignored people's creativity regarding their religion and made the normative view of Irish Catholics as people who have 'clung passively to traditions inherited from a distant Celtic past and who just as passively received (and occasionally absorbed) new beliefs and practices from above'.[105] This is something which this thesis will seek to correct. The 'pagan survivals' model has certainly oversimplified the complexity of vernacular religion in Ireland and has tended to focus on only a minute aspect of it, such as holy wells and mass rocks in the Catholic setting and beliefs such as fairies and banshees

[102] Tom Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutions in Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) p. 45
[103] Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: history, ideology, methodology Studia Fennica Folklorista* (Finnish Literature Society; Helsinki, 2007) pp. 55-61
[104] Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, 'De Valera's other Ireland', Gabriel Doherty & Dermot Keogh, *De Valera's Irelands* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2003) pp.158-60
[105] Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* pp. 7-8

in a wider context. This thesis seeks to explore one aspect of Irish vernacular religiosity; devotion to the Virgin Mary, in which Irish Catholics have exercised autonomy and creativity at Mary's shrines.

Scholarship on Marian devotion in the Irish context has tended to focus on the practices endorsed by the institutional Church, but as Donnelly argues 'to a considerable degree' Irish Marian devotion was, and remains, 'extra-parochial and extra sacramental'. In other words, Irish Catholics have used Marian devotion, as Donnelly asserts, for 'means of religious expression which the parochial structure and the sacramental system were incapable of supplying'.[106] In short, Irish Marian devotion is part institutionalised and part vernacular. Irish Catholics have taken elements of the Catholic Church's Mariology and embellish it to better suit how they live their daily religious lives. The veneration of the Virgin Mary at shrines such as Ballinspittle, Mt. Melleray and Inchigeela is a rich and fertile setting in which to research this, something which has largely been neglected by scholarship on Irish Catholicism and something this thesis aims to redress.

Sources and methodology

Primiano calls upon scholars to be self-reflective with their terminology and moreover, to recognise that to study the lives of ordinary religious believers accurately one needs to go straight to the people themselves. He says that 'religion as it is lived can only be discovered by talking to actual believers'.[107] Bowman likewise contends that 'fieldwork based study' is invaluable and indeed 'inevitable' for the study of vernacular religion. Furthermore, she argues that fieldwork-based study of 'the relationship between belief, practice and narrative (how people narrate their religious lives) produces material that is invaluable in the study of religion in traditional contexts'.[108] Accordingly, ethnographic fieldwork forms the basis for this study.

In all, I visited Ballinspittle and Mt. Melleray more often than I did Inchigeela and the houses of prayer, as the decision to include Inchigeela in the study came later and I had already begun my research at Ballinspittle and Melleray. Prior to my research I had visited Ballinspittle once, circa 2005, and had visited Melleray annually throughout my childhood.

[106] Donnelly, ' The Peak of Marianism in Ireland, 1930-60', pp. 282-3
[107] Primiano, 'From "Folk Religion" to the "Search for Meaning" p. 43
[108] Marion Bowman, 'Vernacular/Lived Religion', George Chryssides & Benjamen E. Zeller (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to the Study of New Religious Movements* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2014) p.256

My first visit to Ballinspittle in the context of my research was in the autumn of 2012, when I first met Sean Murray for our first formal interview. I visited regularly throughout the summers of 2013 and 2014, meeting Patricia Bowen for the first time in June 2013 and Sean for the second, thereafter meeting both several times. I was introduced to the rest of the grotto committee in May 2014, when I was asked to visit the grotto to join in the evening recitation of the rosary. On many other visits I spoke to visiting pilgrims and tourists, as well as other locals who are not members of the committee. Usually my visits to the grotto involved joining in the public recitation of the rosary. When I first met Patricia Bowen we paused at the grotto to recite the Hail Holy Queen and some other Marian prayers before our formal recorded interview. This became my regular practice when meeting Patricia. My interviews with committee members, namely Sean Murray and Patricia, were conducted in the cabin adjoining the grotto, where the committee conducts their meetings and leads the rosary via the public address system. Inside are statues of Mary and pictures of the original and present committee. In my later visits, I was also invited to join the committee inside the cabin. Throughout the summers of 2012-13 I visited Ballinspittle and Melleray, approximately twice a month.

My first formal interviews at Melleray were in the context of the annual anniversary celebrations in August 2013. Having seen the arrangements for the devotions in the local newspaper, *The Avondhu,* I attended the ceremonies daily from the 15 August until the 24th and again in August 2014. My formal recorded and semi-formal interviews there were conducted chiefly on the shrine grounds and the committee's prefab, which acts as their meeting place and which is open to the public throughout the annual anniversary devotions, where refreshments are offered to the visiting pilgrims. On the 15 August 2013, I introduced myself to grotto committee member Muckey, as we were alone in the shrine and he was tidying the grotto shelter in preparation for the evening ceremonies. I inferred he was a member of the committee and thus I saw an opportunity to formally introduce myself to the Melleray committee. He in turn introduced me to chairman of the committee Jimmy Buckley and to visionary Ursula O'Rourke, who I spoke with on the night of the 16 August, after the evening ceremonies had concluded. Later that evening I was invited to join the committee and pilgrims for tea in the prefab, where I listened as they shared memories of the events of 1985 and subsequent developments in the shrine's history since. During the summer months of 2012-14 I joined the public recitation of the rosary at Melleray on Sundays and spoke with visiting pilgrims and locals, and it was in this context that I conducted the remainder of my semiformal interviews at Melleray, as I did likewise

at Ballinspittle. Pilgrims also shared stories and experiences via the public address system, namely during the anniversary devotions and listening to pilgrims chat and swap stories in the grounds of both shrines was always most illuminating and invaluable.

As for Inchigeela, I first visited the village in October 2013. In the months before hand, at the suggestion of one priest I met at Mt. Melleray, I wrote to visionary sisters Fiona Tierney and Marcia Bowen inviting them to participate in my study. I received a polite reply which invited me to visit the sisters' houses of prayer at Inchigeela (West Cork) and Doon (Limerick). I decided to begin with Inchigeela. My initial visits were on Saturdays, where I witnessed very little activity at the Rossmore Grotto, except for the first Saturday devotions. The origins of these devotions can be traced to the Fatima apparitions. They chiefly consist of attending mass and reciting the rosary on the first Saturday of each month in honour of the Virgin Mary. My first significant visit to Inchigeela came on one Sunday in October 2013 at Rossmore grotto, where I met Margaret, a member of *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*. The specific details of my meeting with Margaret at Rossmore are described in Chapter Five. Taking Margaret's advice I visited Doon a week after my visit to Inchigeela, where I briefly met with Nicholas and Marcia, as well other members of *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*. The Immaculate Heart House of Prayer is located in the countryside adjoining the small village of Doon. The house boasts extensive grounds and its own oratory and everywhere one looks one sees images and statues of Mary, Jesus and various saints, more details of which can be read in Chapter Five.

Finally, I met with Nicholas for a second time, approximately a fortnight later at the sisters' prayer room in Limerick city, where I was shown images from the rest of the sister's houses of prayer. Thereafter, I was kept abreast of the activities of Fiona, Marcia and *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* in their monthly or bimonthly newsletter, which is freely available in the Benedictious Bookshop in Cork city. As was the case with Ballinspittle and Inchigeela, I joined in the devotions made by *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*, namely the recitation of the rosary, the chaplet of the Divine Mercy and specific prayers and chaplets composed by Fiona and Marcia, which I shall describe in detail in Chapter Five.

In the case of Mitchelstown I conducted five formal recorded interviews with the local parish priest, the secretary of the grotto committee, the editor of the local newspaper, *The Avondhu*, and two local women who responded to my request for information. I also conducted seven semiformal interviews at the annual devotions in November at the local

holy well. In the context of Ballinspittle I conducted six formal interviews and upwards of thirty semiformal interviews with pilgrims, tourists, locals and other interested parties. In the case of Melleray, I conducted eight formal recorded interviews, five at the shrine itself and three in the home of interested parties and as many as twenty semiformal interviews, not including my participant observation. Finally, in the context of Inchigeela, I conducted two semiformal interviews with Nicholas, one with Margaret and circa ten with different members of *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* and other interested individuals.

In addition to the formal and semiformal interviews, I conducted participant observation at each shrine which simply consisted of observing pilgrims' movements and behaviour at the shrine, such as taking photographs or making private devotions or drinking and collecting holy water from the wells at Melleray and Rossmore grotto in Inchigeela. The pilgrims' private devotions at Ballinspittle and Melleray simply consisted of reciting the rosary either kneeling at the grottoes' railings or in the seating areas provided. At Inchigeela, *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* would add the chaplet of the Divine Mercy and those given to them by Fiona and Marcia. On other occasions pilgrims would slip petitions in the specially provided boxes at each shrine, with the exception of Mitchelstown where there is no petition box, or make donations to the shrines' upkeep. They would also leave flowers or candles. The more specific details of pilgrim behaviour at each shrine will be discussed in each case study where informative. The simple actions of the pilgrims and devotees at each shrine; their body movements, their gesturing (making acts such as genuflecting), their tone of their voices were all instructive into how these shrines and the belief that something sacred resides in each one can have a powerful influence over the bodily behaviour of the pilgrims and locals who gather there.

Additionally, I wrote an open letter to the magazines *Ireland's Eye* and *Ireland's Own*, inviting all interested parties to participate in my study. I received a number of anonymous letters detailing people's experiences at various shrines around the country. I also conducted interviews via email and telephone. This is how I met both Pat and Seamus from Dublin. I visited Pat in his home. I conducted two interviews with Seamus via telephone and also conducted an interview with Annemarie, originally from Cork but now living in England, via email.

As well my ethnographic fieldwork, I cite the devotional literature, discussed above; and where insightful press reports. Understood in the context in which they were

written and carefully handled, the contemporary and later press reports can be most illuminating. Primiano notes this, suggesting that such material is often beneficial for reference by the scholar because of 'their ability to express the religious beliefs of ordinary people'.[109] Scholars of Marian apparitions, such as Philip W. Davies and Jacqueline Boles, who conducted research at an apparition site in Conyers, Georgia in the U.S., argue that press reports should be regarded as both 'interpretive and political products' and useful for the scholar as 'a source of background information'.[110] Finally, in her assessment of Marian apparitions in the 20th century, E. Ann Matter makes an interesting point regarding how scholars have approached such phenomena:

> Serious scholars of the Christian tradition have not always appreciated the presence of Mary in the twentieth century. In fact, historians of Christianity, especially in the Protestant-dominated English-speaking world, have tended to misunderstand the cult of the Virgin as a basically medieval phenomenon, a relic of a former age, and in any case an idea at odds with the rational and egalitarian religiosity of modernity.[111]

She goes on to note that it has only been in recent decades that scholars have begun to pay serious attention to just how much Marian apparitions impact the veneration of the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, she writes, the press have been paying attention to Marian apparitions for some time. She does not suggest 'that supermarket tabloid journalism has more accurately understood the cult of the Virgin Mary' than academic scholarship. Only that scholarship in the past has tended to focus on doctrinal aspects of Marian devotion such as Marian dogmas, which conversely the media usually does not. The value of press reports on Marian apparitions is that they are representative of a particular 'version of Marian piety'.[112]

Consequently, I cite press reports where they add to the observations I have made in the course of my own fieldwork. Lastly, I have endeavoured to place my discussion of Marian based vernacular devotion in Ireland within the wider scholarship on Marian apparitions, vernacular religion and material religious culture. I have chosen to discuss

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[109] Primiano, 'From "Folk Religion" to the "Search for Meaning" p. 36
[110] Philip W. Davies & Jacqueline Boles, 'Pilgrim Apparition Work: Symbolisation and Crowd Interaction when the Virgin Mary appeared in Georgia', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* vol. 32 (2003) (pp. 371-402) p. 378
[111] E. Ann Matter, 'Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics', *Religion* vol. 31 (2001) (pp. 125-53) p. 126
[112] Ibid

four out of a total of thirty-nine shrines which claimed a moving statue or an apparition in 1985. Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela, and Carns in Co. Sligo have become lasting sites of pilgrimage since 1985, whereas the majority of shrines did not. In order to historically contextualise the study, I explore Ireland's first significant Marian apparition pilgrimage site at Knock and the changing of socio-political and economic history in Ireland leading up to the 1980s in Chapter 2. The Ballinspittle moving statue phenomenon is the subject of Chapter 3. Thereafter I discuss the Marian apparitions reported at Mt. Melleray grotto and how they are commemorated today in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 explores the rise of the houses of prayer attached to the ongoing apparitions of Fiona Tierney and her sister Marcia Mooney, since they began at Inchigeela in the late 1980s. Chapter 6 uses the moving statue of Mitchelstown to examine why it is only a handful of shrines attached to the 1985 moving statues phenomena have had the power to continue to attract pilgrimage since they made international headlines and why the majority have fallen to the wayside. The map below shows the locations of the most important Irish Marian apparitions sites discussed or referenced in this thesis.



Figure 1.2 Location of grottoes and apparition shrines

Knock (A)	Mt. Melleray (C)	Mitchelstown (E)	Kerrytown (G)
Ballinspittle (B)	Inchigeela (D)	Carns (F)	

CHAPTER TWO: Knock: from vernacular shrine to institutional sanctuary

Knock shrine has a long and complicated history; a history which until quite recently was neglected by academia. Since the 1940s, Knock has been Ireland's foremost site of pilgrimage and Marian devotion. Few Knock devotees, however, are aware of the deeply contested origins of the shrine. Thanks to recent extensive academic scholarship by sociologists, anthropologists and historians – Eugene Hynes, Edith Turner, John White and James S. Donnelly Jr. – the veil surrounding the shrine's history has been lifted. Since the papal visit of John Paul II in 1979, Knock shrine has been the jewel in the crown of the Irish Catholic Church, but as Donnelly argues conflicts 'punctuated' Knock from the early 1940s through the 1980s.[113] A long campaign for ecclesiastical approval and recognition for Knock was fought from the 1930s thanks to the efforts of Liam (d. 1953) and Judy Coyne (d. 2002) and The Knock Shrine Society. Despite two commissions of inquiry by the Catholic Church – 1879 and 1936 – the Knock apparition and pilgrimage to the shrine remained disputed by the Irish episcopacy. Yet Knock became Ireland's national shrine. Until 1979 significant pilgrimage was made to the modest little shrine at the site of the original apparition of 1879; the gable-end of the local parish church. Today the shrine is overshadowed by its basilica, the imposing apparition chapel and the expansion of the domain which began with the papal visit and continues to the present.

For a century the Mayo shrine had proved a consistent bone of contention between its supporters – members of The Knock Shrine Society campaigning for ecclesiastical approval – and the Catholic Church. This contest was finally resolved by the papal visit. Yet the Irish bishops enjoyed only a short-lived interlude; for only six years after the issue of Knock had at long last been more or less resolved a new wave of apparitions swept the Irish landscape by force in 1985. And the Irish episcopacy was drawn back into a contestation regarding the legitimacy of apparition shrines, now in greater numbers than before. Between the 1879 Knock apparition and the 1985 moving statues, there were other reports of apparitions in Ireland, Kerrytown in Donegal being the most significant, but none of these could boast the number of pilgrims Knock could. Thus, until 1985 Knock had a monopoly on Irish pilgrimage to an apparition shrine. The other prominent sites of

[113] James S. Donnelly Jr., 'Knock Shrine: The Worst of Times – The 1940s', *Éire – Ireland* vol. 48 issue. 3&4 (pp. 213-64) p. 214

Irish pilgrimage – Croagh Patrick, Lough Derg, Clonmacnoise, Faughart, and Our Lady's Island (Wexford) – were mostly pre-Christian in origin and either holy wells (Faughart), monastic (Clonmacnise), or based on medieval Irish pilgrimage (Our Lady's Island, Croagh Patrick, and Lough Derg). This is a reflection of the fact that Knock was Ireland's first significant apparition, with its own pilgrimage shrine, incarnation of the Virgin Mary and devotional cult.

It is necessary to open this exploration of later Irish apparitions by beginning with a proper contextualisation. By discussing the Knock apparition, the campaign for Knock shrine to be ecclesiastically recognised and the Irish Church's response, I will make important points about apparitions in the wider and Irish context which will inform the reader's understanding of my discussion of Marian devotion at the sites of the moving statues phenomenon in the subsequent chapters. Knock gave, and continues to give, hope to the visionaries and grotto committees of Irish Marian shrines such as Ballinspittle, Mt. Melleray and Inchigeela. During one of my semi-formal interviews at Ballinspittle, for example, one member of the committee there mentioned how for decades she has been making the local annual bus pilgrimage to Knock and how it is her hope that one day 'Ballinspittle will be another Knock'; that is to say recognised as worthy of belief and pilgrimage by the Catholic Church. I will focus on the campaign to secure Papal recognition for Knock from the 1930s onwards, which is of more relevance to contextualisation of the later Irish Marian apparitions than the earlier history of the Knock apparition in the 1880s.

In addition, I wish to discuss the important year of 1954 – The Marian Year – a year which was not only significant for Knock but for Marian devotion in Ireland as a whole, since many of the shrines of the moving statues phenomenon were erected to mark the holy year. It was not known then, but the seeds for future apparitions and pilgrimage shrines had been planted. The Marian Year would have some significant outcomes for both Irish Catholicism and vernacular religion. I will also discuss key changes in the nature of Irish socio-political and economic cultural in the lead up to the 1980s, which significantly impacted the practice of Catholicism and the Catholic based morality of Irish society. By 1985 the country had undergone many widespread social, political, economic and cultural changes and a new construction of Irish identity was emerging, as well as the beginnings of a more secularised Ireland. In addition to the scholarship noted above, my principal sources for this chapter include Judy Coyne's memoirs (published in 2004), document material from the archives of Knock museum and Athlone Archives, and contemporary

press reports. I will begin by briefly analysing the original apparition of 1879 and pilgrimages to Knock in the 1880s until their decline and the key developments in the restricting of the Irish Catholic Church and identity running parallel to the apparition. From there I will discuss the origins of The Knock Shrine society and their 1940s campaign, I will then examine the significance of the Marian Year and from there I will discuss the events leading to the 1979 papal visit and the transformation of Knock from a modest vernacular shrine and cult on the peripheries of the Catholic Church to Ireland's institutional Marian sanctuary. To conclude I shall assess what Knock represents for Irish Catholics today.

The 1879 apparition and the 19th century reform of Irish Catholicism

On a wet Thursday evening, 21 August 1879, a vision was seen by fifteen locals outside the parish church at Knock, Co. Mayo.[114] The original testimonies of the witnesses can be read on the shrine's website.[115] The fifteen witnesses – men, women, and children – all described seeing three life size 'figures' appear at the gable end of the church; a woman flanked by two men. None of the figures spoke to the witnesses but they believed that the woman was the Virgin Mary and according to the testimony of Judith Campbell they interpreted the male figures as St Joseph and St John the Evangelist 'because some years ago, statues of St Joseph and of the Evangelist were in the chapel in Knock'.[116] Additionally Mary Byrne had seen a statue of St John in Lecanvey church which resembled the stance of the male figure the witnesses had seen appear to the right of the Virgin Mary; holding a book of gospels in his right hand, with his left raised in an act of preaching. All the witnesses described seeing a brilliant light surrounding the figures, which were floating approximately two feet above the ground. They were mesmerised by what they saw and some stood merely watching, others reciting the rosary. One witness, Bridget Trench, cried out 'A hundred thousands thanks to God and to the glorious Virgin that has given us this manifestation'.[117] Taken as a whole the witnesses described the figures thusly;

[114] 'History', (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/history)
[115] 'Witnesses Accounts; 15 Witnesses', (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/witnesses-accounts)
[116] Testimony of Judith Campbell to Commission of Inquiry (1879) (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/witnesses-accounts)
[117] Testimony of Bridget Trench to Commission of Inquiry (1879) (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/witnesses-accounts)

> I saw a most beautiful crown on the brow or head of the Blessed Virgin. Our Lady was in the centre of the group, a small height above the other two, St. Joseph to her right, and bent towards the Virgin, St. John, as we were led to call the third figure, was to the left of the Virgin…[118]

Some of the witnesses also described seeing an altar surmounted by a lamb and a cross surrounded by hovering angels or stars that appeared beneath the window of the church. The witnesses remained for over two hours at the site of the apparition in the pouring rain. All later told the Commission of Inquiry that the area where the apparition appeared remained dry throughout.[119] Figure 2.1, shows an early lithographic illustration of the apparition based on the witnesses' testimony.

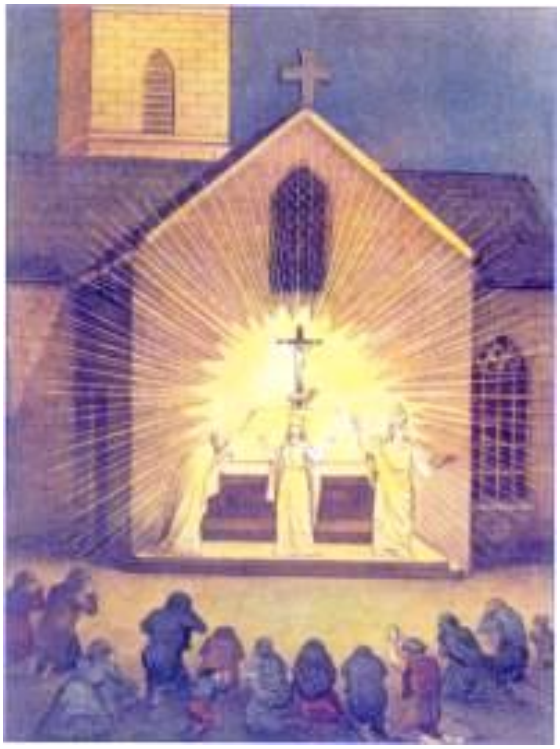


Figure2.1: Knock Apparition (*History Ireland* Issue 4, Winter 1996)

[118] Testimony of Judith Campbell to Commission of Inquiry (1879) (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/witnesses-accounts)
[119] 'Witnesses Accounts; 15 Witnesses', (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/witnesses-accounts)

A Commission of Inquiry was launched under the authority of the Archbishop of Tuam. The parish priest, Archdeacon Cavanagh, was assisted by local clergy from neighbouring parishes and six curates. Their findings were presented to the Archbishop with the consensus that 'The testimony of the witnesses, taken as a whole, was trustworthy and satisfactory'.[120] But no further conclusion was made beyond this and the apparition was not given a formal institutional blessing and the clergy remained aloof from the mass pilgrimages made to Knock in 1879-1880.

A detailed contextual account of Irish socio-political and ecclesiastical history from the 19th century forward is not necessary here. Rather I will discuss key turning points and developments which form the contextual backdrop to the Knock apparition and in the grand durée, the moving statues phenomenon. The Knock apparition was pre-faced by a series of disastrous famines across the entire Irish nation, the growth of Nationalism and particularly significant for the Knock context, the agrarian crisis known as The Land War; caused by the eviction of tenants from their small land holdings by absentee and ruthless landlords. Eugene Hynes's recent – and first – full scale study of the Knock apparition aptly shows the influence this socio-economic context, as well as later 19th century ecclesiastical reforms, had on the interpretation of the Knock apparition by the devotees of Our Lady of Knock.[121]

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Irish nationalists pushed for greater independence from Britain, in the form of 'Home Rule', which sought to re-establish an Irish Parliament in Dublin, rather than having Irish MPs elected to Westminster, as had been the case since the Act of Union in 1800. The Act had formally unionised the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Kingdom of Ireland into a single kingdom, with a single parliament. Several bills were proposed but in the end they all came to nothing, pushing more and more disillusioned Irish men and women to a more militant nationalism, which would eventually culminate in the 1916 Rising and the 1922 Irish War of Independence. As established in introduction (see pp.33-4) the basis of Irish identity in this period was that which was perceived as the opposite of British identity; thus Irish cultural identity from the late 19th century stressed the Catholic religion of the majority of the Irish population, the native language and the rural nature of Irish society. Ireland finally won

120

121 Eugene Hynes, *Knock: the Virgin's apparition in nineteenth century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008)

complete independence from Britain in 1922, when the Free State was established and this construction of Irish identity, more or less, prevailed until the 1960s.

A key development prior to the Knock apparition was the emancipation of the Irish Catholic Church in 1829, prior to which the practice of Catholicism in Ireland was illegal under the Penal Laws. During the Penal era, lasting from the 16th to the 19th century, the celebration of the mass and other sacraments were conducted whenever and wherever they could be, often in the open country side at 'Mass Rocks' or in the homes of lay Catholics. As a result Irish Catholicism was somewhat unregulated and undisciplined. With Catholic emancipation, the Irish hierarchy was in a position to remodel and impose greater discipline upon the Irish Church. In a recent article on the subject, Cara Delay, sums up the key change in the Irish Catholic Church in the latter half of the 19th century;

> As the Penal Laws loosened, with Catholic emancipation arriving in 1829, Ireland's Catholic church began organizing and reforming. For Ireland's late nineteenth century priests and bishops, chapels were essential to the so-called devotional revolution. By bringing the sacraments into the chapel and under church control, priests and bishops hoped to keep a closer watch over lay Catholics.[122]

The Irish episcopacy subsequently embarked on a massive construction and repair of Catholic churches, which became, Delay says, 'central to the topography of almost every Catholic parish', moving religious life away from the landscape. Thus, holy wells and mass rocks, which during the Penal Era were crucial to keeping Catholicism alive, became, for the clergy at least, secondary shrines at best.[123] These shrines, however, were too deeply rooted in the psyche of Irish Catholics to disappear and continued to exert a powerful topophilia, as Marian grottoes would too later, over the minds of the laity. Therefore, the local church became the first and foremost centre of topophilia, but was supplemented by traditional devotions at local saints' wells and mass rocks. Delay's argument makes the setting of the Knock apparition all the more interesting. Given that Church successfully sought to make the local chapel the centre of religious life in each parish, it is interesting that the Knock apparition manifested at the local church and adds further weight to John White's assessment of the Knock devotions, outlined below, which blended traditional elements of the highly localised Irish Catholic devotion with the new

[122] Cara Delay, ' "The Gates Were Shut": Catholics, Chapels, and Power in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland', *New Hibernia Review* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 2010) (pp. 14-35) p. 17
[123] Ibid pp. 17-21

standardised devotions prompted by the clergy in a remarkable display of vernacular creativity.

While other historians have framed the apparition as a reluctant response to embrace modernity, John White argues the opposite. Knock was a modernising endeavour in itself. In the 1880s Knock was frequently dubbed an 'Irish Lourdes'. In linking Knock to the Lourdes apparitions, he says, the Irish were making Knock 'an international phenomenon' and 'were making a clear statement about a shift in Irish piety'. For Lourdes was a 'modern, national pilgrimage', expressing solidarity for the French. Traditionally Irish pilgrimage was highly localised, centred on 'a well or a site associated with an Irish saint'; sites which the majority of Irish parishes had. The Knock apparition combined elements of the localised and traditional devotions, such as making the rounds of the well, with 'neo-Tridentine devotions' such as the Stations of the Cross, benediction, and processions using candles, torches and banners and the recitation of litanies. Knock was, he concludes, a way for the Irish 'to sacralise and make sense of the new world that they themselves were trying to create'.[124] Knock pilgrimage became a hybrid of traditional Irish pilgrimage and modern Church devotions.

The Knock apparition and the subsequent pilgrimages were not a product of the growth of Irish nationalism, but the interpretation of the apparition and the spirit of the early 1880s pilgrimages were certainly coloured by it. The contemporary sources attest to the desire for earthly miracles which was at the forefront of the Knock pilgrimages, but pilgrimage to Knock was as much a political statement as a genuine act of religious and Marian devotion. In short, the rise of Irish nationalism and the increasing power of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the latter half of the 19th century was the context in which the Knock apparition appeared and the ensuing devotion to the apparition and aspects of the understanding of it became reflected the socio-political and ecclesiastical context in which it emerged. The Knock Madonna became a specific Irish incarnation of Mary, hailed as Queen of Ireland and continues to be invoked as such to the present.

Sociologist, Eugene Hynes makes an interesting argument as to how the apparition was understood by the people. He writes that they saw it as 'a statement of the rightful submission of the clergy to the Mother of God'.[125] This belief arose out of the position of the figures as they appeared on 21 August 1879. The witnesses described Mary as the

[124] John White, 'The Cusack Papers; new evidence on the Knock apparition', *History Ireland* Issue 4 (Winter 1996) (http://www.historyireland.com)
[125] Hynes, *Knock: the Virgin's apparition in nineteenth century Ireland* p. 222

central figure, flanked by the two male saints, with St Joseph bowing to Mary 'as if paying her respect' to use Mary O'Connell's description. Furthermore, the Virgin appeared as the largest of three figures, floating higher than the other two and wearing her 'brilliant crown'. O'Connell, for example, described the figure of Mary as 'life-sized', with 'the others apparently either not so big or not so high as her figure'.[126] Hynes concludes that the Virgin of Knock was thus interpreted as an authoritative and royal figure, one to whom the clergy were subordinate. From the apparition the people understood that Mary was 'on the side of the people regardless of what priests might or might not do, in effect weakening clerical power generally by setting limits to its exercise'.[127] The agency of Mary superseded that of the priests and the apparition site of the local church was sacred in their minds not because 'the priest offered mass' there nor because of the presence of the Eucharist in 'the Tridentine discipline' but because the Virgin Mary had designed to appear and work miracles there via the mortar over which she and the saints had hovered.[128]

Although the 19th century witnessed the rise of clerical power and greater discipline and uniformity imposed upon the Irish Catholic Church, there remained a gap between the Church's institutional Mariology and how the people envisioned and invoked the agency of Mary. This led to and continues to lead to clashes between clergy and laity and is a key feature of the later 1930s campaign for Knock, the moving statues and the dynamic relationship between institutionalized and vernacular Irish Catholicism. Hynes' theory is certainly illuminating as part of an explanation of the local clerical's authority to dampen the fervor shown by pilgrims for the miraculous at Knock. They persistently denied later apparitions and the miracle cures claimed at Knock. On 25 March 1880, the feast of the Annunciation, *The Irish Times* reported that many 'visions' were claimed that day and testimonies were collected but that Archdeacon Cavanagh dismissed these as 'not important'.[129]

The apparition site had been imbued in the minds of ordinary Catholics with the miraculous power of the Virgin Mary, which was directly accessible via the cement of the gable wall, to which the contemporary press reports show many cures were attributed. Thus, at the apparition gable the agency of the Virgin Mary was freely available to all

[126] Testimony of May Byrne (O'Connell) to Commission of Inquiry (1879) (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/witnesses-accounts)
[127] Hynes, *Knock: the Virgin's apparition in nineteenth century Ireland* p. 222
[128] Ibid p. 255
[129] 'Lady Day at Knock: Our Special Correspondent', *The Irish Times* 26 March 1880 p. 5

without the need for clerical intervention. The role of the priest diminished. Threatened, or at the very least undermined, by the charisma of the apparition site it was in the interests of the local clerics to downplay the miraculous elements of Knock, which in any case they already doubted. From being a site of mass pilgrimage and miracle claims Knock returned to the sleepy anonymous village it had been prior to 1879 and remained so for fifty years, until a young couple, Judy and Liam Coyne, took it upon themselves to reignite pilgrimage there and to have the necessary ecclesiastical authorities reinvestigate the apparition and miracle cures of the 1880s. In *Encountering Mary* Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz explains how the prerogative to recognise an apparition belongs to the local bishop. But even where a negative or non-committed ecclesiastical judgement is passed pilgrims may continue to flock to the apparition shrine if an interest is retained. For her Knock was 'a case in point'.[130] The Coynes were successful in remaking Knock the site of mass pilgrimage in the 1930s to the point that a second Commission of Inquiry was granted in 1936. The efforts of the Coynes and The Knock Shrine Society (KKS) belong to the second phase of the shrine's history. It would not be smooth sailing for the Coynes and the KKS and local clerical resistance was to reassert itself with more vigour than it had in the 1880s, as the KKS challenged the carefully crafted authority of the Irish Catholic Church which had been established with the Church's mass reforms of the 19th century and the conflation of Irish cultural identity with Catholicism in Independent Ireland.

The Knock Shrine Society and the campaign for Ecclesiastical recognition

The Irish Independent reported in 1929 that for the first time in fifty years 'a large pilgrimage' was due to visit Knock on 21 August.[131] The Archbishop of Tuam, Gilmartin, addressed the pilgrims on his visit, careful to point out that 'his presence was not to be taken as giving any official sanction' to the apparition. 'Ecclesiastics were taught to be suspicious about alleged visions', and were expressly taught not to promote them where any doubt existed as to their origin. The faith of the Catholic Church did not depend on apparitions nor was pilgrimage a necessary prerequisite for Catholics. The laity were free to make up their own minds but the Archbishop sought to remind them that 'The solid

[130] Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: from La Salette to Medjugorje* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991) p. 10
[131] C. Austin, 'The pilgrimage to Knock: after 50 years', *The Irish Independent* 16 August 1929 p. 6

basis for all true devotion to Mary was the dogmatic truth that she was the Mother of God and Son made Man' and that 'Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was independent of all shrines, no matter how highly privileged they might be'. His conclusion was simply that supernatural or no, 'the sons and daughters of St. Patrick in the Faith' did not ultimately need the Knock apparition, or any other for that matter, to confirm their faith.[132]

The Church's attitude to apparitions has not altered significantly, indeed if at all, since Gilmartin made this sermon. Evidently there was still significant clerical doubt regarding the 1879 apparition. Gilmartin did not suspect fraud but suggested that perhaps what the fifteen witnesses had seen was an 'ocular deception'.[133] Nevertheless, a renewed interest had been awakened in Knock. Amongst the Archbishop's audience that day were Judy and Liam Coyne. Her memoirs note their surprise at the Archbishop's address, which sparked a desire in them to change the way the Church perceived Knock.[134] Some years later the Coynes were on pilgrimage at Lourdes. After witnessing the mass pilgrimages and devotions at the famous French shrine, Coyne and her companions began to question why the same was not happening at Knock and how 'much it easier it would be for all concerned, we reasoned, if they could be taken to a shrine at home'. They decided to reopen 'the cause' of Knock.[135]

This forms the back drop to the founding of the Knock Shrine Society, which was a lay organisation dedicated to the promotion of Knock as Ireland's national Marian shrine. Their intentions for Knock were to say the least ambitious. Firstly, they wished for the Knock apparition to receive a Vatican blessing. Secondly, they sought to build a suitable shrine at Knock to mark its significance. Thirdly, they wished to have all miracle cures at Knock formally investigated and finally, and ultimately they wished to promote the veneration of Mary under the title of Our Lady of Knock. The KKS had initial success in the 1930s. The numbers returning to Knock for pilgrimage increased considerably, the contemporary press reports numbered them in their thousands. In February 1935 *The Irish Times* reported that 'steps' were being taken to have Knock recognised 'as a special shrine of the Blessed Virgin'. The Archbishop of Tuam had forwarded a recently published book by District Justice Coyne on the apparition to Rome. The last two surviving witnesses of the 1879 apparition, Mrs Mary O'Connell and Mr Patrick Byrne, made sworn statements

[132] 'The apparitions: what the Church teaches', *The Irish Independent* 19 August 1929 p. 9
[133] Ibid
[134] Judy Coyne, *Providence my guide: The heroic force in the Knock Shrine story* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004) p. 15
[135] Ibid pp. 15-8

which were in the Archbishop's possession.[136] The findings of the Second Commission of Inquiry, simply reiterated those of the first; no fraud was suspected but neither was a miracle.

Mrs O'Connell ended her sworn statement with the declaration 'I am clear about everything I have said and I make this statement knowing I am going before my God'.[137] She died six weeks later.[138] With the testimonies of the surviving witnesses sent to Rome for consideration the future must have seemed bright for the Coynes and the KKS, and there were further signs that Knock would soon become what they set out to make it. A medical bureau based on that of Lourdes was established in 1936.[139] A report by *The Irish Times* noted a 'growing interest' in the work of the society. 700 had joined from all parts of Ireland and 100,000 prayer leaflets had been issued.[140] *The Irish Times* noted that more than 4,000 thousand made the pilgrimage for the Feast of the Assumption 1936.[141] Everything seemed to be going according to plan and there were promising signs of ecclesiastical support from the Archbishop of Tuam.

Despite his cautious speech of 1929, Gilmartin was sympathetic to the KKS's cause and was on good terms with the Coynes. Judy wrote of him in her memoirs that he had a 'reputation for being a cold, aloof man' but a pious one. Privately, Gilmartin supported the KKS and Coyne believed he 'was merely waiting for the right moment to do something about it.[142] The moment, however, did not arrive and the KKS's relationship with the local clergy deteriorated in the wake of the Archbishop's death in 1939. James S. Donnelly Jr. has written a most interesting article on this period of the shrine's history; 'Knock Shrine: The Worst of Times – the 1940s'. The personal papers of the KKS reveal 'a series of conflicts between the lay leaders of this notable pilgrimage site and the priests and archbishops who exercised ecclesiastical authority over the shrine'. The outside world was blissfully unaware of this thanks to the Coyne's efforts to gloss over it.[143]

Throughout her memoirs, Coyne regularly drops in the names of supporting clerics and mentions clerical opposition where it arose, though she omits the specific details of the

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[136] 'Irish: the claims of Knock', *The Irish Independent* 4 February 1935 p. 7
[137] 'Knock History/Commissions of Enquiry', (Http://www.knock-shrine.ie/comissions-enquiry, 30 June 2013)
[138] 'Witness of Knock apparition: Mrs O'Connell dead', *The Irish Independent* 20 October 1936 p. 11
[139] 'Famous Irish Shrine: a medical bureau for Knock' *The Irish Independent* 19 July 1935 p. 9
[140] 'Knock Shrine Society: growing interest', *The Irish Independent* 23 October 1935 p. 10
[141] 'Pilgrimage to Knock: more than 4,000 attend', *The Irish Times* 17 August 1936 p. 2
[142] Coyne, *Providence my guide* p. 113
[143] James S. Donnelly Jr., 'Knock Shrine: The Worst of Times – The 1940s', *Éire-Ireland* vol. 48 issue 3&4 (Fall/Winter 2013) (pp. 231-64) p. 213

often very ugly clashes between the KKS and the local clergy. As far as the KKS was concerned the case for the formal recognition of Knock was 'clear-cut and had more convincing evidence to support its claim than many shrines worldwide where ecclesiastical approval had been given'.[144] But the problem for the KKS, as Coyne admits, was simply that the Church did not share this opinion. Additionally, the KKS was encroaching on the authority of the local clergy and this was the principal cause at the root of the clashes which manifested between them in the 1940s. There were no returns on the information Gilmartin had forwarded to the Vatican, which led more critical clerics to blast the work of the KKS. One particular priest from Mallow in North Cork, C. W. Corbett, wrote a condemning letter to *The Irish Times*. At the time of the 1879 apparition he was training in the Maynooth seminary, where he said the apparition received a 'cool, disinterested' reception. By 1881 Knock was, he noted, largely forgotten. In 1893 and 1894 he had passed his holidays in the West of Ireland and found that his colleagues did not believe the apparition of Knock. Some attributed it to alcohol. Corbett queried the pilgrimages of Knock, when the Vatican had not yet returned a blessing. He summed up his argument against it thus; 'I know I am giving expression to the thoughts of many priests and people in asking the question: Whiter does all this tend?'[145]

By the 1940s his Knock colleagues were fully in the same frame of mind. The success the KKS had achieved in the 1930s was seriously diminished in the 1940s with the outbreak of the Second World War. Donnelly writes that owing to the rationing of petrol and coal during the war years, the mass pilgrimages made to Knock dramatically dropped. This, coupled with the 'withholding of Vatican recognition', he says, accounts for the frustrations felt by the KKS and the Coynes and worsened their relationship with the parish priest and his curate, Fr. Loftus. Moreover, the Knock priests criticised the pilgrim's behaviour – there were accusations of sexual misconduct on the occasion of all night vigils at the shrine – and the pilgrims' 'inadequate piety'. The small numbers of priests in the area came under serious strain with the numbers of pilgrims the KKS were attracting to Knock. Additionally, the Coyne's invited supportive priests to officiate at the shrine which ruffled the feathers of the local clergy.[146] Donnelly notes that matters came to ahead for the national thanksgiving pilgrimage which marked the end of the war in 1945,[147] when a

[144] Coyne, *Providence my guide* p. 229
[145] C. W. Corbett, 'Knock and Church discipline: letters to the editor', *The Irish Times* 27 July 1938 p. 4
[146] Donnelly Jr., 'Knock Shrine: The Worst of Times – The 1940s' pp. 223-9
[147] Ibid p. 233

procession was interrupted by Loftus for some unidentified reason. As a result Liam Coyne penned an acid letter to the parish priest, Fr. Grealy.

Loftus, he wrote, had 'behaved in a demented fashion by violently breaking up the procession in honour of Our Lady…he was like one possessed' and did 'great harm to the cause of Knock'.[148] From here forth the KKS's tenuous relationship with the local clergy continued on a downward spiral. The local clergy stiffened in their opposition to pilgrimages, and they were not shy about showing it. In 1946, for example, one disturbed pilgrim wrote to the Archbishop of Tuam, Walsh, under the penname 'Horrified'. They wrote to criticise the violent remakes made by Fr. Loftus from the pulpit where he allegedly told the congregation that he would love nothing better than for God to prevent pilgrims coming to Knock. He went so far as to express a wish for God to 'strike them dead at the door' and threatened 'to call the curse of God on them'.[149] Loftus's explanation, has not survived but one must take into account the pressure he and the parish priest were under in trying to cope with numbers of pilgrims, who were beginning to return in larger numbers after the war. Just as it had been in the 1880s agency and clerical authority were the bone of contention between the laity and the ecclesiastical authorities regarding the apparition, veneration of Our Lady of Knock and the promotion of the pilgrimage shrine.

The problem was, as Liam Coyne saw it, that the KKS was alone in their desire to make Knock a national shrine because Grealy and Loftus wanted to keep it as a parish one. Coyne duly informed the priest that he, his wife or the KKS would not be intimidated nor would they suffer a repeat of Loftus's interruption again. He finished with the warning that 'if your thugs attempt any of their tactics, you and your curate can take the consequences'.[150] Donnelly comments that this letter 'demands contextualisation'; it reflects 'contested authority or contested views about authority'.[151] To put it simply, the Knock clergy felt seriously undermined by what they saw as the usurpation for their proper authority by the KKS and the Coynes. Conversely, the KKS were frustrated and bitterly disappointed by a lack of clerical support for the promotion of Knock as an important Marian shrine.[152]

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[148] L. Coyne to Canon John Grealy, 1 May 1946 (copy, JCP, Display Folder 10, Knock Museum)
[149] Letter – 'Horrified' to Walsh undated (postmarked 6 May 1946) (JWP, P. 40/7/1, Athlone Archives)
[150] L. Coyne to Canon John Grealy, 1 May 1946 (copy, JCP, Display Folder 10, Knock Museum)
[151] Donnelly Jr., 'Knock Shrine: The Worst of Times – The 1940s' pp. 235
[152] Ibid p. 238

Archbishop Walsh softened the crisis in the relationship between the KKS and the local clergy in the 1940s. In her memoirs Coyne described him as a 'firm supporter' who regularly came to Knock on pilgrimage and led the diocesan one each year.[153] Certainly the relationship between the KKS, the Coynes and the Knock clergy became less bitter than it had been in the course of the 1940s but nevertheless tensions remained and would periodically reassert themselves where the intentions of the KKS and the clergy differed. As the 1950s dawned the KKS regained the ground they had lost in the 1940s and Knock became Ireland's most important pilgrimage site. The year 1954, in particular, was to have noteworthy significance for both Knock and Catholic Ireland as a whole. In the decades following the Marian Year, significant socio-political changes in Ireland would witness the beginnings of the rise of secularisation in Ireland and weakening of the Catholic element of Irish identity.

The Marian Year

With the death of her husband, the year 1953 began badly for Judy Coyne and the KKS.[154] As a predominately Catholic nation, the Irish enthusiastically welcomed Pius XII's call to mark the holy year of 1954, to celebrate the centenary of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The faithful were called upon to express their devotion by visiting the sanctuaries and shrines of Mary that were present across the Catholic world. The Pope desired that the faithful should 'throng' to these places in 'great numbers'.[155] Judy Coyne spied an opportunity for the cause of Knock; 'Now I began to get the idea that we should arrange a special pilgrimage of handmaids and stewards to Rome…which would coincide with the end of the Marian Year'. She raised the subject with the leaders of the KKS and they agreed that 'as representatives of Ireland's Marian shrine, we should certainly be there'. The Archbishop of Tuam was not in favour, preferring to send a clerical representative, but given Judy's recent loss he eventually conceded. This was an opportunity for Vatican recognition that the KKS was not prepared to pass over. And so Coyne, with other KKS members, set out for Rome under the banner of Our Lady of Knock. [156]

[153] Coyne, *Providence my guide* p. 230
[154] Ibid pp. 45-6
[155] 'Our Lady's Year: Reviewed work(s)', *The Furrow*, vol. 4, no. 11 (Nov., 1953) (pp. 666-668) p. 666
[156] Coyne, *Providence my guide* pp. 146-7

In 1954 Knock was Ireland's only real candidate to honour the papal request. Anthropologist Edith Turner writes that the post 1929 revival of pilgrimage to and devotion to Knock was ramified by 'the independence of Ireland and an expression of its pride'. Our Lady of Knock became 'an all-Ireland figure'.[157] Pilgrimage to Knock soared in 1954 and it became Ireland's principal site of Marian devotional rituals to mark the year. On the 11 December 1953, for example, the Bishop of Killala, Dr O' Boyle, announced that during the Marian Year a special 'Rosary Crusade' would be organised by Rev. P. Peyton in both the diocese of Killala and the Archdiocese of Tuam.[158] On 8 December special ceremonies were held at Knock and presided over by the Archbishop of Tuam. They were broadcasted by Radio Éireann. Pilgrims from many parts of Ireland attended.[159] As the end of May neared a 'Monster Pilgrimage' to Knock was planned by the Franciscans of Limerick. It was believed to be 'the biggest of its kind ever to leave Limerick'. Five special trains would carry pilgrims to the shrine.[160] 25,000 pilgrims gathered to celebrate the Assumption at Knock.[161] Further large pilgrimages came in October. On 'Rosary Sunday' 2,000 members of the Irish Army made the pilgrimage. *The Irish Independent* reported that the village and area around the shrine was thronged with other pilgrims for the day.[162] A further 10, 000 visited Knock on 10 October to celebrate the Dominican Order's annual Rosary Confraternity Pilgrimage.[163] On the 24 October more than 500 members of the C.I.E. Sodality of Our Lady made their pilgrimage.[164] For the feast of the Immaculate Conception 1954 Knock once again took centre stage, with a ceremonial crowing of the statue of Our Lady of Knock. The crown was made from 'gold and precious stones'.[165] It was a year which greatly boosted the work of the KKS but their ultimate achievement was made at Rome at the formal closing of the Marian Year.

There they found the 'first meaningful recognition' for the 1879 apparition, when Coyne and the KKS members were invited to walk together with the banner of Knock shrine in a procession and to have it blessed by the Pope. As a great devotee of the Virgin Mary, the Knock pilgrims caught Pius XII's eye. The memoirs describe the members

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[157] Edith Turner, 'Legitimization or Suppression? The Effect of Mary's Appearances at Knock, Ireland', Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen & Catrien Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009) p. 207
[158] 'Rosary Crusade for Killala Diocese', *The Irish Independent* 11 December 1953 p.4
[159] 'Marian Year Ceremonies', *The Tuam Herald* 12 December 1953 p. 1
[160] 'Monster Pilgrimage from Limerick', *The Limerick Leader* 26 May 1954 p. 5
[161] '25,0000 pilgrims at Knock Shrine', *The Irish Independent* 16 August 1954 p. 8
[162] 'Army pilgrimage to Knock', *The Irish Independent* 4 October 1954 p. 2
[163] '10,000 Pay Homage at Knock Shrine', *The Irish Independent* 11 October 1954 p. 6
[164] 'C.I.E. pilgrimage to Knock', *The Irish Independent* 25 October 1954 p. 8
[165] 'Nation offers homage to Our Blessed Lady', *The Sunday Independent* 5 December 1954 p. 11

carrying the banner being greeted with cheers of 'Viva Irlanda' and the enthusiasm of the Romans for Knock:

> We were aware of the cheering on all sides of us and tried to realise that our own banner from Knock, poor Knock, a joke for so many, many, years, was now among the chosen few, there at the very heart of Christendom to be greeted and blessed by the Pope himself, a vindication, had we needed one, of all those troubled years.[166]

It was a personal triumphant for Coyne and the KKS, and in theory it was the Vatican blessing they had so long coveted. Coyne's statement; 'A vindication, had we needed one' is most illuminating because it captures the complex attitude of the devotee regarding the Church's right to pronounce the legitimacy of an apparition and by extension its devotional cult and pilgrimage to the apparition shrine. On the one hand, the devotee does not feel the need for the Church's approval to deem an apparition worthy of belief, but on the other they long to have that belief institutionally blessed and when the Church with-holds from doing so this often gives rise to the kind of bitter conflicts which dominated the KKS and the Knock clergy's relationship. Regardless of the Church's opinion, devotees of a particular apparition cult will continue to promote it, but since only the Church can officially legitimise the cult, the devotees, usually in the form a lay organisation, will continue to press the local ecclesiastical and Vatican authorities for a formal recognition of the apparition. Coyne's comments aptly reflect this complex attitude of the devotee; on the one hand a 'vindication' was felt to be unnecessary to prove the legitimacy of the apparition – for the believer that always speaks for itself via miracles and signs – and yet the pursuit of a vindication was what dispatched her to Rome in the first place.

The Papal nod, for that is what it was at best, was the first meaningful, as Coyne described it, pointer that Knock was on its way to becoming one of the major Marian apparition shrines of the world. But the full recognition of the Knock apparition and pilgrimage was some way off. I shall return to this below, for now I wish to discuss the wider implications of the Marian Year for Irish Catholicism. The contemporary press reports reflect the passion with which the holy year was celebrated; special masses and novenas, processions and pageants, mass rosary recitations, but the most lasting and tangible marker of the Marian Year was the widespread erection of Marian grottoes across the Irish nation. Most of them were replicas of the famous Lourdes apparition. There

[166] Coyne, *Providence my guide* pp. 154-5

seems to be two reasons for the choice of Lourdes. Firstly, the French apparition had been linked to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, since the famous declaration 'I am the Immaculate Conception'. Hynes offers the second; in the sexually repressive and patriarchal culture of 1930s-1960s Ireland, the pubescent little virgin of the Lourdes apparitions suited Ireland more than the regal and authoritative queen who appeared flanked by two bowing men at Knock.[167]

The new grottoes were erected on an unprecedented scale; nearly every Irish townland and village can boast their own. Since the latter half of the 19th century a new kind of mass produced Catholic devotional materiality flooded Catholic Europe, and especially Ireland. This new Catholic material culture was one of domestic and ecclesiastical lithography, statuary, and devotional artefacts such as the use of prayer books, medals, and scapulars. Imagery and statuary became a hallmark of Catholic churches and homes. Historian Lisa Godson details this in her article 'Catholicism and Material Culture in Ireland, 1840-1880'. [168] The importance of this materiality for lived religion was seen in the procession of Marian statues in the Marian Year and the erection of the grottoes themselves. Until 1954 the principle site of Irish pilgrimage and local devotions were saints' holy wells and mass rocks. In *Occasions of Faith*, Lawrence Taylor notes that because of devotions made at holy wells and mass rocks, the very landscape itself was sacralised in Irish Catholicism and that these acted as 'the only form of local shrines not inside churches'.[169] The mass erection of Marian grottoes dramatically changed this and moreover suited the devotional mood of the time, the period 1854-1954 was a time of unrivalled ascendancy for the cult of the Virgin Mary thanks in part to the popularity of her apparition cults. The Catholic material culture so cherished at the domestic level was now quite literally fused to the landscape itself; the Virgin Mary's image now tied to the landscape further sacralised it. They made Mary the Protectress of the community; an idea the clergy were instrumental in spreading.

At the blessing of Ballynaty Beg grotto, Co. Limerick, for example, the celebrant's, Monsignor Moloney, homily was detailed in *The Limerick Leader*. He told the congregation that with the erection of Ballynaty Beg's Marian Year shrine:

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[167] Hynes, *Knock: the Virgin's apparition in nineteenth century Ireland* p. 222
[168] Lisa Godson, 'Catholicism and Material Culture in Ireland 1840-1880', *Circa* no. 103(Spring, 2003) (pp. 38-45) pp. 38-42
[169] Lawrence J. Taylor, *Occasions of Faith: an anthropology of Irish Catholics* (Lilliput Press: Dublin, 1995) p. 70

> They had set up a lovely Lady to watch over them at the gates of their City as she watched over the gates of Heaven...on your way to and from work she will be watching over you and by praying to her as you pass she will help ease the burdens on your shoulders.[170]

It is ironic then, that the priests themselves set in motion the idea that shrines in the Virgin's honour were the medium for her intercessional agency and omnipresence. In just over thirty years, as shall be seen in the next chapter, the Irish bishops were trying to squash such beliefs at a time when thousands were flocking to roadside grottoes in the hopes of encountering an omnipotent Virgin Mary there.

The mass-scale erection of these Marian Year shrines resulted in what could be termed a colonisation of the Irish landscape by the figure of the Virgin Mary. The statues of Mary and St Bernadette were mass produced, many of which were made in the same workshops and cut from the same moulds. Maurice O'Donnell, for example, made the statues for Ballinspittle, Glanmire and Belgooley grottoes in Cork from the same moulds. The moulds used in Irish workshops were imported from Europe, predominately from France and Italy. Thus, the majority of Irish grottoes have little variation in their statues, which were moulded in local workshops from a relatively small selection of designs. These statues, mostly based on the Lourdes and the Rue du Bac apparitions, were standardised in style and pattern. The Lourdes Madonnas, for example, were painted white with a blue girdle and consequently, these standardised statues of Mary resulted in the colonisation of the landscape. Over the intervening decades, however, these mass produced Marys became locally customised. This usually involved repainting the statues, to give the grotto a more local or unique significance. In Belgooley grotto, for instance, the Lourdes Madonna was repainted to have a white outer cloak over a blue gown with a gold girdle, making the statue stand apart from those which follow the usual design of Lourdes Madonnas.

These mass produced statues of Mary were also used to narrate and mark the significance of local and indigenous events. At Inchigeela, for example, a Lourdes Madonna was used to mark the site of an apparition of local girl Mary McCarthy at Gortaneadin, which subsequently became the Gortaneadin grotto. The statue of the Lourdes Madonna at Rossmore grotto, Inchigeela, was repainted following the apparitions of Fiona Tierney (see pp.170-3) to accord with how Fiona described seeing the Virgin

[170] 'Unveiling for Marian Year shrine', *The Limerick Leader* 1 November 1954 p. 1

Mary, whom she described as dressed in brilliant gold and so the hands of the statue were repainted gold to mark the significance of Fiona's apparition. (see photograph on p.180). Many of the Marian Year grottoes were erected on sites which were already believed to have been 'holy' or 'sacred' in their own right and hence the statue of Mary was used to denote this. Hence the erection of a statue at Gortaneadin following an apparition at the site, or as in the case of Mt. Melleray grotto, the shrine was erected on the site of the first local abbey, known locally as 'little Bethlehem'. Here the use of material statues of the Virgin Mary is used to symbolise the sacralisation of the landscape. This narration or localisation of these mass produce statues of the Virgin Mary is a prime example of vernacular creativity and the localisation of globalised Marian devotion. The statues, originally replicas of the famous Lourdes shrine, became embedded into the existing local narrative and are customised to take on a new localised significance.

The second significant consequence of the Marian Year was the rise of the grotto committee. These are lay organisations charged with the responsibility of maintaining the local grotto's upkeep and as a place of prayer. Grotto committees resembled the KKS on a smaller, parochial scale. Donnelly makes a fundamentally important point regarding the KKS and what the founding of such an organisation meant for the Catholic Church. 'It is difficult', he writes, 'to think of another organisation of Catholic lay people on the diocesan level whose leaders were in a position to challenge clerical authority' as they did.[171] Even Coyne herself was willing to admit that the Catholic Church faced an unprecedented challenged with the founding of the KKS. In the mid-1930s and until Vatican II, the laity, Coyne wrote in her memoirs, had 'little or no voice, the business of the Church was the business of the bishops and the priests, they made the decisions and there the matter rested'. The founding of the KKS was by her own admission 'unique' and 'nothing comparable had ever come within the jurisdiction of the Irish Church'.[172] Once again the situation changed with the Marian Year and the establishment of the local grotto committees. As shall become apparent to the reader in the ensuing chapters, and especially in the case of Ballinspittle, a grotto committee can cause the same level of angst which the KKS presented the Catholic Church in the 1940s. The kind of tension which simmered between the KKS and the local clergy became a reality for many priests in 1985 – and in some cases to the present – when local grottoes were suddenly transformed into the site of pilgrimages to an apparition shrine.

[171] Donnelly Jr., 'Knock Shrine: The Worst of Times – The 1940s' pp. 264
[172] Coyne, *Providence my guide* pp. 228-9

Thus, the Marian Year was of paramount importance to Irish Catholicism and the erection of the Marian Year shrines had unforeseen consequences for the nature of clerical authority and agency. If so many grottoes had not been erected in 1954, the impact which the 1985 moving statue phenomenon made would have been of much more minor significance, because there would not have been so many shrines to claim a moving statue to begin with. There would not be a devotional cult attached to an apparition shrine nor a grotto committee to challenge the local clerical authority by promoting it. For Knock, the Marian Year represented the semi-formal recognition of the shrine as Ireland's national Marian pilgrimage shrine but the KKS still had much work to do to place Knock alongside Lourdes and Fatima, as one of the foremost Marian shrines of the universal Church. Between the Marian Year and the Papal Visit, Ireland would experience significant socio-political, economic, cultural and ecclesiastical transformations.

Vatican II and the secularisation of Ireland

The 1960s heralded an era of change in the economic, social and political policies of Ireland, which had a trickledown effect on both Irish culture and the construction of Irish identity. These changes, however, did not occur over night, but came somewhat intermittently, and it was the 1980s before the full impact was felt. By the 1960s, the notion of an insular, self-sufficient Ireland began to lose its lustre. The idea of a completely self-sufficient Ireland, independent of Britain and Europe, was championed by Eamon De Valera[173] and his Fianna Fail government from the 1930s, reaching its climax in the 1937 constitution. In a recent article for *History Ireland*, historian Dermot Keogh has described it as 'De Valera's Constitution' and has demonstrated the pains De Valera took to satisfy the hierarchy of the Irish Catholic Church in drafting it. In fact the Catholic primate of Ireland, John Charles McQuaid was involved in writing a draft of the Constitution.[174] While the Constitution stopped short of naming the Catholic Church as the official state religion, the Church was nevertheless identified as 'the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens'. As a result, as William Crotty argues,

[173] Having been a leading in figure in the 1916 Easter Rising, the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War, Eamon De Valera became the leader of the Fianna Fail party and Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland from 29 December 1937-18 February 1948 and again from 20 March 1957-23 June 1959, later becoming the 3rd President of the Republic of Ireland, holding the office from 25 June 1959-24 June 1973.
[174] Dermot Keogh, 'The Catholic Church and the writing of the 1937 constitution', *History Ireland* Issue 3 (May/June 2005) Vol. 13 (www.historyireland.com)

'conservative social doctrine was inserted into the 1937 Constitution, including the primacy of the family, and the crucial role of the woman as homemaker and mother, and prohibitions against divorce'. The values of the Irish state reflected the values and morality espoused by the Catholic Church in this period, making Ireland, as Crotty says, 'rural, socially conservative, overwhelmingly Catholic, parochial and deeply traditional in family matters and cultural norms of behaviour'. From the 1930s to the 1950s Ireland was an insular looking nation, determined, as De Valera was, to be self-sufficient economically, politically and socially.[175]

Slowly, however, it was realised that the Ireland which the De Valera regime had envisioned, and as enshrined in the 1937 Constitution, was unrealistic; Ireland could not exist on her own and successive governments began to look in the direction of Europe. As the 1960s progressed membership of the European Economic Community [EEC] (now the Europe Union) became the chief aim of Ireland's economic, and later political, agenda. Irish governments sought to demonstrate that Ireland was not on the periphery of Europe, but in fact constituted a European nation in her own right. This change in political policy resulted in a shift in the construction of Irish identity as discussed in the introduction (see pp. 33-4). Less emphasis was placed on the Catholic element of Irish identity and as Ireland sought membership of the EEC, the emphasis on the rural, self-sufficient Ireland of the 1930s-50s evaporated. In short the Irish nation was no longer insular looking but looked out to Europe and began to slowly incorporate the social, economic and political values of Western European Nations.[176] Irish identity was now extended to include European identity and the once insular looking Irish nation became European and more cosmopolitan in its thinking, affecting every aspect of Irish life from socio-economic and political life to religion.

Membership to EEC was finally granted in 1973 and it brought significant changes to the Irish nation as a whole. Slowly the Church's once extensive power over public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, began to recede, although the Church continues to maintain a foothold in Irish primary school education, and religious orders continue to run several of the country's hospitals. Nonetheless from the 1970s onwards the Church no longer had an undue ascendency over such social institutions, and by extension social

[175] William Crotty, 'The Catholic Church in Ireland and Northern Ireland: Nationalism, Identity and Opposition', Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon & Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007) p. 119
[176] Andy Bielenberg & Raymond Ryan, *An Economic History of Ireland since Independence* (Oxon; Routledge, 2013) p. 25

norms and policy. Ireland was undergoing the beginnings of secularisation and while the Church continued, and to a certain extent continues, to have a voice in the socio-political life of Ireland, a break between Church and State had arisen. The Church no longer had the special place as envisioned in the 1937 Constitution and thus could no longer dictate the construction of Irish identity as it had from the 1930s to the 1950s. The dawning of a break in Church-state relations was evident from the outset and the Fifth Amendment to the constitution removed the reference to the special position of the Catholic Church in the Irish Constitution by referendum in 1972, when membership to EEC was on the political horizon. The special reference to the Catholic Church in the Irish constitution was thought to be somewhat undemocratic.[177]

The arrival of television too was of paramount importance and had unforeseen consequences for social and religious practices once cherished in Irish society. It had been custom for families to gather and recite the rosary each evening and for neighbours to regularly visit one another. These practices now faced stiff competition from television, which became the focal of many living rooms and the family's principal source of entertainment. The threat to the recitation of the family rosary was almost immediately spied by the Church, who feared for the morals of good Irish Catholics exposed to the 'evils' of modern society via television. Strong censorship was enforced, but as the Church feared Irish Catholics became neglectful of their domestic religious devotions and the family rosary began to wane from the 1960s. A campaign was launched to have the rosary recited by the Irish broadcaster RTÉ, and thus encourage viewers to join in each evening, but it came to nothing and in the end only the Angelus was broadcasted.[178]

Running parallel to the changes in Irish socio-economic and political policies, were the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. These brought about a reappraisal of Marian devotion in the Catholic Church, which as noted in the introduction was central to Irish Catholicism from the 1930s-50s. In *Lumen gentium* the Catholic Church sought to curb what it deemed excessive Marian devotion, warning against over amplification. From 1854 to 1954 Mary had reached a pinnacle within Catholicism, rivalling that of the godhead and with the Dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption she was in danger of being worshipped more as demigoddess in her own right than venerated as a saint. Ronald D. Mactal raises the point in his discussion of Marian devotion post-Vatican

[177] Daphne Halikiopoulou, *Patterns of Secularization: Church, State and Nation in Greece and the Republic of Ireland* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011) p. 50
[178] James S. Donnelly Jr., 'Opposing the "Modern World": The Cult of The Virgin Mary in Ireland, 1965-85', *Éire – Ireland* vol. 39 no. 1&2 (Spring/Summer 2004) (pp. 183-245) pp. 196-8

II. The Pontificate of Pius XII has been seen by Mactal as 'an age of Mary' strongly supported by the Pope expressing himself on the 'theme of Mary'. As a result 'popular' devotion to Mary spread like wild fire, particularly in the years 1950 to 1958. Through the Marian devotional practices, meetings, confraternities, societies and institutes, and in the Irish context the Marian shrines and grottoes and family rosary, Mactal argues that 'Mary had been accorded a more prominent place in the minds and hearts of the faithful'.[179] The situation changed in the Pontificate of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, issuing the Council's statement on Mary in 1964.[180]

Lumen gentium argues that Mary's 'function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique meditation of Christ, but rather shows its power'. It goes on to explain that Mary is venerated under the titles of 'Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix', none of which 'takes away anything from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator'. The pronouncement of the Second Vatican Council envisions Mary as a 'type or figure of the Church'; a role model and faithful follower of Christ but in a 'subordinate role' and *Lumen gentium* makes it clear that Mary possess no power of her own being merely an instrument of God. As mother of Christ she is to be venerated and her maternal love allows Christians to approach 'Jesus through Mary'. *Lumen gentium* recognised the agency of Mary but generally sought to set limits to its exercise, ensuring that Christ and Mary were not seen as equals, with Mary being a passive instrument of the male godhead.[181] Mactal suggests that as a result of the Papacy's new 'sober mindedness' devotion to Mary 'became tame and without much exaggeration'. Mary had not disappeared in the institutional Catholic Church but her role was a subordinate one and the institutional devotion to Mary was somewhat diminished after it. Vatican II was a 'return to the sources – to Sacred Scriptures and Tradition' and the biblical references to Mary are sparse at best. With greater emphasis being placed on scripture, the devotions centred on images and statues and so the kind of devotion to Mary which strengthened in the Pontificate of Pius XII was severely marginalised by the institutional Church.[182] Less emphasis was henceforth placed on what could be termed the

[179] Ronald D. Mactal, OP, 'Mariological Development after the Second Vatican Council and the Impact of Marian Devotion in the Philippines', *Philippiniana Sacra* vol. 42 issue. 125 (May-September 2007) (pp.249-300) (http:// 0-web.ebscohost.com.library.ucc.ie/eshot/, 21 June 2013) pp. 249-50
[180] Ibid
[181] Lumen gentium, Excerpts from CHAPTER VIII: OUR LADY, from sections 60-65, Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 21 November 1964, 'Mary's role in the Church', (http://www.ewtn.com/faith/teachings/marye7.htm, 1 June 2013)
[182] Mactal, OP, 'Mariological Development after the Second Vatican Council and the Impact of Marian Devotion in the Philippines', pp. 249-50

more ornate rituals of the Catholic Church prior to Vatican II and especially the use of statuary and images. I have described the reaction of devout and conservative Catholics in the introduction and I shall revisit this in more detail in Chapters Three and Five.

Thus, by the 1980s Ireland had undergone a series of sweeping and far reaching changes. The country had experienced economic booms and busts and by the mid-1980s was once again in the throes of an economic recession. The strict, and extremely narrow, morality of the 1930s-50s Ireland had also undergone a dramatic alteration. By the 1980s issues such as sex outside of marriage, the availability of contraception and unwed mothers became less taboo and campaigns such as The Women's Movements and homosexuality groups were becoming more vociferous. It was at this time that a decline in the numbers attending mass and Church services were first noticed and in the weeks before the Ballinspittle phenomenon broke, *The Cork Examiner* ran an article describing the 'big rise' in the 'no religion numbers', which were becoming more common in census returns, especially between 1971 and 1981.

The 1971 figure was 7,616. In the space of ten years the number had considerably increased to 39, 572. The number of those who failed to fill in the section on religious beliefs rose from 45,548 to 70,976. A total of three per cent of the total population accounted for those with 'no religion' or those who did not complete the religious belief section[183] Catholicism was fast losing its place as a cornerstone of Irish cultural identity. Writing forty years after the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council, Jim Corkery could say 'The cultural and religious landscapes in Ireland are simply different…Even when it [Catholicism] is still practiced by some, it is not *embedded* in the culture as it once was'.[184] James S. Donnelly has demonstrated how horrified conservative Catholics were by the changes sweeping Ireland and by the mid-1980s they had mobilised to re-promote the Catholicism of the 1930s-50s Ireland, as discussed in the introduction (see p.7). The moving statues phenomenon, as I shall described in detail in the subsequent chapters, proved a source of inspiration and created a number of centres for the activities of Marian devotees who felt threatened by these changes in Irish society.

From 1954-79 the work of the KKS continued as it had from the 1930s; working to organise the diocesan and other pilgrimages and to promote the veneration of Our Lady of Knock. As the centenary of the original apparition dawned the KKS decided to make a

[183] 'Big rise in 'no religion' numbers', *The Cork Examiner* 30 August 1985 p. 1
[184] Jim Corkrey SJ., 'Whither Catholicism in Ireland?', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* Vol. 101 No. 404 (Winter 2012) (pp. 387-96) p. 404

bold step to once and for all establish Vatican recognition. This would culminate in the famous visit of John Paul II, but it would not come to pass without tension arising between the KKS and the local ecclesiastical authorities once again.

1979; the centenary and the Papal visit

The year 1979 is one of the best remembered in the history of Knock shrine because of the papal visit. It was the ultimate triumphant for the KKS, the Irish episcopacy and Catholic Ireland as a whole. Very few, however, are aware of the circumstances of how the papal visit came to pass and the tension it caused. As far back as 1964 the KKS began to plan for the upcoming centenary, with the goal of establishing Knock as a major international Marian sanctuary. Coyne's memoirs note their plans; '1. Invite the Holy Father for the centenary; 2. Invite foreign prelates; and 3. Make a request for the permission of the Golden Rose…I was determined to get every possible honour and recognition for Knock for the centenary'.[185] These were incredibly daring proposals, and the local clergy was once again not impressed. A new curate, Fr James Horan had arrived at Knock in 1963, becoming parish priest in 1967. Horan has gone done in history as the 'builder of Knock' and to pay him his dues this is a title he earned; partially at least. He is best remembered for building the basilica (1976) and Knock airport (1985). His other major achievement is billed as the papal visit.[186]

Coyne's memoirs record Horan's reaction, who she wrote 'had a knack of scanning an agenda and picking items which he was prepared to discuss, while he ignored all else. On that occasion he did just that'.[187] Horan had the full support of the Archbishop of Tuam, Joseph Cunnane, who penned a firm letter to the KKS criticising them for 'overstepping the mark'. What they proposed 'was the business of the bishops, and the bishops alone'. Once more clerical authority became a bone of contention between the KKS and the ecclesiastical powers that be. Coyne is careful to point out in her memoirs that the KKS's intention had only been to ask the necessary ecclesiastical authorities to make the suggestion to the Vatican. She was not put off by a clerical refusal and turned to prayer. The following day Horan sent her a message; 'just to leave things to him, and

[185] Coyne, *Providence my guide* p. 216
[186] 'Monsignor Horan (1911-86)' (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/monsignor-horan)
[187] Coyne, *Providence my guide* p. 216

everything we had asked for would be done'.[188] To Horan's credit, this is what happened but it is reflective of an important, and in the context of a Knock a recurring, point. The Church would not allow a lay body to arrange for the formal recognition of an apparition shrine. After decades of bickering and contestation regarding clerical authority the time had come to settle the question of Knock once and for all, making the Church the ultimate authority over the shrine. For this is exactly what the papal visit established.

Reporting for the visit, *The Irish Times* recorded how Pope John Paul II told 'a human tidal wave' that he achieved the goal of his pilgrimage to Ireland by visiting Knock Shrine, after which he anointed it 'as one of the great major Marian Shrines of the world' with the presentation of the coveted Golden Rose.[189] It had taken a hundred years but Knock had come full circle. The modest little shrine was quickly transformed into an international Marian sanctuary. In her articles, for the edited volume *Moved by Mary* and *New Hibernia Review*, Edith Turner charts this transformation. She made visits in 1971, 1972, 1995, 1996, 1999, and 2000. She aptly describes Our Lady of Knock as a 'Celtic Mary'. Certainly with her flowing hair, her authoritative regal bearing and her towering figure, the Knock Madonna cuts a remarkable contrast to the more submissive and docile ladies of Lourdes and Fatima. Since the Catholic Church assumed the full reins of power over the shrine in 1979, Turner writes, that the Irish bishops have attempted to 'displace the persistent pro-Mary tendency in the people's religion, replacing her statues with what was correct for the hierarchy, that is, Christ as the Lamb of God'.[190]

When one examines the ecclesiastical literature on Knock, one can see the accuracy of Turner's assertion. For example, *The Glory of Knock* by Msgr. Michael Walsh states:

> The Knock Shrine devotion is composed of both private and liturgical prayer. There is no undue emphasis on popular devotion at the expense of the sacred liturgy. Rather it is true that the Knock devotion culminates in going to Confession, assisting at Mass and receiving Holy Communion.[191]

Turner says that 'the shrine became an example of the absorption of a devotion at the level of a lived religion' into 'the hierarchical structure of the Church'. Knock, she comments, has been transformed under the supremacy of the Church from 'a holy place for Mary' into

[188] Ibid pp. 217-8
[189] John Healy, 'Pope describes Knock shrine as the goal of his pilgrimage', *The Irish Times* 1 October 1979 p. 19
[190] Turner, 'Legitimization or Suppression? The Effect of Mary's Appearances at Knock, Ireland' pp. 201-2
[191] Msgr. Michael Walsh, *The Glory of Knock 9th edition* (Custodians of Knock Shrine; Knock, 2009) p. 24

'a shrine of the Lamb of God'.[192] Since 1979, she concludes, the Church has diminished 'the healing and intercessory role of Mary' and has 'redirected' and in places 'falsified' the history and interpretation of the Knock apparition. Ultimately, Turner sees 'a profound division between the faith of ordinary folk and the Catholic hierarchy at Knock'.[193]

There are two examples which serve to illustrate the 'division' Turner identifies between the faith of the laity and the clergy at Knock. The first is the position of the statues representing the apparition in the apparition chapel. The second is a series of apparitions claimed at Knock by Ballyfermot visionary Joe Coleman in 2009. To begin with the apparition statues, these proved another contested area between the KKS and the local clergy. In the 1960s Judy Coyne travelled to Rome to have the renowned sculptor, Professor Lorenzo Ferri sculpt the necessary statues.[194] The statues arrived in Ireland in 1963 but remained in their shipping boxes until the centenary papal visit because of a disagreement between the KKS and the clergy; Horan favoured a 'bare gable' but quickly changed his mind when the papal visit was arranged. The statues were set in place to be blessed by the Pope.[195] Tuner writes that in accordance with Vatican II theology and reforms, the priests had placed the altar with the Lamb in the middle to the KKS's chagrin because they felt that it should be the Virgin and the saints in the middle; 'the Church authorities had literally shifted the positions of the statues and pictures of the visionary figures to comply with Vatican theology'. This Turner asserts reflects the changing nature of devotion at Knock from the veneration of Mary favoured by the ordinary laity to the Christo-centric theology of the Church.[196]

The testimony of the witnesses describes the altar to the left or east of the three figures. As noted, they described Mary as the largest figure and described how all three persons and the altar surmounted with the lamb faced them directly [197] as shown in the early lithograph of the apparition above. Figure 2.2 below shows the apparition gable and the position of the statues as seen today.

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[192] Turner, 'Legitimization or Suppression?' pp. 211-14
[193] Edith L. Turner, 'Our Lady of Knock: Reflections of a Believing Anthropologist', *New Hibernia Review* vol. 15 no. 2 (Summer 2011) (pp. 121-25) p. 124
[194] Coyne, *Providence my guide* p. 193
[195] Ibid pp. 206-7
[196] Turner, 'Legitimization or Suppression?' pp. 208-9
[197] 'Witnesses Accounts; 15 Witnesses', (http://www.knock-shrine.ie/witnesses-accounts)



Figure 2.2: Knock Shrine Apparition Chapel (Photo reproduced with photographer's permission, 2014)

Note how the statues of Mary and the saints do not directly face forward but are positioned inclining towards the lamb upon the altar. Thus, the Church has reemphasised the role of the lamb in the original apparition to better suit institutional theology and therefore downplays the more prominent role the Virgin played for the original witnesses and pilgrims alike. Yet despite the Church's best efforts, Turner found that Mary remains the main attraction for pilgrims at Knock. She cites the example of an elderly pilgrim she met there who told how Mary had appeared to 'the poor, not to the proud, not to the educated people…I had found this kind of consciousness to be prevalent at the level of lived religion'.[198] Linda Lehrhaupt takes this point further. She writes that by participating in the institutionally organised rituals the pilgrim's ties with the Church are strengthened but the attraction of Knock remains Mary's rather than the clergy's agency; 'they will enter into the presence of the Virgin Mary and other saints'. For pilgrims, Knock is a sacred place 'charged' with Mary's continuing 'presence'.[199] And it is this belief that once again led to clashes between the laity and the Church in 2009.

In October 2009, Michael O'Regan reported for *The Irish Times* that the Archbishop of Tuam, Dr Michael Neary, was strongly discouraging new 'apparition gatherings' at Knock. Earlier in the month more than 5,000 had gathered at Knock, on 11

[198] Turner, 'Legitimization or Suppression?' p. 209
[199] Linda Lehrhaupt, 'Processional Aspects of Irish Pilgrimage', *The Drama Review: TDR* vol. 29 no. 3 (Autumn 1985) (pp. 48-64) pp.54-7

October, 'in the hope of seeing an apparition of Our Lady', when 'clairvoyant' Joe Coleman predicted the Virgin Mary would appear. He later told the crowd that at 3 pm on 27 October Mary would appear again at 'the scene of the original apparition'.[200] For the next few months the shrine was the scene of a bitter contest of wills between Coleman, supported by his followers, and the Church.[201] After a few months Coleman's vigils attracted fewer and fewer pilgrims and he has since kept a lower profile. The problem that Coleman's apparition vigils presented to the Irish Catholic Church was the same as those present to by the KKS from the 1930s to the 1970s; a challenge to clerical authority and the promotion of devotions and beliefs which the Church seeks to downplay or marginalise. It is a reminder for the Church of the attraction that Mary has over the institutional Catholic Church at her shrines. As for the KKS, after the papal visit the society finally came under the direct control of the parish priest. Coyne notes the changes in her memoirs, where she describes the parish priest as 'the ultimate authority' over the shrine.[202] The KKS has become an organ of the Catholic Church, with everything regulated to the Church's requirements. The Coynes and the KKS had set out for full ecclesiastical recognition, it had taken the most of four decades to secure and with it the KKS was finally subordinated to the Church. With the securing of the formal recognition of the necessary Church authorities there followed an expansive building programme at Knock. A visit to the shrine's museum is a fascinating experience for the pilgrim and the scholar alike.

There one sees the only remnants of the Knock of the 1940s to the 1970s; the small statues originally used by the KKS to 'beautify' the gable, the photographs of the much smaller domain of the shrine and the oral accounts collected by the curators capture a Knock which is no longer visibly to be seen. It has since been buried in the glitz and glamour of overarching chapels, holy water taps and lines of shops selling mass produced religious artefacts. In the course of my own research the subject of Knock was regularly raised and many of my participants criticised the 'commercialisation' of the shrine. One lady in particular pined for the Knock she had visited in the company of her mother in the early 1970s:

[200] Michael O'Regan, 'Archbishop discourages Knock 'apparition' gathering', *The Irish Times* 27 October 2009 p. 1
[201] Turner, 'Our Lady of Knock: Reflections of a Believing Anthropologist' p. 125
[202] Coyne, *Providence my guide* p. 244

> The only ever time I really liked Knock was on my first visit. There was nothing there but a small shrine and just those three little holes in the wall[203] from people rubbing it. It was peaceful and all about prayer. I don't like it there now. The basilica is cold and it's all just too commercial. The only place I like is the original church and the museum, with the photos of the old Knock.

A touch of yesteryear remains, though, in the lines of pilgrims circling the apparition chapel while reciting the rosary to make the traditional 'rounds'. There, devotion to Mary resides at the grassroots level of piety; the desire to feel the Virgin's endearing presence at the site of the original 1879 apparition.

Conclusion

Sr. Mary Cusack's account of the Knock apparition, written in 1880 and held in the archives of Knock museum, republished a most interesting letter to the editor of *The Catholic Times*. Its author was certain that the Knock apparition could not have been the first on the Irish isle. While they had only found record of one public apparition in Dublin in 1580 and one private, they believed that records of previous Irish Marian apparitions 'if not destroyed' existed somewhere. All that remained was 'for some future historian to fill the gap and disentomb the hidden records of this phase of Celtic Marian History which, I feel confident lies buried somewhere'.[204] Alas for that poor individual no such records have ever come to light and Knock remains Ireland's first prominent apparition case. The next truly noteworthy apparition in the Irish context came in 1939 at Kerrytown, in county Donegal.[205] A small shrine was established there and has been attracting pilgrimage since, though nothing along the lines of Knock.

It was not until 1985, by which time the Irish nation had witnessed mass scale socio-political, economic, cultural and liturgical reforms that Knock was to face stiff competition from another Irish Marian shrine. Its story bears marked parallels with Knock's, for Ballinspittle, a sleepy little village few had heard of, too became famous for

[203] This was an original piece of stone from the gable before it was plastered over. Pilgrims would rub the stone, to the point that an impression of the hand was made. They would then rub their hands over their faces and place the crosses of their rosaries inside the holes.
[204] 'Previous Apparitions: letter to the editor of *The Catholic Times*', Sister Mary Frances Clare, *The apparition of The Blessed Virgin Mary at Knock, Co. Mayo: The Irish Lourdes* (New York: Lynch Core & Meehan, 1880) (Knock Museum) p. 126
[205] 'Eyewitness stories of apparition', *The Irish Press* 15 March 1939 p. 9

its attachment to the Virgin Mary. In *The Statues That Moved A Nation*, author John D. Vose notes that for a brief spell Knock was rivalled by Ballinspittle.[206] By 1985 an estimated 1.8 million visited Knock each year. Ballinspittle, it is estimated attracted 600,000 that year,[207] no mean feat for a shrine that was virtually unknown before July of 1985. *The Cork Examiner* dispatched a journalist to Knock to solicit the opinion of Monsignor Horan. He refused to be in drawn into the ongoing ecclesiastical debate regarding Ballinspittle and saw it as 'no threat' to Ireland's 'official' Marian shrine.[208] His private attitude, as I later learned at Ballinspittle from the grotto committee, was quite different. There, one member recalled meeting Horan (who died suddenly in 1986). He asked how Ballinspittle was faring after its mass pilgrimages and media hype some months before; 'ye missed your chance', he quipped.

As for Judy Coyne she received the title of Dame and remained at Knock until her very last. Her niece, Ethna Kennedy edited her memoirs. In her epilogue, Kennedy wrote that 'nobody outside a very small circle knew the extent of her (Judy) involvement' in making Knock 'what it is now: huge, important and respected'.[209] Indeed – for right or wrong – it is Horan who is more or less solely remembered as the man responsible for changing Knock from a modest little shrine into the Catholic sanctuary it is today. The history of Knock is both long and fascinating. In discussing it in detail I have a raised a number of important points which are a commonality in all Marian apparition claims. Here I will sum them up.

The Catholic Church, contrary to popular opinion, proceeds most cautiously wherever an apparition of the Virgin Mary is reported. Tensions arise where a body of lay devotees seeks to promote the apparition and a devotional cult around which a particular incarnation of Mary forms. They press the institutional Church for a formal investigation. Usually, although the process seems to take much longer in the Irish context, a significant period of time passes before the Church awards their approval for the apparition cult and pilgrimage shrine. In the interim serious clashes can arise between the lay organisation promoting the apparition and the institutional Church. More often than not clerical authority and agency, as well as contested meanings and symbolisation of Marian devotion, are at the root of these conflicts. When and if the Church sees fit to make a final

[206] John D. Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* (Cornwall: United Writers, 1986) (illustrations)
[207] Irish Times Reporter, 'Jobs scheme for 'moving' statue shrine', *The Irish Times* 8 October 1985 p. 6
[208] 'Grotto no threat, says Horan', *The Cork Examiner* 2 August 1985 p. 7
[209] Ethna Kennedy (ed.), 'Epilogue', Judy Coyne, *Providence my guide: The heroic force in the Knock Shrine story* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004) p. 15

positive pronouncement on the apparition and its devotional cult, the lay organisation usually becomes subsumed into the mechanics of the Catholic Church and the original apparition shrine is subject to a mass building programme of basilicas and chapels which reinforce the authority of the Church over the shrine. The apparition is then reinterpreted by the Church, and links are drawn between specific elements of it and institutional theology, such as the Lamb of God and the celebration of Mass in the case of Knock or papal infallibility and the promulgation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception at Lourdes.[210] Yet as Coleman's 2009 apparition vigils demonstrate, contestation between the belief of the laity and the clergy is never too far away from any Marian shrine, be it a vernacular or institutional one.

Each apparition produces its own particular incarnation of the Virgin Mary and each is unique to the time and place in which it manifests but parallels can be drawn in the basic pattern of events I have described here; the formation of the apparition cult, the response of the Church and the relationship between the lay promoters of the shrine and the local clerical authorities is a factor in each Marian apparition. In the next chapter I am going to discuss the case of Ballinspittle's moving statue, which has spawned its own Marian cult and has come under considerable criticism from the local ecclesiastical functionaries, much as Knock did from the founding of the KKS until 1979 and again more recently in 2009.

[210] Pius XII's Encyclical 'Warning against materialism on the centenary of the apparitions of Lourdes' (July 1957) set in motion the belief that Mary had appeared at Lourdes and declared 'I am the Immaculate Conception' to vouchsafe papal infallibility, since the dogma had only be formally promulgated in 1854, four years before the 1858 Lourdes apparitions.

CHAPTER THREE: Ballinspittle's Moving Statue

I began my research by making a number of visits to Ballinspittle grotto without drawing attention to whom I was and why I was there. I simply wanted to ascertain what an average day at the shrine might be like. For some months I visited and watched peoples' comings and goings. Some days I witnessed very little activity, particularly in the winter months. Public rosaries were recited on Sundays from the spring to autumn and many individuals came there to pray and reflect quietly. Several cars slowed to take a short glance and drove on. As the spring and summer progressed I noticed how the numbers coming to the shrine increased, especially when tourist season began. Throughout the summer (mainly June to September) busloads of visiting tourists, the majority from the US and the UK came to see the shrine. I watched as they delighted themselves in taking photographs at the grotto's railings and listened as they debated amongst themselves whether the statue could actually have moved or if it was an optical illusion, a hallucination or just hysteria. The grotto is a favoured spot on the local tourist route from the nearby fishing village of Kinsale. Tourists are certainly not a regular trait at the typical Irish grotto, but as *Irish Times* journalist Dick Hogan aptly put it in August 1985; 'Moving Statue puts Ballinspittle on the map'.[211]

Aside from its famous moving statue, there is nothing of note which would make Ballinspittle grotto stand out as anything more than the typical Irish roadside shrine. Its layout conforms to the standard pattern of Irish grottoes and the surrounding topography is scenic but nothing unique. The shrine was modelled on Glanmire grotto just outside Cork and there are many similar shrines around the county.[212] In the summer of 2012 I formally introduced myself to the grotto committee. Serendipity played its part and whilst researching pilgrimage in Lourdes I met a nun from Cork who kindly offered to break the ice with the committee on my behalf. She introduced me, via letter, to committee members Sean Murray and Patricia Bowen, former grotto committee chairman and secretary respectively. They in turn presented me to the other committee members. Beyond the committee, finding participants who had visited Ballinspittle was relatively effortless. Several family members, neighbours and colleagues eagerly offered to share their experiences, beliefs and opinions regarding Ballinspittle's moving statue. I also wrote to

[211] Dick Hogan, 'Moving statue puts Ballinspittle on the map', *The Irish Times* 6 August 1985 p. 5
[212] Tim Ryan and Jurek Kirakowski, *Ballinspittle: moving statues and faith* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1985) p. 10

the editors of the popular Irish magazines *Ireland's Own* and *Ireland's Eye*[213] inviting any interested parties to participate in my research. That is how I met Pat aged 75 from Dublin, Seamus also from Dublin and Annemarie originally from Cork but now living in England. Annemarie shared her experiences via email. I also received some anonymous letters sharing experiences and opinions regarding the Ballinspittle phenomenon.

I will not dwell too long on the year 1985, accounts of which can be read in Ryan and Kirakowski's *Ballinspittle; Moving Statues and Faith*, John D. Vose's *The Statues That Moved A Nation* and local historian Derry Donovan's *Ballinspittle and De Courcey Country: historical landscapes*. Rather I will focus on Ballinspittle as it is today and how people create and express their religiosity at the shrine in the here and now. For some it is as relevant at present as it was thirty odd years ago, and for locals it has been so since its erection in 1954. For others it is a part of their past but one which nevertheless made a lasting impact and influenced how they perceive the world around them, especially miracles and the supernatural. I shall begin then, by briefly summarising the events which brought this grotto to the attention of not only the entire Irish nation but also America, the UK and even as far away as Sri Lanka.[214] The Ballinspittle phenomenon sparked debates, often quite heated, about the nature of Catholicism, Irish identity and materiality and is still as keenly debated now as it was when it first made international headlines.

'A festival of faith'

Very few locals were surprised when the statue of Ballinspittle grotto began to move in 1985, for there had been 'rumours' over the years. Cathy O'Mahony, one of the first witnesses of 1985, later put it thusly in a 1988 RTÉ radio interview:

[213] *Ireland's Eye* monthly magazine regularly features reports on Irish visionary Christina Gallagher and her Achill House of Prayer, Co. Mayo. Her apparition messages are printed in the magazine. According to her website (http://www.christinagallagher.org/), Gallagher began receiving her apparitions at Cairns Shrine in Co. Sligo. A grotto was erected there after four local teenagers claimed an apparition there in the autumn months of 1985.

[214] I once met with a distinguished Professor of English who duly informed me of a colleague who remembered the Ballinspittle moving statue being widely discussed in Sri Lanka. Several contemporary media sources mention discussions of the moving statues phenomenon on American and British TV and radio shows. A contemporary BBC news report on Ballinspittle can be seen on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZjM83wZmWw)

> We had heard humours back along the years, how different people saw different things here and you know there was no one believed them…..we were just told not to…..not to go spreading it like.[215]

For her part O'Mahony remained puzzled as to why people willingly accepted that she, her teenaged daughters along with some other locals, saw the statue move on the night of 22 July 1985. They had been out for an evening walk, pausing at the shrine to recite a decade of the rosary when they noticed that the statue appeared to be alive; moving and breathing. Others joined them that night and stayed there until after midnight, praying and watching. In subsequent media interviews, she was at pains to stress that she did not 'go spreading' what happened to her and the others that night.[216] Nevertheless as she later told John Vose 'word got out'.[217] To begin the moving statue attracted first local and then wider regional attention in the Munster area before becoming a national household name and pilgrimage destination by the 15 August 1985. As word spread of what happened on 22 July, more and more curious locals came to the grotto. The committee stressed both in my own interviews with them and in many previous media examples, that not all who came there witnessed or experienced anything unusual but that a significant majority did. They estimate that 9 out of 10 visitors saw the 'to and fro' movement, the statue shake or shimmer or other visions such as the face of Christ and various other saints 'superimposed' over or on the statue. Yet initially the locals treated the claims with caution.

Retired Garda Sergeant, Sean Murray, was very reluctant to believe that anything supernatural was actually materialising at the grotto and told me that in the early days, circa 22-24 July, he shied away from visiting himself despite the many experiences he heard about from neighbours and friends. It was not until his own wife had seen something there that Sean felt compelled to go and see for himself. He recalls that he was working in one of the family's fields on his day off from duty in Cork city when his wife approached him. She had just returned from the grotto, awestruck by what she had seen and witnessed there. A nurse by profession, Sean placed great faith in his wife's testimony, describing her as a woman who would not accept claims of moving statues lightly and not a fantasy prone individual. He arrived at the shrine around mid-day, where over a short period of time he saw the statue leave its niche, float in mid-air and move forth from and around the grotto.

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[215] Peter Woods, 'The summer of the moving statues: an interview with people from Ballinspittle, Co. Cork and Carns, Co. Sligo', RTÉ Radio Documentary Spring 1988, complied by Sinead Mooney.
[216] Ibid
[217] John D. Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* (Cornwall: United Writers, 1986) p. 56

Those around him were also witnessing this bizarre phenomenon as Sean describes the crowds collectively gasping and making a backward movement as the statue appeared to fly out from the niche.

The following morning he went to investigate the shrine early on his way to work, at approximately 6am. Sean was certain that what he had witnessed the previous day was the work of a prankster or some 'manipulation of the statue'. Yet to his great surprise he found no trace of the statue having been 'interfered or tampered with'. His scepticism, naturally, diminished and he became one of the most committed and via his manifold media interviews since, one of the most publically attached witnesses of the Ballinspittle phenomenon. Many other members of the committee too shared similar accounts with me, almost all assuring me that they initially rejected the claims. It is not difficult to trace how the phenomenon then went from a purely local one, to a regional and then a national one. The contemporary media sources spell it out. According to an article which appeared in *The Cork Examiner* in late September 1985, the initial calls to the newspaper's editor regarding the Ballinspittle phenomenon were politely ignored until they became so persistent that a viable and interesting news story was spied. One of the newspaper's own, Pat Casey, was willing to admit that it was a 'God-send' to journalists in need of something to fill their columns.[218]

Locals remember well the arrivals of what in essence became a mass media frenzy, as journalists and camera crews became a constant presence in the village for the next few months. Cork based journalist Tim Ryan was among the very first to make capital out of the Ballinspittle news story and in the course of our interviews Sean described how Ryan contacted him for a statement at which he recommended Ryan visit the grotto himself. The national newspapers took up the lead from the regional ones and thus the national interest in the phenomenon was duly established. The newspapers played a significant role in making travel arrangements and the times for devotions available to those well beyond the pale of the village. Pat from Dublin confirmed this for me; 'news of the wonderful happenings at Ballinspittle came through, in the papers and on the telly', he responded when I inquired when and how the Ballinspittle phenomenon first came to his attention. Figure 3.1 below shows one such article from *The Evening Echo*[219] describing the special travel services offered to Ballinspittle by the national and local bus services.

[218] Pat Casey, 'A Godsend, or spiritual voyeurism at its worst?', *The Cork Examiner* 25 September 1985 p. 7
[219] Tim Ryan, 'Special Buses To Grotto', *The Evening Echo* 1 August 1985 p. 1



A yawn and straight faces from young scouts at the official opening of the Irish Scout Jamboree at Portumna yesterday. (Kieran Clancy).

Special Buses To Grotto

BY TIM RYAN

Starting this evening, C.I.E. are introducing a special bus service to Ballinspittle, the scene of the "moving statue" of Our Lady.

C.I.E.'s Traffic Engineer, Mr. Tim Hayes said the company was responding to numerous requests from the general public. The bus will leave Parnell Place at 8 p.m. and the departure time from Ballinspittle will be 11.30 p.m.

On returning to the city, the bus, or buses, according to the demand, will tour various areas to facilitate passengers getting home. The stop-off points will be in Ballyphehane, Glasheen, Wilton, Cathedral Road, Farranree, Blackpool, Dillons Cross, Blackrock Road, Skehard Road, and Douglas Road.

Said Mr. Hayes: "We will run the service for a week and see how it goes."

The local shrine committee in Ballinspittle worried about the growing numbers said they are encouraging pilgrims not to bring young children at night, and old people and invalided people should consider not coming late at night.

Pilgrims are advised to bring arm bands and torch lights as the approach roads are badly lit.

Meanwhile, reports are coming into the *Echo* office of another 'moving' statue in Courtmacsherry in West Cork. The movement was first sighted last night by passers-by and by some 200 people who had gathered to say the Rosary. Mr. Barry O'Farrell, a local newsagent this morning told the *Echo* that the statue is located in a Marian shrine about 100 yards from the village. "I just couldn't believe it," he said, "it moved to and fro from the shoulders up. I thought it was going to fall. I used a tree as a guide and the statue was definitely vibrating behind it."

Mr. Don Carey, a garage owner in Bandon said: "It was moving to and from just like the statue in Ballinspittle."

There are unconfirmed reports that a local priest went up and put his hands around the statue and felt it 'move'. However the parish priest Fr. O'Cleary said today that he had heard nothing of the occurrence.

Figure 3.1: Article from *The Evening Echo* 1 August 1985.

From August onwards a display of euphoric devotion mixed with sheer curiosity washed over the village as thousands made their way to the grotto. Each committee member in turn regaled me with their own tales, far too many to go into detail here. They all fondly remember the traffic jams, busload upon busload of pilgrims, and the all night vigils and prayer ceremonies at the grotto. Numbers peaked for the feast of the Assumption on 15 August when a reported 15,000 turned out. A great sense of expectation, they told me, hung over the feast day. In the course of our informal interviews Patricia Bowen aptly summed up the locals collective memories of the summer of 1985 when she described the events thusly;

> The grotto was the place to be every night for almost everyone in the parish and neighbouring parishes. People finished work early to be there, cars lined the road for miles and miles, rosaries were said until two and three o'clock in the morning and people walking back to their cars, which were miles away, sang hymns and were very happy after visiting the grotto.

What happened in 1985, she says, was akin to 'a festival of faith'. The numbers slowly receded thereafter and locals say that as the winter set in and the weather became colder the mass pilgrimages drew to a halt. The record numbers of pilgrims that year have to date never re-materialised. Ever since, however, there have been persistent claims that the statue is regularly seen to move by locals and other pilgrims. The feast of the Assumption annually sees the largest turn out, with crowds of over a 100 and some years more; locals still described the 15 August as 'a big day' in the village. More modest

crowds attend the rosaries on the 22 July each year and they vary considerably for the recitation of the rosary on Sundays from May to October. Sometimes the crowd can be as small as fewer than twenty persons and sometimes they can reach upwards of a hundred strong. Local GAA and other sports activities can be a deterrent to attendance of local men.

Many journalists were bemused by what the attraction of Ballinspittle grotto's moving statue was in 1985 but the answer to this is what it has always been; the excitement of something new and the idea that someone or something is directly and tangibly channelling a supernatural force. The moving statue of Ballinspittle, whatever caused it, provided a fascinating curiosity to the mundane aspects of ordinary life and Catholic devotion. The general consensus of the grotto committee and my participants as a whole is that it was sheer curiosity which principally drew the multitudes to Ballinspittle in 1985. The chance to see a moving statue was exciting and attractive in what would otherwise have passed as an extremely dull and wet summer. After a few months the moving statue became old news and while the curiosity surrounding Ballinspittle has never truly disappeared, it nevertheless simmered down and life, as the locals are fond of saying, had to return to as normal as it could thereafter. When the dust settled it was only those who were most convinced that a miracle had unfolded in Ballinspittle that were left to return to the grotto and preserve the memory of what happened there; the 'die-hards' as one nonchalant sceptic once described them to me.

The moving statue of Ballinspittle continues to attract modest but noticeable pilgrimage. People still make their way to the West Cork shrine in the hopes of directly encountering the divine there. Many pilgrims and visitors continue to witness movements in the statue, visions and other phenomena. Claims of miraculous healings and conversions are still made. For many then the phenomenon remains as fascinating and inspiring as ever. As such Ballinspittle grotto is a distinct centre of Marian devotion and vernacular religiosity. There are various elements to this vernacular religiosity which include a particular manifestation of Mary underpinned by a material based devotion. In this chapter I shall examine the character and attributes of Our Lady of Ballinspittle and I will then consider the question of materiality in the Ballinspittle phenomenon. Devotion to the Ballinspittle Madonna is intrinsically allied to a Catholic material based veneration of Mary through her image and the use of other religious objects and artefacts, namely the use of rosary beads. From there I shall consider the topophilia of the Ballinspittle shrine. Some of this is tied to the materiality of the shrine and some of it is tied to the landscape.

Thus, I will discuss the natural elements separately. I will then briefly discuss pilgrim's and adherents' creativity in the form of devotional poetry and prayer before I conclude by examining the ongoing tension between the devotees of the Ballinspittle Madonna and the local ecclesiastical authorities.

Our Lady of Ballinspittle; the Vernacular Virgin

Ballinspittle has ceased to be a mere imitation of a previous apparition and has become a place associated with the supernatural and Marian apparition in its own right. Thus, devotion to the Virgin Mary at Ballinspittle is not merely devotion to the Lourdes Madonna; it is the veneration of an incarnation of Mary which has in essence become 'Our Lady of Ballinspittle'. This emerged clearly in the context of my participant observation at the shrine, where committee members would end the rosary with the petition 'Our Lady of Ballinspittle pray for us'. To the Catholic faithful there is one over-arching Virgin Mary but she has manifested herself in various incarnations through repeated apparitions since the 19th century; hence there are Our Ladies of La Salette, Lourdes, Knock, Pontmain, Fatima, Medjugorje, Garabandal and Ballinspittle; the list goes on. Each is an individual personification of Mary and each has its own distinctive vernacular cult and characteristics which simultaneously sets each apart and yet the faithful devotees of the Virgin knit them together into the form of the single over-arching figure of the Mother of Christ.

Thus, at Ballinspittle one finds another unique incarnation of Mary which draws upon accepted Marian motifs in devotions, both institutional and vernacular. In 'National, transnational or cosmopolitan heroine?', Agnieszka Halemba poses the interesting question to what extent are the multiple incarnations of Mary evocative of the one figure who is venerated as the Mother of Christ. To illustrate her point she refers to a humorous exchange between Fatima visionary Sister Lucia and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican Secretary of State. The Cardinal confided in the visionary how whilst delivering a sermon at Lourdes, he referred to the Fatima apparitions and messages. To this the old woman wryly replied that the Cardinal should take care not to 'mix up the Virgin Marys, because the one of Lourdes might get upset if he mentioned the Fatima visions in her home town'.[220] Of course Sister Lucia was joking but this anecdote nevertheless raises an

[220] Agnieszka Halemba, 'National, transnational or cosmopolitan heroine? The Virgin Mary's apparitions in contemporary Europe', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* vol. 34 no. 3(March 2011) (pp. 454-70) pp. 454-5

important question; do all the various incarnations of Mary springing from her numerous apparitions represent the same woman in the mind of the believer or do they all represent a different sanctified person?

Institutionally, that is to say according to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, there is only one Mother of God who is thought worthy of veneration as a powerful mediator between humanity and Christ. But as Halemba argues, in praxis Mary has become gradually materialised and compartmentalised. By materialised she means that Mary is worshipped primarily 'through images that are accessible to direct sensual experience'. I shall explore this particular feature of Mary's cult, or in reality cults, in more depth below. Here I wish to focus on what Halemba means when she argues that Mary has been 'compartmentalised', and that is to say that the figure of Mary has become associated with 'particular identities or localities' through her various images and apparitions. Often particular incarnations of Mary are tied to particular localities and by extension, Halemba says, 'national identity and nation statehood'. The Virgin Mary has become a significant and important 'mobilising force behind national identities'. So Our Lady of Knock is hailed as Queen of Ireland, Our Lady of Częstochowa the Queen of Poland, Our Lady of Guadalupe the patroness of the Americas.[221]

Thus, 'Our Lady of Ballinspittle' has become tied to the Ballinspittle locality as another unique incarnation of Mary. Patricia Bowen, for instance, often follows the invocation of 'Our Lady of Ballinspittle pray for us' with 'Our Lady Queen of Ireland pray for us'. The Ballinspittle Madonna then is as much Queen of Ireland in the minds of locals as her Knock incarnation is. Each incarnation is a chance to encounter Mary, as Halemba concludes, in 'her multiple existences through particularistic, localised and materialised appearances' and these 'motivate people attached to a particular Virgin Mary to embark on a journey to meet her other incarnations'.[222] When pilgrims come to Ballinspittle they go to see that particular incarnation of Mary, who happens to be as much the Mother of God as Our Lady of Knock, Lourdes and the others are. The Ballinspittle Madonna takes precedence over other incarnations of Mary at her shrine and vice versa. It is not that my participants forget or ignore other incarnations of Mary; they often referred to the messages of other apparitions in our interviews and conversations, but that the Ballinspittle Madonna is at the forefront of their thoughts and actions at the grotto and the figure to which their devotions and petitions are directed. Accordingly, each incarnation of Mary is

[221] Ibid pp. 455-6
[222] Ibid p. 465

simultaneously the single Mother of God but a particular incarnation of that overarching figure in a particular locale with an attached devotional cult.

As with all incarnations of Mary, the Ballinspittle Madonna has particular characteristics and attributes, some which make her appear as powerful as the figure of Christ himself. One of the immediate characteristics which struck me is that she is imbued with the attributes reserved for the godhead alone, at least in theory, at the institutional level; omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence. Here is an all-powerful Virgin Mary, who possesses not only the ability to intercede with the figure of Christ but is believed capable of working miracles in her own right. A sign near the grotto, on the committee's billboard, attributes many cures to the Virgin there, including cures of cancer cases, those suffering from arthritis and various other illnesses. Many of my participants shared stories with me regarding cures they both experienced and witnessed as a result of the Ballinspittle Madonna's agency.

Sean Murray, for example, described how a lady he had worked with was suffering from cancer. He was left dumbstruck when he met the ill lady in Cork and advised her to the visit the grotto, believing that it would benefit her. Some months later he re-encountered her and she had by then made a complete recovery. The lady admitted that she found her visit to Ballinspittle had helped her. Sean posited that her body her begun to 'heal itself' after praying there. In her own cancer journey, Patricia Bowen found, to use her words, 'peace and consolation' at the grotto, where she prayed each evening while undergoing her chemotherapy treatments. Moreover, many novenas, she told me, are said there for 'people who are seriously ill, and together with masses and prayers many have been cured'. That is what she attributes her own recovery to. These kinds of miracle claims predate even the year 1985. Cathy O'Mahony in Derek Mooney's 1992 RTÉ radio special, 'If the statues stopped moving', described how a visiting American tourist believed her cancer had been cured after praying at the shrine in the early 1980s.[223]

The contemporary press reports show that there were widespread claims of miraculous cures at the shrine in 1985, the most publicised being of a deaf housewife from Cork city who believed that her hearing was partially restored while praying at the grotto.[224] For believers these act as tangible proof that a genuine manifestation of Mary is present at Ballinspittle. Tales of the Ballinspittle miracle cures have travelled across the country, with one woman at Inchigeela telling me that the Virgin Mary has referred to

[223] 'If the statues stopped moving', Derek Mooney RTÉ Radio Interview 1992
[224] Dick Hogan, 'Woman's deafness 'cured at statue', *The Irish Times* 18 September 1985 p. 7

Ballinspittle as her 'land of miracles' during her apparitions to the visionaries there. Reports of miraculous cures have been attached to Marian apparition and pilgrimage sites throughout history, increasingly so since the 19th century. The Ballinspittle Mary is a hailed as healer like the more famous Lourdes Madonna.

In the vast majority of apparitions Mary appears to one or more visionaries and imparts messages and warnings of global significance. These apparitions can be a single occurrence such as La Salette in 1846 or take the form of a series of repeated apparitions over the course of a short period of time, ranging from a few weeks, to months and increasingly throughout the later 20th century, years. This, however, was missing from the outset in the case of Ballinspittle. Firstly, messages of a global warning are not attached to the Ballinspittle phenomenon, although some of my participants described messages of a personal nature received there which I shall explore in more detail below. Secondly, unlike the majority of Marian apparition cases there were no central visionaries in the case of Ballinspittle such as Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes, the children of Fatima or the Medjugorje visionaries. Accordingly, the Ballinspittle phenomenon lacked this kind of star personalities usually attached to Marian apparitions. Bernadette Soubirous biographer, Thérèse Taylor, for instance makes it clear that pilgrims to the famous Massabielle grotto went there to see and meet with Bernadette as much as they did in the hopes of experiencing something supernatural. In the case of Lourdes the majority of pilgrims could see nothing and instead focused on Bernadette's actions once she had fallen into a state of ecstasy.[225]

In the absence of charismatic visionaries the statue of Mary in Ballinspittle became and has remained the key personality, if one can call it that, of the phenomenon and I shall explore this feature in more depth below where I consider the question of materiality in the moving statue phenomenon. The absence of standard apparition messages to a central visionary gave the Ballinspittle phenomenon less of the usual structure accompanying Marian apparition claims and since so many claimed to see the phenomenon, what happened in 1985 was quite chaotic when compared to the highly structured events of Lourdes and Fatima. This is not to suggest that a message has not been attributed to the phenomenon but like Knock before it, the Ballinspittle phenomenon has been described as

[225] Thérèse Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: her life, death and visions* (Continuim: London, 2008)

a ‘silent message’. That at least is how one local put it in *The Irish Independent* in August 1985; the Virgin’s silent message, they inferred, was that it was ‘time to pray’.[226]

The committee members and other devotees have held to this interpretation of the events of 1985; that it represented, as Pat from Dublin advised me, ‘a call to prayer’. Thus, they have situated the Ballinspittle phenomenon within the wider interpretation of Marian apparitions by faithful Catholics. The Ballinspittle Madonna shares the characteristic of special knowledge and omniscience with the more famous incarnations but rather than displaying this power by making global predictions, such as the prediction of a Second World War at Fatima in 1917, the Ballinspittle Madonna does so in more unusual ways showing something of a playful character in some examples. One lady, for example, told me how she had visited Ballinspittle at the suggestion of her sister shortly after giving birth to her daughter. She took her baby with her, wrapping the child in a warm woollen blue blanket as the day was quite wet and cold.

Whilst there a lady member of the grotto committee approached her and took the baby from her arms to be blessed by the Virgin Mary. The lady watched nervously as the woman climbed the steep slope to the statue with the child. After a few minutes, much to the lady’s relief, she returned the baby telling her that when she approached the statue, she said ‘look at this beautiful baby boy’. The Virgin Mary laughed, she said, promptly informing her ‘That’s a girl!’ Such humorous stories are not regularly found in the canon of devotional literature on Marian apparitions, but examples abound in the vernacular oral narratives which surround them. Thérèse Taylor offers many like examples, one being that a man who defamed the Lourdes grotto received a sharp blow from the Virgin Mary in the dead of the night whilst sleeping.[227] Other messages described to me portray the Ballinspittle Madonna in a more familiar prophetic light but again displayed in more unusual ways, which bear the hallmarks of vernacular narrative and belief.

Whereas at other apparition sites Mary is prone to displaying her omniscience by making prophetic declarations, the Ballinspittle Madonna made purely personal revelations. Here I shall discuss two examples proffered to me in Dublin. The first comes from Pat. He organised two visits to Ballinspittle, one in the autumn of 1985 and a second some years after whilst on a cycling tour of Ireland. On the second he was approached by members of the tour whilst camping outside Cork city to take them to Ballinspittle, which he happily agreed to doing on the strict condition that they treated both the shrine and the

[226] Dick Cross, ‘Thousands pray at the ‘moving statue’, *Irish Independent* 16 August 1985 p. 3
[227] Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes*

phenomenon with respect. In the course of our interview Pat was very critical of the media's handling of the phenomenon, which he believed journalists snidely reduced to a joke. Accompanied by his wife, family and friends and their children Pat set off to the village, his Volkswagen van packed to capacity. When they arrived in Ballinspittle the group spread out around the domain of the grotto to recite what Pat called 'the usual prayers'.

Many of his group, and Pat himself, had multiple experiences that night. Some saw the statue move, others saw visions of saints and some saw nothing but felt a great sense of peace whilst praying there. Over the course of the night Pat described an experience akin to an inner or interior locution; that is to say he heard the Virgin Mary speaking to him in his mind. The message he received was simply 'I have acknowledged you', which he heard repeatedly over the visit. After a few hours the group returned to Cork but Pat's experience was not over yet for the following morning he was approached by a teenager in the group to help him repair his damaged bicycle. This boy was particularly fond of teasing Pat for his religious beliefs but on this occasion Pat sensed that something had changed him. As they worked on the bicycle he confided in Pat that he had heard a voice speak to him at the shrine, telling him 'I have acknowledged you'. This incident confirmed for Pat the Virgin's omniscience and he concluded that Mary makes herself known at Ballinspittle to reveal the will of the divine to the believer.

The second example is quite different in tone, though it too casts the Virgin as an all-knowing figure. Like Pat, Seamus from Dublin visited Ballinspittle in 1985 but he did not have the inner locution Pat described. Instead he saw a series of unusual visions at the grotto, ones which did not have an explicitly religious character for he did not witness apparitions of saints or popes. Instead he saw visions of people he did not then know but later in hindsight recognised. The first two were women who later became his daughter in law and sister in law. The significance for Seamus being that both these marriages ended in divorce. Secondly, he saw a vision of a man in a black suit with a red tie and kerchief. Again he did not then recognise the figure and did not in fact realise who this was until quite recently. While attending the funeral of his former boss, with whom he had a contentious relationship; Seamus finally understood his prophetic vision as the man had been waked in a black suit with a red tie and kerchief. He immediately telephoned me to share this, which he attributed to providence. These examples, and the many others I was told about, give the Ballinspittle Madonna a character which sets her apart from that displayed by the more famous Lourdes, Fatima and Medjugorje Marys. The Ballinspittle

Madonna has a marked light-hearted touch missing in other incarnations of Mary. A final example will serve to illustrate this point.

On the night of Pat from Dublin's second visit to Ballinspittle he described how on the return journey he missed the sign for Cork city and so the group found themselves off route in Kinsale. Pat recalled witnessing a lunar phenomenon that night, he had never seen the moon shine so brightly nor appear so 'attractive', which another member of the group too witnessed. The lady believed it was 'a lovely thank you from Our Lady for calling up'. Likewise Pat believes that the group was taken on a 'journey' and also considers it as 'a gift if you like' from the Virgin Mary. Both interpreted this as a powerful sign from Mary, attributing a powerful sense of omnipotence to the Virgin. Thus, for them the power of the Ballinspittle Madonna extended well beyond the confines of her shrine. In an article regarding 'pilgrim work' at a Marian apparition site in Georgia, USA, Philip W. Davies and Jacqueline Boles found that pilgrims visiting apparition sites will seek out signs as tangible proof that Mary is actually manifesting her presence there. Such signs can range significantly and they state that pilgrims often view 'coincidences, surprises, and difficulties as signs, blessings and confirmations'. More often than not pilgrims take what Davies and Boles call a 'Marian sense' of their entire journey to and fro the apparition site.[228] Consequently the entire journey to the apparition site or shrine is a time when pilgrims watch for signs as proof of Mary's apparition and blessings.

Mary then is a powerful figure and the moving statue and the other miracles attributed to the Ballinspittle Madonna are proof positive of this in the minds of believers. Scholars have long debated why the Virgin Mary is so important in the lives of Catholics. Andrew Greeley took the stance that in 'worshipping Mary' they are essentially worshiping the female aspect of God.[229] In the same vein of thought, Lawrence Cunningham argued that Catholics turned to Mary's maternal protection to find aspects missing in the cold, patriarchal male God.[230] But there is more to it than this. Certainly Mary fills the niche for a feminine presence that would be otherwise missing in Christianity, most notably in Catholicism and Orthodoxy. She, however, has another important function. Mariana Warner correctly posits that the figure of Mary is the only one to bridge the gap between the veneration of the saints and the adoration of God. Mary, she

[228] Philip W. Davies & Jacqueline Boles, 'Pilgrim Apparition Work: Symbolisation and Crowd Interaction when the Virgin Mary appeared in Georgia', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* vol. 32 (2003) (pp. 371-402) pp. 385-6
[229] Andrew Greeley, *The Mary Myth: on the femininity of God* (New York; Seabury Press, 1977)
[230] Lawrence Cunningham, *Mother of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982)

writes in *Alone of all her sex*, 'occupies the principal mediating position, as a creature belonging both to earth and heaven'.[231]

In a recent article assessing the links between the Medjugorje apparitions and Croatian national identity, Zlatko Skrbiš made an interesting assessment of the role Mary plays in the lives of ordinary believers. Whereas Christ acts as 'the first mover' being the human incarnation of God, Mary 'assumes the role of a nurturer and the overseer of the divine plan'. As a maternal 'nurturer' she is more than a 'passive tool of God' and gives strength as 'an active intercessor', being a 'deity with a human face'.[232] This description of Mary's function is an interesting and I believe an accurate one, echoing Warner's statement that Mary is both of this world and the supernatural. The point here is that Mary retains enough of her human identity to be approachable and yet she is perceived as being powerful enough to help humanity. In her unique position as Mother of God, with her Immaculate Conception and Assumption, Mary is more powerful than all the other saints of Catholicism but like them with her earthly beginnings she retains what Skrbiš so aptly calls her 'human face'.

That is to say Mary is believed to have been a normal human woman in human history, as Warner writes 'the Virgin Mary, an ordinary woman, who gave birth to Christ, in whom all found new life, becomes the symbolic mother of the Church, gives each of its members a part in God's plan, and also stands as a model of perfect humanity'.[233] Mary then is essentially the figure of Christ in reverse. Christianity, in all its forms, teaches that Christ was God made flesh, that is to say he became human. By bearing God within her, Mary an ordinary human being, then becomes a sort of demi-goddess in the minds of her Catholic adherents. She became touched by the divine enough to gain divine attributes but retains enough of her human self to feel compassionate and maternal empathy for humanity in the eyes of her devoted followers and as such directly intervenes in their lives. Christ began life as a god and then is believed to have become human. Mary on the other hand began life as human, becoming superhuman later. This is why Skrbiš can identify her as a 'deity with a human face'. Over and over again my Ballinspittle participants addressed Mary as 'Our Blessed Mother'. Her position as Mother of Jesus combined with her apparition of sorts through the moving statue makes the Virgin to them a powerful but

[231] Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary* (London; Pan Books, 1990) p xxii
[232] Zlatko Skrbiš, 'The apparitions of the Virgin Mary of Medjugorje: the convergence of Croatian nationalism and her apparitions', *Nations and Nationalism* vol. 11 no. 3 (2005) (pp. 443-61) (Http://academicsearchcomplete.org, 18 December 2013) pp. 443-5
[233] Warner, *Alone of all her sex* p. xxiii

sympathetic figure that comes to their aid and assistance as nurturer and friend. Mary is thought as capable of assisting them in their daily plight as the figure of Christ. In Mooney's 1992 interview, for example, the treasurer of the grotto committee told the journalist that prayer to Mary was as important and as effective as prayer to Christ because he said 'she'll answer the prayers' in time.[234]

It was a telling statement which accurately reflects the central role Mary occupies at the heart of devotions in Ballinspittle. This kind of belief has often brought the censure of the institutional Church upon the Ballinspittle phenomenon which as I shall describe below, and has prompted the Church's fear that devotion to Mary at the grotto is giving her a marked precedence over Christ. But this is not the only element of Ballinspittle vernacular religiosity which has met with ecclesiastical disdain and the materiality of the phenomenon is too contested, for the Ballinspittle phenomenon of a moving statue is in its essence a material based one. The moving statue of Ballinspittle was and remains at the heart of the shrine's charisma and its ability to attract pilgrims.

Performing Statue; materiality and the Ballinspittle phenomenon

It would not be an overstatement to suggest that Ireland's moving statues phenomenon has pushed the boundaries of material based Catholic devotion to its very limits. The Ballinspittle moving statue, and its sister moving statues, sparked a nationwide debate as to the appropriateness of the use of statuary in Irish Catholic devotions. Sceptics criticised pilgrims for their 'pagan' behaviour at the grotto, which they believed was nothing short of idolatry. [235] The phenomenon, though, merely acted as an opportunity for an ongoing and universal debate about the place and use of religious imagery and artefacts within Catholicism and especially with Marian devotion. As noted above, many scholars have demonstrated how Mary is primarily venerated through her multiple images, the majority of which since 15th century Michael P. Carroll states are based on Marian apparitions. In fact much of the most popular Catholic material based devotion, he argues, stems from Marian apparitions. Examples abound but the most popular are the use of rosary beads which vernacular Catholic legend says Mary presented to St Dominic, the Miraculous Medal from the apparitions of Catherine Labouré in 1830 and the brown scapular revealed

[234] 'If the statues stopped moving', Derek Mooney RTÉ Radio Interview 1992
[235] M. Kennedy, 'Disturbed at pagan overtones', *The Cork Examiner* 3 August 1985 p. 6

to St Simon Stock. Thus, it is his assertion that apparitions of Mary are the backbone of Marian devotion because of the shrines and material artefacts and objects they create.[236]

The statue of Mary in Ballinspittle brings the presence of the Virgin more readily into the mind of the pilgrim, as indeed all images of Mary, Jesus and the saints do. Scholars such as Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw and Micrea Eliade trace the importance and need for materiality in religious expression and devotion to what Philip P. Arnold classifies as 'contact with the sacred other'. In this sense the 'other' being a breath-taking 'engagement with absolute power, or manifestation of the sacred'.[237] This phenomenon is known as hierophany. Human life is a continuous engagement with the supernatural 'other' or the forces believed to directly control life beyond this world. In *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Arnold writes that 'a meaningful orientation to the material world is only understood with reference to this wholly significant other'. That is humanity needs and wants to capture the supernatural 'other' in material and thus understandable, relatable and approachable form.[238] The use of statuary, images and religious artefacts within Catholicism is therefore a means to both encapsulate and communicate with the divine other; God, Christ, Mary and the saints. This is one reason why grottoes were erected in the Marian Year, as means to inspire devotion to Mary and to make Catholics aware of her presence in their daily lives.

Material religion can tell scholars much about how people live their daily lives and express their faith. John E. Cort has commented that when studying 'a living tradition' one should use 'material culture as a starting point'. In his article 'Art, Religion and Material Culture', Cort poses an interesting challenge to scholars of religion when he asks if scholars would come up with 'a different view of the tradition' were they to begin by first examining the use of religious objects and artefacts to base their attempts at understanding religion. This would be a departure from the traditional text-based starting point scholars take when studying religion. The problem, he says, is that scholars can be 'blinded to the physical presence of the object' before them if it does not conform to their text-based 'pre-understanding' of a religion.[239] This I believe is why so many journalists and sceptics were puzzled, even somewhat disgusted by the scenes of devotion witnessed before

[236] Michael P. Carroll, *The cult of the Virgin Mary: psychological origins* (Princeton & Surrey; Princeton University Press, 1986) p. 115
[237] Philip P. Arnold, 'Materiality', Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion* 2nd ed. vol. 15 (Detroit; Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) (pp. 10047-50) p. 10047
[238] Ibid
[239] John E. Cort, 'Art, Religion and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* issue. 14 vol. 3 (September 1996) (pp. 613-32) pp. 615-6

Ballinspittle's moving statue; because it did not conform to what theologians and scholars wrote about the use of images to merely inspire and instruct devotion. They were seeing and experiencing things which they did not expect. As Cort comments, often devotions around material religious objects or elements in their depiction are not always 'evidenced in textual sources'.[240] In other words often what one sees at places like Ballinspittle can seem strange and bizarre because it is not perceived as canonical devotion by institutional religious functionaries.

Secondly, often mass-produced Catholic art such as the Ballinspittle statue is seen as 'kitsch' or 'banal' and as Betty Spackman argues academics, theologians and ecclesiastics are dismissive and judgemental towards them, seeing them as 'garish visual representations of Christianity'. They are weighed against the great masterpieces of Christian art, namely from the 14th-18th centuries and are rejected as being of lesser artistic value, usually with the stigma of 'popular' attached to them.[241]

Yet it is these objects, Catholic statuary and images, rosaries, medals and scapulars, candles and all the other mass produced religious artefacts, which play an important role in the daily devotions of thousands. They are used to make domestic and public shrines and to both contemplate and experience the divine. This has been relatively neglected by scholars. In her superb analysis of Catholic materiality in the Irish context, E. Frances King has commented that 'religious images can be considered banal, vulgar, and trivial but rarely is thought given to why they actually move people, inspire them, or motivate them to fury and destruction'.[242] The Ballinspittle phenomenon, I contend, is an excellent case study to do just this because it has moved and inspired people, while driving others to the heights of fury and destruction. King argues that shrines possess a material and natural charisma which draws pilgrims to them.[243] I shall assess the natural charisma below where I discuss Ballinspittle's topophilia; here I wish to examine the material charisma of the shrine by discussing Jon P. Mitchell's most illuminating theory of 'performing statues'.

Statues 'in popular Catholicism', Mitchell writes in his contribution to *Religion and Material Culture*, link the material world to the immaterial, the natural world to the supernatural. In so doing, he contends, the use of statuary in lay devotion resolves

[240] Ibid p. 620
[241] Betty Spackman, 'Reconsidering "kitsch" '; 'Talk on the Street', *Material Religion* vol. 1 issue. 3 (pp. 404-16) p. 404
[242] E. Frances King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* (London; Routledge, 2010) p.1
[243] Ibid p. 81

'inherent tensions within Catholic theology, between immanence and transcendence'.[244] To put it another way, statues shorten the distance between the devotee and the saint, God, Jesus or Mary and bring the sanctified closer in the mind of the believer. Theology makes the divine seem distant but imagery brings it closer and often makes complex theological ideas more understandable and relatable to the ordinary believer. Robert Wuthnow writes that Catholic religious artefacts are in fact retained in memory more powerfully than creeds or theological doctrines and dogmas.[245] Mitchell argues that the saints and Mary are perceived as close in Catholicism because they can intervene to assist the devotee but distant because their intervention is unpredictable. Saints then have a duality and are hybrids, being historical and mythological, every-day and transcendent, natural and supernatural all at the same time. Statues 'both communicate and resolve this duality'. The statue and devotional objects incorporate both the charisma and power of the saint and their presence.[246] King concludes that statues have 'ritualistic, devotional and theological functions; what the image depicts becomes embedded in the memory of the believer as do the theological beliefs applied to it.[247] Statues help to lessen the distance between theology and everyday religious practice by performing a range of functions.

As one of the foremost scholars on the subject of material culture and religion, David Morgan has neatly expressed the function of Catholic statues and images, which he writes in *The Sacred Gaze,* are used both to engage and communicate with the supernatural forces believed to control and govern human life. They make the saint or deity 'available for petition, praise, offering, and negotiation'. In short statues have a presence and moreover they are imbued with agency, giving them a talismanic quality for the believer.[248] As Andrew Greeley puts it, Catholics live in 'an enchanted world' full of devotional objects from images to rosaries and votive candles, all of which he says can act as a 'revelation of the presence of God'.[249] Gordon Lynch describes a sort of spiritual exchange going on between people and saints/deities with religious objects and artefacts acting as the medium for this exchange. The relationship between the individual and the sacred object is not a one sided but a dual one. The believer makes a request or demand of

[244] Jon P. Mitchell, 'Performing statues', David Morgan (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon; Routledge, 2010) pp. 264-5
[245] Robert Wuthnow, 'Spirituality and Spiritual Practice', R. Fenn (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford; Blackwell, 2003) p. 318
[246] Mitchell, 'Performing statues', pp. 264-5
[247] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* p. 10
[248] David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (London; University of California Press, 2005) pp. 59-68
[249] Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkley; University of California Press, 2000) p. 1

the saint/deity, communicated via their image or devotional object and the saint/deity in return makes a demand of the petitioner.[250]

Lynch goes on to say that saints, divine figures and sacred objects have agency because people are thought to 'relate to them in certain ways – as a source of healing, moral challenge, forgiveness, power, hope, blessing, and so on'. And this expresses very well what Ballinspittle's moving statue does for pilgrims and local devotees alike. Pilgrims go to the grotto to seek out the Virgin's agency, her assistance. One woman, for example, told me how she went to pray there for a 'special favour' and when it was granted she returned to recite the rosary and 'to thank Our Lady for helping me'. Thus, as Gordon Lynch argues agency 'emerges through the interactions between adherents and the sacred subject'.[251] To return to Mitchell's 'performing statues' theory, he identifies two kinds; 'invisible' based on the feelings and emotions they inspire and the 'visible' that is bleeding, weeping and moving statues which perform a visible and thus tangible miracle for the believer.[252] It is the latter which is relevant here and which the Ballinspittle statue is perhaps one of the best known examples thanks to enormous media attention it received in 1985.

If the ordinary Catholic image, ordinary in the sense that it does not produce a visible miracle, can create a profound sense of presence for the believer then this is greatly magnified where a statue is seen to move. On two occasions I witnessed the effect of the moving statue on pilgrims. The first was a visiting American tourist. He remained mesmerised as he sat staring at the statue from the opposite hillside while the other tourists posed for photographs and debated the phenomenon. The gentleman became rather pale and had to be helped back to the bus, describing the to and fro movement he had witnessed as he descended the hill. While somewhat shocked by it, he believed he had witnessed a miracle because he had seen the movement in broad daylight. For locals the movement in the statue is taken as proof that Ballinspittle grotto is a sacred or holy place. The statue is believed to have agency that is to say that the committee members and pilgrims speak of the Virgin's agency as channelled through the statue. This was evident from the very beginning. Cathy O'Mahony, for example, described a feeling of 'peace and protection.

[250] Gordon Lynch, 'Object theory: Toward an intersubjective, mediated, and dynamic theory of religion', David Morgan (ed.), *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon; Routledge, 2010) p. 50
[251] Ibid p. 51
[252] Mitchell, 'Performing statues', p. 275

That we were being protected' that first night she, her daughters and neighbours saw the statue move.[253]

The majority of the contemporary press reports suggested that most who came there in 1985 saw the to and fro movement or the head statue move or the hands open and close. Witnessing the phenomenon can take an emotional toll on people. An early press report by Jim Cluskey in *The Cork Examiner* described how on 24 July 1985 a woman 'overcome by the tangible emotion' at the grotto fainted and was carried away 'moaning and crying'.[254] A week later the newspaper reported that one gentleman with a heart condition had been so overcome with shock at what he saw at Ballinspittle that he collapsed and died at the grotto.[255] Others saw visions appear in front of the statue, as if superimposed over it like a projection. Mary from Kilworth shared her experience of such visions with me. She was very sceptical of the phenomenon and remains so despite what she has seen and experienced at Ballinspittle. When she visited in 1985 Mary saw three images or visions appear before the statue; the image of the Sacred Heart, a Crucifix and the mysteries of the rosary surrounding the statue. Mary, who fears the Virgin Mary, remains puzzled by this but is certain that she did not imagine it. Others I spoke to such as Pat from Dublin and Annemarie originally from Cork described seeing the face of the statue change to that of Padre Pio. They, however, are certain what they witnessed was a tangible miracle.

An interesting and rather unique account appears in Vose's *The Statues That Moved A Nation*. Mrs Sheila Casey from Doneraile in Co. Cork wrote to Vose describing her visit to Ballinspittle where she did not see the statue move or any visions superimposed over it but instead saw the statue change to a statue of Christ; 'I looked up towards the statue and saw not a statue of Our Lady as I expected, but a statue of Our Lord with the Crown of Thorns on His head'. She was left disgusted by those who claimed that 'a lump of clay can't move', writing to Vose that 'with God all things are possible'.[256] Mitchell states that statues have agency because people believe they have miraculous properties. The Ballinspittle statue is believed to be imbued with agency because it has visibly demonstrated it by moving and changing as described here. Moreover, Mitchell writes that the statues of saints, Christ and Mary act as 'social persons'; people pray and speak to

[253] Peter Woods, 'The summer of the moving statues: an interview with people from Ballinspittle, Co. Cork and Carns, Co. Sligo', RTÉ Radio Documentary Spring 1988, complied by Sinead Mooney.
[254] Jim Cluskey, 'Hundreds pray before 'moving' statue', *The Cork Examiner* 25 July 1985 p. 1
[255] 'Man dies at grotto', *The Cork Examiner* 31 July 1985 p. 1
[256] Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* pp. 71-3

them, touch them and in the case of a performing statue like that of Ballinspittle watch them for a visible sign.[257] Certainly some of my participants addressed the statue as if it was alive. The first thing Pat, for example, did when he arrived in 1985 was to speak to it, telling Mary he had come not to see her 'dance like they're talking about…just to thank you for all the blessings I've received'. Thus, pilgrimage to Ballinspittle involves social interaction with the statue.

Anthropologist Chris Eipper comments that 'rosaries, statues and the like are enabling devices' because they formulate what would otherwise be inchoate. In short they provide a 'focus' for an expression of faith, which is what he believes draws pilgrims to Ballinspittle grotto. Statues of Mary, he writes, are purposely designed to make the Virgin appear youthful, innocent, benign and graceful to attract people to them. When a statue begins to weep, bleed or move, it then has the power to become a new and separate incarnation of Mary. Hence when the Ballinspittle statue started to perform visible miracles for the faithful it ceased to be a replica of the Lourdes Madonna and became the representation of the incarnation of Mary now referred to as 'Our Lady of Ballinspittle'. The moving statue, he believes, is important to its devotees because it confirms and reaffirms their belief in a supernatural power governing the natural world.[258] Yet not everyone who sees the statue move at Ballinspittle understands it in this light. As King puts it 'religious images are as liable to evoke antipathy as empathy'.[259] This was something I personally witnessed on the second occasion when I was in the company of two women who saw the statue move.

On a warm evening in May 2014 I once again visited Ballinspittle. The two women remained after the recession of the rosary had finished and were discussing the phenomenon with some committee members. It was dark, approximately 11:30 pm. They later shared their experience with me. The elder, the mother, saw it first; the statue appeared to be 'shimmering' or 'shivering'. She quickly looked away but felt compelled to look again and the statue continued to 'shimmer'. The lady noticed that her daughter seemed unnerved and had gone pale in the face. She enquired if the young woman noticed anything unusual and she too saw the statue 'shimmer'. While they were seeing all this, an elderly member of the committee was explaining to them that he himself had never seen it but that his grandson is so afraid of the moving statue that he refuses to get out of the car

[257] Mitchell, 'Performing statues', p. 266
[258] Chris Eipper, 'Moving Statues and Moving Images: Religious Artefacts and the Spiritualisation of Materiality', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* vol. 18 no. 3 (2007) (pp. 253-63) pp. 255-8
[259] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* p. 22

when brought to the grotto, referring to it as 'Scary Mary'. The ladies politely but quickly returned to their car with the firm resolve to leave immediately. They had found the experience unsettlingly rather than encouraging.

Many I met at Ballinspittle or who had visited felt likewise; the moving statue had not inspired a deeper devotion in them nor had it changed the way they approach religious artefacts such as images and statues. Generally and not surprisingly I found that it made a deeper impact upon those who were already prone to the use of such objects in their domestic devotions in the home. Yet the responses of these individuals who saw the statue move give merit to Eipper's assertion that 'It doesn't require belief in a phenomenon to be affected by it'.[260] The individuals discussed here may have their doubts about any supernatural force being responsible for what they have seen and experienced in Ballinspittle but it still had the power to elicit an emotional response, in this case fear but for others it inspires deep seated anger and disgust.

In *The Sacred Gaze* Morgan states that 'images readily become the site of conflicting ideologies or identities'.[261] This is exactly what happened on the evening of 31 October 1985 when three Evangelicals smashed the Ballinspittle statue's hands and face with a sledge hammer as locals and pilgrims watched on in sheer horror. A contemporary press report by Dick Hogan in *The Irish Times* describes how the three men shouted abuse at the crowd, telling them that it was 'silly to be adoring a statue'. They quickly fled the scene and were arrested later that night in Abbeylix, Co. Laois.[262] For the three Evangelicals, the crowds gathering before Ballinspittle grotto were guilty of idolatry and they had come to put an end to it. When I raised this incident with the committee the anger some members felt regarding the attack is still as poignant now as it was then. Patricia Bowen assured me that the people of Ballinspittle, even the sceptics, were left both shocked and devastated in the aftermath of the attack. They felt threatened at their own shrine. A wave of sympathy echoed across the country and the press coverage mentions that the committee was swarmed with telephone calls from those who wished to express their sympathy and to enquire if the statue was repairable. Most interestingly an article in *The Irish Press* reported that pilgrims continued to see the faceless statue, seen in Figure

[260] Eipper, 'Moving Statues and Moving Images' p. 256
[261] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze:* p. 71
[262] Dick Hogan, 'Gang damages 'moving' statue in an axe attack', *The Irish Times* 1 November 1985 p. 1

3.2 below, move.[263] The attack had not put an end to Ballinspittle's moving statue phenomenon as the Evangelicals so clearly hoped it would.

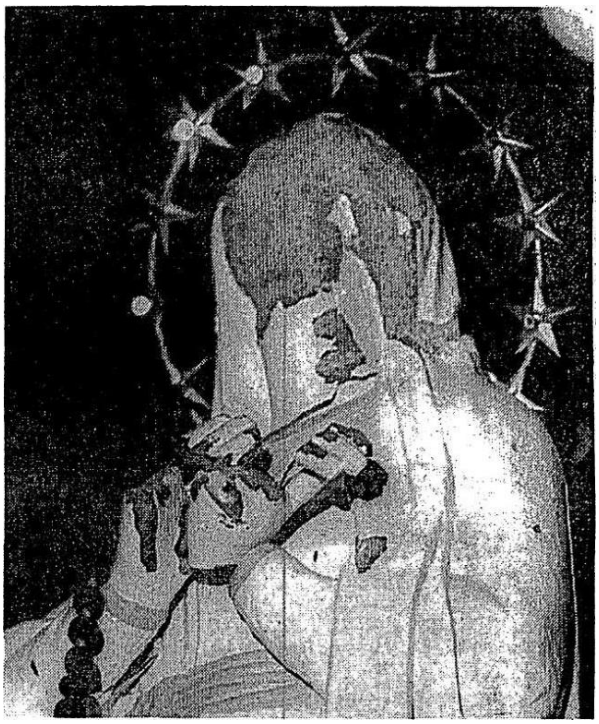


Figure 3.2: Damaged Ballinspittle Statue *The Irish Press* 1985 ©

The statue had, however, to be temporarily removed from the shrine to be repaired by its original maker, Maurice O'Donnell.[264] What happened in the interval of the statue's absence is most informative. People continued to pray at the grotto where *The Irish Independent* reported a 'stand-in' statue of Mary had been placed in the grotto, though no one claimed to see it move.[265] This has heretofore been an overlooked aspect in the history of the Ballinspittle phenomenon. Committee members explained that the repair of the statue cost almost £900, which one member told me was practically the price then of a new statue. Yet it had to be the original, they wanted their statue back. The fact that a small 'stand-in' was placed in the grotto is reflective of the need to have a statue for the reasons laid out above; to inspire devotion, to communicate with and to bring the presence of the supernatural world closer to the natural. The committee assured me that no other statue would suffice in the long run; the Ballinspittle statue is no ordinary one but a special one

[263] Gerry Moriarty and Isabel Healy, 'Dubliners to face court charge today', *The Irish Press* 1 November 1985 p. 1
[264] Dick Cross, 'Statue may now attract more pilgrims', *The Irish Independent* 2 November 1985 p. 3
[265] 'Moving statue gets a stand-in', *The Irish Independent* 5 November 1985 p. 11

imbued with talismanic power in their eyes; that it is believed to possess supernatural and or protective power. They were overjoyed and relieved when it was returned to the grotto on 8 November 1985, looking *The Irish Independent* reported 'better than ever'.[266]

Eipper and Mitchell have debated the significance of the attack made on the Ballinspittle statue in 1985. For his part, Eipper says that 'the attack did not shake the convictions of the cult's members' because 'the statue was "merely an emblem" of Mary'. That is to say the committee members and devotees were not going to stop praying at the shrine despite the accusations of idolatry made against them by Evangelical Christians because 'they venerated not a statue but the mother of God'.[267] On the surface this assertion is correct and the committee members and my other participants were at pains to remind me of this. The attack, however, has left its mark and locals are somewhat petulant when people ask if it is the statue or Mary they are venerating. Mitchell, though, is not convinced by Eipper's conclusion and believes that the statue, whether devotees are consciously aware of it or not, is crucial and central to the cult of the Ballinspittle Madonna. He argues that the absolute conviction that the original statue had to be repaired and returned to the grotto represents 'the immanence of that particular, local and historical significances, linked to particular narratives, personalities and politics'. These, he writes, cannot be overlooked because they highlight 'tensions between universal and the local, the transcendent and the immanent' and are 'central to Catholic understandings of the world – indeed, to the very definition of Catholicism'.[268]

Mitchell, I contend, makes the better argument, for it may be the Mother of God whom the Ballinspittle devotees venerate but it is tied tightly to a particular manifestation of Mary in the form of her statue, which as Eipper points out they believe the Virgin Mary 'may have chosen' as a 'sign'.[269] For the committee members and devotees I spoke with there is no 'may have' about it, for they firmly believe that Mary chose and continues to choose the Ballinspittle statue to make a sign. When I asked Patricia, for instance, why she believed Mary chose to reveal herself in the manner of a moving statue she replied that Mary simply chooses the place where she knows people will respond to her call and the method she knows will best attract them, hence the moving statue of Ballinspittle. Thus, the veneration of the Ballinspittle Madonna is intimately allied to the statue by which she makes herself known. By making the statue move Mary instilled it with blessings and

[266] Dick Cross, 'Statue back, 'better than ever', *The Irish Independent* 9 November 1985 p.3
[267] Eipper, 'Moving Statues and Moving Images' p. 256
[268] Mitchell, 'Performing statues', p. 276
[269] Eipper, 'Moving Statues and Moving Images' p. 256

graces in the minds of the pious and consequently it could not so easily be set aside or replaced permanently by any other. In its absence the committee made do with their 'stand-in' but that 'stand-in' did not possess the talismanic charisma of the original, a talismanic charisma which continues to attract pilgrimage and devotion to the present.

The attack on the Ballinspittle statue did have another effect which the attackers surely never intended; it created relics. Patricia Bowen has kept some of the fingers from the original hands of the statue, which she herself described as relics. This in itself is a further revelation of the talismanic power devotees attribute to the Ballinspittle statue. Patricia felt it would have been disrespectful to the Virgin Mary for these to have been simply disposed of. Furthermore, she has also kept some of the walking sticks left behind by pilgrims who believed themselves cured through the intercession of the Ballinspittle Madonna. For Patricia these too are relics, acting as tangible proof of the miracle cures attributed to Ballinspittle. Others have collected relics in the form of photographs of the statue, some of which are believed to show movement or some other miracle. In his 2005 article 'Taking pictures of Jesus', Edward Berryman argues that photographs of Mary, Jesus and other saints have 'become a staple of Catholic apparition claims'. This phenomenon of images which are believed to have captured proof of the supernatural is almost as old as photography itself, but has become especially popular in connection with the ongoing Medjugorje apparitions. These photos, Berryman asserts, are highly prized by devotees because with a photographic image the deity or saint ceases to be a 'mere representation and achieves a presence whose reality and concreteness is hard to equal with the drawings or paintings'. On top of this they act as tangible proof and evidence that an apparition has taken place by capturing the deity/saint in their transcendental form.[270]

In his seminal article on the subject, Daniel Wojick comments that the rise of apparition or miracle photographs within Catholic based apparition claims represents 'an emergent folk religious practice' for which Wojick applies Yoder's definition of folk religion, (see pp.16-7). They are, he says, 'central to the religious experiences' to followers of a particular incarnation of Mary and the attached shrine because they are interpreted as 'divine communication offering insights of prophetic and personal relevance'. These apparition and miracle photos are, he concludes, an extension of 'previous Catholic traditions of miraculous images', of which the moving statue of Ballinspittle is an apt

[270] Edward Berryman, 'Taking pictures of Jesus: Producing the Material Presence of a Divine Other', *Human Studies* vol. 28 no. 4 (October 2005) (pp. 431-52) p. 432

example. These photos offer insight into 'the dynamic nature of religious traditions and the role of creativity in people's religious lives'.[271]

Because these images are thought to capture an apparition or a related miracle they are treated as relics by the devotee. There are many examples to draw upon in relation to Ballinspittle phenomenon in 1985. To begin I wish to discuss one described to me by Pat when I met him in Dublin. On one of his visits to the shrine, Pat returned there in the morning accompanied by his wife and a friend to say a final prayer before they left the locale. They found themselves alone at the shrine. The previous night Pat had seen a petal fall away from a small rose in the hands of the statue a number of times. As he arrived at the shrine the following morning he was immediately struck that 'the rose that was…that had been a petal was now thick as a bunch of flowers.' Pat's wife and their companion too noticed this and as a florist his wife decided to take a photograph 'of this magnificent sight'. Having paid their respects, the three departed from the grotto but he anxiously awaited the photographs his wife had taken there. Some weeks later Pat looked through the developed photos to find the one of the Ballinspittle statue. To his great surprise he told me:

> that photograph taken of the grotto, just some of what we saw didn't make it in the photograph. We took a photograph of what we saw and the camera didn't take it. How do you explain that?

Of course to a person not present the photograph would appear normal and no miracle would be delectable but for Pat, his wife and their friend this was proof positive that something supernatural had taken place in their midst. Both Berryman and Wojcik state that often apparition photographs have to be interpreted and analysed by the believer to find the miracle they have captured and Wojick asserts that this is 'influenced by individual and social context'.[272] Thus, it is not surprising that Pat's photograph appears normal until he explains what the miracle is and this in turn suggests that people can create their own miracles and by the use of modern technology, proof that their belief that Mary is manifesting in a particular time and place. The photograph becomes a material relic in which the graces and blessings of the apparition are instilled. Pat's photograph is one

[271] Daniel Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven: Photography, Folk Religion, and the Miraculous Image Tradition at a Marian Apparition Site', *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 109 no. 432 (Spring 1996) (pp. 129-48) pp. 129-30
[272] Ibid p. 134

example but they were abundant in 1985, the committee members could cite many examples they had been shown, some of which were debated in the contemporary press reports.

Sceptics who doubted the legitimacy of Ballinspittle's moving statue suggested that photographs be taken so as to prove that nothing was happening; this at least was the advice of one letter to the editor in *The Munster Express*.[273] *The Cork Examiner* published the results of one such experiment. A retired Garda Jim Herlihy, spoke to Tim Ryan about some photographs he had taken which he believed proved the statue was moving. He had placed his camera on a tripod and so it was 'perfectly steady' when the photos were taken. One picture showed the statue 'in its usual way' but a second photo taken from the same vantage point seemed to show that the position of the statue's hands had altered. Herlihy was convinced that the statue was moving and for good measure added that he did not develop the films himself but had a professional do so.[274] On 25 September the newspaper published the findings of an experiment conducted by several members of its staff to test the validity of the phenomenon, simply by positioning themselves amongst the crowds and watching. Some saw the movements, others did not but the collective consensus was that no miracle was detectable. Of more interest here are the photographs taken of the statue. Accompanying the in-depth investigation of the journalists were five photographs of the statue taken by photographer Donal Sheehan between 12:48am-1:07am, captioned 'Spot the difference' of which none is evident.[275]

Yet on the front page of the same edition of the paper there appeared another photograph of the statue, Figure 3.3 below.

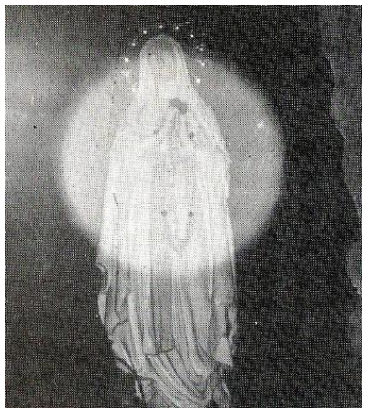


Figure 3.3: Photo of Ballinspittle Statue by Martin O' Carroll, *The Cork Examiner* September 1985 ©

[273] 'City Chatter: the Moving Statues!'', *The Munster Express* 16 August 1985 p. 13
[274] Tim Ryan, 'Feast day pilgrimage to Ballinspittle', *The Cork Examiner* 15 August 1985 p. 1
[275] 'SPOT THE DIFFERENCE', *The Cork Examiner* 25 September 1985 p. 7

The ‘unusual’ photograph, the newspaper reported, was taken by Martin O’Connell from Cork city. The original was in colour but the reprint for the paper was black and white. The original ‘for some unexplainable reason’ had a ‘shading of red light on the left-hand side’ which diminished in size and strength ‘as it approached a large white circle of light on the statue’. Only the white circle of light was visible in the reproduction for the paper. O’Connell stated that the negative showed both the red shading and white circle of light clearly. The photographs had put the statue ‘under the spotlight’ the report quipped.[276] But Vose reveals the significance of the photograph for the believer in *The Statues That Moved A Nation*. He republished the photograph alongside another taken by O’Carroll five minutes earlier, the latter showing the statue as normal. He explained the white glow of the second as a ‘host-like haze’ and added that ‘the negative of the picture gives no answer to where the ‘strange glow’ came from.’[277]

Read in tandem the sceptical cynicism of the press report and Vose’s devotional take on the same photograph reveal an important fact, namely that sceptic and believer alike can turn to the medium of photography to create material proof that an apparition or a miracle is or is not materialising in a given locale. As Wojick correctly posits ‘apparitions are not isolated from the influence of modern technology’[278] and the examples from *The Cork Examiner* reflect the fact that modern technology was employed in the wider debate of whether or not the statue in Ballinspittle grotto was physically moving. For the believer the apparition photograph is proof and a keepsake of an engagement with the divine, for them it is rather like the Christian icons of Veronica’s veil or The Shroud of Turin; tangible material evidence of the existence of the divine and a holy object.[279] As an extension of the apparition experience and message, the genre of apparition photos has, Berryman says, received scant attention by scholars on the subject of Marian apparitions.[280] Much work needs to be done on this fascinating aspect of the modern Marian apparition phenomenon and experience. In the next chapter I shall take this a step further by examining the parallel phenomenon of the apparition video. Apparition photos are thus part and parcel of the Ballinspittle phenomenon’s materiality. Materiality via the performing statue and the recitation of the rosary is at the heart of the Ballinspittle phenomenon and the devotion it inspires.

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[276] ‘Under the spotlight…’, *Cork Examiner* 25 September 1985 p. 1
[277] Vose, *The statues that moved a nation*
[278] Wojick, ‘ “Polaroids from Heaven’ p. 132
[279] Ibid p. 140
[280]Berryman, ‘Taking pictures of Jesus’ p. 433

Ritual too infuses life into the Ballinspittle statue, which as Cort writes creates a dynamic relationship between material objects and the believer. To be fully appreciated and understood 'we have to go to field-work sources' to appreciate this dynamic relationship.[281] King convincingly argues that material religious objects such as statues make demands on the believer. If their talismanic properties or the mediation of the saint as channelled through them is to be fully achieved then they must be and are treated with respect by the believer as material representation of a higher transcendent power.[282] Material religion can tell us much about how people live and express their faith daily and is an integral aspect of vernacular religiosity. Any study of materiality in religiosity needs to pay attention to both the substantive and functionalist roles religious material artefacts perform. The Ballinspittle statue, for example, is substantive in the sense that it is treated as a material representation of the Virgin Mary and functionalist because it possess agency in the mind of the devotee who approaches it ritualistically to access that agency. This is what T. Dant argues in *Materiality and Society*, where he writes that objects acquire agency from human actions which form them, human agency is transferred to the object which happens 'through emotion, through meaning, through perception and through interconnection'.[283]

The Ballinspittle Madonna, via her moving statue, is therefore a powerful agent on behalf of the devotee and the pilgrim, one engaged through prayer, ritual and emotion, all of which facilitate a powerful relationship between the Virgin and the devotee. The material charisma of the shrine is vested in its statue and is first and foremost the most significant aspect of the shrine's magnetism. Second to this is the shrine's topophilia and many of my participants described an emotional feeling or 'sense of presence' to be felt at the shrine. This is an emotional aspect of the pilgrimage to Ballinspittle, one that is related to the moving statue but which is not solely dependent on it. Not all those I spoke with had seen the statue move, change or had any experience there but they described a peaceful feeling to be found at the grotto, a sort of natural holiness that cannot be seen but only felt. It is the emotional topophilia of the shrine, aided by the grotto's natural location in a quiet place off the beaten track. This can be described as 'the emotional charisma' of the shrine.

[281] Cort, 'Art, Religion and Material Culture' pp. 630-2
[282] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* p. xi
[283] T. Dant, *Materiality and Society* (Buckingham; Open University Press, 2005) pp. 60-1

The sense of presence: Ballinspittle's topophilia

There is more to a visit to Ballinspittle than just the hopes of seeing a moving statue. That of course is the principal attraction but for the more pious minded individual there is more to it than that. The media's portrayal of events in 1985 tended to neglect this. Tim Ryan and Jurek Kirakowski first raised this point in *Ballinspittle: Moving Statues And Faith*, when they wrote 'much has been made of the sightseeing aspect of this phenomenon'. The media were, in their opinion, writing the phenomenon off as simply the summer attraction of 1985.[284] As the crowds began to ease off and the media accordingly lost interest in the Ballinspittle phenomenon, people were left wondering if the shrine would simply fade back into the obscurity from which it suddenly sprang to national attention. Some months after his visit, Vose gave voice to these questions in his book; 'A nine days' wonder? Will Ballinspittle still be remembered in years to come?'.[285] Certainly the Ballinspittle phenomenon has carved out its place in Irish popular history. It regularly pops up in documentaries such as RTÉ's *Reeling in the Years* and conjures nostalgic memories for an entire generation. Journalist Kim Bielenberg dubbed the Ballinspittle moving statue an 'icon of the '80s' in *The Irish Independent*.[286] Almost thirty years on the emotional side of the Ballinspittle phenomenon remains largely neglected in favour of its 'sightseeing' side.

When I began my research I expected to hear the phrase 'I saw', I did not know then that this would be accompanied by the phrase 'and I felt'. The pilgrimage to Ballinspittle conjures deep emotions; joy, happiness, sadness, fear, and even anger. Over and over again my participants described the emotional atmosphere of the place. One middle aged woman who visited in 1985 saw nothing but she described the atmosphere of the crowd and the shrine as 'electric' and 'powerful'. Many I spoke to told me that they sensed a divine presence there. Pat from Dublin was especially aware of this. As he prayed at the grotto and as he witnessed his visions and movements in the statue, he was continuously aware of a presence which he could not see but had a deep emotional impact on him. He also experienced this on pilgrimage to Lourdes. Others I spoke with described feeling a desire to remain at the grotto longer than they had intended on their visits. Cathy O'Mahony described it to Mooney thusly in their 1992 interview:

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[284]Tim Ryan & Jurek Kirakowski, *Ballinspittle: moving statues and faith* (Cork; Mercier Press, 1985) p. 69
[285] Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* p. 69
[286] Kim Bielenberg', 'Great Irish icons – 2006', *The Irish Independent* 6 May 2006 p. 38

> well that's the problem here, if you come here you can't go home…There's something here that holds you, you can't go home. You can come here of a night now, maybe eight or nine o'clock…if you went down about nine o'clock now, you could stay here to eleven or twelve o'clock and there's no such thing as go home. [287]

She went on to recall that on one particular night during the mass pilgrimages of 1985, she and a neighbour walked home from the grotto around 1 am during a 'terrible' thunder and lightning storm. Cathy was deathly afraid of thunder and yet that night she told Mooney she felt no fear; 'and no more as if there was no thunder there…we took no notice of it'. When asked if the phenomenon had changed people in the village she replied it had changed some and that the people were very proud of their grotto. The 'same parishioners' she said always went there but more locals join them for 'special rosaries' when anyone is unwell in the area.[288] This is something which lasts to the present. In 2014, for example a young woman from Ballinspittle tragically lost her life and there was a significant rise numbers at the grotto for the recitation of the rosary by neighbours and friends who wished to pray for her family and friends. In times such as this, committee members told me, the people of the community come to grotto to find peace and consolation, the natural 'holiness' of the place they believe helps people.

In my interviews with Sean Murray he explained the natural holiness and sense of presence which the committee believes surrounds the grotto. He encourages people to go there and pray or reflect because it is a quiet and peaceful place. There is, he says, a mingling of two worlds at the grotto; the natural and the supernatural. For his part, Sean does not believe that the statue in the grotto is a magic or talismanic one. Rather he believes that there is some element of divine power imbued in the landscape of the shrine and that is what makes the statue appear to move. Ballinspittle then is an epicentre in his mind where the divine power manifests in the natural world. This is why Sean believes that thousands have found peace at Ballinspittle and this why, he says, people continue to visit the shrine. In March 2000 an interesting article touching what Sean described to me appeared in *The Irish Times*. Disgraced financier Mr Finbarr Ross visited the grotto whilst facing charges of fraud. Ross was embroiled in a financial scandal involving the loss of over £7 million. He told the paper that he found 'solace' at Ballinspittle. A minister of the Light of Christ Church, an 'esoteric' Christian group from Oklahoma, Ross claimed to be a

[287] 'If the statues stopped moving', Derek Mooney RTÉ Radio Interview 1992
[288] Ibid

'channel for Mother Mary', describing a mystical experience in 1992 with Mary that gave him a 'healing technique' to cure emotional illness. When asked how he found Ballinspittle he replied that peace overcame him there and that he 'could definitely feel the vibrations'.[289]

One presumes that Ross was referring to the vibrations of a supernatural power there. A powerful emotional charisma too is an important aspect of the Ballinspittle shrine. Pierre André Sigal writes of the Catholic pilgrimage experience, that it is a means 'of coming into contact with the divine and thereby obtaining grace because of the accumulation of supernatural power in the pilgrimage site'.[290] Belief in the Ballinspittle Madonna is not simply tied to seeing her statue move. As David Morgan comments belief is not just a word; it is feeling, smelling, hearing and seeing.[291] Devotion to the Ballinspittle Madonna and pilgrimage to her shrine then involves all of this; pilgrims speak of feeling a strong sense of a divine and otherworldly presence at the grotto, they come to look upon its statue, recite the rosary, smell the flowers of the shrine and listen both internally and externally to the sounds of devotion and nature there. There is more than mere 'sightseeing' in the Ballinspittle phenomenon and many have tried to capture this in song and poetry. The Ballinspittle moving statue has inspired both devotee and sceptic alike to put pen to paper, to compose. I will now explore a sample of this creativity which is such a prominent aspect of vernacular religiosity.

In word and song; creativity and the Ballinspittle phenomenon

The Ballinspittle phenomenon has inspired creativity in the form of devotional poetry and prayer. These poems and prayers reflect pilgrims and devotees beliefs and what Wojick calls 'the folk theology of the shrine'.[292] I have already explored this above in the characteristics devotees attribute to the Ballinspittle Madonna. Each Marian shrine has a vernacular theology of its own, which devotees situate into the wider theology of the Catholic Church; that is to say that the theologies of these shrines are hybrids of vernacular and institutional beliefs and doctrines. The devotional poetry and prayers reflect the

[289] Arthur Beesley, 'Ross finds religious belief a solace in troubled times', *The Irish Times* 4 March 2000 p. 19
[290] Pierre André Sigal, 'Pilgrimage: Roman Catholic Pilgrimage in Europe', Lindsay Jones (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* 2nd ed. vol. 10 (Detroit; Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) p. 7148
[291] David Morgan (ed.), 'Introduction', *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon; Routledge, 2010) p. 5
[292] Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven' p. 135

vernacular theology the shrine's devotees create. I shall begin by examining a prayer recited by the grotto committee after the recitation of the rosary at the grotto. It is simply known as 'Evening prayer'. The opening lines immediately capture the beliefs about the moving statue and the Ballinspittle Madonna teased out above:

Night is falling dear Mother, the long day is o'er
And before your loved image I'm kneeling once more,
To thank you for keeping me safe thro' the day,
To ask you this night to keep evil away

Here an omnipotent Mary is being both petitioned and thanked for her protection by coming before her 'loved image'. Thereafter the prayer evokes Mary's maternal mercy, asking her to stand between the devotee and God at the hour of their death. In return they pledge that no day will pass without a prayer to the Virgin 'in our hearts and on our lips'. The prayer begs Mary to remain close in both happiness and sorrow and asks that when the reciter departs this world, that it is she who will greet them 'at the gates of Heaven'. The prayer nicely encapsulates the vernacular theology of the shrine, the incarnation of the Ballinspittle Madonna as 'a mother ever ready to help us', and the needs and wants of the devotee. This particular prayer is a cherished one by the committee members, many of whom recite it their daily prayers and I was told that many pilgrims requested a copy. The prayer can be read on the grotto's billboard.

Another interesting and similar example appears in Vose's book, a poem penned by Patricia Ahern 'In honour of Ballinspittle'. The poem is a creative response of Ahern's visits and experiences at the shrine in 1985 but still devotional in style. In it she describes the thousands who 'night after night' come to the grotto:

Where a statue moves
And faces change
And many tongues
In prayer engage;
Where hymns are sung,
And voices raise
To blend as one
In joyous praise.[293]

[293] Patricia Ahern, 'Night Lights (In Honour of Ballinspittle)', John D. Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* (Cornwall: United Writers, 1986) p. 10

Ahern concluded her poem by calling the moving statue a 'mystery', a 'wondrous sight'. It was the creative response of a believer and one clearly moved by the experience of the Ballinspittle phenomenon. Nor is Ahern's the only example. Mooney's 1992 Radio documentary ends with a song, or rather a hymn, written about the moving statue playing in the background as he drew his conclusions. As the documentary ends, the last line of the hymn can be faintly heard; 'to pray faced together at the statue of Our Queen'.[294] The Ballinspittle Madonna has moved her devoted followers to sing her praises, quite literally, in word and song. Yet just as with the example of the apparition photographs quoted above, sceptics have also turned to the medium of poetry and song to express their opinions regarding the phenomenon.

Well known Irish folk singer and comedian Richie Kavanagh, for example, has visited the shrine and commemorated it in a jocular song. Here, however, I wish to discuss an example shared with me in the course of my fieldwork by Mo, a songwriter and musician in his 50s. Mo was living in Boston when the multitudes were gathering before the shrine but interestingly he remembered that the Irish community there closely followed events, both in the media and from the experiences of family and friends. Mo returned to Ireland in the mid-1990s and is a self-confessed sceptic regarding Ireland's moving statues phenomenon. Raised a Catholic, Mo now prefers to worship a 'God of my own understanding'. His visit to the grotto was at approximately 1am, where he found himself alone returning on his way home to North Cork after playing a 'gig' in the locale. Taking his guitar with him, Mo climbed the steep slope to the statue. Pilgrims are requested not to do so and the committee have placed signs at the shrine advising all of the hazards of doing so. In the mad rush to touch the statue in the past many people have been injured climbing the slope.

Mo was intrigued by the 'physical' aspects of the famous statue, thus he took advantage of being alone at the grotto to get a closer look. In our semi-formal interview he admitted that he found the grotto's atmosphere peaceful but that his visit did nothing to lessen his scepticism. Yet it did move him to compose and sitting at the base of the statue, Mo strummed the chords of his guitar; 'Hey lady, don't dance for me' his song begins and continues in this genre. This once again reinforces the fact that one does not have to readily belief in a phenomenon to be affected by it. In his scepticism, Mo found inspiration to put his beliefs and feelings regarding the Ballinspittle phenomenon into song.

[294] 'If the statues stopped moving', Derek Mooney RTÉ Radio Interview 1992

Interestingly I never encountered any paintings or sketches of the grotto or devotional images of the Ballinspittle Madonna beyond the apparition photographs discussed above. In August 1985 *The Cork Examiner* did report that one girl selling postcards of 'Our Lady in Ballinspittle' sketched by an artist was doing well[295] but the committee has always discouraged and stopped this 'commercialisation' of the phenomenon. They do so, they assured me, to avoid accusations of personal gain and because of a sincere belief that the spirituality which Ballinspittle offers is priceless. The use of photography has in any case has been sufficient to capture the image of Our Lady of Ballinspittle for the believer and photography at apparition sites is too part of the believer's creativity, one which Wojick argues offers impressive insights into the role of 'creativity in people's religious lives'.[296]

Scholars of religion with a text or institutional based bias would perhaps easily pass over these devotional and sceptical expressions of creativity but the fact that the individual was motived enough to create them speaks volumes. Within these expressions of faith the scholar can learn much about religious belief as daily practice and how people think about and understand the world around them. They are an important source when trying to understand vernacular religiosity and how religion is lived. I have until now deliberately avoided discussing the Catholic Church's response to the Ballinspittle phenomenon so as to first properly explore and analyse the key elements in the vernacular cult of Our Lady of Ballinspittle and to avoid detracting from its power and significance. But the cult of Our Lady of Ballinspittle does not exist in a vacuum. Thus far I have explored it from the vernacular and individual point of view but the relationship between the vernacular and institutional components is also important. All Marian apparition claims spawn purely vernacular cults to begin with until the ecclesiastical authorities make a decision as to whether the apparition is thought worthy of an institutional blessing or not. If granted, the Church will assume responsibility for the shrine, if not then the shrine often continues to exist on the margins of the institutional Church, as what I call a peripheral vernacular shrine and that is what Ballinspittle grotto has become. To conclude then I will discuss the response of the Irish Catholic Church to the Ballinspittle phenomenon, a response which has made the grotto a contested site of devotion.

[295] Tim Ryan, 'Grotto throngs' *Cork Examiner* 16 August p. 18
[296] Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven' p. 130

Ballinspittle and the Bishops; the contested meanings of a Marian shrine

Ask any member of the Ballinspittle grotto committee about the Church's response to the phenomenon of the moving statue and you will see a range of emotions, from disappointment to resentment. Some members, though by no means all, continue to hope and pray that someday Ballinspittle will become an institutionally recognised shrine of the Virgin Mary. Almost thirty years have elapsed, however, and the prospects of having this possibility realised remains far over the horizon. This is why some members are less optimistic than others. Sean Murray, for example, does not believe that Ballinspittle will ever become Ireland's second institutionally recognised Marian shrine. Before I begin to examine the Church's rather testy relationship with the committee and the phenomenon as a whole, I wish to remind the reader of one important fact; that the members of the Ballinspittle grotto committee and the majority of pilgrims who come to the shrine are all practicing Roman Catholics. They have great faith in the Catholic Church. What they do at the grotto is for them part of being a faithful and practicing Catholic as much as attending mass and other Church sacraments, which they strongly encourage all to do. The fact that the Irish Bishops, and particularly the Bishops of Cork, since Ballinspittle grotto is under their jurisdiction, have not granted their blessing for the promotion of the grotto as a place where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared has caused no small amount of hurt and regret to many members of the committee and Catholics further afield. But they have resolved to soldier on in the absence of full ecclesiastical support, simply because the grotto and what happens there is important to them.

I say in the absence of full ecclesiastical support to call attention to another important fact and that is that the Church does not condemn either devotions such as the recitation of the rosary at public shrines or the use of images. After all it was at the Church's expressed desire that so many roadside grottoes were erected in the first place. E. Frances King spells out the Church's stance on the use of religious images, statuary and other devotional artefacts. They have, she writes, put in place strictures on their use and namely that is they must be first blessed by a priest, be treated with respect and are usually attached to particular institutional novenas and rituals, such as the use of the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in the traditional nine day novena. All of this, King says, is to maintain orthodoxy [297] and I would add to both protect and sustain the agency of the priest.

[297] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* p. 23

In blessing the religious artefact, the priest employs his agency without which the religious object would not fully provide agency to the believer. Ballinspittle grotto was formally blessed on the 8 December 1954 and thus met with the Church requirements.

From my fieldwork I inferred the local clergy simply ignored the claims of the moving statue and other miracles at the grotto prior to 1985. When I asked one local about this he simply replied; 'They never wanted to know about it…they weren't interested then or now'. The publicity the grotto received in 1985, however, forced the local clergy and the then Bishop of Cork, Dr Michael Murphy, to face up to the phenomenon for the first time. In the early weeks, the media repeatedly approached the local clergy for a statement but were refused. The only comment the local priest would give *The Irish Press* was simply that no priest from the parish 'has any involvement' in what was happening at the shrine.[298] I learned from Patricia that the local clerical situation was less than ideal at the time. The parish had only a curate, whom Patricia described as a 'late vocation'. He did his best, she said, but was overwhelmed by the situation. A new parish priest, Canon Kelleher, was duly appointed that September and he took a dim view of what was happening at the local grotto. Sean Murray believes that his arrival was no coincidence. The Canon, Sean told me, had been sent to Ballinspittle with a 'mission' and that was to dampen the fervour for the moving statue.

As for the Bishop of Cork he made his feelings clear in a public statement to the media on 30 July 1985. Ryan and Kirakowski, both of whom spent considerable time in Ballinspittle in the summer and early autumn of 1985, aptly summed up the situation when they wrote:

> The Catholic Church authorities are in no hurry to investigate the happenings at the grotto in Ballinspittle. 'Privately', said a BBC 2 report, 'the local Bishop would be more than happy to see the whole thing fade away but since the church believes in miracles the bishop can hardly say this one is impossible, merely that it is unlikely.[299]

Accordingly, the Bishop's statement was open-minded but non-committed. The main thrust of it was to remind the faithful that 'direct supernatural intervention is a very rare happening in life'. People, he said, needed to approach the Ballinspittle phenomenon with 'extreme caution' and in keeping with the Church's standard response to such claims, he reminded the faithful that all natural explanations would have to ruled out before the

[298] T. P. O'Mahony, 'Thousands flock to Ballinspittle' *The Irish Press* 16 August 1985 p. 1
[299] Ryan & Kirakowski, *Ballinspittle* p. 82

Church could give any serious thought towards launching an institutional investigation, though he found the spirit of prayer displayed at the shrine 'praise-worthy'.[300]

The Bishop's statement remains the Church's public position on the Ballinspittle phenomenon, even after almost three decades. Locally, however, the situation between committee and clergy is often quite fraught. When I first discussed the Bishop's statement with Sean, he told me how the Bishop had requested to meet the committee, where he reiterated his statement to them in person. He then described 'an extraordinary' meeting that took place in the parish hall shortly after the arrival of Canon Kelleher, where he said it quickly became clear that he would not entertain Ballinspittle's moving statue. In fact whenever he received a telephone enquiry he would promptly 'slam' the receiver down. Committee members, I ascertained, had a rather love/hate relationship with the now retired priest. In the same breath that she criticised him for remaining aloof from the grotto, Patricia Bowen told me that he was a 'good priest' and a 'true priest' whom the Virgin Mary had purposely brought to Ballinspittle to 'test' the phenomenon. She then recounted how she and the Canon had fallen out for the space of a year when he refused to announce from the pulpit the times of the recitation of the public rosaries held annually on 22 July. Despite their temperamental relationship, I could sense genuine affection on Patricia's part for the priest and she was delighted when he recently attended a public rosary at the shrine to pray for vocations.

Yet his refusal to promote the miracle of Ballinspittle greatly hurt Patricia. I believe that the Church's reluctance to embrace the moving statue of Ballinspittle is rooted in a contestation regarding agency and a fear that endorsing a moving statue claim will, as has happened on 31 October 1985, result in accusations of idolatry and personal advantage to the Church. Moreover, the Ballinspittle Madonna is not in keeping with the Mariology promoted by the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council. Several scholars who have worked on the cult of the Virgin Mary have pointed to the changes in how the Church envisions Mary since Vatican II. Carroll notes a shift in the Church's approach to Mary making her more of an ecumenical figure, a symbol for Christian unity and the model follower of Christ.[301] Pope John XIII summed up the mood of the Vatican II reforms regarding the position of Mary when he said 'the Madonna is not pleased when she is

[300] Vincent Power, 'Moving' statue: Bishop urges caution', *The Cork Examiner* 31 July 1985 p. 1
[301] Carroll, *The cult of the Virgin Mary* pp. 222-4

placed above her son'.[302] In the Introduction, (see pp. 6-8), I discussed the implications of this line of thought for the kind of Marian devotion which flourish from the 19th century until the 1960s. In the wake of Vatican II the Virgin Mary received a dressing down within the institutional Church and much of the traditional rituals and practices attached to her cult were revalued by the institutional Church.

King, for example, argues that 'in recent decades the rosary, the most common religious practice associated with Mary, has become associated with a lesser or inferior level of religious practice' and as a result, she writes, it is rarely encountered 'in contemporary Church liturgy'.[303] Thus, much of traditional Marian piety was pushed aside though not explicitly abandoned by the Church. Practices such as the rosary and the strong emphasises on the use of material religious artefacts attached to Mary and the saint's cult were demoted as the Church, and treated as if 'outdated' and belonging to the past rather than the future. Vatican II made some significant changes to the liturgy and theology of the Catholic Church and sent shockwaves of horror to many devout Catholics. In the Introduction I quoted Ballinspittle statue marker Maurice O'Donnell's words to that effect, (see p. 29). King argues that such changes were probably more intensely felt by Irish Catholics but interestingly asserts that the reforms of Vatican II took longer to both implement and take effect in Ireland.[304] It was not until roughly twenty years after the pronouncements had been made that they were really taking root on Irish soil, not long before the moving statue of Ballinspittle grotto became the centre of euphoric pilgrimage.

That, at least was the message my participants conveyed to me. One priest who I broached the subject with set the Ballinspittle phenomenon in the fall away from the recitation of the rosary at such shrines. The Church had been the strongest promoters of practices such as the family rosary, the use of devotional objects such as scapulars and religious imagery. In the 1950s for example Mayo born priest Rev. P. Peyton toured the country with his 'Rosary crusades', which thousands attended.[305] After Vatican II the Church was seeking to wean Catholics from this sort of devotion in favour of a more scripture based liturgy. For the ordinary believer the effects of this were to say the very least sudden. Mary from Kilworth described what life was like for the lay Catholic in both pre and post Vatican II Ireland:

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[302] Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion Vol. 1 From the Beginning to the Eve of the Reformation* (New York; Sheed and Ward) p. i
[303] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* p. 71
[304] Ibid
[305] 'Rosary Crusade for Killala Diocese', *The Irish Independent* 11 December 1953 p.4

> Each family was told to pray the rosary and they'd enrol you in the Brown Scapular and everyone had a set of their own rosary beads…every house had to have a Sacred Heart picture, there would be holy pictures in every room and altars and all of that kind of thing. And I remember my mother would be doing novenas and prayers and you had to have all of that…and suddenly, not long before the moving statues, things changed and the Church moved away from all of that kind of thing and so the younger people, well we eased off them.

The Ballinspittle phenomenon emerged at a time of change; cultural, social, economic and religious. Some people like Mary could embrace the changes but old habits die hard and others could not. Ryan and Kirakowski touched on this. One of the authors was acquainted with an elderly lady who spoke with 'sadness' to him concerning 'the falling away from devotion to Our Lady that she saw in the modern church'. She privately felt that the Second Vatican Council had made mistakes but she continued to have faith in the clergy, telling the author she was on an old woman and it was not easy for her to change.[306] Many journalists writing at the time certainly believed, and with good reason, that the attraction of the Ballinspittle phenomenon was because it gave Catholics a more satisfying experience than what the Church had to offer. Mary Holland in *The Irish Times*, for example wrote that the phenomenon was as a product of a lack of 'spiritual leadership' by the Irish Bishops. Vatican II had taken away cherished practices in Ireland such as the family rosary and the Latin Mass and replaced them with 'cold' ceremonies that left the faithful spiritually malnourished. It brought back 'warmth and comfort to their faith'; a faith under threat from ecclesiastical reform and sweeping cultural changes.[307]

Ballinspittle became an outlet of sorts for Catholics suffering from an identity crisis and a profound sense of dislocation in the wake of Vatican II, coupled with the social changes caused by the diminishing authority of the Church and the rise of social issues such as abortion. The moving statue at Ballinspittle helped to aid this crisis, as the use of material objects can often give support and reaffirm identity. Arnold, for example, argues that modernity brought a change 'in the human material orientation from locative to utopian', that is from a sense of place to no place and as such objects, both man-made and natural, became 'material referents', used to create an identity, a sense of place and

[306]Ryan & Kirakowski, *Ballinspittle* p. 80
[307] Mary Holland, 'Ballinspittle and the bishops' dilemma', *The Irish Times* 21 August 1985 p. 8

meaning.[308] This was one of the attractions of the Ballinspittle phenomenon in 1985 and thereafter. It was a Catholic shrine, a place for Catholic devotion and a place where Marian devotions could flourish. It gives a sense of whom one is and where one is. Furthermore, as Mary Holland wrote, the fact the Virgin's statue was seen to move there was taken by the faithful as a tangible sign that their beliefs, regardless of what the Church might say, are still valid in the eyes of God.[309] One, however, must be careful not to over emphasis here. I do not wish to attribute the Ballinspittle phenomenon purely to the identity crisis and sense of dislocation created by Vatican II. People, I have no doubt, would have gone there still had the Church never embarked on the Vatican II reforms. The point is that this happened in tandem to the phenomenon and became subsumed into it. It also is another reason why the Church was not going to promote the moving statue; they were after all seeking to move away from this kind of devotion which one critical priest wrote in *The Sunday Independent* was in danger of putting 'a frivolous idol in the place of a holy God.'[310]

The grotto, however, remains a place where cherished practices no longer hailed by the Church find a home and are readily promoted by the grotto committee. They are especially desirous to promote the family rosary, placing signs at the grotto to encouraging people to recite in their homes. The issue of agency arises out of this and that I believe is what has led to disputes between the committee and the local clergy in the past where the priest and the committee differ in opinions regarding the benefits of prayer at the local shrine and the intercession of Mary. For the Church the grotto acts as a secondary shrine but for the committee and pilgrims it is a place where Mary can be seen and experienced directly and is every bit as important as the local church. And therein lays the crux of the problem for the clergy. If people can directly see and invoke Mary's agency at the local grotto then the priest's agency becomes a lesser and secondary one at best. There is also another worry for the clergy concerning what is and is not acceptable in Catholic orthodoxy and how this can be threatened and at the times from the vantage point of the clergy, flouted at the grotto. For instance one young woman interviewed by Ryan and Kirakowski made the telling statement; 'There are things you'd do out there (i.e. the field

[308] Arnold, 'Materiality', *Encyclopaedia of Religion* p. 10048
[309] Holland, 'Ballinspittle and the bishops' dilemma', p. 8
[310] Fr. Gabriel Daly, 'When hearts move', *Sunday Independent* 22 September 1985 p. 6

at Ballinspittle) that you wouldn't dream of doing in a church in case people thought you were odd'.[311]

Such a statement would unnerve many a priest and therein lies the clergy's fear and animosity towards the Ballinspittle phenomenon. But this statement is also reflective of the vernacular culture of the shrine, that is to say that things one might not deem appropriate to do in the confines of the Church may be more freely expressed at the grotto, especially since the local clergy has as little as possible to do with the devotions the committee organise there. Nevertheless I did find traces of the local clergy's attempt to impose what they see as proper orthodoxy upon the shrine. At the grotto there is a small plaque written in a theological language and couched in Vatican II Mariology. Figure 3.4 shows the A4 plaque.



Figure 3.4: Parish Priest's Plaque at Ballinspittle Grotto (Photo by author)

My suspicions that this was the work of the parish priest were confirmed by Patricia who told me that Canon Kelleher asked for the sign to be put there. Significantly it makes no mention of the moving statue. The sign, entitled 'Our Lady's Shrine at Ballinspittle', begins by addressing the erection of the shrine to mark the Marian Year and explains the

[311]Ryan & Kirakowski, *Ballinspittle* p. 76

Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. From here it proceeds to the Church's stance on Marian veneration and that is expressed simply in the phrase 'To Jesus through Mary'. Kelleher cites biblical examples to portray Mary as the silent and faithful follower of Christ and with true Vatican II principles in mind wrote that 'the devotion that is centred around this shrine is in the line of descent that goes back to the beginnings of the Gospel story'.

Mary then is only a means to get to the agency of Christ, possessing no direct power of her own. Nothing could be further from the actual beliefs of those who venerated the Ballinspittle Madonna but this sign is proof of the contested meanings of the shrine and the Virgin. The parish priest would not have seen fit to place it there unless he thought that those visiting needed a stern reminder of the Church's Mariology. The sign is read, as all the others at the grotto are, by visiting pilgrims and tourists but as to how far its message is assimilated is difficult to assess. On the on hand the committee respect their priest's right to both compose and place it there but his failure to mention anything related to moving statue and miracle claims are a dour reminder to the committee that the local ecclesiastical authorities remain aloof from what has both made and kept the shrine so important to them as devout Catholics. Many in fact were shocked by the Church's response, since as they told me visits to Ballinspittle by lukewarm Catholics and avowed atheists have resulted in many miraculous conversions.

In Mooney's 1992 interview, for instance, one local woman described how she had met a priest who told her that because of the Ballinspittle phenomenon he had witnessed a huge increase of the young 'coming back to the sacraments'. Mention of the repair of Ballinspittle's church was also included as a benefit of the phenomenon, flowing from the surplus donations made from pilgrims. One committee member explained that this had been the custom beforehand; all surplus grotto funds went to the church, since the grotto was its 'property'.[312] Indeed the contemporary press reports noted that masses at Ballinspittle were reaching record attendance. Prayer groups were being formed by those who had experienced something at Ballinspittle. In addition to prayer, pilgrims began to leave their petitions and even money in the crevices of the statue.[313] And still the Church refused to budge. As noted they were willing to recognise the sincerity of people's beliefs but the grotto remains more of a thorn in the side of the local clergy's flesh than anything else. As a result they have continued to shy away from any direct involvement. On the rare

[312] 'If the statues stopped moving', Derek Mooney RTÉ Radio Interview 1992
[313] Jim Farrelly, 'Can see her move: look she is beautiful', *Irish Press* 9 August 1985 p. 6

occasion that the local clergy visit the shrine it is to the sincere delight of the committee. This is usually confined to the feast of the Assumption when a Benediction service is annually held. It should be noted that the Bishop of Cork refused to celebrate mass at the grotto for the 15 August 1985, fearing that if he did so it would send the wrong message, give people false hope and he did not wish to promote the moving statue of Ballinspittle, or so he told the media.[314]

Time has not softened the Church's opinion of the Ballinspittle phenomenon and the hierarchy remain sceptical and unnerved by it. When approached by *The Irish Independent* in 2009 for a comment on Joe Coleman's Knock vigils, Dr Willie Walsh, Bishop of Killaloe, had plenty to say and touched upon the subject of Ballinspittle. In one single statement, the Bishop sums up the Church's opinion of the Ballinspittle moving statue and other related phenomena:

> Ultimately, our religion and our practise of religion for me is found somewhere in the Gospel and the life and teaching and example of Jesus Christ. That is the foundation, not the visions, not the moving statues. [315]

Time has also not defused the tension between grotto committee which promotes both the moving statue and more traditional based devotions and a more ecumenically minded Church which promotes scripture. Agency and contested symbolism remain the sticking point. In her recent documentary, Catherine Foley touches upon what made Ballinspittle so attractive in 1985 and what has kept it alive for many and that is the need for something more than what the Church offers. In her 2013 TG4 documentary *Pobal ag Guí (Public at Prayer),* she comments 'There is a huge spiritual desire within a lot of us...many of us want proof that there is an almighty God amongst us'. She noted the increasing secularisation of Irish society and the falling numbers at weekly mass attendance. Yet she stated that the Irish continue to express 'a need for spectacle, magic…and the promise of a spirituality as happened in Ballinspittle'.[316]

The Ballinspittle phenomenon addresses the gaps at the institutional level and is reflective of the fact that ordinary Catholics still hunger for direct and tangible engagement with the divine 'other' and still yearn for miracles. For its part the Church is dismayed by

[314] Tim Ryan, 'UCC psychologists challenged to shrine debate', *Cork Examiner* 12 August 1985 p.1
[315] John Cooney & Barry Duggan, 'Senior bishop urges pilgrims to stay away from Knock shrine', *The Irish Independent* 4 November 2009 p. 7
[316] *Pobal ag Guí (Public at Prayer)* TG4 2013 Documentary

this need for spectacle, believing the Church sacraments are sufficient. Indeed many clerics bemoaned their failure for not doing a sufficient job of dispensing these sacraments which they believed had caused people to find solace at Ballinspittle. Fr Gabriel Daly was one such cleric, writing in *The Sunday Independent* that the priests and pastors had failed in their 'presentation of the Good News' and as a result people were forced to turn to the moving statues phenomenon 'to satisfy their spiritual needs'.[317] But there is more to the attraction of the Ballinspittle phenomenon than a failure on the clergy's part. Rather as Victor and Edith Turner write in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 'the invisibility and intangibility of the spiritual and supernatural order obviously create problems regarding communication between incarnate and discarnate members of the Church'. How, they ask, can one be sure that a prayer has been heard and acknowledged by the saint or the deity? How can they be certain that there is a divinity beyond this world?[318]

In short people need to directly witness and/or experience the divine to be sure that it exists and this is what the promise of a moving statue holds out for them and that is why Ballinspittle is a site of contested religious agency. When the believer turns to a moving statue the priest feels threatened. Wojick has correctly argued 'at the apparition site, holy miracles are not the sole domain of the Catholic Church, the saints or the divinely chosen few' but are accessible to all pilgrims and believers. Furthermore, he says, the apparition site can become the centre from which Church liturgical reforms are challenged and this has become an increasing aspect of Marian apparition sites in the wake of Vatican II. The faithful have absolved themselves of any guilt by arguing that they have the blessing of the Virgin herself for doing so and are in fact conveying her message to the Church.[319]

A good example of this is to be found in Vose's book. Sheila Cleary who wrote to him to share her apparition experiences at Ballinspittle and Doneraile criticised the local clergy for dismissing her apparition experiences. They were trying to 'hush up' her experiences. The Church, she wrote angrily, could not ignore the miracle of Ballinspittle and should be happy people were going to pray there. At Doneraile grotto the Virgin told her to pray 'the old way'. The agency that the phenomenon gave the people over the authority of the Church was summed up when she said; 'More people are coming back to God and mass, myself included, the ones that did get messages are only trying to carry out

[317] Daly, 'When hearts move', p. 6
[318] Victor W. Turner & Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1978) p. 205
[319] Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven' p. 141

Our Lady's wishes'.[320] And Our Lady wished, she said, for prayer in the old, pre-Vatican II style. Statements such as this are why the Church has continuously distanced itself from the Ballinspittle phenomenon in the hopes that by doing so it will eventually run its course and remove the threat to the agency of the clergy.

A final note on why the Ballinspittle phenomenon and the countless other examples similar to it across the globe are a reminder of an important fact. Despite the Church's dressing down of Mary and the dethroning of her ascendancy in Catholic devotion since Vatican II, there remains what Paula M. Kane calls a 'fluid Marian audience'.[321] Robert Orisi takes this a step further in *Between Heaven and Earth*, where he writes that the Vatican II reforms on Marian devotion 'paradoxically signalled the Virgin's enduring power and presence', a presence which continues to remain as influential as ever despite the institutional Church's strictures on the more traditional rituals attached to the Marian cult.[322] In the Irish context King found that despite the fact families may no longer recite the rosary in the home or erect Marian altars in the month of May, the sales of statues and images of Mary and devotional objects such as rosaries and scapulars remains strong. Additionally, large attendances are still to be seen at Marian novenas and pilgrimages to the Virgin's shrines. Thus, she concludes that there remains 'an audience for Marian devotional media', all of which she argues testifies 'to the continuing popular strength of devotion to Mary'.[323]

It is thanks to shrines such as Ballinspittle that this is the case, for the grottoes erected to Mary in 1954 have created a space where the vernacular devotion to Mary continues to thrive daily despite the Church's reforms. In the case of Ballinspittle where the statue is seen to move, the grotto has become a contested site of devotion whose agency and symbolism are refuted by the Catholic Church. Like the more pessimistic members of the committee I do not think that an institutional blessing from the necessary ecclesiastical authorities will ever come Ballinspittle's way but as long as the ordinary individual seeks out the miraculous, Ballinspittle will remain an attractive if modest centre of Marian pilgrimage. It will keep Mary as what Warner writes she has always been; 'the focus of a vigorous and fertile grassroots piety'.[324] It will too keep a particular incarnation

[320] Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* p. 71
[321] Paula M. Kane, 'Marian Devotion since 1940', J. M. O'Toole (ed.), *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth Century America* (London; Cornell University Press, 2004) p. 126
[322] Robert A. Orisi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the People who study them* (Princeton NJ; Princeton University Press, 2005) pp. 57-8
[323] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* pp. 72-3
[324] Warner, *Alone of all her sex* pp. xxii-xxiii

of Mary alive and will as Carroll says affirm her separate identity and role as 'mother-goddess'.[325] That is why venerating Mary at her own shrines keeps her separateness from the godhead alive, especially so in cases like that of Ballinspittle where miracles are attributed directly to her. So long as this continues the shrine and its cult will be one robustly contested by the institutional Church.

Conclusion

The Ballinspittle moving statue has created an incarnation of Mary who is venerated as a powerful figure and appealed to as a powerful agent in her own right. Devotion to Our Lady of Ballinspittle is underpinned by a materiality which creates a strong sense of a divine presence as channelled through the statue in the grotto, imbuing it with talismanic properties in the mind of pious adherents. Apparition photographs are also imbued with the agency of Our Lady of Ballinspittle for her devotees. Mary's omnipotence and omnipresence at the grotto is channelled through the statue and the use of material religious artefacts. The vernacular Mariology of the shrine can be seen and experienced in multiple ways; through the devotions practiced there, how people narrate their work at and devotion to the shrine and in the devotional prayers, poems and hymns they have composed. The fact that so many people continue to believe in the validity and power of the Ballinspittle grotto despite the Church's ambivalent attitude to the phenomenon is reflective of a simple truth; what constitutes a miracle in the eyes of the ordinary believer and the Church is not always one in the same thing. The Church continues to question that there is anything supernatural in the Ballinspittle phenomenon. Devotees of the Ballinspittle Madonna, however, have no such hesitations. One of my interviewees, Annemarie, put it this way; 'Yes I do believe what happened was a miracle and a manifestation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. No question about it'. Such faith will keep Ballinspittle shrine alive as a site of pilgrimage and vernacular religiosity but as a contested one on the fringes of the institutional Catholic Church.

Sigal writes that there are two types of Marian pilgrimage shrines; those based 'on the veneration of a miraculous statue' and those 'sanctified by an apparition' of Mary and 'the transmission of a message to a believer chosen by her'.[326] In this chapter I have

[325] Carroll, *The cult of the Virgin Mary* p. 224
[326] Sigal, 'Pilgrimage: Roman Catholic Pilgrimage in Europe', *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* p. 7148

explored the former whereas in the next two cases I shall explore the latter. I will begin by discussing the apparitions of Mary reported at the small wayside Lourdes grotto of Mt. Melleray in Co. Waterford in Chapter 4 and I will discuss the still active Inchigeela apparitions in Chapter 5. Melleray, like Ballinspittle attracted, significant pilgrimage and media attention in August 1985, but the events there were fundamentally different in tone and pattern and have spawned their own incarnation of Mary, with her own vernacular cult and its distinctive own rituals.

CHAPTER FOUR: The 'mystic grotto': Mount Melleray

When I arrived at Mount Melleray grotto on 15 August 2013 the first thing I was politely but sternly told is that there is no moving statue here. I had come to the annual nine day novena ceremonies which last from the Feast of the Assumption until the 24 August each year. 'It wasn't a moving statue, it was a vision'; these were the words Melleray grotto committee chairman and father of one of the three visionaries, Jimmy Buckley, first greeted me with. He quickly added that 'at the time they were all talking about moving statues and Ballinspittle, but Melleray was different…it wasn't a moving statue'. But this was something I was already well aware of. I approached my fieldwork at Melleray on a much firmer basis than I initially did Ballinspittle, for it is a shrine I have known since childhood. I was taken there with my siblings on an annual excursion each year in the month of May. The grotto is located in perhaps one of the most beautiful and scenic parts of the Irish countryside; with breath-taking panoramic scenery of mountains, lakes and streams all lining the way on one's journey to Melleray grotto. Thus, I was already familiar with the basic story and operations, if you will, of the shrine. I knew that three local youths had experienced apparitions of the Virgin Mary there and each year I would read their apparition messages in the pamphlet available at the grotto.

I knew also that the rosary is recited there in the summer months and that the apparitions are commemorated annually with a nine day round of rosaries, novenas, vigils and processions. I decided, however, to again begin with participant observation before introducing myself to the grotto committee. I visited the shrine throughout the summers of 2012 and 2013 to observe pilgrims' behaviour there. It was in the context of the annual anniversary celebrations in August 2013 that I formally introduced myself to the committee and met my participants, with whom I conducted my semi-formal interviews. These, along with my observations form the principal sources of this chapter. In addition, I will draw upon the committee's own account of the apparitions as described in their pamphlet and Melleray local William Deevy's longer account, in his booklet *Our Lady is speaking to you*.[327] Where substantive I will also refer to the contemporary media reports and later documentaries. Once more I will not provide a blow by blow account of the

[327] W. Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you: are you listening? Her messages from Melleray Grotto* (published by author, 1986)

apparitions or the events of August 1985. Rather I will focus on how those events have been commemorated and lived since. But I will begin by briefly considering the substance of these apparitions, which have shaped the lives of many and which stood apart so strikingly from the events which took place at Ballinspittle.

The nine day miracle and the message of Melleray

The shrine has long been attached to the moving statue phenomenon and in the popular imagination it is a sort of second Ballinspittle of sorts. There are many features to Melleray grotto which make it stand apart from the typical Irish roadside Marian Shrine. Firstly, it is a wayside rather than a roadside grotto; it cannot be seen from the road. The grotto is nestled on the slopes of the Knockmealdown Mountains, not far from the small townland of Cappoquin in Co. Waterford. Located a mile or so from the shrine is the beautiful Cistercian Melleray Abbey, the monks arrived in the locality in 1832.[328] The entire area is a tranquil and peaceful spot, well suited to the quite life of the local monks. Secondly, the grotto is a bastion of nature, not resembling the usually highly stylised and artificial look of the average Irish Lourdes grotto. The statue of the Virgin Mary stands on a natural cliff face surrounded by trees and vegetation, although in recent years a beautiful stone railing has been erected by the committee. The Monavugga stream can be heard flowing behind the shelter established to protect pilgrims from the elements and the sound of birds chirping rebounds around the shrine. All of this adds to the rather rustic and charming look of the grotto; see Figure 4.1, which I was told was erected in 1979. Its tranquillity somewhat vanished amidst the rush of pilgrims who came there in August 1985.

[328] John D. Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* (Cornwall; United Writers, 1986) p. 36



Figure 4.1: Melleray Grotto (Photo by author, 2013)

The label ‘moving statues’ is something of a misnomer, at least in the context of Melleray. I was told by the Ballinspittle grotto committee that it was conjured up by the media. It is understandable why the media would choose it in the context of Ballinspittle, given that people were describing seeing movements in the statue there. Melleray, however, was different. The events there were more in line with those of La Salette, Lourdes and Fatima. That is to say the Melleray apparitions conformed to the standard patterns in such events; an apparition of Mary rather than a miraculous image and messages transmitted to key personalities in the form of young visionaries. There is, however, much in the Melleray apparitions which tie it to a specific incarnation of Mary as Our Lady of Melleray and to her shrine at Melleray grotto. There were also aspects which have become associated with European Marian apparitions since the 19th century which did not materialise at Melleray; namely there were no secrets given to the visionaries nor did they fall into a state of ecstasy. In other respects, though, the Melleray apparitions were the first instance of a Marian apparition on Irish soil which resembled the more famous European equivalents for Melleray was not a silent vision such as Knock and Ballinspittle.

An in-depth exploration of the apparitions is not necessary to understand the vernacular cult of Our Lady of Melleray. Local man William Deevy essentially sums them up in a note in the preface to his booklet where he wrote;

> It was in that little Grotto, one mile below the Cistercian Monastery of Mount Melleray, in the Knockmealdown Mountains, that Our Blessed Lady chose, on Friday 16 August, 1985, to appear to a seventeen-year-old local girl, Ursula O’Rourke, and

> for the following week to appear and speak to two young local boys, Tom Cliffe, aged twelve and Barry Buckley, aged eleven, giving them messages and warnings of impending world catastrophe.[329]

Throughout the autumn of 1985 these three youths became the focus of media and wider attention for their experiences at what the media would later dub the 'mystic grotto'.[330] In August 2013 I was introduced to Ursula O'Rourke via the committee. She is now married with her own family. I was told that Tom Cliffe was present but wished to keep a low profile. I was, however, introduced to members of Tom's family who serve on the committee, including his mother. Tragically Barry Buckley lost his life in a motor accident and his father, Jimmy with the support of his family, has since dedicated himself to the upkeep of Melleray grotto and spreading the apparition messages received by Barry and his cousin Tom. Neither Ursula nor Tom has claimed any apparition experience since 1985 but both attend the annual ceremonies and Ursula in particular still speaks to interested pilgrims on these occasions. When I met her on 16 August 2013 she had spent the previous night telling a busload of pilgrims from Northern Ireland of her experiences at the shrine twenty-nine years earlier. She remained at the grotto until after midnight to share this with them.

Phenomenologist Sandra Zimdars-Swartz took a particular interest in the Melleray apparitions and conducted fieldwork there shortly after. She thought it significant, and correctly so, that the Melleray apparitions emerged in the context of the moving statues phenomenon. In *Encountering Mary*, she noted that by the time of the Melleray apparitions there were already more than thirty cases of moving statues throughout the Republic of Ireland. Some members of the committee she spoke with admitted that they had seen moving statues at other grottoes beforehand but it was their firm belief that what happened at their shrine 'was of a higher order'.[331] The committee continues to hold to this belief, hence Jimmy Buckley's words to me when I first met him. It is not that they in any way doubt the moving statue phenomenon, Ursula informed me that the Virgin Mary had told Tom and Barry that she would 'make herself known' in other grottoes across the country. It is then merely that they do not wish to have the Melleray apparitions discredited in the manner they believe the Ballinspittle moving statue has been.

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[329] Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you* p. 10
[330] 'Archon', 'Here & there: no earthquakes at Inchigeela', *The Southern Star* 11 September 1993 p. 5
[331] Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: from La Salette to Medjugorje* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991) p. 16

For her part Ursula told me that she and her family had in fact been planning a trip to Ballinspittle on the very day she witnessed her apparition but her mother had decided that the journey was too long and opted for a visit to the local shrine instead. Ursula and the committee attribute this to providence. Her experience of that day is recounted in the committee's pamphlet. This pamphlet, printed on double-sided A5 paper but folded in half to make four A4 pages, was composed by the visionaries parents in the weeks following their apparitions. It was later amended from an account they had previously published in *The Cork Examiner* in December 1985.[332] According to this shorter version, when the O'Rourke family arrived on 16 August 1985 they recited the rosary and noticed nothing unusual until they were preparing to leave. It was Ursula who observed the statue of Mary had changed to a live apparition. The teenager became emotional and began to speak to her apparition, addressing Mary as 'the Queen of Heaven', asking why she had been chosen for this and requesting that her family be blessed. The vision made no reply but simply smiled. Ursula described seeing the shrubbery around the vision form a very dark green, which began to spin around the Virgin. As she walked out of the grotto, Ursula continued to see her vision. When she made it to the family car she was overcome with emotion and broke down. The family returned to grotto, where they could all see the vision whose beauty Ursula has always said no words can accurately describe.[333] The boys and other locals who saw apparitions there described Mary as a young woman, with golden hair and blue eyes and a lightly tanned complexion. She wore the clothes of the Lourdes Madonna; 'a white robe and blue sash'.[334]

The pamphlet does not recount what happened to Ursula next, saying only that many locals came to the grotto the following day and 'had experiences, seeing the statue change to Our Lord, Padre Pio and many other visions'.[335] Despite the committee's protests that the Melleray phenomenon was an apparition-based one, many did claim to witness the statue move there and see images superimposed over it a la the Ballinspittle phenomenon but on the whole greater importance has been attached to the apparitions of the two boys and Ursula. Accordingly, I will focus on those because these are what set Melleray apart from Ballinspittle. Ursula told John D. Vose that on the day after she experienced her apparition she and her sister went to work in Cappoquin as normal. She

[332] Anne Ryan, 'The Melleray 'apparitions', *The Cork Examiner* 24 December 1985 p. 1
[333]'Friday 16th August 1985', *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 1
[334] Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you* p. 20
[335]'Friday 16th August 1985', *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 1

pleaded with her family not to 'spread' what had happened to her the previous evening, but her sister told the staff and so word of the strange occurrences at the grotto circulated. *The Irish Independent* also reported that the local G.A.A. team had visited the shrine on the night of the first apparitions as they were returning from training and thus had a hand in bringing the O'Rourke's family experience to wider attention.[336]

Tom and Barry's apparitions began on the 18 August and lasted for a week. Each evening the boys came to grotto where they communed with their apparition and relayed the messages to the crowds. One committee member, Muckey, described how the boys were accompanied by their parents who relayed the messages via a public address system. The grotto was then much smaller and could not accommodate the mass crowds coming there to watch and pray. As such Muckey explained the majority stood outside on the road and the pathway which leads down into the shrine. Each evening the excitement, one local told me, was 'fever pitched' as people saw and experienced much there and she remembered how Tom and Barry 'would tell us to watch for a sign from Our Lady'. By 21 August the apparitions had come to the media's attention and the North Cork based newspaper *The Avondhu* estimated a total of between eight and ten thousand present. By 9 pm, the report says, people had to walk a distance of almost three miles to pray at the grotto as the roads became impassable with crowds of people thronging the shrine. Some had come from as far away as Galway. By 11 pm cars were parked on both sides of the road to the grotto from Cappoquin. Members of the Waterford Civil Service were on duty to keep order.[337]

The night of the 21 August 1985 is the one which the committee remembers as the most significant because the Virgin, they revealed, worked many 'signs' that night for the crowds. Although their apparitions concluded on 24 August the Melleray visionaries were hounded by the media for some weeks after and gave a substantial interview to *The Cork Examiner* in September[338] and December 1985,[339] even though they had by then returned to school and were no longer visiting the grotto. Pilgrimage, however, continued. One elderly gentlemen from North Cork I met described how 'people came to see the apparitions and, well, they've been coming here ever since…most come during the summer months now you know…but they come every year since'. By time Zimdars-Swartz was writing in 1991 Melleray was, she wrote, Ireland's second largest site of

[336] Joseph Power, 'Talking statue: Bishop urges caution', *The Irish Independent* 22 August 1985 p. 1
[337] 'Movements' at Melleray', *The Avondhu* 22 August 1985 p. 1
[338] Carole Coleman, 'I was chosen by Our Lady…', *The Cork Examiner* p. 7
[339] Anne Ryan, 'The Melleray 'apparitions', *The Cork Examiner* 24 December 201985 p. 1

pilgrimage to a Marian shrine.[340] While Melleray does not attract anywhere near the one million pilgrims that visit Knock annually, it has remained Ireland's second premier site of pilgrimage to an apparition shrine. I noticed that the grotto receives noticeably larger crowds than what I had seen in Ballinspittle. The crowds ranged from one hundred to almost two hundred for the anniversary ceremonies in August 2013 and throughout my regular visits there from 2012-14; there was a steady flow of pilgrims throughout the summer months. One can always judge how many have visited the grotto by the number of candles burning in the specially provided stone sconce and the bouquets of flowers left there. It is a rare occasion when one sees no burning candles there, which can be seen burning away even in the heart of the winter months.

Ever since the apparitions concluded the committee has described their mission as two fold; the regular work of a committee in maintaining the shrine and organising prayer ceremonies and the added feature of being the custodians of Mary's message which they make freely available to all at the grotto and on their website.[341] The annual anniversary ceremonies continue to attract pilgrims from across the country. Busloads of pilgrims descended on the shrine even from as far away as Belfast in 2013. The committee places adverts, such as Figure 4.2 below, in the local newspapers and businesses inviting all to these ceremonies which are quite elaborate.


MELLERAY GROTTO
CAPPOQUIN, CO WATERFORD
"MY MESSAGE IS PEACE & PRAYER" - AUGUST 1985
THURSDAY, AUGUST 15th
"FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION"
Prayers 3-5pm incl Annual Benediction of Blessed Sacrament (by special permission) at 3pm.
Celebrant Fr Thaddeus Doyle, Shilleagh, Co Wicklow (of Curates Diary) – followed by Ceremony of Healing
Evening Prayers including Candlelight Procession at 8pm
Prayer Leader: Fr Thaddeus Doyle | Choir: Melleray Folk Choir
PROGRAMME FOR 28TH ANNIVERSARY 2013
Organised Prayers in Grotto during Anniversary, Aug. 16th - 24th incl
Evenings commencing 8pm | Saturday 9pm
FRIDAY, AUGUST 16th
Prayer Leader: Fr Ml Fitzgerald P.P. Mitchelstown
SATURDAY, AUGUST 17th
Prayer Leader: Night Vigil Group
Prayers 9pm:
Night Vigil 12pm-6am
SUNDAY, AUGUST 18th
Prayers 3pm | Prayers 8pm
Prayer Leader: Fr Ml Campbell C.C. Kilbren, Kanturk
MONDAY, AUGUST 19th
Prayer Leader: Fr John Kiely P.P. Cappoquin
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8th
Our Lady's Birthday Prayers at 8pm incl Candlelight Procession
TUESDAY, AUGUST 20th
Prayer Leader: Fr Ml Cullinan P.P. Lismore
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 21st
Prayer Leader: Fr Eamon ODriscoll OFM Waterford
THURSDAY, AUGUST 22nd
Prayer Leader: Fr Ml Farrell P.E. Tallow Choir
FRIDAY, AUGUST 23rd
Waterford Marion Group
SATURDAY, AUGUST 24th
Anniversary will close. Prayers 3pm
Prayer Leader: Fr Ml Fitzgerald P.P. Mitchelstown
CONCLUDING WITH CANDLELIGHT PROCESSION
GROTTO IS OPEN FOR PRAYER AT ALL TIMES DAY & NIGHT

Figure 4.2: Melleray anniversary ceremonies advert in *The Avondhu* August 2013

[340] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary* p. 16
[341] (http:www.melleray.com/prayer_and_peace)

Over the years many have continued to claim many different experiences at the shrine. In 1997, for example, *The Mirror* reported that a teenager from Co. Down was having apparitions there[342] and more recently Ballyfermot visionary Joe Coleman claimed he was told to go there by Mary to receive one of his regular apparitions.[343] When I asked Jimmy about these he replied that the committee has only sought to commemorate the apparitions of August 1985 as creditworthy, suggesting the others may have been caused by 'the deceiver', that is to say the devil. And so it is the apparitions of Ursula O'Rourke, Tom Cliffe and Jimmy's son Barry which spawned the cult of Our Lady of Melleray and which is honoured each year from May to October with public rosaries, processions, Benedictions and special days for the sick. After almost three decades, pilgrimage to Melleray remains popular, more so even than to the more publicised Ballinspittle and this shrine is too seeped in a vernacular religiosity.

I shall follow the same structure as I employed in the previous chapter and begin by examining the incarnation of Mary which is Our Lady of Melleray. The Virgin here is more militant in style and her cult is closely allied to a national identity. The Melleray Virgin bears little resemblance to the characteristics of the Ballinspittle Madonna. I will then progress to discuss the shrine's topophilia which is more intricate than that of Ballinspittle. Materiality at Melleray is tied much more closely to the shrine's natural features but I will discuss the role the statue of Mary and other manufactured material artefacts play there in a separate section and examine the natural materiality in relation to the grotto's topophilia. I will conclude by discussing the response of the Catholic Church to the Melleray apparitions and the much less strained relationship between the grotto committee and the local ecclesiastical authorities than that I described in relation to Ballinspittle.

Our Lady of Melleray

In her assessment of Marian devotion since the 1940s, Paula M. Kane comments that Marian piety is now directed towards an apocalyptic, militant and reactionary devotion to Mary and the use of Mary's presence at her apparition shrines is used as a mobilising force for those who feel threatened by a modernity they believe is causing the decay of

[342] 'Virgin Mary spoke to me; teenager's vision starts rush of pilgrims to shrine', *The Mirror* 31 July 1997
[343] Eimear Ni Bhraonain, 'Visionary' gets too much information', *The Irish Times* 26 August 2010 p. 22

traditional Catholic morality.[344] Since the 19th century Marian apparitions have taken on a pronounced millennial tone, which continued to strengthen throughout the 20th century and shows no sign of receding in the 21st. Melleray, however, was the first example of this in the Irish context. The Melleray apparitions were the first, public at least, Irish revelations from the Virgin that bore specific requests and warnings. The figure of Mary has become somewhat entangled with the battle of wills created between the rise of secularisation and conservative minded Catholics and as a result Miri Rubin argues that her 'figure has not been lost' in the modern age but has undergone a transformation.[345] Mary has gone from being the passive Mother of God to a major player and agent in the affairs of humanity via her many apparitions. She has become the patroness for traditional Catholic ideals and morals and those who adhere to this flock to her many apparition cults. The cult of Our Lady of Melleray is a fine example of this.

The description of the apparitions composed by the committee paints an image of a Mary that is a rather complex figure. She is at once maternal and regal, close but distant. The softer side of the Melleray Madonna is seen in the messages she imparts to the boys. Over and over again she speaks of her great love for the Irish people; 'I love the Irish people…I am praying with the people to God to forgive the Irish people'.[346] She also comforted the boys when frightened and show acts of kindness such as warming them with breezes when they felt cold. Yet on other occasions the Virgin appeared withdrawn and distant. For instance on one evening Tom extended his arm to touch his apparition but was met with a harsh reproof and on another when he read a note passed to him from the crowd he received a sharp pain in his ear.[347] Moreover, the boys addressed Mary with formal salutations such as 'Queen of Heaven' and overall while they praised the kindness the Virgin had showed them the account of the apparitions does not show the same level of intimacy between Virgin and visionary one notes in earlier apparitions such as those of Lourdes, Garabandal and Medjugorje. Compared to the Ballinspittle Madonna, the Melleray one is more of a sombre and serious figure bearing messages of a looming chastisement, she has more in common with the Fatima incarnation of Mary.

She does however possess the same omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent attributes that feature in all Marian apparitions. For example, she regularly told the boys

[344] Paula M. Kane, 'Marian Devotion since 1940', J. M. O'Toole (ed.), *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth Century America* (London; Cornell University Press, 2004) p. 126
[345] Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (London; Allen Lane, 2009) p. 413
[346]'Tuesday 20 August 1985', *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 4
[347] Ibid

that she was blessing the people, especially the sick amongst the crowds. Unlike the Ballinspittle example, her omniscience was revealed through the standard predictions of global importance. Once, for instance, she was asked 'why is there so much suffering in Ethiopia?' and made the ominous reply 'It is the cruelty of the world'. Also, it is the belief of Jimmy Buckley that the prayers recited by pilgrims from the North of Ireland at the grotto played an integral role in bringing peace to the troubled state. This belief is shared amongst many in Ballinspittle also. Patricia Bowen, for example, believes that it was the prayers said by pilgrims at both shrines which brought peace to the North of Ireland. As for Mary's omnipresence that was reinforced by her constant requests for people to visit her in her shrine and pray there with her.[348] The most interesting aspect of the cult of Our Lady of Melleray is its attachment to a national Catholic Irish identity, more so than is the case with the Ballinspittle Madonna. To be clear, the Ballinspittle and Melleray committees both set the phenomena at the shrines as a signal from Mary that traditional Irish Catholic identity is under threat and as a call to return to a more traditional life of Catholic piety. The difference between the two cases is that this is inferred in the case of the Ballinspittle phenomenon but was actually verbally requested in the Melleray apparitions.

This trend is not unique in the Irish context. Zlatko Skrbiš, for example, has written an article examining the absorption of Croatian nationalism and nationalist discourse in the context of the Medjugorje apparitions. The apparitions have been co-opted into nationalism because of the idea of being 'chosen' or 'specialness' and this allows Croatian nationalists to appropriate the messages of the Medjugorje apparitions in their discourse. Skrbiš found that because of Medjugorje, Croatians felt 'special' as a result of coming from a country where the Virgin Mary continuously appears. He conducted this research amongst second generation Croatians in the 1990s. Despite the fact that Medjugorje is outside of Croatia, Skrbiš noted that Croatian nationalist literature lies between 'nationalist struggles and the appropriation and mobilisation of the Virgin Mary'. In short, reference to Marian apparitions and the shared idea of being 'a chosen nation' which they create can be co-opted by nationalist groups to gain support for and justify their actions.[349]

In the previous chapter I noted similar points made by Agnieszka Halemba on this absorption of national identities into localised cults of Mary or incarnations of Mary tied to

[348] Ibid

[349] Zlatko Skrbiš, 'The apparitions of the Virgin Mary of Medjugorje: the convergence of Croatian nationalism and her apparitions', *Nations and Nationalism* vol. 11 no. 3 (2005) (pp. 443-61) pp. 443-5

particular locales, (see pp. 83-4). Scholars have already noted this trend manifesting in the Irish context out of the Melleray apparitions. Angela Martin is one. She writes that Irish women have been constantly involved in a continuous 'mimetic performance of Mary'. They use the image of Mary and make references to apparition messages such as of those of Melleray to suggest that the Irish are a chosen nation, destined to uphold traditional Catholic ideals.[350] When one examines the messages imparted by the Melleray Madonna it is not difficulty to see why they would appeal to a national identity, because they explicitly state that the Irish nation has been chosen to spread the Virgin's warning:

> I want the Irish people to spread my message to the world…God is pleased with Ireland, Ireland will be saved. I want the people to convey my message to the world…I want the world to get my message…I want all of ye to tell the world.[351]

The remainder of the messages warned that the devil was attempting to seize control of the Catholic Church and pleaded with the people to return in greater numbers to the mass and prayer as the only means to avoid this, and the Irish were entrusted with the mission of making this known across the world.[352]

No small amount of pride has been attached to this special favour for the Irish. When I met Ursula, for example, she jubilantly told me how when the Medjugorje visionaries asked their apparition about what was simultaneously happening in Ireland in 1985 she made the reply 'The Irish are the messengers of my message'. By acting as the custodians of the apparition shrine and the messages attached to it, the grotto committee have assumed agency from the Virgin herself. They can justify this by making it clear that they are merely adhering to the requests made by the Virgin herself. They set about spreading the messages immediately following the conclusion of the boys' apparitions. Zimdars-Swartz used her fieldwork with them in the case study 'in the Development of an Apparition narrative'. She reports that instantly the committee set about publishing the apparition messages and worked with William Deevy to this end. They placed signs at the grotto requesting pilgrims to send accounts of their own experiences to them. The accounts, Zimdars-Swartz, noted went through several stages; firstly the boys' parents

[350] Angela K. Martin, 'Death of a nation: transnationalism, bodies and abortion in late Twentieth-century Ireland', T. Mayer (ed.), *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (Routledge; London, 2000) pp. 69-73
[351] *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) pp. 2-4
[352] Ibid

made a handwritten account each evening and these were later redrafted into the committee's pamphlet (and the pamphlet went through a number of editions in the early months also) before Deevy's longer booklet. Interestingly she noted that some of the Virgin's more personal messages to the boys and members of the crowd were omitted as being only of 'private concern'. She sums up the importance of the committee's account for pilgrims when she wrote that what began as an oral process within a community which was coming to terms with some unusual experiences 'thus leads, finally, to a written account, which tends to be accepted as canonical by persons who are subsequently drawn into the believing community'.[353]

Canonical is certainly how pilgrims I encountered in my own fieldwork at the shrine treat the grotto committee's account of the apparitions and many told me how each year they return with a number of the pamphlets to distribute in their own community. One lady from the West of Ireland had even sent some to America and the UK 'because Our Lady asked the Irish people to spread those messages'. The Melleray Madonna acts as the patroness of traditional Irish Catholic identity and this became clear to me whilst listening to the petitions pilgrims shared over the PA system. Drawing upon Zimdars-Swartz's theory, John P. Mitchell correctly comments that apparitions and their messages reflect 'broader socio-religious concerns'.[354] This is definitely something I found at Melleray in the petitions of pilgrims. One woman, for instance, prayed for Our Lady to protect the unborn and stop the government from pushing through any abortion legalisation. Another prayed for the children of 'broken marriages' and for a fall in the divorce rate. A third prayed for an increase in vocations. The Melleray Madonna then is a rallying figure for those disturbed by what they perceive as a decaying morality in Irish society. In their desperation they turn to the Virgin Mary at the shrine where she has specifically chosen them to spread her messages to prevent just this from happening. As such Melleray has become de facto Ireland's second national Marian shrine, even in the absence of an ecclesiastical pronouncement to that effect. As one gentlemen told me 'Our Lady chose this shrine for the all the Irish people who believe'.

Michael P. Carroll notes that 'there are millions who have worked to promote the devotions associated with some particular "Mary" '[355] and the Melleray grotto committee

[353] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary* pp. 12-5
[354] John P. Mitchell, 'Performing statues', David Morgan (ed.), *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon; Routledge, 2010) p. 264
[355] Michael P. Carroll, *The cult of the Virgin Mary: psychological origins* (Surrey; Princeton University Press, 1986) p. 116

and the devotees of the Melleray Madonna are firmly amongst them. Each apparition is a chance to encounter a particular incarnation of the Virgin, which as Halemba argues is 'a personal, highly emotional experience'. Moreover, the apparition site created by the vision is 'especially significant as simultaneously sites of national struggles and of feelings of unity with the world and sacrum'. Mary, Halemka writes, acts as a 'transnational agent' because via her apparition incarnations she has played a key role in 'the building of national identities, but simultaneously her presence attracts international pilgrims to her apparitional sites'.[356] Although the Melleray Madonna acts as the patroness of Ireland her shrine has nevertheless attracted wider pilgrimage. In 1990 busloads of French pilgrims from Marseilles visited the shrine and were captivated. They came with two priests. Two weeks later *The Munster Express* reported that two French nuns were staying at Melleray and were enjoying the 'rare atmosphere and peaceful peace of the Irish shrine'. They had first discovered the shrine in W. Deevy's booklet.[357]

Rubin has written that 'the habits developed in nineteenth century, of apocalyptic devotional mobilisation around shrines, in reaction to perceived attacks by liberal and democratic movements, served some Catholics well during the 'Godless' twentieth'.[358] This remains the case at Melleray where the Virgin is first and foremost venerated as the Queen of Ireland and the Protectress of Irish and universal Catholic identity in the modern world. Despite the universal style of the Melleray messages, there were still elements in them which give the Melleray Madonna a localised vernacular feel. For example, as is the case with the majority of Marian apparitions, the Virgin used the local dialect and syntax. Thus, instead of using 'you' in the plural she used the vernacular Irish syntax 'ye'. Additionally the boys told the crowds that the Virgin prayed the rosary in Irish and that when she prayed it in English she did not use her own name, i.e. 'Hail…full of grace'.[359] The use of local dialect, though, too adds to a sense of being chosen. The fact that Mary is always described as speaking the local dialect and in the appearance of a native where ever she appears supports nationalist discourses of being chosen.

Through my participant observations I noticed that the Melleray Madonna is a figure that is still capable of commanding respect from pilgrims. The committee have placed a number of signs in the grounds of the shrine which ask pilgrims to remain silent

[356] Agnieszka Halemba, 'National, transnational or cosmopolitan heroine? The Virgin Mary's apparitions in contemporary Europe', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* vol. 34 no. 3(March 2011) (pp. 454-70) p. 465
[357] 'Special evening in Mount Melleray', *Munster Express* 10 August 1990 p. 20
[358] Rubin, Mother of God p. 418
[359] *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011)

and respect the sanctity of the grotto in accordance with the expressed wish of the Virgin. One notice under the title 'Facts about Our Blessed Lady's apparitions at Melleray Grotto' in particular conveys the idea that the committee believes in Mary's continued presence in the grotto. This sign, an A4 laminated paper, explains how on 19 August 1985 the people's behaviour at the grotto was unruly, upsetting the apparition who demanded that they 'behave', in light of this the committee through the medium of this sign requests all pilgrims to 'please respect the wishes of Our Blessed Lady' since they suggest when the apparition said 'I want prayer' the indication was 'that she wanted this Grotto to be a place of prayer'. Pilgrims I observed respect this. While left alone in the grotto with two middle aged ladies, I heard one comment that 'we'd better stop the auld chatter….she doesn't like it. C'mon we'll say the Joyful mysteries'. When I first approached Muckey, the first member of the committee I introduced myself to, he was tidying the grotto grounds. He kindly but promptly directed me to the entrance of the shrine to speak with him there, not wishing to disturb the praying pilgrims because the silence is only to be broken by the recitation of prayer and the signing of hymns.

I also witnessed something there I had not seen at Ballinspittle nor any other Marian grotto I visited in the course of my fieldwork; pilgrims genuflecting at the shrine's railings. Normally the act of genuflecting is usually reserved for an act of homage to the consecrated Eucharist within the Catholic Church and it is a reflection of the genuine belief that some pilgrims, not all pilgrims did this, have that the Virgin Mary is ever present in the shrine. I shall explore this point in more detail below where I discuss the topophilia of the shrine. To conclude on the Melleray Madonna's cult I wish to discuss the strong devotion members of the Irish Travelling community have to both the shrine and Our Lady of Melleray. I did not notice a strong presence of members of the Irish Travelling community at Ballinspittle but on occasion they did visit the shrine in small numbers. In a thought-provoking article Attracta M. Brownlee explores Traveller devotion to Mary and pilgrimage to Knock. Travellers turn out in strong numbers to the Co. Mayo Shrine each year on the 15 August. She writes that Travellers have a 'great fidelity to the Virgin Mary and to particular shrines associated with her'. Brownlee lists Knock, Our Lady of Clonfert's shrine in Galway and Lady's Island, Wexford as the most popular.[360] One could comfortably add Melleray to this list. On the Feast of the Assumption 2013 there was a constant steady stream of Traveller pilgrims to the shrine all day and for the

[360] Attracta M. Brownlee, 'Irish Travelers at Knock: Contesting Sacred Space', *New Hibernia Review* vol. 15 no.2 (Summer 2011) (pp. 126-35) p. 126

midday and evening ceremonies. By far and away the devout Traveller pilgrims brought the most flowers and votive candles to the shrine.

Travellers, unlike the majority of the Catholic population in modern Ireland, continue to place a high emphasis in honouring Mary in the home with domestic and garden Mary shrines and the recitation of the rosary. Devotion to the Virgin, Brownlee writes, is higher amongst Traveller women but Traveller men do participate in annual pilgrimages to Marian shrines in strong numbers. This is certainly along the lines of what I witnessed at Melleray. Interestingly she notes that while the institutional Catholic Church emphasise Mary's virginity and passivity, Traveller women instead emphasis Mary's strength, her maternal protection, her courage and womanhood. This is, she says, because Traveller's have their own traditions and their own distinct way of being Catholic. In short, Traveller women mirror their culture in how they perceive and venerate the Virgin. At Knock Travellers thus do not always participate in the ecclesiastically organised devotions but like other pilgrims they make devotions 'for ritually protecting the family and the community'. Mary then is their patroness and Protectress of Traveller culture and heritage.[361]

At Melleray the Traveller pilgrims did participate in the organised ceremonies which largely consisted of the recitation of the rosary but many returned to recite it privately as a family for their own personal intentions throughout the day. They place great faith in the protection and agency of the Melleray Madonna. In the evening, as I sat in the grotto's shelter I listened to two Traveller families share their reasons for coming there. A young mother had come she told the matriarch of the second family because she wished to pray for her brother and his family after he tragically committed suicide at a young age leaving a widow and a daughter behind him. Her parents, she said, were 'hurt' and had stopped attending mass and praying in their grief. At this the husband of the elder lady told her she had come to right place and that 'Our Lady…she'll help ye all…she'll bless ye'. Over the course of the day I watched as Traveller pilgrims collected bottles of Melleray's holy water to, one elderly lady told me, 'bless our homes and keep harm away from us'. The Melleray Mary cult has also become absorbed in Traveller devotion to the Virgin Mary and attracts a significant share of traditional Traveller pilgrimage on the 15 August each year.

[361] Ibid pp. 128-31

An interesting aspect of devotion to the Melleray Madonna is how certain pre-existing rituals and devotions have taken on a new meaning at the shrine. Throughout the apparitions, the boys relayed to the crowd how Mary sang the hymn Peace is Flowing Like a River and on several nights requested the crowds to sing it. As Deevy put it, the hymn 'was Our Lady's theme song' whilst appearing at Melleray.[362] It is printed on the back of the committee's pamphlet under the title 'Our Blessed Lady's Hymn.[363] The committee's account of the apparitions makes it clear that this hymn was not composed at Melleray; 'Tom and Barry heard Our Lady singing the hymn, but not being familiar with it, they relayed the words. Members of the crowds recognised it'.[364] Nevertheless, the hymn is now exclusively associated with the Melleray Madonna in the eyes of committee and devout pilgrims alike. On the final Saturday evening four elderly pilgrims concluded their rosary by singing 'Our Lady's hymn'. On the feast of the Assumption, the 24 August and on the feast of the Virgin's nativity, 8 September, candle light processions are held at the grotto. These are, I contend, a conscious emulation of rituals practiced at Marian shrines such as Lourdes and Knock. It is a way of saying that devotion to the Melleray Madonna is as legitimate as those apparitions that have received an institutional blessing. A small statue of Our Lady of Lourdes is taken on procession through the grounds because the statue in the grotto is a Lourdes model but in reality this procession is in honour of Our Lady of Melleray and this is a prime example of the globalised being re-localised. Traditional Marian rituals take on new meanings at each Marian shrine; the same ritual may be put in practice but in honour of a different incarnation of Mary.

The apparitions at Melleray in August 1985, their message and the cult dedicated to Our Lady of Melleray has made the shrine Ireland's second most popular apparition pilgrimage site, second only to Knock. The committee have dedicated much of their lives to honouring the requests made during the apparitions to maintain the shrine as a place of pilgrimage and to spread the message entrusted to the Irish people. The Melleray Mary, like the Ballinspittle one, is a powerful agent. Our Lady of Melleray is a militant Madonna, calling upon the people to pray in greater numbers to avoid the wrath of God and has become the patroness of Irish Catholic identity. The role the Melleray Virgin plays in the lives of her devotees is nicely encapsulated by sociologist Michelle Spencer-Arsenault in her assessment of the gendered aspects of devotion to Mary in Canada. (I shall explore this

[362]Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you are you listening?* p.41
[363] *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 4
[364] Ibid p. 3

more in the context of the Inchigeela apparitions in the next chapter.) Spencer-Arsenault describes Mary as a 'maternal friend' who acts as bridge between this world and the supernatural world. Her image 'provides both comfort and challenge in a world filled with disappointment, excitement, ambiguity and despair'.[365] This is certainly in keeping with how the Melleray Madonna is both envisioned and venerated at her shrine. Topophilia plays a fundamental role in the charisma and attraction of Melleray grotto. The natural beauty of the place adds significantly to the cult of the Melleray Madonna and pilgrims believe that by appearing there, Mary has imbued the shrine with her special blessings. I shall now explore this element of vernacular religiosity at Melleray.

'A little bit of heaven'; Melleray's topophilia

In *Alone all of her sex*, Warner discusses the increasing significance of apparition shrines since the 16th century Counter Reformation. At that time elements of longstanding Catholic devotion and veneration, most notably reliquary shrines, were coming under attack as 'bogus' from reformers and consequently in response the Catholic Church downgraded these former sites of mass pilgrimage. The need for pilgrimage, however, did not dissipate and a void was left behind. That void, she writes, was filled by apparition shrines, which created 'a new and fertile seam of holy things'. The site of the Virgin's appearance and the place where the visionary communed with her became imbued with heavenly 'grace'. As Warner puts it 'an apparition sanctified the portion of the terrestrial sphere where it took place with lasting salvific effect'.[366] Apparition shrines, of course, date from well before the 16th century but Warner's argument that with the dramatic decrease in saint relic shrines these apparition sites became all the more important is an interesting one. This no doubt bolstered Mary's ascendancy over the other saints of the Catholic Church, since Marian apparitions far outweighed the number of apparitions of other saints and even Christ. Carroll argues that Marian apparitions are central to Marian devotion because the majority of Marian shrines are attached to an apparition.[367]

James J. Preston has identified a common denominator in all such pilgrimage shrines; a 'spiritual magnetism'. This 'spiritual magnetism' is, he says, derived from

[365] Michelle Spencer-Arsenault, 'Mother Mary: The (Re)Construction of a Female Icon', *Sociology of Religion* vol. 61 no. 4 (2000) (pp. 479-83) p. 482
[366] Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary* (London; Pan Books, 1990) p. 301
[367] Carroll, *The cult of the Virgin Mary* p. 115

human concepts and values, which come together in one place in four variables; miraculous healings and cures, apparitions, sacred geography and difficulty of access. These variables come into play in varying degrees at each site of pilgrimage.[368] In the case of Melleray I noticed that the grotto exerts a powerful and pronounced 'spiritual magnetism' or charisma over pilgrims and locals. Three of Preston's variables are detectable in the case of pilgrimage to Melleray grotto. None of my participants expressed any difficulty of access either to the spirituality of the shrine or in making a journey to it. They did, however, narrate their experiences of and belief in the shrine in terms Warner uses for apparition shrines, that, they believe that Melleray grotto has been blessed by the salvific presence of Mary. For example, Jimmy Buckley spoke to me of all the 'blessings and graces' his family had received from the shrine. He has shared this belief in many previous press interviews. In an interview with *The Sunday Independent* for the fifteenth anniversary of the apparitions, Jimmy described how despite the tragedies they experienced, the families involved in the apparitions continued to consider themselves 'blessed' by their experiences there. Tragically by then Jimmy and his wife had lost a second son but the grotto remained 'a source of faith for life's hardships and mysteries'.[369]

The sentiment is widely shared by pilgrims. Repeatedly pilgrims described the 'great sense of peace' that comes to them whilst praying at the grotto. Melleray is the favourite shrine of Mary from Kilworth in North Cork. 'There is something in Mount Melleray for me', she said, 'there is nothing there but there is something there for me…a simple place…where time would move for me without me even noticing it'. When asked if she could describe what that 'something' was she simply replied 'I don't know what you would call it…only a holy or peaceful feeling'. Mary has never seen or experienced anything unusual at the grotto but believes that because of this 'holy feeling' she gets there that something did happen there in 1985. 'Maybe it's all the prayers that have been said there…I don't know but I know that it is a holy place'. Many pilgrims I spoke with narrated their experiences in the same manner and many too believe that the apparitions and the prayers said there have made the grotto a sacred place. J. Eade and M. J. Sallnow comment that 'the sacred centre' or shrine often 'appears as a vessel into which pilgrims devoutly pour their prayers, hopes and aspirations'.[370] This is very much the case with

[368] James J. Preston, 'Spiritual Magnetism: An Organising Principle for the Study of Pilgrimage', A. Morinis (ed.), *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991) p. 33
[369] 'Blessings', *The Sunday Independent* 13 August 2000 p. 42
[370] J. Eade & M.J. Sallnow (eds.), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London; Routledge, 1991) p. 15

Mount Melleray grotto, where I watched as pilgrims recited their rosaries and placed their petitions in the specially provided box.

The natural setting of the grotto, in the heart of the Irish countryside, certainly plays its part in the sacred geography and topophilia of the grotto. Vose touches on this in his description of the grotto:

> The statue of the Virgin Mary is set on a hillside surrounded by brambles and trees. A more natural setting would be impossible to envisage. Birds chatter in the greenery and drink at the tiny stream which flows from a spring on the grotto floor. A place more suited to peaceful prayer would be almost impossible to find.[371]

Many pilgrims directly addressed this in our semi-formal interviews. Margaret from Mitchelstown (North Cork), for example, told me how; 'I could stay there all day…just listening to water and the birds singing and I wouldn't have a bother in the world'. Another middle aged woman told me that she now favours Melleray over Knock and Lourdes which she feels has become too 'commercialised'. Melleray grotto is more attractive to her because 'it's poor here…it's all about prayer and not money, it's simpler'. Even sceptics I spoke with described the shrine as a very peaceful place and one man could well understand the attraction of it for pilgrims; 'Well it's in a lovely place isn't it? I can understand why people would think they feel something supernatural there or get some kind of a vibe because of the nature of the place'. A shrine's location is of paramount importance to its topophilia and it is no coincidence that shrines like Melleray and Ballinspittle are located on quiet country roadsides.

The committee and pilgrims alike believe that the spiritual graces and blessings bestowed upon the grotto by Mary herself manifest in it in tangible and visible ways. This has been described in two respects. Firstly, in the miracle cures attached to pilgrimages to the shrine and especially in its holy water and secondly in a number of other signs incorporating natural elements in the shrine. I shall deal with the latter before I discuss the importance of the grotto's holy water well. Pierre André Sigal posits that pilgrimage is a means 'of coming into contact with the divine and thereby obtaining grace because of the accumulation of supernatural power in the pilgrimage site'.[372] A number of instances at the grotto have been described in terms of hierophany; that is the divine manifesting in the

[371] Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* p. 38
[372] Pierre André Sigal, 'Pilgrimage: Roman Catholic Pilgrimage in Europe', Lindsay Jones (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* 2nd ed. vol. 10 (Detroit; Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) p. 7148

natural world. For example, one member of the committee told *The Cork Examiner* how on one particular occasion, during the evening apparition and while the crowd was 'deep' in prayer, the chippings on the ground and the water in the stream at the grotto became luminous. It remained this way, she said, for a considerable period of time. Twice people broke off small pieces of twigs on trees blocking their view of the statue, which then transformed into the shape of the cross. One woman described how a friend had brought one of the luminous sticks to her house to show her. They decided to split it in two and share it but when they snapped it 'the power was gone out of it'.[373]

Many pilgrims shared similar stories with me. One woman told me how she regularly saw a basket of roses appear near the statue. Another who had found luminous sticks at the grotto took them home and fashioned a crucifix from them, which she hangs in her kitchen. All of this, the committee told me is a visible sign that Mary has appeared and remained at the shrine, that 'her blessings pour forth here' as one particular enthusiastic pilgrim put it. The topophilia of the grotto then is deeply allied to the surrounding nature in the minds of the pilgrims. Each aspect of the shrine; its trees, its stream is treated as sacred. Additionally many have claimed to witness the famous Sun Miracle at the grotto. In the summer of 1986 several press reports surfaced regarding bizarre solar phenomena at Melleray. *The Irish Times* reported how pilgrims praying in the grotto had seen the Sun change to a 'pinkish' colour and transform into 'the shape of a heart'. Thereafter it appeared to 'burst' and spray a 'light purple mist far and wide'.[374] Deevy's booklet too recounts instances of the 'Sun Miracle' seen at Melleray.[375]

Others told the media of seeing 'dancing lights' at distance from the grotto. Two men working in a nearby field, for example, claimed that a 'brilliant light' came across the sky from the direction of the grotto, which went down the chimney of a local house and illuminated it.[376] Over the years the committee have continued to see this kind of phenomena. One member, Muckey, remembered seeing a very bright star pass over the grotto on one particular occasion. The impression given by both pilgrims and the committee is that these 'signs', as they call them, are tangible proof that a supernatural presence is still to be found at the grotto. The topophilia of the shrine is something which is both felt but can take on visible form in the natural surrounds of the grotto. All of this gives the shrine what locals call a 'heavenly presence'. One elderly gentleman from

[373] 'Tales of the unexpected', *The Cork Examiner* 25 September 1985 p. 7
[374] 'Sun 'changed its form over Grotto', *The Irish Times* 17 June 1986 p. 6
[375]Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you are you listening?* p. 69
[376] 'Tales of the unexpected', *The Cork Examiner* 25 September 1985 p. 7

Galway said of the grotto via the PA system 'it's the nearest thing to heaven we have here on earth'. There is a belief that the holiness of the grotto can be traced back to its erection in 1979. Deevy gives voice to this in his booklet. On 19 January 1985 'ever before the apparitions', a bible was found at the grotto bearing the inscription; 'I donate this Bible to this shrine where I found some Miraculous cures. It will be remembered in my prayers'. This led Deevy to conclude that 'the Grotto has been a holy place for some time'.[377]

This is certainly the local feeling as I encountered it in the course of my fieldwork. But one element of the shrine's topophilia has directly arisen out of the apparitions; the holy water well. On the top left hand corner of the committee's pamphlet is what they believe is the most important message imparted by the Virgin Mary to Tom and Barry; 'My Message is Peace and Prayer. Tell the People that the Water is Blessed'[378] I watched as pilgrims drank from the shrine's holy water well, dip their rosaries in it and fill bottles of it to distribute to family and friends. Many miraculous cures have been attributed to it. Tom Cliffe told *The Mirror* in 1997 that 'there have been plenty of cures from that water over the years'.[379] The presence of holy water wells and 'miraculous springs' have become a famous component of Marian apparition shrines since the visions at La Salette in 1846 but especially those of Lourdes in 1858.[380] The holy water well is certainly a prominent feature of the shrine, now surmounted in a stone arch as seen here in Figure 4.3.



Figure 4.3: Melleray Holy Water Well (Photo by author, 2013)

[377]Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you are you listening?* p. 70
[378] *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 1
[379] 'We saw the Virgin Move; her gown rustled in wind and a crown appeared on her head', *The Mirror* 31 July 1997
[380] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary* pp. 35-6

Sigal writes that 'the salvation of the soul and the thirst for miracles' remains the motive for pilgrimage.[381] This is certainly a factor in pilgrimage to Melleray. On the 15 August 2013 a special 'Ceremony of Healing' was conducted at the shrine, which has now become hailed as the site of miraculous cures. Some of these are attributed directly to the shrine's holy water, others to praying and making pilgrimage there. The elderly man from Galway who called Melleray a 'little bit of heaven' shared the story of his brother who was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, leaving his family grief stricken. His doctors informed him that he had only two weeks to live. Desperate, the family turned to the Virgin for assistance and made a pilgrimage to Melleray. They were joined by many of his friends and prayed there for his recovery, which they attributed directly to their pilgrimage to the shrine. Many similar examples were shared over the course of the nine days.

Melleray's holy water is part of the shrine's natural materiality. Material culture can comprise of both manufactured goods and natural materials, such as water, oil, salts, foodstuffs, stones, earth and associated goods.[382] In the minds of pious pilgrims, Mary's agency is imbued in the shrine's holy water since her declaration that it is blessed. David Morgan argues that 'the transcendent' does not come to the majority of believers as 'pure light or sublime sensations', such as the Melleray visionaries experienced in 1985. Rather it comes to them in the 'order of musty shrines or mouldering robes or the pantry where they pray'. It comes to them in touch, sight, hearing, taste, feeling, and emotion, in action, imagination and intuition.[383] The use of Melleray's holy water and the belief in its miraculous properties is a prime example of this. Pilgrims bless themselves with it, drink it and bottle it all as a means of accessing the agency of the Virgin in a material form. As Morgan says 'materiality mediates belief, material objects and practices both enable it and enact it'.[384] In the same line of thought Gordon Lynch writes that agency exits and 'emerges through the interactions between adherents and the sacred subject' or the sacred object.[385] So the Virgin's agency is believed to be imbued into the shrine's holy water simply because people believe so and accordingly they treat the water with respect in the hopes that they will solicit Mary's agency through it.

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[381] Sigal, 'Pilgrimage: Roman Catholic Pilgrimage in Europe'*The Encyclopaedia of Religion* p. 7149
[382] E. Frances King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* (London; Routledge, 2010) p.2
[383] David Morgan (ed.), 'Introduction', *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon; Routledge, 2010) p. 8
[384] Ibid p. 12
[385] Gordon Lynch, 'Object theory: Toward an intersubjective, mediated, and dynamic theory of religion', David Morgan (ed.), *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon; Routledge, 2010) p. 51

Moreover, King argues that 'agency is imputed after the event'. That is people make a petition to the saint or deity for help and only attribute agency to them when they believe that the help requested has been received. All the stories that pilgrims shared with me were cases such as this. She continues that in the case of the saint or Mary 'their personhood is distributed' via their relic, image and 'objects that extend devotion'. These mementoes, she says, 'serve to index the sacred person and when they are reputed to have healing powers then they have taken on the personhood of the saint'.[386] This is certainly the case with Melleray's holy water which has taken on the graces bestowed by Our Lady of Melleray in the minds of her devotees. King also identifies the power of holy water for the believer and the desire for pilgrims to take mementoes from the shrine such as twigs and leaves. These are instilled with the sacredness of the shrine and the means by which, she argues, the shrine has an 'afterlife'. What she means here is that by, for example, taking holy water from the grotto's well it serves to 'advertise the merits of the shrine, keeping in the forefront of the mind of the returned pilgrim'. They in turn distribute these merits in the form of such tokens 'the material charisma of the sacred place'. A shrine's holy water is thus a 'natural presence' which acts as 'a container for the holy', facilitating 'the dispersal of the sacred through this natural element'.[387]

Before I assess the other aspects of materiality in devotion of Our Lady of Melleray below I wish to conclude my discussion of the shrine's topophilia by examining a curious and an often previously overlooked element in it. The sense of an otherworldly or supernatural presence which pilgrims describe feeling at Marian shrines such as Melleray and Ballinspittle is not always one of a benevolent force; grotto committee chairman Jimmy Buckley, for example, told *The Sunday Independent* that Mary's goodness was 'attractive for forces of evil'.[388] He too conveyed this to me when he dismissed other apparitions at the shrine as the work of 'the deceiver'. During the course of the apparitions the boys communed only with the Virgin Mary but did see other figures such as Christ and on occasion the devil. The committee's account of this says that many crowds also saw the vision of Satan, writing that 'this vision disturbed many people'.[389]

Others at the grotto, such as local farmer Michael O'Donnell who experienced an apparition of Mary at the grotto, had other unusual and frightening experiences. His family

[386] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* pp. 43-5
[387] Ibid pp. 94-7
[388] 'Blessings', *The Sunday Independent* 13 August 2000 p. 42
[389] *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 4

saw him 'transformed into a very old man, completely deformed and with a bald head'. They thought he was 'about to die'.[390] Only one of my own interviewees described a similar experienced. She remembered seeing a 'black shadow' near the statue which made her feel 'extremely cold and scared' while she was praying at the grotto alone some ten years earlier. Moreover, she added 'I'm not the only one who seen this sort of thing here…I've heard things back along the years but you know sure wherever Our Lady is the devil is never too far behind'. Members of the Ballinspittle grotto committee described similar experiences in my fieldwork there and the contemporary press reports mention visions of the devil at many other grottoes in the autumn of 1985. Pilgrims have attributed the sense of a sinister presence to attempts by a malignant force to counter the intentions of the Virgin when she appeared at the shrine. It is an interesting aspect of the shrine's topophilia that the spiritual magnetism of the place incorporates both good and evil in the minds of pilgrims and locals alike.

On the whole, however, people continue to believe that a heavenly presence resides there to be both experienced in visible and invisible ways. It is deeply embedded into the geography of the shrine and some pilgrims believe that it radiates out to the surrounding area. An interesting example of this appeared in *The Cork Examiner,* when two girls who visited the shrine with an elderly relative were unable to enter the grotto but from the car they reported feeling water spilling down their shoulders and 'the lovely presence of Our Lady' as they prayed. [391] The grotto has become a popular pilgrimage destination, especially for the annual anniversary celebrations for both its connection to the 1985 apparitions and for its location. A local report for the twentieth anniversary by *The Avondhu* newspaper nicely encapsulates this; 'people came in their hundreds to pray at the famous grotto' and shared 'in the community spirit which filled the sacred air'.[392] The grotto's location in the Knockmealdown Mountains adds greatly to its ability to attract pilgrimage but manufactured material Catholic objects also have their role to play at Melleray and I shall now explore this aspect of the vernacular cult of Our Lady of Melleray.

[390] Ibid p. 1
[391] 'Tales of the unexpected', *The Cork Examiner* 25 September 1985 p. 7
[392] 'Mount Melleray celebrate 20 years of devotion', *The Avondhu* 8 September 2005 p. 18

Material mediation

The grotto, as I remember it in my childhood, was a rather unique looking one. The then modest wooden railing of the shrine was draped with religious objects such as rosaries and medals, statues and images, crucifixes and so on. The grotto's shelter was packed to capacity which such items; old lithographs of the Sacred Heart, Mary and the saints hung everywhere and rather shabby 'chic' statues of all sizes were interspersed between them. Photographs and memorial cards were pinned beneath these religious artefacts as were key-rings and teddy bears, as Figure 4.4 below shows.



Figure 4.4: Chris King 'Melleray Grotto Icons'© (16 February 2007)
(http://www.flickr.com/photos/totheking/)

Yet these objects have all since vanished and the committee has replaced them with signs reading that any religious or secular items left behind in the grotto's shelter will be donated to charity. When I queried the removal of the items with the committee, I was told that they took the decision because they strongly felt that these items distracted from the main shrine and that people were simply abandoning old, damaged and unwanted items there. Their removal, however, was met with scorn from many pilgrims.

The pilgrim mementoes were removed in 2010. A report by Tracey Keegan for *The Irish Independent* stated that 'the peace and quiet of the sanctified grotto' was being 'broken by an unholy row' at their removal. The 'thousands of personal items', she wrote,

were the tangible proof of 'the huge number of pilgrims to have visited the site over the past 25 years'. Many pilgrims and devotees of the grotto blasted the committee for their decision. Phil Watters from Tipperary, for example, told Keegan of her 'disgust' at this measure. She had recently voiced her anger in person to one committee member, only to be told that 'the shelter was full of "old, tatty bits and pieces" '. She added;

> This is something I feel very strongly about and being told that people's personal prayers and sentimental items are merely bits and pieces of old tack absolutely disgusts me. I was horrified by the answer I got when I asked a local man why that sign was up telling people to remove their things.

Despite the protests of many pilgrims, the committee's decision was final. Jimmy Buckley made it clear that the shelter had never been intended as anything other than a place to protect pilgrims from bad weather 'during the summer and Easter vigils we hold at the grotto'. People leaving objects there, he explained, was making the site where the Virgin had appeared lose 'its focus'.[393] And so the material artefacts which had so long been an aspect of the shrine vanished.

The response amongst the pilgrims I spoke with was mixed. Some agreed that these items added nothing to the shrine, others were sorely disappointed. One lady believed that they had greatly added to solemnity of the grotto and thought it most unfair that pilgrims should no longer be allowed to mark their pilgrimages there in this way. King comments on the removal of such items at other Irish shrines, most notably at holy wells and mass rocks; 'the orthodoxy of a shrine can be disrupted by deposits of incongruous objects'.[394] This certainly sums up the attitude of the grotto committee regarding their decision. Hence the committee's declaration that the pilgrim mementoes were disrupting the shrine and stealing attention away from where the Virgin Mary had appeared as justification for their removal. Attracta Brownlee describes a similar occurrence at Knock. To the back of the main shrine, between the basilica and the car park there is a small grotto of Our Lady of Knock. There pilgrims, especially but not exclusively Traveller pilgrims, leave votives and mementoes. This is strongly discouraged by the ecclesiastical authorities and all these items are cleared away at the end of each day. The items left behind, Brownlee writes, 'symbolise' pilgrims 'individual relationship with Mary'. Their removal, she continues,

[393] Tracey Keegan, 'Removal of Grotto mementoes sparks unholy row', *Irish Independent* 14 February 2010
[394] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* p. 99

'reflect how religious symbols, meanings and spaces are contested quite literally "on the ground" '.[395]

The same is true in the Melleray context where pilgrims and the committee contest what is and is not appropriate at the shrine. Since the removal of the pilgrim mementoes pilgrims have had to content themselves with leaving flowers and candles at the shrine in the specially provided areas. Burning candles is an especially popular feature at the shrine, no doubt in another emulation of Knock and Lourdes. Pilgrims purchased their candles in the monks' little shop in the nearby abbey. It is a rare occasion when one does not see candles burning at the shrine. Pilgrims usually recite a short prayer at the candle sconce when placing a candle there. The pilgrims I spoke to informed me that they burned their votives in the hopes that Mary would grant their petition or to thank Mary when the petition has been received. Figure 4.5 shows the candles, usually depicting Mary, Jesus or a saint left burning at the shrine.



Figure 4.5: Pilgrim's candles at Melleray Grotto (Photo by author, 2013)

The committee distributes smaller blessed candles for their processions. David Morgan comments that people 'make belief in the things they do'.[396] The use of votive candles is like the use of images and statues; a means to invoke the agency of the saint and bring the supernatural 'other' closer to the natural world. As for processions, Morgan comments that

[395] Brownlee, 'Irish Travellers at Knock' pp. 131-2
[396] Morgan (ed.), 'Introduction', pp. 11-2

this is 'one of the ways in which a saintly or divine presence happens for devotees'.[397] The other material artefacts of the shrine comprise of the committee's pamphlets and holy water bottles, both flanked by an image of the grotto's statue which has in essence become a representation of Our Lady of Melleray. Robert Orisi explores the 'material mediation' these kind of objects offer the believer. The saints and their devotional material artefacts, he writes in *Between Heaven and Earth*, 'have all the complexities – all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on – of relations between humans'.[398] Lynch takes this point further and argues that the relationship between the devotee and the saint, Christ and the Virgin Mary is maintained and made possible 'by the material mediation of these saints through pamphlets and pictures' and bolstered by 'social mediation', that is gathering with others who share devotion to them.[399]

The committee's pamphlet is incorporated into the annual anniversary celebrations as the Virgin's messages are read out over the PA system. Pilgrims take a copy at the grotto's entrance, rather like taking a mass leaflet to participate in the Sunday ceremony. In addition many pilgrims came with their own novena and prayer booklets to make their own devotions. As Morgan has commented 'religious material culture consists of the objects, spaces, practices and ideas in which belief takes shape'.[400] The committee's pamphlet and holy water bottles are an important aspect of the shrine's materiality and how they are used can tell the scholar much about religion as it is lived. The pamphlet is important to pilgrims because it contains the Virgin's messages and the bottles because they act as souvenir of the pilgrimage. Many pilgrims I encountered explained how each morning and night they bless themselves with the shrine's holy water and others read the messages in the pamphlet whilst reciting the rosary. The statue of Mary in the grotto is too an important aspect of the shrine's material charisma. One pilgrim I spoke with, Margaret from Mitchelstown described how when she visited the shrine her eyes were 'glued to it…I couldn't take my eyes off that statue'. Another keeps a framed picture of it, praising its beautiful delicate features. Although the committee has attached a greater significance to the apparitions of Ursula, Tom and Barry, they do not deny that many have seen the statue in the grotto move and many still do. When I was first introduced to Jimmy Buckley

[397] Ibid p. 17
[398] Robert A. Orisi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who study them* (Princeton NJ; Princeton University Press, 2007) p. 2
[399] Lynch, 'Object theory, p. 52
[400] David Morgan (ed.), 'Materiality, social analysis, and the study of religions', *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon; Routledge, 2010) p. 73

a neighbour approached him to congratulate him on the large turnout. Before turning to proceed into the grotto she added that her visiting America relations had 'experiences' there the previous week and also at Ballinspittle, suggesting that they saw the statues move in both grottoes.

In the previous chapter I discussed the phenomenon of apparition photographs attached to Marian visions in the modern context. I was not shown any such images at Melleray. However, I was advised by pilgrims to visit the website YouTube where a number of individuals had uploaded videos they recorded at the grotto which showed miraculous phenomena. Thanks to increasing technology such as video phones, the apparition video is fast become an extension of apparition based photography and the apparition and pilgrimage experience. Intrigued, I visited the website where I found a number of videos made by pilgrims who visited both the grotto and the local abbey. Two videos were believed to have explicitly captured a miracle on film at the grotto. The first is captioned ''our lady appearing in Ireland pleaze watch and comment???'.[401] The video was uploaded to the website on 1 November 2009. As the video was recorded on a mobile phone at night, the quality is not good and only the silhouette of the statue can be made out. Beneath the author gives a vague description of the 1985 apparitions and an explanation that they have been coming to the grotto for years and seeing the same thing each time:

> i have been there with my family and also with coach tours and each and every time i like the rest see the same thing our lady praying with you.. she has and still is appearing to this day from she 1st appeared over 24+yrs ago..

A brief explanation is made regarding the poor quality of the video but the author insists that the statue was moving, although they admit that they had to move the phone 'because she was moving all over the place as we sang but you can see her changing colors'. Finally an appeal is made for viewers to adhere the messages and warnings given at Melleray to avoid the looming chastisement. The video runs for one minute and forty three seconds as pilgrims sing the hymn 'Star of the Sea'.[402]

A lively debate between sceptics and believers rages in the comments section beneath the video. A total of sixty five comments has been made, at the very top the author

[401]'our lady appearing in Ireland pleaze watch and comment???'
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nW4BzOrnUWk
[402] Ibid

has replied to the sceptics by suggesting that they were in the company of over twenty five people when they filmed the video, who all saw the movement. Moreover, they challenged sceptics by pointing to the many similar videos made across the world as proof that Mary is appearing in many places, Melleray included. Evangelicals comment to warn people against idolatry echoing the sentiments made by the three Dubliners who smashed the Ballinspittle statue. Believers thank the author for the chance to see the video. A typical sceptical reply is 'What a load of crap. I cant believe people still believe in this muck. Loony bin for the lot of ye'. The website has become a forum where religious symbolism and meaning are contested, capturing the contested space that is Melleray grotto.

Like Ballinspittle, Melleray shrine has been subject to attack by Evangelicals. I was told by the grotto committee that in the late 1990s the grotto's shelter, then still full of statuary and images, was maliciously set on fire. The animosity of Evangelicals to the shrine seems to have been present since the apparitions began and the committee's pamphlet records that on one particular night, towards the end of the week, 'the stewards said afterwards that this was the largest crowd to date and that within the Grotto and out on the road some of the crowd was hostile'.[403] Time has not softened this hostility. I received a letter, for example, from an Evangelical in the Waterford area who warned me that statues cannot 'move, see, hear, speak or help anyone'. Neither God nor Mary would choose to communicate with humanity in the manner which has been claimed at Melleray and neither would they 'use statues to bring people to God'. As for the recitation of the rosary at places like Melleray and Ballinspittle, he believes, that God 'doesn't listen to recited words'. He does, however, attribute the happenings and devotions at Melleray to a supernatural force; Satan. In his opinion an evil force 'is drawing people away from God' in places like these and furthermore he is critical of Marian devotion as he suggests that Jesus never requested prayers to Mary asking only that people 'pray to the Father' and this is he writes 'true to God's word'.

This consensus is shared by other Evangelicals. In the comments section for the video they repeatedly either denounced it as idolatry, demonic activity or a misunderstanding of the agency of God and the role of the Virgin Mary. A second video, captioned 'see the grass change at grotto'[404] and uploaded to YouTube on 25 September 2008, shows the grotto clearly in daylight hours. In this case the author gives no

[403] *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 4

[404]'see the grass change at grotto' http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YwW4VXwVo0

description of the video beyond the caption, commenting only on the birds singing. The video shows some pilgrims praying quietly at the shrine. Two viewers have made comments, one says that they have 'some photos of the same thing as your video' and the other shares her experiences there as a child:

> I saw some amazing miracles here as a little girl. I witnessed the Holy Communion outside the mouth of Our Lady's statue. I also witnessed the grass change from this as you see in the video, to an all green like a painted wall before the statue developed a beautiful crystal crown. After this the statue changed from that of Our Lady to St Padre Pio and then to Saint Joan of Ark. I take this as being the saints I must pray to. I was 7 or 8 when this happened.

Interestingly apparition photographs of Melleray are too in circulation, although I was not shown any in the course of my fieldwork. Daniel Wojick asserts that at the apparition shrine the camera becomes 'a technological mediator between the supernatural and its physical manifestation'. Miraculous photographs, and videos, taken at Marian apparition shrines, he writes, are 'produced repeatedly by a community of believers deliberately seeking to document supernatural phenomena in a sacred context'.[405] Comments like the one quoted here are exchanged between a community of believers who wish to document and share their encounter with the supernatural, both amongst themselves and the wider world.

These videos, via the internet, can be used as a means of creating contact with other believers and for requesting information. They can be used to generate awareness of and devotion to a particular incarnation of Mary. A third video, captioned 'Mount Melleray Grotto Co Waterford Ireland',[406] for example, has a single comment below it which reads:

> I visited the grotto again recently and saw many visions and I'm still trying to piece them together. Could you tell me, because it looks different on this video to what I saw, when you filmed the statue from the side nearest it on the hill, did Our Lady appear as though she was pregnant? She did to me while I was there, but it doesn't seem that way in your video. God bless

[405] Daniel Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven: Photography, Folk Religion, and the Miraculous Image Tradition at a Marian Apparition Site', *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 109 no. 432 (Spring 1996) (pp. 129-48) p. 138

[406] 'Mount Melleray Grotto Co Waterford Ireland', (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mOB7DDh7zA)

This was something Wojick encountered in his fieldwork at the Bayside apparition shrine in New York. Believers turn to the community for both confirmation and interpretation of their own experiences and what they are shown in the form of apparition photographs and videos. It is debatable, perhaps, to what extent an apparition video can be considered a material object but it is an extension of the apparition experience and miraculous photography which, as discussed in the previous chapter (see pp. 101-4), acts as a relic and tangible proof of divine intervention and manifestation for the believer. The apparition video does the same thing, perhaps with even more intensity. As Edward Berryman argues 'If a traditional image of the Virgin Mary can be one of the resources to *elicit* belief, a photo of the Virgin Mary seems to *impose* belief'.[407] The same is true of the apparition video for the believer. As to the extent to which a video can be seen as a material artefact, Wojicks touches upon this point. 'Catholic folk piety and Marian devotion', he writes, have by tradition placed a strong emphasis on the importance of material representations of the divine in the form of religious imagery, statuary and devotional objects. They have also accepted 'the changing nature of iconography'[408] and thus the apparition photograph and video are now part of the vernacular materiality of Marian devotion and of the apparition experience, as the videos and comments above serve to aptly demonstrate. There are an excellent source for the scholar of vernacular religiosity and offer a powerful insight into how religion and in particular experience of an apparition is lived. These videos and photographs are a part of the material mediation of the cult of Our Lady of Melleray.

Like the Ballinspittle phenomenon, the Melleray apparitions opened up a debate concerning materiality in modern Ireland. Sceptics again believed that the apparitions there were caused by a fear of change and a yearning for the 'good old days' of yesteryear. Two comments made to John Vose encapsulate both sides of the argument. One was made by a sixty-five year old waitress in Dun Laoghairee to the effect that the widespread reports of moving statues and apparitions were caused by the disgust of 'the older people' with the state of the world around them; 'They long for a return to the old days and the old traditions'. She described herself as 'a devout Catholic' but added that she couldn't believe any of the reports. The people were, she concluded, 'latching' onto their old customs and religious materiality in a vain attempt to cope with the changes on the horizon. The second comment was made by Ursula O'Rourke, who told Vose that 'Ireland has become a

[407] Edward Berryman, 'Taking pictures of Jesus: Producing the Material Presence of a Divine Other', *Human Studies* vol. 28 no. 4 (October 2005) (pp. 431-52) p. 432
[408] Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven:' p. 140

country dominated by materialism'. People, she said, were all trying to 'outdo each other with new cars and everything else'. As a result 'the old standards have gone' and she attributed her apparitions and the moving statues as a call 'to return to God'.[409]

Sceptics upbraided believers for being obsessed with an outdated religious materiality. Believers countered this by arguing, as Ursula did, that sceptics were obsessed with a materialism that was eroding away at the fabric of tried and tested Irish morals. Above I discussed how the cult of Our Lady of Melleray has become closely allied to an Irish Catholic identity and the defence, in the mind of adherents, of traditional Irish morals. When I was introduced to Ursula, for example, she was critical of the impending abortion legalisation being discussed by the Irish government and believed this kind of 'evil' was one of the principle reasons Mary appeared at the grotto with her messages in 1985. Her sentiments were shared by many other pilgrims I met there and elsewhere. Morgan comments that 'images or objects that circulate among many can serve to unify public feeling or sentiment'.[410] King takes this point further by arguing that people can feel attachment to religious objects and images for more than purely religious sensibilities. They are culturally and socially attached to them. People will choose religious images which 'resonate with their lives and beliefs'.[411]

Moreover, she argues that images are significant markers of identity. She discusses this in relation to the display of images of the Virgin Mary in Northern Ireland, which is as much cultural and political as it is an expression of religious belief. Images can create a strong sense of belonging – belonging to one group 'but it sends out a message of religious difference to another'.[412] The statue in Melleray grotto creates a sacred place where people belonging to one such particular group gather to worship and pray. It is a marker of identity as much as a means to make the divine more readily accessible for the believer. They are part of a group which adheres to a strong belief that Irish identity is still rooted in Catholic morality and the statue of Mary in their grotto is an emblem for the figure they believe has called them to defend this, hence the use of the statue on the devotional objects, see figures 4.6 and 4.7 below, to create a sense of unity for believers via the image and messages of Our Lady of Melleray, which as Jimmy Buckley told me are 'for everyone…she wants everyone to have her message'.

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[409] Vose, *The statues that moved a nation* pp. 96-8
[410] Morgan (ed.), 'Materiality, social analysis, and the study of religions' p. 58
[411] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* p. 35
[412] Ibid p. 48



Figure 4.6: Melleray Grotto Committee Pamphlet © (Photo by author)



Figure 4.7: Mount Melleray Holy Water Bottle (photo by author)

Gordon Lynch comments that people are primarily 'relational beings' first and 'autonomous' second, the decisions we make are embedded and shaped by our relationships and the material world around us'. Subjectivity and relationship are important

in the context of lived religion.[413] In hindsight this point certainly resonates with what I was told, witnessed and experienced in the context of my fieldwork. When I met Ursula, she explained that her mother had a great faith in the Virgin Mary which she instilled in her children by telling them the stories of Lourdes and Fatima. Ursula was thought to have respect for Mary, her image and her devotional objects. Many of the pilgrims there and elsewhere told me likewise. How one is brought up to understand and engage with material objects then impacts on how one approaches them in adult life. Thus for those who were thought to have reverence and respect for such religious imagery as statues of Mary and rituals which incorporate them such as the rosary and processions, apparitions at grottoes like Melleray are attractive because they are in line with their pre-existing spirituality. As Gordon Lynch suggests, the past is 'a key rhetorical tool of religious legitimation'.[414] One must, however, be on their guard against generalising here; many sceptics I encountered were raised to respect religious artefacts in childhood, only to abandon the use of them in adulthood. One pilgrim from Tipperary, for instance, said of the annual processions 'It's just so beautiful; you don't see them that much anymore. It reminds me of the big ones at Lourdes and Knock. It's just a lovely way to honour Our Lady'. Another said they reminded her of those she had participated in as a child.

Catholic identity at Melleray is closely allied to the shrine's materiality and a sense of continuity regarding traditional use of a Catholic materiality underpins the devotions and rituals practiced there. An observation made by Edith Turner in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* nicely sums up what pilgrimage to Melleray, and in essence all Marian and Catholic shrines, is about. At the heart of pilgrimage, she says, are the ordinary people 'who choose a "materialist" expression of their religion'. Pilgrimage 'as a religious act is a kinetic ritual, replete with actual objects, "sacra", and is often held to have material results, such as healing'.[415] In this process images play their role and as King writes 'have the power to sustain community and while this can be promoted, even exploited, popular enthusiasm for a religious artefact can be contagious'. Images can turn into the focus that unites a group.[416] The statue in Melleray grotto and the material rituals practiced there perform a wide range of functions; from material mediation with the divine other to symbolising the unity of shared beliefs, morals and identity.

[413] Lynch, 'Object theory' pp. 42-3
[414] Ibid p. 50
[415] Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1978) p. xiii
[416] King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* pp. 147-8

When I arrived at Melleray for the twenty-eighth anniversary ceremonies in August 2013 I was immediately struck by the presence of the priest leading the recitation of the rosary, the Benediction and the healing ceremony. Over the course of the ten days the ceremonies were led by visiting priests at the invitation of the grotto committee. Many nuns too visited the shrine, taking bottles of the grotto's holy water with them. Given what I had been told regarding the local clerical response to the Ballinspittle phenomenon, (see pp. 112-23), I was surprised to see that Melleray had found favour with some many priests. Since an ecclesiastical blessing has not been awarded to any shrine or apparition claim in Ireland since Knock, I simply assumed that Melleray had met with the same cautious distancing that Ballinspittle and so many similar examples since have been subject to. Yet there was no shortage of priests on hand to lead the Melleray ceremonies. There were no less than seven priests leading the ceremonies along with the committee and The Waterford Marion Group over the ten day celebrations in 2013. When I queried the Church's response to the apparitions with Jimmy Buckley he told me that the Church 'has stayed away' and that the grotto committee had always been careful not to offend the local ecclesiastical authorities. I saw no reason to doubt him but when compared to what I had experienced at Ballinspittle and the fact that the majority of the ceremonies were being led by supportive priests, his statement rang somewhat hollow. It was immediately clear to me that the Melleray apparitions had met with a very different response from the Catholic Church.

'Of a higher order'; The clerical response to the Melleray apparitions

In an article for *U.S. Catholic* Jim Dinn sums up the ecclesiastical position on apparition claims. The Catholic Church in general, he says, is not receptive or welcoming of apparitions and have only approved of a handful in the thousands that have been reported. For the Church to approve of an apparition they must first consider its message to be un-objectable and not to contradict the teachings of the Catholic faith. Even if the apparition receives the Church's endorsement no Catholic is required to believe it. That is a matter of personal choice for the individual. The Second Vatican Council made no mention of apparitions when discussing Mary and the Church and the Church has also emphasised that traditional devotion to Mary is scripturally based. This is the usual cautious response of the Church to Marian apparition, they have invested in certain apparitions such as Lourdes

and Fatima but the for the most part the Church distances itself from such phenomena.[417] As discussed in the previous chapter there is much which remains objectable to the Catholic Church in the Ballinspittle phenomenon. The Melleray apparitions, however, were received by many members of the Irish Catholic clergy in a much more favourable light than Ballinspittle and the majority of other apparitions and moving statues claims.

This was impressed upon me from both from my participant observation at the shrine and in my interview with Fr. Michael Fitzgerald, who led the prayer ceremonies on the 16th and 24th August. He was happy to speak to me of his commitment to the Melleray apparitions and his support of the visionaries there. He first met Tom, Barry and Ursula in 1985 when he visited the grotto during the course of their apparitions. He was struck immediately by what he described as their absolute 'sincerity' and 'humility'. As for the apparitions he has judged them, as the Church does, by a biblical injunction; 'you will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7:16). Fr. Fitzgerald believes that the events at Melleray stand out amongst the multiple claims made that year because the children there 'communed with their vision'. They were, he says, events of a 'higher order', with a specific message being imparted to the visionaries which does not contradict Catholic orthodoxy. Fr. Fitzgerald has been participating in the annual ceremonies for some years now and has remained in contact with the committee, Ursula and Tom. He promotes the Melleray apparitions and the grotto as a place of pilgrimage because he believes both have led many to a deeper commitment to the Catholic Church. In short there is nothing in the Melleray apparitions or devotions which he identifies as a potential distraction rather than an aid to the Catholic Church.

His opinions were shared by his colleagues who expressed similar sentiments to the pilgrims. Fr Thaddeus Doyle, for example, expressed his commitment via the PA system as he led the ceremonies on 15 August, telling the pilgrims to put their trust in their 'Holy Mother who knows all your troubles' and listen to her message. When she conducted her fieldwork at the grotto, Zimdars-Swartz found that the committee were optimistic regarding a potential Church investigation but also spoke with 'studied realism'; 'They were prepared to wait, they said, "as long as it took at Knock".'[418] To present the situation has not altered much. The committee told me that they still hope that at some future date the local clerical authorities will see fit to investigate the apparitions but know that such

[417] Jim Dinn, 'What does the Church say about Marian apparitions?' *U.S. Catholic* vol. 70 issue. 10 (October 2005) p. 45
[418] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary* p. 16

things take time. In the intervening years, though, they have amassed a network of supportive clergy that their Ballinspittle counterparts would be overjoyed to share. Initially the Church took the same cautious and non-committed approach as they employed in the context of Ballinspittle. *The Irish Independent* reported that the Church was stressing 'extreme caution' when news of the Melleray apparitions reached the local Bishop in 1985.

A spokesman for the Catholic Church stated that people had no need to look for signs like those claimed at Melleray as the Catholic faith was based 'on a much firmer base'. He added that there was 'a good natural explanation in all these matters' which was always the opinion of the Catholic Church on such occurrences.[419] In my interview with Muckey he explained the initial cautious response of the Church. During the apparitions the boy's mothers were accompanying them to the grotto and communicating the messages from the boys to the crowds over the PA system. They could be heard, he said, asking the boys what they should say or what the vision wanted them to tell the people. Someone amongst the crowd made a recording of this which was later played for a priest or several priests. When heard 'out of context' Muckey believes that it portrayed the events in the wrong light as it appeared that boys were being duped by their elders and that the apparitions looked like a charade.

Curious as to the response of the local monks, I also queried this with Muckey. The general feeling is that they have been ordered to maintain their distance and if and when they do visit the shrine it is in the early hours of the morning. Yet the monks had a hand in the erection of the shrine and one in particular has been supportive of the visionaries and the devotions of the grotto since the outset. Fr. Celestine spoke to *The Evening Echo* newspaper regarding the apparitions at the grotto which he was an 'instrumental' part of erecting. The grandfather of Ursula O'Rourke was one of his chief supporters as he sought local support to build it. He 'firmly' believed that Mary was appearing to the local children at the grotto. For him all 'was going to plan'. The monk had always had the site in mind for the construction of a grotto, going back to 1969 and now the apparitions there set the seal on his ambition for Melleray as a place of pilgrimage. A local resident explained that the apparitions 'had been brushed aside' as another moving statue but it was more than

[419] Joseph Power, 'Talking statue: Bishop urges caution', *The Irish Independent* 22 August 1985 p. 1

that, Mary had brought messages to the people and the world at Melleray.[420] Fr. Celestine shares this belief and in particular was a pillar of support for Ursula.

As she was some years older than Tom and Barry, Ursula found herself 'doing a lot of the talking' to both media and pilgrims. This, understandably, took its toll on Ursula, especially as the grotto attracted what she described to me as 'a lot of the wrong kind of people'. On one particular occasion Ursula felt overwhelmed by the volume of media and pilgrims scrambling for her attention at the grotto. She explained how Fr. Celestine had taken her away from the grotto for a while and reassured her by reminding her that she had been chosen by the Virgin Mary to do this and to have faith. Over the years Ursula has remained close to the now elderly monk and spoke highly of the others. Her fondness for the Cistercians is widely shared by locals and pilgrims alike. The monks still sell copies of Deevy's booklet in their shop, something they would hardly do if they were not supportive of the apparitions or desirous to promote them. No contemporary press reports that I read mentioned the response of the local priest but that was revealed fifteen years later in a documentary made for RTÉ, *True Lives; Seven Days: a journey with Palo Coelho*,[421] made by Liam McGrath, the cousin of Tom Cliffe. In 2002 he invited the Brazilian writer and philosopher, Paolo Coelho, to visit Melleray in an effort to make sense of what had happened to his relatives in 1985.

Coelho solicited the opinion of the local parish priest. He informed Coelho that he had taken 'sworn statements' from the children. His first response to the apparitions was one of 'delight, if true'. The priest was impressed by the parents' reaction to the children's experiences especially Ursula's mother, who was initially, he said, very 'critical' of the apparitions and refused to accept them. It was their 'simplicity', he explained, which impressed him most. When asked why the apparitions have not yet received an official acknowledgement, he told Coelho that the Church wants them proven true 'the hard way'. Personally, though, he felt they had been inadequately tested, which he attributed to the institutional Church's fear of being dragged into 'disrepute' by such claims. The most crucial point, as he saw it, was that Melleray was the first time the Virgin had spoken in Ireland, something she had not even done at Knock. She had even spoken in Irish and he was especially gratified by the fact she had told the children 'that Ireland will be saved'.[422]

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[420] Carole Coleman, 'All going to plan says Melleray monk', *The Evening Echo* 30 August 1985 p. 1
[421] Tom Young, 'Melleray's "moving statues" feature in True Lives programmes', *The Munster Express* 31 May 2002 p. 2
[422] RTÉ *True Lives: Seven Days, a journey with Paulo Coelho*

There are, I believe, crucial differences between the case of Ballinspittle's moving statue and the Melleray apparitions which help to explain the dramatic difference in the ecclesiastical responses between the two. Over the course of my fieldwork, a number of the celebratory priests drew attention to the fact that the boys witnessed a number of biblical visions in the course of their apparitions. These included Noah's Ark and the Great Flood and a number of scenes from the life and ministry of Christ as told in the New Testament. Since Vatican II the Church has attempted to base Marian devotion on a more scriptural basis. In her biography of Bernadette Soubirous, Thérèse Taylor specifies that the celebration of Marian apparitions changed from an emphasis on 'ornate rituals' to a more biblical focus with Vatican II.[423] There remains a strong emphasis on 'ornate rituals' at Melleray but the presence of biblical visions certainly conforms to the outlook of the Church's theology since Vatican II. Many priests interpreted these visions as a message to the people to recognise the importance of the Bible in their devotions. Moreover, there were messages relayed by the visionaries that encouraged people to attend mass; 'The people must go to mass more, and receive my son more often'.[424]

The latest edition of Deevy's booklet lists miraculous conversions and a return to the Church as an example of the many miracles emanating from Melleray grotto.[425] The celebratory priests for the annual anniversary celebrations also made much of that particular message and the number of conversions they have encountered because of pilgrimage to Melleray, which they have identified as the proper factors in determining the legitimacy of an apparition. In giving the clergy a role to play in annual events the committee have not alienated clerical support and have they assured me that they always pledged obedience and respect to both the teachings and authority of the Catholic Church. A note in the preface of Deevy's booklet for example, reads; 'Until these happenings are fully examined by competent ecclesiastical authority, no claim of any kind is made for prior approval of any kind from ecclesiastical quarters for this compilation'.[426] This has remained the attitude of the committee. They work to promote awareness of the grotto and the apparition messages but they respect the right of the Catholic Church to intervene if and when they see fit.

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[423] Thérèse Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: her life, death and visions* (Continuim: London, 2008) p. 341
[424] *Extracts from Our Blessed Lady's Message from Melleray Grotto,* (Cappoquin: Mount Melleray Grotto Committee, 2011) p. 2
[425] W. Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you: are you listening? Her messages from Melleray Grotto* (published by author, 2009)
[426] Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you are you listening?* p. 7

Many pilgrims I met at Melleray and Ballinspittle too, assured me that they knew priests who had seen statues move and had experienced other phenomena at grottoes in 1985. I see no reason to doubt this but no priest I spoke to admitted this nor could I find any examples in the contemporary press reports. Anthropologist Michael Allen accurately sums up the situation when he wrote in *Ritual, Power and Gender*:

> Though a small number of priests, and even more so monks and nuns, undoubtedly shared in the belief that the statues were not only moving but that Our Lady was attempting to communicate with the people, they kept a very low profile and refrained from making any public pronouncement of support[427]

In the case of Melleray priests and the local monks have given their support but since the local Bishop has not ordered an investigation they have thus not been in a position to make any public pronouncement but have contented themselves with participating in the annual anniversary ceremonies. Presence is a strong indicator of support and thus Melleray has received visible support from sympathetic priests. Moreover, there were some priests who visited the grotto in 1985 and experienced visions there. Deevy's booklet includes a letter from one, a Fr. Patrick Lannen, who was then stationed in the Waterford town of Dungarvan.

His lengthy account explains that he dismissed the widespread claims of moving statues and apparitions out of hand until he visited Melleray. He was not aware of the experiences of Tom, Barry and Ursula when he made his own visit on 25 August 1985. The priest described seeing a number of stationary visions including the Sacred Heart, Our Lady of Lourdes, St Joseph and the Boy Christ. He took his own experiences 'in a sense as a guarantee of what's happened to the young people'. What is most interesting is a statement he makes at the beginning of the letter regarding why he initially dismissed the claims of moving statues he had been told about at Melleray; 'I felt it was something unusual, and was a departure from Lourdes, Fatima, etc.[428] This, I contend, goes a long way in explaining why clerics are more inclined to accept an apparition claim rather than a moving statue one. Since the 19th century a clear pattern has emerged in Marian apparition claims; Mary appears to visionaries, usually quite young, and imparts messages of global and ecclesiastical significance. Silent moving statues are not strictly in keeping with this.

[427] Michael Allen, *Ritual, Power and Gender: Explorations in the Ethnography of Vanuata, Nepal and Ireland* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000) p.316
[428] Patrick Lannen, 'Melleray Grotto: Letters to the Grotto Committee', W. Deevy, *Our Blessed Lady is speaking to you are you listening: her message from Melleray Grotto* (published by author, 1986) pp. 42-5

Furthermore, the tone of the Melleray apparitions and their messages are in accordance with those of Lourdes and Fatima whereas the Ballinspittle phenomenon is not. The Melleray apparitions, then, fitted the expectations of the clergy regarding Marian apparition phenomena in a way that other cases in 1985 simply did not; hence Fr. Fitzgerald's description of the Melleray apparitions as being of 'a higher order'.

It is interesting to note that the reverse seems to have been the case in continental Europe. William A. Christian makes this point in the context of his study of miraculous images in Spain, where he asserts that 'where images were found, the image was there to show. With apparitions, nothing was left to show, so that some proof was needed'. Christian noted tension between ecclesiastical authorities and those who constructed Marian shrines in the Spanish countryside because they gave the people a certain amount of religious autonomy. The Church would resist devotion to any shrine in Medieval and Renaissance Spain where they were uncertain any divine intervention had taken place, as indeed they still do. In the Spanish context, he concluded, 'a miraculous image' was more likely to be accepted by Church authorities than an apparition to a visionary or group of visionaries.[429] The Irish hierarchy and priests, in contrast, have been very critical of miraculous images, but have promoted certain apparitions, in particular those of Lourdes and Fatima, making use of their messages in their parochial work.

Finally, an interesting interpretation of a particular message of Mary's at Melleray had been understood in a thought-provoking way by the committee and pilgrims. Repeatedly the Virgin warned that the devil was trying to seize control of the Catholic Church. This message has resonated with the committee in a new way since the widespread shocking revelations of clerical child sex abuse in 20th century Ireland. At the time the message was given to them, Jimmy explained, the locals were rather puzzled by it but in retrospection Jimmy believes that Mary was giving the Irish people a direct warning about clerical sex abuse when she said the devil was trying to take control of the Church. 'We understand what it means now', he told me. Interestingly several members of the Ballinspittle committee share this belief and believe that the events of 1985 at their grotto was too a warning to prepare the Irish people for the shock that was soon to follow when these claims first came to light in the 1990s. The priests who acted as celebrants at Melleray, on the other hand, interpret this as reference to the falling attendance at mass and increasing secularisation in Irish society. These alternating beliefs have not lead to a clash

[429] William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton NJ; Princeton University Press, 1981) pp. 90-2

between clergy and committee but it is nonetheless interesting to see differing interpretation of people and clergy.

Melleray provides a model where the vernacular and institutional are working in unison rather than opposition. Religion is complex and cultural, social, political, economic and, above all, local and contextual factors come into play. Ballinspittle is a case where the local ecclesiastical authorities disapprove of a particular vernacular incarnation of Mary and the cult attached to it, Melleray is an example where approval, if not formal at least informal, is granted and the clergy have carved out a niche in the annual anniversary celebrations. Ballinspittle is an example, similar to those identified by Christian where the Church fears the autonomy locals derive from the shrine. Melleray is an example where the clergy on the whole accept that something supernatural has happened which threatens neither the Church's authority nor its orthodoxy. It is interesting to note that a second apparition claim made at Carns in Co. Sligo in September 1985 has been met with a similar response from the local clergy there. In a remote field four local teenage girls described seeing an apparition of Mary and St Bernadette in the night sky, although no messages were imparted.[430] Thousands came to the apparition site in the weeks following their apparition and there were reports of pilgrims seeing burning balls of fire in the sky there. A shrine was erected and each year the visionaries return to participate in the annual mass and vigils for the anniversary of the vision. Carns like Melleray has remained a popular pilgrimage shrine. In a 2012 interview with the local newspaper, *The Sligo Champion*, one of the original visionaries was proud of the fact that many 'who have stopped going to Mass find themselves going back after visiting the grotto'. She had heard many 'stories of how people find their faith renewed once they visit the grotto' over the years.[431] Doubtless the local clergy at Carns like their Melleray counterparts are happy to support the grotto as a place of pilgrimage which leads people to a deeper faith in the institutional Church and have found nothing in the cult of Our Lady of Carns which threatens institutional orthodoxy. It is another example of the vernacular and the institutional working in unison rather than at variance.

[430] 'Bishop cautions on apparitions', *The Irish Times* 16 September 1985 p. 1
[431] 'It's 26 years since Carns apparition', *The Sligo Champion* 1 December 2012

Conclusion

Almost thirty years have elapsed since the Melleray apparitions drew thousands to the wayside grotto in the autumn of 1985.The shrine remains a popular pilgrimage destination as Ireland's second foremost Marian apparition shrine. A formal and public ecclesiastical blessing has yet to be made and a Church investigation may or may not take shape in the future. The shrine, however, has all the makings of a national one. With her messages of a looming chastisement entrusted specifically to the Irish nation, the Melleray Madonna has become the Protectress of an Irish Catholic identity, making her devotees feel 'chosen' because of their duty to spread her messages. These messages contain nothing to challenge Catholic orthodoxy, in fact some explicitly enjoin the Catholic faith on the believer, and so have not come under clerical derision. Devotion to Our Lady of Melleray has become a powerful shaper and marker of identity.

The charisma of the shrine is vested in its natural landscape, which pilgrims believe is shrouded in the Virgin's graces and agency. The agency of the Melleray Madonna is accessed via natural and material elements of the shrine, and material mediation plays a prominent role in the Melleray devotions. Although the committee has sought to prioritise the apparitions of Ursula, Tom and Barry, many continue to experience apparitions and movements in the statue at the grotto and pilgrims invoke the power of the Virgin through both material and emotional mediation. In 2006 *The Munster Express* described Mt. Melleray grotto as 'a favourite place of prayer and reflection for thousands of people who visit the grotto each year from all parts of Ireland and abroad'.[432] It is a fitting description for what the grotto has become. The principal visionaries involved have since married and 'moved on' with their lives, to use local parlance. The annual anniversary ceremonies are about remembering and honouring the mission bestowed on the Irish nation. Ursula and Tom return to shrine each year to participate in the annual ceremonies but neither claim to commune with Mary any longer. As far as they are concerned they have played their part and allow the committee to promote the shrine and the messages imparted there. In the next chapter I will examine a series of apparitions at Inchigeela in West Cork, which began at the same time as the Melleray ones but have since taken a dramatically different direction.

[432] '21st Anniversary Melleray Grotto', *The Munster Express* 18 August 2006

CHAPTER FIVE: The 'apparition grottoes' and the houses of prayer: Inchigeela and Doon

The West Cork village of Inchigeela proves by far the most complex site of the entire moving statues phenomenon. When I began my research, Inchigeela was completely unknown to me. The press reports for 1985 made only the minutest references to the apparitions reported there. The Inchigeela apparitions were merely mentioned in passing, being overshadowed by Ballinspittle, Melleray and to lesser extent Asdee and Carns, the more publicised cases. I had no intention, then, of visiting Inchigeela, assuming that the village had enjoyed a brief spell of a moving statue or apparition of some sort, as so many other villages and townlands had in 1985. This, however, proved to be an oversight on my part. I was repeatedly asked at Ballinspittle and Melleray if I intended to include the Inchigeela apparitions in my study and if I had ever visited the village. One pilgrim I met at Melleray was particularly shocked that I had not heard about the Inchigeela apparitions and recommended that I make a visit there. A priest there also advised me to 'look into' the Inchigeela apparitions, which are an on-going phenomenon, and told me about two visionary sisters – Fiona Tierney and Marcia Mooney – whose apparitions began at Inchigeela in the late 1980s. Fiona, Marcia and their devoted followers, *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*, (from here forth I shall abbreviate this to SWIH), have established a number of houses of prayer across Ireland and Europe, dedicated to promoting the messages of the sisters' apparitions.

I first visited Inchigeela in October 2013. There I met with one SWIH, Margaret, at the Rossmore Lourdes grotto, a mile or so outside the village, on the Cork side, where public rosaries are recited each Sunday afternoon by the SWIH. She took me to *St Joseph's House of Prayer* in Inchigeela, where she familiarised me with the sisters' story, how they first came to Inchigeela and the details of the other houses of prayer run by the SWIH. The central house of prayer is in Doon, Co Limerick, *The Immaculate Heart House of Prayer*, which I also visited in October 2013 at the invitation of Margaret, where I briefly met Marcia and her husband Nicholas. I later visited the SWIH prayer room in Limerick city, where Nicholas showed me photographs of the SWIH houses of prayer in Co. Clare and Co. Tipperary, and the houses in Portugal, Russia and the Ukraine. The foundation of these houses of prayer and the promotion of the sisters' apparition messages is the 'mission' of Fiona, Marcia, their husbands and the SWIH. Initially, the Inchigeela

apparitions were virtually identical to those reported at Melleray but steadily grew more complex as they progressed into the late 1980s and early 1990s. What sets Inchigeela apart is that there was not one but two apparition shrines and there were three phases of simultaneously linked but independent apparition phenomena at the local grottoes, with a considerable number of visionaries involved, culminating eventually in the arrival of Fiona and Marcia in Inchigeela, replacing the local girls who had reported apparitions at the Rossmore and Gortaneadin grottoes from August 1985 – March 1987.

In general, I am going to focus on the apparitions of Fiona and Marcia, making reference only to the earlier apparitions where they have had a lasting impact upon Fiona and Marcia's visions. I learned from Margaret at *St Joseph's House of Prayer*, that Fiona and Marcia, originally from Cork city, were taken to Inchigeela by their aunt for the apparition vigils of three local youths, Kelley Noonan, Rosemary O'Sullivan, and Marie Vaughan and Macroom housewife Mary Casey from 1985-87. Elements of the messages of these visionaries have been incorporated into Fiona and Marcia's apparitions, namely that Inchigeela is a chosen village and a sacred place. The majority of the 1985-87 apparitions were centred on Gortaneadin grotto, which was erected by the local McCarthy family in 1969 following the death of teenager Mary McCarthy who had witnessed an apparition of the Virgin Mary there and had expressed a wish that a Lourdes grotto be built on the site. Thus, a chain of causation is evident in the Inchigeela context. The apparitions of Mary McCarthy established the principal apparition site of the 1985-87 apparitions of Noonan, O'Sullivan, Vaughan and Casey and these in turn were the context in which Fiona and Marcia's apparitions began. The sisters have a written a booklet detailing how their apparitions and 'mission' began in the village; *Inchigeela: The Humble Beginnings of The Ultimate Triumph*, where the connection between the 1985-87 apparitions and the beginning of their own is made clear:

> We were taken to West Cork during the Summer of 1986, where there were reports of local girls claiming to see Our Blessed Lady. Many people gathered at Gortaneadin Grotto to pray and see for themselves what was going on…When I (Fiona) would return to the grotto, I would always see the statue smile and wink at me…I can't give dates or times only that on the Sundays of 1986, I would see different things happen to the statue.[433]

[433] The Mustard Seed: the Immaculate House of prayer, *Inchigeela: The Humble Beginnings of The Ultimate Triumph* p. 4

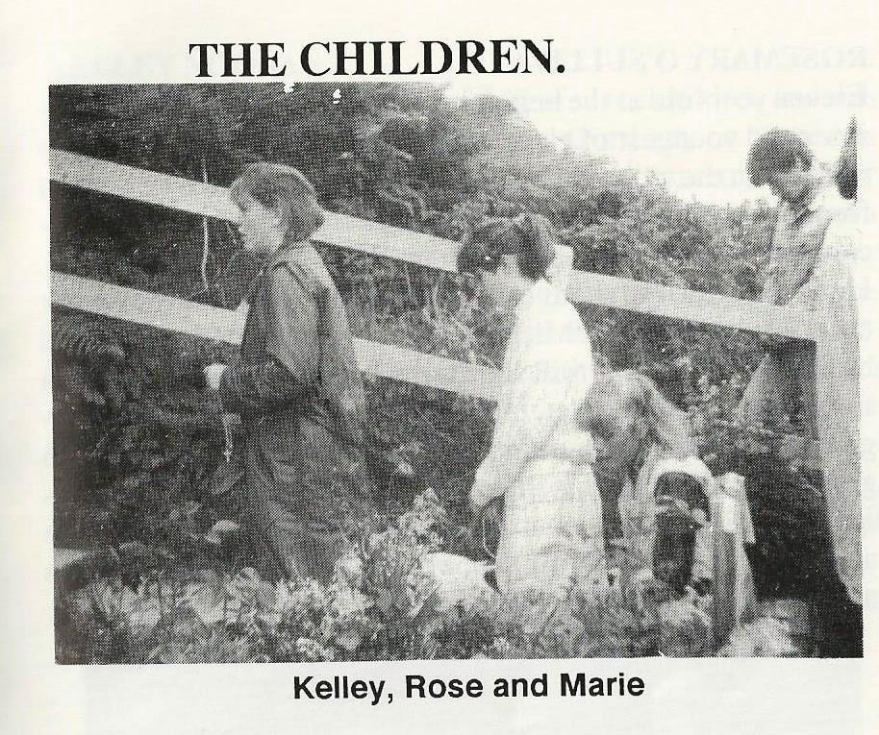


Figure 5.1: Kelley Noonan, Rosemary O'Sullivan, and Marie Vaughan at Gortaneadin

Figure 5.1 above shows the original visionaries at one of their vigils at Gortaneadin, the vigils which Fiona and Marcia attended with their aunt. Despite the original link between the sisters' apparitions and those of Noonan, O'Sullivan, Vaughan and Casey, I was told the 1985-87 visionaries no longer visit Inchigeela or the houses of prayer, having, as Margaret told me, 'moved on'. Casey died some years ago. The messages of her apparitions can be read in a pamphlet available at Gortaneadin. Additionally, the messages of Noonan, O'Sullivan, Vaughan and Casey can be read in the booklet *Inchigeela: A Call To Prayer, An Account Of Apparitions Experienced In Inchigeela, Co. Cork, Ireland since August '85*, composed by Mary O'Sullivan sister to the 1985-87 visionary, Rosemary. [434] The messages of the 1985-87 apparitions can also be read on the website of Gortaneadin grotto.[435] I will begin with a brief account of Fiona and Marcia's Inchigeela based apparition vigils from 1987-93, which led to the establishment of the Doon and other houses of prayer and the sisters' 'mission'. In addition to my own participant observation at Inchigeela and Doon, there is a greater pool of documentary materials to draw upon, as

[434] Mary B. O'Sullivan, *Inchigeela: A Call To Prayer, An Account Of Apparitions Experienced in Inchigeela, Co. Cork, Ireland since August '85* (Inchigeela Queen of Peace Group: Cork, 1989)
[435] (http://www.inchigeela.net/Visionaries.html)

Fiona and Marcia have detailed their apparitions in several booklets and a monthly newsletter written and produced by the SWIH at Doon.

The Way of the Immaculate Heart

The SWIH generally describe their work and life as one of simple faith and prayer in accordance with the wishes of Mary and Jesus as communicated to Fiona and Marcia. The sisters call this '*The Way of the Immaculate Heart'*. A description of what this entails is given in the booklet *Inchigeela: The Humble Beginnings*, written by Fiona, Marcia and their husbands Donal and Nicholas:

> In 1998 Jesus established what He calls "The Way of The Immaculate Heart". He asked for those who responded to His invitation to come to His Mother's House and to commit themselves to the tasks and works He has assigned for us here. We take Our Lady as our role model and we try in our daily living to imitate Her Way, a Way of love, of prayer, of obedience, of humility and silence.[436]

The origins of *The Immaculate Heart House of Prayer* at Doon can be traced to the Rossmore shrine at Inchigeela, where I was told that the Virgin had revealed her desire for the establishment of the house of prayer to Fiona, showing her the exact location in a vision. Fiona's first communication with Mary was in 1987, when her 'mission' formally began at Rossmore. From 1987-1993 she and her family would visit the shrine each Sunday to host an apparition vigil.

By 1993 Fiona's apparitions had come to significant media attention. Contemporary press reports disclose the basic pattern of events. Fiona would come to the grotto on Sunday afternoons, usually attracting somewhere around 100-300 people but reaching 1,000 in August 1993. She would fall into a state of ecstasy, receive her apparition and relay the message. One report in *The Cork Examiner* described 'busloads' of pilgrims making their way to Inchigeela for what had become a public event. They came from Sligo, Nenagh, Mayo and Dublin, and across the Munster area.[437] As for Marcia, her apparitions, usually taking the form of Inner Locution, began at Mt. Melleray

[436] The Mustard Seed, *Inchigeela* p. 13
[437] Ann Cahill and Neans McSweeney, 'Girl visionary claims to have seen Jesus: Bishop is urged to investigate apparitions', *The Cork Examiner* 30 August 1993 p. 3

grotto in 1995. Marcia has remained with Fiona and the SWIH since.[438] This was the backdrop to the establishment of the Doon house of prayer. The SWIH have since opened *St Joseph's* in Inchigeela, *The Divine Child Jesus House* in Tullycrine (Co. Clare), a prayer room and grotto at Benamore, Roscrea (Co. Tipperary), and *The Divine Love House of Prayer*, at Castanheira de Prea near Fatima (Portugal) and *The Mother of Love House, Pontmain* (France). Since the establishment of the houses of prayer, the sisters' apparitions for the most part are centred there. They have attracted a strong number of followers but no longer draw the kind of crowds that attend Fiona's Rossmore vigils in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

As for being a member of SWIH one is free to be as committed as one wants. Thus some have more or less entirely dedicated their lives to SWIH; others come regularly on retreats to the houses and join the SWIH on their pilgrimages abroad. More still come for one visit only and for whatever reason do not return. The SWIH assist the sisters in their various activities. They are a registered charity, have their own prayer line which acts as a counselling service, write and distribute the newsletter and work in the shops attached to the houses of prayer. Part of the sisters' mission since the early 1990s has been the conversion of Russia or 'The Morning Star' as it is known to them. They also do similar work in the Ukraine. The SWIH described their visits abroad to me, working in orphanages, assisting in the building of churches and supplying religious artefacts (statues, images, rosaries, medals, relics, candles, chalices, sconces, vestments, prayer books and devotional literature, holy water and oil) to converts in Eastern Europe. To this end they accept donations of unwanted Catholic devotional items to distribute in their missionary work. I was told by the SWIH that it is Jesus and Mary who personally appoint, via the visionaries, the SWIH who are to join Fiona and Marcia on their visits abroad. When I met Margaret, for example, she had just returned from a pilgrimage to Fatima and a visit to the house of prayer there.

The 1985-87 apparitions were virtually identical to those reported at Melleray. The same maternal yet stern Madonna emerges from the messages of Noonan, O'Sullivan, Vaughan and Casey. The tone and pattern of events in Fiona and Marcia's apparitions initially followed those set by the 1985-87 visionaries. The erection of the houses of prayer and the pilgrimages to Russia and the Ukraine, however, gave a distinctive character to Fiona and Marcia's apparitions, not evident in the earlier 1985-87 apparitions. The

[438] The Mustard Seed, *Inchigeela* p. 11

establishment of houses of prayer is not unique to Inchigeela and has become a phenomenon its own right since the 1990s. Controversial Irish visionary, Christian Gallagher first reported apparitions at Carns in Co Sligo, at the same time Fiona and Marcia were first taken to Inchigeela. In the mid-1990s she established her house of prayer at Achill in Mayo and has since established several more in the United States and Mexico, details of which can be found on Gallagher's website.[439] The development of the houses of prayer is a phenomenon which has not benefited from academic research or analysis, but is one of the most fascinating aspects of modern Marian apparitions.

To begin, I will outline how Fiona and Marcia's apparitions have shaped the SWIH's beliefs regarding the role of Mary and the saints, which is a key aspect in the establishment of the houses of prayer, all of which are dedicated to particular incarnations of Christ, Mary and the saints. I shall explore the incarnation of Mary arising out of the sisters' apparitions by framing it within a discussion of the controversial Fifth Dogma; a dogma which would proclaim Mary as essentially Christ's equal. The campaign for the promulgation of this dogma is actively pursued by the SWIH and a subject dear to their heart, as it is to many a devotee of the Virgin Mary. I will also assess the role of the saints for the SWIH, especially those demoted by the Second Vatican Council. I will then explore the importance of the houses of prayer in creating a powerful sense of topophilia alongside the original apparition shrines of Rossmore and Gortaneadin for the SWIH. The sisters' apparitions have also fashioned a distinctive material culture, with the SWIH making use of images and devotional objects based on their visions. Finally, I will conclude by discussing the role of Fiona and Marcia to act as 'prophets', which is how Margaret first described the sisters to me at Inchigeela. The perception of the sisters as 'prophets' has led to tension between the SWIH and the hierarchy of the Irish Catholic Church, in which the visionaries' gender and marital status is also a contributing factor.

'To Jesus through Mary'; the role of Our Lady Queen of Peace and the saints

Since the 20th century, increasingly so following Fatima's example, new trends have emerged in the context of Marian apparitions. Namely visionaries now also witness and

[439] 'Christina Gallagher: the remarkable story' (http://www.christinagallagher.org/en/Christina_Gallagher_Story.htm, 20 June 2013)

commune with apparitions of other figures, from angels to saints to Christ, and the Inchigeela visions are no exception. Fiona and Marcia also regularly witness apparitions of Jesus, St Joseph, Padre Pio, St Michael the Archangel as well as guardian angels. The Inchigeela apparitions have especially followed trends which emerged in the American context, most notably the apparitions of Veronica Luken (d. 1995) and her followers known as the Baysiders, in Bayside New York[440] and Nancy Fowler in the small town of Conyers in Georgia.[441] Both these visionaries relayed messages not only from Mary but also from Jesus and other saints. They also produced their own incarnations of Mary such as Our Lady of the Roses (Bayside) and their own material artefacts; specific prayers, images, medals and relics. Both created apparition shrines drawing thousands of pilgrims from across the United States. The increasing presence of Jesus alongside Mary in apparition claims has had the effect of creating a desire for the formal institutionalised recognition of Jesus and Mary as equal partners in establishing Christian salvation.

The roots of this desire stretch back well into Catholic history but began proper in the modern context following the apparitions of Dutch visionary Ida Peerdeman in the 1950s. The Virgin Mary appeared to her under the title of Our Lady of All Nations with the request that Peerdeman make known the Virgin's desire to be recognised as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate with Christ; the Fifth Dogma. Peter Jan Margry has explored Peerdeman's apparitions in a recent article. Although they have since been accepted by the Catholic Church, they were deeply contested for decades. Peerdeman also received a specific prayer to Our Lady of Nations, which ended with the rather odd expression 'may the Lady of All Nations, who was once the Virgin Mary, be our advocate'. The offending phrase 'who was once the Virgin Mary' has since been removed and the Vatican has given its consent to the title Our Lady of All Nations.[442] The Church, however, has to date refused to promulgate the Fifth Dogma, which if recognised would in essence reverse the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*.[443] This dogma was one of the first things Margaret spoke to me of when I met her at

[440] Philip W. Davies & Jacqueline Boles, 'Pilgrim Apparition Work: Symbolisation and Crowd Interaction when the Virgin Mary appeared in Georgia', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* vol. 32 (2003) (pp. 371-402)
[441] Daniel Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven: Photography, Folk Religion, and the Miraculous Image Tradition at a Marian Apparition Site', *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 109 no. 432 (Spring 1996) (pp. 129-48)
[442] Peter Jan Margry, 'Marian interventions in the wars of ideology: the elastic politics of the Roman Catholic Church on modern apparitions', *History and Anthropology* vol. 20 no. 3 (September 2009) (pp. 243-63) pp. 250-1
[443] *Lumen Gentium* outlines the Church's official Mariology since Vatican II, presenting Mary as a passive and silent figure and the ideal follower of Christ.

Rossmore. With the recent election of a new pope, she hoped that the dogma would finally find institutional recognition for a belief many Catholics such as her already firmly adhere to.

When one assesses the apparition messages of Fiona and Marcia, via their many booklets and newsletters, it is not difficult to see why the SWIH are so desirous for the recognition of the Fifth Dogma. Fiona and Marcia place great emphasis on equal veneration of Mary and Jesus and the importance in turning to both to achieve salvation. For example, in the foreword to their 1996 booklet *Love and Mercy as dictated by Jesus and Mary to Fiona Tierney*, Fiona describes Mary and Jesus as 'loving parents', appealing to all to 'open your hearts, your homes and your very beings; and into these welcome Jesus and His Blessed Mother; only then will you find *true* Peace, Joy and Happiness'.[444] The booklet ends on a particular message from Jesus, 'King of All Nations', regarding Mary's role as Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate and the Fifth Dogma; 'Soon now, My Mother will be given Her new title, a title that is long overdue'.[445] My suspicions that this message referred to the Fifth Dogma were confirmed in the course of my fieldwork at Doon. Margaret promptly explained the reasoning for recognising Mary thus as she spoke to me at Rossmore; 'Our Lady is Our Lord's Mother and she works with him to bring people back to the true religion…to God. Our Lady brings us closer to Jesus and he wants us to acknowledge his Mother'. This is why the SWIH turn to both Mary and Jesus for their own salvation and the salvation of the world.

The importance the SWIH attached to the equal mediation of Mary and Christ is reflected in the devotions they make. To illustrate this I shall recount what I observed when I first met Margaret at Rossmore. My companions, two female relatives, and I arrived at the grotto shortly after 2:30 pm, where we found ourselves alone. I had been visiting the grotto for some weeks beforehand. Throughout the week very few came there but signs detailed the times for public prayer on Sundays. After almost 40 minutes it appeared no one was coming. As I prepared to leave a car entered the grotto grounds with a prominent statue of Mary visible on its dashboard. An elderly lady emerged, beckoned us and knelt down at the railings of the grotto. I introduced myself and my companions and explained why we had come. Before Margaret was willing to speak with me she asked that we join her in making her devotions. Short of a rosary, she sent me to fetch the pair of pink

[444] Fiona Tierney, *Love and Mercy: as dictated by Jesus and Mary to Fiona Tierney* (Immaculate Heart House of Prayer; Doon, 1996) p. v
[445] Ibid p. 82

plastic beads dangling from the statue's hands; 'Our Lady would much prefer you to use them'. She then began by reciting the chaplet of the Divine Mercy (revealed to Polish visionary St Faustina in the 1930s), followed by the rosary and finally a chaplet neither my companions nor I were familiar with, the chaplet of the Immaculata.

Evidently Margaret did not expect us to know the last one because she fetched two prayer books from her car, flanked by an image of the Immaculate Heart and entitled simply *The Way of the Immaculate Heart Prayer Book*. She opened it to the appropriate page, where a note above the prayer reads;

> Jesus gave to us the Chaplet of the Immaculata. It is very simple but very powerful. On the 5th November, 1999 Jesus spoke of the blessings He will bestow on all who recite this Chaplet: graces and blessings for peace, joy, happiness, for conversion and for strength and courage in times of trial and temptation.[446]

I later purchased a copy for reference. The chaplet is recited on the traditional rosary beads. The prayers involved ask Mary to assist the reciter to come closer to Christ; 'Mary my Mother I love you. Help me to love Jesus as You did and do'. It concludes with the invocation 'United Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Triumph and Reign'. Following it are Fiona's apparition messages from both Jesus and Mary who promise to bless all who recite it; 'My Mother will hear your cries and bring you to Me through it'.[447]

For the SWIH, then, the equal role Mary and Jesus play in establishing salvation is divinely mandated and to be honoured in their devotions. The Virgin Mary is their patroness and intercessor who works in full tandem with Christ to establish salvation. The Fifth Dogma and the kind of Marian piety attached to it remains a disputed issue within the institutional Church, as do the Inchigeela apparitions in the Irish context. I shall explore the Church's response to both below. Suffice to say that for the SWIH adoration of Christ is intrinsically linked to the veneration of the Virgin Mary as co-intercessor. But Mary, although the most important, is not the only means of achieving closer unity with Christ; veneration of the saints, angels and the holy souls is of paramount importance to the SWIH, second only to their Marian veneration.

The prayer book the SWIH carry is full of novenas, some traditional and some composed by Fiona and Marcia (or dictated by Jesus to the sisters), in honour of various

[446] 'The Chaplet of the Immaculata', *The Way of The Immaculate Heart Prayer Book* pp. 31-3
[447] Ibid

saints. The foremost saint venerated and invoked by the SWIH is St Joseph. Fiona and Marcia, I was informed by Margaret, opened the *St Joseph's Patron of Families House of Prayer* in Inchigeela on the expressed orders of Jesus and Mary. A full account of the establishment of St Joseph's is given in *Inchigeela: The Humble Beginnings*; 'In June 2004, Jesus asked us to fetch a property in the Cork area which He said could be used as a shop and Prayer room…dedicated to St. Joseph'. With the assistance of 'God's providence' they purchased the house in Inchigeela in 2005, renovating it and opening it to the public in 2006. There follow many apparitions messages in which Jesus asks the SWIH to venerate Joseph, 'his Guardian', and Mary's 'spouse'.[448] Each year the saint's feast day is marked by special devotions at Inchigeela. A statue of Joseph is taken on procession from the house of prayer to Rossmore where prayers are recited from 3 pm. The feast day is marked as a special one in particular for fathers, who are invited to participate in the procession. The numbers in attendance varies each year, depending on how many SWIH are in Ireland at the time. It usually does not attract much attention from the wider public. Prominence is given to different saints in the various houses.

In Doon, for example, special emphasis is placed upon St Michael the Archangel, St Philomena and the local patron saint, Fintan. The SWIH prayer book contains a prayer to Fintan 'given by Jesus'.[449] Additionally, a 'litany to the saints for the oratory of the Blessed Virgin Mary' was given to the sisters when they established the Doon house of prayer. It includes Saints Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Margaret-Mary Alacoque, Joseph, John, Benedict, Bridget, Anne, Anthony, Francis, Peter, Paul, Patrick, Gertrude, Martha, Theresa of the Child Jesus and Philomena.[450] When one assesses the prominence afforded to the intercession of the saints in the SWIH devotions one cannot help but be struck by the conservative aspect of it; that is to say the pre-Vatican II style of saint veneration which alongside traditional Marian piety was decentralised by the institutional Church. A number of saints were demoted by the Second Vatican Council, two of the most popular being St Christopher (patron of travelling) and St Philomena (virgin martyr). There is a significant body of academic literature discussing the outcry of Catholics at such measures many of whom continued to venerate these saints regardless of the Church's pronouncements. Ellen Badone explores this in her introduction to the volume *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*. Badone thinks it reductive for scholars to set 'official' and

[448] The Mustard Seed: the Immaculate House of prayer, *Inchigeela: the humble beginnings of the ultimate triumph* pp. 18-24
[449] 'The Chaplet of the Immaculata', *The Way of The Immaculate Heart Prayer Book* p.63
[450] Tierney, *Love and Mercy* p.38

'popular' religion in opposition, arguing instead 'to focus on the dialectical character of their interrelationship'. She makes a good point. To illustrate this she discusses an incident at the Church of St Louis in the Parisian suburb of Port Marly between the Bishop of Versailles and the parishioners at Easter 1987. The parishioners protested the use of Vatican II reforms, specifically the suspension of the Latin Mass, and so they barricaded the altar.[451]

Badone argues that this is a case where the scholar can 'see people actively and creatively shaping their religious domain, sometimes in collaboration with "official" ritual specialists, often in open rebellion against such specialists or voicing criticisms of them'.[452] An episode in the course of my own fieldwork lends weight to Badone's theory. When I stepped into the Oratory of The Blessed Virgin Mary at Doon to meet with Nicholas, Marcia's husband, I immediately noticed two things; the Eucharist which the SWIH were making their devotions before and a small, circa 2ft, statue of St. Philomena placed upon a shelf to the back of the chapel. I queried both with Nicolas. Jubilantly he informed me that the SWIH had recently received the permission of the parish priest to have Eucharistic adoration at the house of prayer. Here the SWIH are working in collaboration with the local ecclesiastical authorities regarding the promotion of devotion to the Eucharist. As for the statue of Philomena, it found its way to Doon by 'providence'. It had come from a closed convent in Tipperary, where it had been donated by a gentleman who prayed to the saint to cure his illness with the promise that he would commission a statue of her if his petition was granted. When the convent closed he made enquires as to where the statue was taken. A friend advised him to visit Doon, where he would find it, which of course he did; hence Nicholas's belief that the statue came there by 'providence'.

Whilst discussing the statue, the subject of Philomena's demotion was raised. It should be noted the saint has since been restored to the calendar of saints, but as far as Nicholas and the SWIH are concerned Philomena was never demoted. They justify this belief by the fact that Fiona witnessed an apparition of the saint at Rossmore grotto, where she was duly made aware of the demoted saint's sadness at the fact that no one prayed to her anymore. Thus, her novena is included in the SWIH prayer book and they actively promote the saint's cult. Here one sees an example of resistance at institutional change, not perhaps open rebellion but certainly a flouting of the institutional Church's wishes. It is

[451] Ellen Badone (ed.), 'Introduction', *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) pp. 3-6
[452] Ibid

reflective of an important point; institutional change is not always recognised or adhered to at the vernacular level. Just because the Church saw fit to remove Philomena from the calendar of saints did not mean that lay Catholics followed suit. Since the saint's cult has become less popular following Vatican II the majority of Catholics clearly accepted the demotion but enough pockets of resistance emerged for the saint to have been reinstated. In the case of the SWIH this is justified by the appearance of the divine figure herself, which had the authority to overrule the institutional Church's decision in the minds of devotees in the houses of prayer.

Jaroslav Pelikan comments that 'for many millions of people no form of Marian devotion or doctrine has carried more momentous significance than her miraculous apparitions'.[453] With their increasing presence in the Catholic apparition phenomenon, the same rings true for the saints since the latter half of the 20th century. For example in the course of her apparitions at Rossmore Fiona claims to have seen St Bernadette Soubirous, the Children of Fatima, St (Padre) Pio, St Anthony, St Patrick, St Bridget, the four Evangelists, St Peter and Philip, St Thomas, St Bartholomew, St Therese of the Child Jesus and St Joseph. The presence of these saints has facilitated and justified the traditional novenas and rituals attached to their respective cults for the SWIH. In principal the SWIH adhere to the Church's teaching regarding the mediation and agency of the saints; these figures are worthy only of veneration for their virtue which imitates the virtue of Christ and ultimately prayers addressed to saints and veneration at their shrines is directed to Christ. Often, especially in the context of the 16th century Reformation, the Catholic veneration of saints has been accused of crossing the line between a monotheistic and a polytheistic faith. Yet their veneration remains important in the Catholic Church but there can often be a wide gap between the institutional and vernacular veneration of the saints.[454]

An instance in the course of my research is a good example. An elderly participant was particularly devoted to Padre Pio and asked a favour, that I purchase one of the saint's novena's booklet for her. Consequently, I visited one of the small shops in Cork city specialising in Catholic religious goods. When I arrived at the till with the saint's booklet in hand the elderly shop assistant beamed with delight, pressed the booklet to her chest saying, 'My one and only…you've made my day'. I had not the heart to tell her that the booklet was intended for another. While on the surface harmless if not rather heart-

[453] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through The Centuries: Her place in The History of Culture* (London; Yale University Press, 1996) p. 187
[454] Patrick J. Geary, 'Cult of Saints', Lindsay L. Jones (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* vol. 3 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) p. 2083

warming, such a statement, however, would not find favour with many clerics in the institutional Church who hold to the belief that Christ, and not the saints nor even the Virgin Mary, should be a Catholic's 'one and only' with the saints' role restricted to act as role models rather than the source of miracles. It is nonetheless, indicative of the ordinary Catholic's faith in the agency of the saint or the Virgin.

A similar example is recounted in a story told by Francis Walsh in the popular Irish magazine *Saint Martin*, a monthly publication by the Irish Apostolate of St. Martin, Dublin. Walsh describes how a neighbour of his had a particular devotion to the St. Martin de Porres, whom he affectionately called 'my man'. The gentlemen would regularly visit the saint's shrine in the local church. Walsh writes how:

> I remember talking to him one day and someone whom we both knew passed by and laughingly said something to my friend about going to Mass. His answer! 'St. Martin, is my man'. He had complete faith in his friend St. Martin…[he] kept up a relationship with St. Martin all his life, confident that his friend in Heaven would look after him and teach him to live in a way that would bring him home safely to the Father.[455]

Thus, devotion to a particular saint can often trump devotion to Christ. Centred around apparition shrines and cults, such as that created by Inchigeela and the houses of prayer, is a vernacular theology which affords greater emphasis on the mediation of Mary and the saints as the path to unity with Christ than is the case in the teaching of the institutional Church, in the same manner in which Walsh describes his friend's 'complete' faith in the intervention of St. Martin to bring him safely to heaven.

That day I first encountered Margaret at Rossmore, she called the saints 'great people' who had 'come before' to guide and 'point the way'. For the SWIH the saints are powerful agents in their own right and they venerate them as guides, friends and instructors alongside Mary and Christ. A note by Fiona in *Love and Mercy* sums up the importance of all these sanctified persons to the SWIH; 'Jesus, Our Blessed Lady and the Angels and Saints have revealed themselves through Messages, Miracles, Signs and Wonders; for Ireland and the whole world'.[456] Thus, the saints and Mary are thought equally capable of working or at the very least channelling miracles, signs and wonders.

[455] Francis Walsh, 'He's my man', *Saint Martin Magazine* November 2013 p. 28
[456] Tierney, *Love and Mercy* p. v

The SWIH venerate an incarnation of Mary that is equal status to Christ under the title Our Lady Queen of Peace. The title goes back to Casey's 1985-87 apparitions but Fiona and Marcia have continued to use it. As a final addendum on the veneration of this incarnation of Mary it should be noted that like Our Lady of Melleray, this Mary has called upon the Irish to spread the apparition messages of Inchigeela, Fiona and Marcia's as well as those of the 1985-87 visionaries; 'Our Blessed Lady and Jesus have chosen our Isle, Ireland, in a very special way'.[457] This inspires the same feeling of being chosen as the messages of Melleray have and the same all-powerful, all-knowing and all-present depiction of Mary emerges from the sisters' messages and from how their followers speak of and engage with Our Lady Queen of Peace, who in the Inchigeela context is joined by the more prominent presence of Jesus and the saints. All of these figures play an important role in the topophilia of the Inchigeela grottoes, the houses of prayer and Benamore grotto. I shall now explore this distinctive topophilia, which is far more complex than that previously described in relation to Ballinspittle (see pp.106-8) or Melleray (see pp.141-8).

'Our Lady's Land of Peace, Love, Joy and Happiness'; topophilia at Inchigeela and the houses of prayer

One of the long term effects of the moving statues phenomenon has been to create what in essence have become apparition grottoes. In the late 1980s and early 1990s apparitions of the Virgin Mary continued to be reported at various roadside shrines across the country and vigils followed. The Inchigeela apparitions of Fiona Tierney and the apparitions of Christina Gallagher received the most media attention and to judge from the press reports the largest crowds. A current, some might even call it a subculture, has emerged within Irish Catholicism of creating sites of pilgrimage, some temporary and some with more lasting impact. Many of the former have since vanished back into the shadows but Inchigeela became a lasting pilgrimage destination, even if it no longer attracts the kind of pilgrimage Fiona's apparitions drew in the early 1990s. From the outset the Inchigeela apparitions were more complex by virtue of the fact that not one but two shrines were involved; two apparition shrines were created instead of one. In addition the messages of Mary Casey's apparitions gave rise to the belief that Inchigeela village was itself a holy place; 'This is the parish I have chosen. I am giving many graces and to all who come here

[457] Ibid

and pray'.[458] It was this belief which drew Fiona and Marcia and their family to Inchigeela in the first place and they have taken this a step further with their apparitions;

> This is My House for My children, between the chosen sites (*Rossmore Grotto, and Gortaneadin Grotto, both apparition sites of Our Lady in Inchigeela, Co. Cork*). I want this place to be a reminder of what happened here. Inchigeela is a chosen village like Garabandal and Medjugorje, it is a place of pilgrimage, a place of Grace. [459]

The SWIH hold to the belief that the land between the two grottoes has been imbued with salvific grace because of the apparitions there. The agency of Our Lady Queen of Peace is thus spilt between the two grottoes and the house of prayer in the village. The map below is taken from *Inchigeela…A Call to Prayer*, and shows the locations of the two Lourdes grottoes in relation to the village and the surrounding countryside.

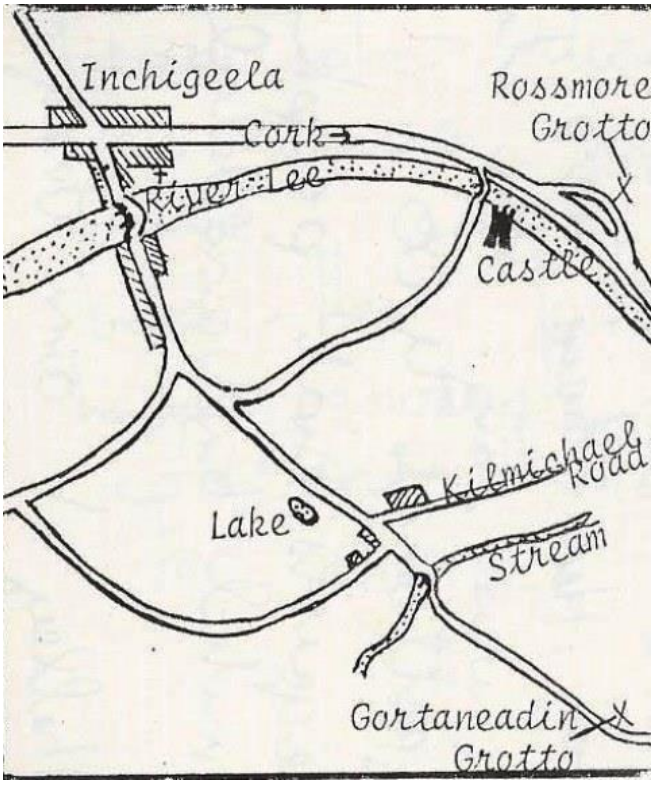


Figure 5.2: Map showing location of Inchigeela's grottoes, the village and the surrounding hinterland.

[458]'13-8-1986', 'Messages of Our Blessed Lady to Mrs. Casey at Gortaneadin Grotto, Inchigeela, Co. Cork, Eire'. (Pamphlet available at grotto) p. 1
[459] *Inchigeela* : *the humble beginnings* p. 21

And this is the key difference between Inchigeela and the other sites such as Ballinspittle and Melleray. The Ballinspittle and Melleray grotto committees have been outward looking in their desire to promote their grottoes as pilgrimage sites and in spreading the Melleray messages to the wider world, but as regards topophilia they have been inward looking, focusing their attention on one sacred shrine. The Inchigeela visionaries, however, have extended the sacred geography of the Inchigeela shrines to the houses of prayer and Benamore grotto by holding apparition vigils there and at their European houses also. I shall begin by assessing the topophilia of the Inchigeela shrines, focusing on Rossmore since it features more prominently in the SWIH's work. I will also briefly consider Benamore grotto before I discuss the topophilia of the houses of prayer.

At Rossmore, Margaret informed me that the Virgin Mary has a specific name for her shrine there. It is known to the SWIH as 'Our Lady's Land of Peace, Love, Joy, and Happiness'. When she had finished making her devotions, she walked my companions and I around the grounds of the grotto (it has its own picnic area) pinpointing places where Mary and the saints had stood and had blessed. For example, she told us that Mary had stood in the small waterfall next to the grotto and blessed its water. Cups are provided for pilgrims to drink it, as well as holy water bottles. At another spot in the picnic area she identified the location where the Virgin requested that an oratory be built at some future date. Finally, she explained that the steps to the statue of the Virgin have been blessed and that the statue, Figure 5.3, is guarded by two angels.



Figure 5.3: Rossmore grotto, Inchigeela (Photo by author, 2013)

Details of 'the blessings' at the grotto can be read on A4 laminated sign, left there by the SWIH:

> This Grotto has special blessings: The arched stone has Healing, the steps from there up have the following: Strength, Courage, Peace of Mind, Love. The seven others have the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety and the Fear of the Lord.

In addition to this the SWIH believe that angels 'protect' the grotto of Rossmore. Details of this are outlined in Fiona's booklets. In total, she says, nine angels 'protect Our Lady's Lands'. These are stationed are the two entrances, before the grotto's railings, at the statue and in the picnic area; 'On many occasions during the apparitions, Fiona could see these Angels and they often told us they were praying with us'.[460] Certain rules are observed by the SWIH at the shrine in accordance with Fiona's apparition messages; namely they do not speak but only to pray (an exception was made for my study) and women, though not all, cover their hair at the shrine to respect Mary and the sanctity of the site. Here one again detects the influence of pre-Vatican II Catholicism; it also poses some interesting questions regarding gender, which I shall discuss in more detail below.

SWIH mainly visit the Rossmore shrine for vigils on the first Saturday of each month and whenever Fiona and Marcia suggest. The other apparition grotto frequented by the sisters is Benamore. I was told that the shrine there 'came about' through an apparition Fiona received at Rossmore. In 1993 the statues in the grotto were donated to Fiona following the closure of a convent. After being shown where to erect the grotto in a vision, Fiona and her husband established the grotto at Benamore. The significance of Benamore shrine for the SWIH is linked to the passion of Christ. Fiona, I was told, received an apparition of The Crucifixion there on the feast of the Triumph of the Cross in 1997. The feast day has been honoured there since with vigils. According to SWIH Mary calls Benamore her 'land of reparation'. Prayers are recited there daily from noon to 3pm in the adjoining prayer room. The SWIH speak highly of both Rossmore and Benamore grottoes as places of prayer and peace, where many 'signs and miracles' have taken place. It is their firm belief that Mary, Jesus and the saints are ever-present at these shrines. Whilst praying

[460] The Mustard Seed: the Immaculate House of prayer, *Inchigeela: the humble beginnings of the ultimate triumph* p. 15

at Rossmore, for instance, Margaret greeted me with the words 'Our Lady always keeps the sun shining on our backs while we pray here…she is with us'.

The shrines' locations certainly played their part in this. Inchigeela is a most scenic part of the country, not quite the treasure trove of natural beauty Melleray is but the waterfalls and surrounding woodlands at both Rossmore and Gortaneadin certainly add to the charisma of the grottoes. The SWIH I spoke with enjoyed praying in the peaceful locations. None, though, shared any of the kind of 'signs' described to me at Melleray (see pp. 143-8), but they did emphasis feeling saintly presences at the grottoes. For the SWIH, Fiona and Marcia's apparitions have sanctified the grottoes but it is the vigils and devotions they make at these grottoes that have kept the grottoes 'holy'. As Frances King comments; 'whatever may be the initial impetus or cause of the creation of a shrine, it is people that contribute to its sacredness by their movements and behaviour'.[461] The statues also play a role in a shrines' topophilia. In *The Sacred Gaze*, David Morgan captures this; when he writes that images create spaces that are seen as sacred; 'spaces of worship and devotion'.[462] A process by which a grotto becomes a sacred place is evident in the case of not only Inchigeela but Ballinspittle and Melleray also.

With the collective consent of the community and the local clergy, a shrine is erected and blessed in Mary's honour. It becomes a centre of Marian devotion and community prayer. An apparition or series of apparitions imbues the shrine with further blessings and salvific grace. Thereafter the shrine is maintained as a holy place by the pilgrimages made there. In short it is made special by people themselves because they identify it as such and make the necessary signs such as pilgrimages, vigils, and devotions to mark the significance of the sacred space. This is bolstered by hierophany; the pilgrim/devotee searching for 'signs' or proof of the divine manifesting in the natural world at the shrine. In the case of the SWIH this has predominately been the number of conversions they have witnessed at Rossmore, Benamore and other shrines, that at least is the impression Margaret gave when I met her at Inchigeela. In the case of Gortaneadin, she explained that people have continued to see the statue move there since 1985. The prime motivation for pilgrimage to Inchigeela amongst the SWIH remains what it has always been; salvation of the soul, miracles and a deeper connection with the divine. That certainly is why Margaret was there, she continuously spoke of the state of sin humanity is

[461] E. Frances King, *Material Religion and Popular Culture* (London; Routledge, 2010) p.84
[462] David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (London; University of California Press, 2005) p. 56

always in and this is why they have recourse to the agency of Mary and the saints, to be found at their shrines.

In essence the houses of prayer perform the same function for the SWIH. They have been sanctified by the apparitions Fiona and Marcia received there and this is reflected in the rules that are enforced whilst visiting them. For example a sign has been placed at the entrance to the oratory at Doon which reads;

> This is Holy Ground! Please ensure that you are covered up when entering the oratory of the BVM and the Calvary room. No mini skirts or dresses, No shorts, No low tops or tops with plunging necklines are allowed.

The SWIH describe the same sense of feeling the presence of Jesus, Mary, and the saints in the oratory, seen here in Figure 5.4.



Figure 5.4: Oratory of The Blessed Virgin Mary, Immaculate Heart House of Prayer, Doon. (Photo by author, 2013)

Fiona has experienced many apparitions in the oratory, which are described in the monthly newsletters and her booklets. Once again the SWIH believe the houses are imbued with

salvific grace, which the sisters' apparition messages also imply; 'I have asked you to build this My Oratory…My Heart is here…many Blessings are bestowed here…'[463]

A special timetable of devotions is observed in each of the houses of prayer to honour the presence of the divine figures:

11:45 am	Morning Prayer of The Church
12.00 Noon	The Angelus
	The Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary
	The Litany of the B.V.M.
	The Magnificent
	Read the Gospel of the Day
	Read a message of Love and Mercy
	Hymn
	Blessing with Our Lady's Holy Oil
3 pm	The Chaplet of Divine Mercy
	The Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary
	Chaplet of the Immaculata
	Messages of Love and Mercy
	Hymn
6 pm	The Angelus
	The Chaplet of the Holy Souls
	Litany of the Saints of the Immaculate Heart House
	Chaplet of Love
	Baptism of Desire for the Unborn
	Messages of Love and Mercy
	Evening prayer of the Church
8.30 pm	Our Father Prayer
	Prayer of Love
	Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary

[463] Tierney, *Love and Mercy* p. 47 (Apparition message concerning the opening of the house of prayer at Doon in 1995)

Chaplet of the Holy Souls

Messages of Love and Mercy/Hymns[464]

These devotions were, I was told, dictated by Jesus to make the houses of prayer holy places.

Inchigeela presents the most complex topophilia and sacred geography of all the apparition sites attached to Ireland's moving statues phenomenon, far more complex than that of the Ballinspittle and Mt. Melleray grottoes. Not only have the Lourdes shrines been sanctified by the presence of divine figures for the SWIH but also the houses of prayer in Ireland and abroad, where Fiona and Marcia have also claimed their apparitions. The graces that the SWIH hope to obtain from visits to the shrines and the houses of prayer exert a powerful charisma for them. It is in the quest to save one's soul and to find Mary, Christ and the saints that pilgrims journey to Inchigeela and the other sites 'linked' to it as Fiona writes in her special booklet on Inchigeela.[465] Talismanic power, (talismanic in sense that certain places or objects are believed to possess supernatural and or protective power), is attributed to each shrine and to the Doon house of prayer, in their holy water wells which have special blessings as described above. In addition special graces are promised to all who make the pilgrimage to either the grottoes or the houses of prayer, as repeated continuously throughout the sisters' apparition messages. Thus, the shrine's charisma is, as is the case with Melleray (see pp 129-36.) accessed through natural material elements in the shrine. Many SWIH spoke of cures they witnessed from the use of the shrines' holy water. In addition to the powerful topophilia created by the apparitions, a distinct material culture has emerged in the context of the apparitions with production of religious artefacts based on the sisters' descriptions of Mary and Jesus. Inchigeela is one of only of two cases in the context of Ireland's 1980s apparitions where this has come about, the other being the visions of Christina Gallagher. These religious artefacts are held in high reverence by the SWIH and I now wish to explore this particular and unique element of the Inchigeela apparition cult.

[464] The Mustard Seed: the Immaculate House of prayer, *Inchigeela: the humble beginnings of the ultimate triumph* p. 13
[465] Ibid p. 16

‘Let my image be shown’; Inchigeela’s material culture

Like Melleray, Inchigeela’s devotional materiality comprises of both manufactured artefacts and natural elements. The SWIH make use of holy water and oil; olive oil believed to be blessed by Mary in the course of Fiona’s apparitions. Religious objects such as images, statuary, rosaries, scapulars, crucifixes, medals and prayer cards are also given to Fiona for the Virgin and Christ to bless. It would be all too easy for the scholar to lightly overlook such acts.

The onus is on the scholar of religion to pay significant attention to both natural and manufactured material religious culture. The temptation is often for scholars to pay greater heed to how devotees engage with images but the use of water, oils, fire, foodstuffs, flowers, and the like is equally invocative of vernacular, and institutional religion. As Philip Arnold writes; ‘Material elements such as water, stones, mountains, and trees are the referents for religious activity throughout the world’. Inchigeela is a fascinating case study for this. The point that is worth bearing in mind is simply the one Arnold makes and that is that objects, both natural and manmade, are ‘material referents’ used to create a sense of identity, place and meaning.[466] Like Melleray, the Rossmore grotto has its own holy water well, as do some of the houses of prayer, which give rise to similar beliefs regarding the talismanic properties of holy water, as discussed in the previous chapter, (see pp. 145-8). Here I will discuss the use of candles and oil by the SWIH for talismanic purposes but in this section I wish to focus mainly on the images and devotional objects created by Fiona and Marcia’s apparitions, giving Inchigeela its own distinct materiality missing in the cases of both Ballinspittle and Melleray.

When Margaret took my companions and me to the house of prayer at Inchigeela, she took us first to see the oratory. Inside traditional Catholic images and statues, the Sacred Heart, St Joseph, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, were everywhere one looked but my eyes were drawn immediately to a large image of Mary hanging over the altar. It was one I was not familiar with but I immediately deduced that this must be Mary as Fiona describes her. In fact Margaret explained that this was just one of the many, many guises in which Mary has appeared to the visionary. ‘So this is Our Lady of Inchigeela?’ I asked. ‘No’, Margaret replied, ‘That’s Our Lady of Orsk’, Russia she quickly added noting my obvious

[466]Philip P. Arnold, ‘Materiality’, Lindsay Jones (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* 2nd ed. vol. 15 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) p. 10048

confusion. I shall describe the origins, symbolism and meaning of this image below, for now I wish to describe what happened next. Margaret instructed us to kneel as she returned with a small flask of oil. Rubbing it onto our foreheads and the palms of our hands, she made the following blessing 'Bless you (Will) and bless your hands to do the work of Jesus'. I was again blessed likewise at Doon. Kindly Margaret offered me a small container of the oil.

The SWIH particularly prize it for curing cancer. A note in *Inchigeela: The Humble Beginnings* explains this in more detail. Fiona, it says, had been asked by Mary to bring oil to Rossmore, which she did several times. The Virgin placed 'her finger in it' and informed the visionary that Jesus had placed twelve special blessings upon it; 'Peace, Courage, Healing, Sickness'. It is also granted 'indulgence for the hour of Death, Blessing on the home and family, Blessing to avert evil & danger, Conversions, Keep fear away'. Additionally, the oil is believed to bestow 'special blessings for expectant mothers'. The oil is distributed freely, but donations are encouraged.[467] Holy oil, much like holy water, is a means for the devotee to invoke the agency of Mary or Christ. David Morgan comments that previous approaches to studying religion 'have tended to dismiss the cultural biography of things in religious belief as superstitious idolatrous, low-brow, or primitive'.[468] But as Jeanne Halgren Kilde posits in *Material Religion*, 'the ways in which individuals and groups construct the environments and settings of their religious practices and imbue them with meaning are central components in the panoply of religious phenomena'.[469] Thus, one man's 'superstition' is another's way to access the agency of a higher power. It falls upon the scholar not to make condescending dismissive remarks about practices that do no accord with their own belief system or lack thereof. Practices such as the use of holy oil for protection and healing tell us much about how people construct and understand the world around. A number of examples in the context of Inchigeela illustrate Kilde's point.

During February and March 2014 a wave of destructive storms struck Ireland and the UK. A prayer, 'Blessing Against Storms' was included in the SWIH February newsletter; the reader is advised to keep a copy of the prayer in the home 'along with your

[467] *Inchigeela: the humble beginnings of the ultimate triumph* p. 15
[468] David Morgan (ed.), 'Materiality, social analysis, and the study of religions', *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010) p. 59
[469] Jeanne Halgren Kilde, 'Space, place, and religious meaning', *Material Religion* vol. 3 issue. 2 (pp. 277-78) p. 277

blessed candle and holy water and the Lord will protect you'.[470] After reciting the prayer the devotee is instructed to 'sprinkle holy water, and light a blessed candle'.[471] It would be all too tempting for many to dismiss this as 'superstition' but it is reflective of the sincere faith placed in such religious artefacts and their relationship to the agency of Christ. Scholars often set aside 'belief' as an empty signifier and tend to focus exclusively on practice; this is, to my line of thinking, a mistake for what is a practice if not a reflection of a belief. Increasingly scholars making use of the terminology associated with Primiano's definition of vernacular religion and those interested in the study of material religious culture, such as Ülo Valk, are calling upon scholars to take the phrase 'I believe' at more than surface value. As Valk writes;

> Belief is a vernacular category used in everyday communication to refer to the act of attributing veracity and validity to something, having a conviction, accepting a truth or expressing a firm opinion how things are.[472]

Morgan takes the point further; 'beliefs are what people do, how they do it, where and when. Not just why, which is the traditional framing of the contents of belief'. [473] Belief is not just a word, it is feeling, smelling, seeing and hearing. It is learned and it is taught; 'religious and ethical belief is a holding to a practice and a tradition of that practice'. Morgan identifies three ways to define 'belief'. Firstly, he defines it 'dogmatically' as the avowal of tenets. 'Affectively' he defines it as the 'experience of certain feelings and emotions'; and thirdly, 'voluntaristically' as partaking in a group's distinct and definitive practices. Materiality plays a key role in this, as it 'mediates belief, material objects and practices both enable it and enact it'.[474]

Belief, then, that sprinkling holy water and lighting a blessed candle will protect oneself from dangerous storms or that blessing oneself with holy oil and water will protect and heal is the means to articulate a belief in the existence, power, agency and protection of a supernatural other. The same faith, namely protection, is often also attributed to

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[470]' *The Immaculate House of Prayer newsletter* (Issue 181) (February & March 2014) p. 2
[471] Ibid p. 19
[472] Ülo Valk, 'Belief as Generic Practice and Vernacular Theory in Contemporary Estonia', Ülo Valk & Marion Bowman (eds.), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (Equinox; London, 2012) p. 351
[473] David Morgan (ed.), 'Preface', *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010) p. xiv
[474] David Morgan (ed.), 'Introduction', *Religion and material culture: the matter of belief* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010) pp. 5-12

images in the Catholic context. The setting of devotion in the Inchigeela apparitions offers a fascinating and a thought-provoking example of this. Here I wish to return to the images of Mary and Jesus which have been produced by the SWIH based on the descriptions given by Fiona and Marcia of their apparition's appearances and as desired by Mary, I was told to be venerated across the nation; 'Let my image be shown' the visionaries say there were instructed. I shall examine three in total, the images of *Our Lady of Orsk, Mother of Love* and *Oh Divine Love*, I will begin with the image 'Mother of Love'. I first noticed this in what is known as the Calvary Room at the Doon house of prayer, see Figure 5.5 below.



Figure 5.5: 'Mother of Love', Immaculate Heart House of Prayer, Doon (Photo by author, 2013)

The image depicts Mary in her traditional garb with a Crucified Christ displayed over her chest. I was given a replica of the image, which the SWIH distribute freely as an A3 sized poster. The reverse explains the significance of the image and the indulgence attached to it as revealed to the visionary by Christ:

> Child, tell My children that wherever this image is placed and honoured, I will honour it. I will take your hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh. I will part My blessings of conversion, blessings of protection, blessings of peace, love, joy and happiness, blessings to repent and seek My forgiveness.

The image is displayed by the SWIH in their homes as the means to invoke the blessings promised by Christ to Fiona. It is not unlike the practice of enthroning the image of the Sacred Heart in the Catholic home, both for protection and as a means of honouring the figure of Christ. The SWIH I spoke to about this image, emphasised that it represented both Mary and Christ's sacrifice for the world and more importantly their continuing suffering caused by rejection. They place special significance on the promise of forgiveness for all those who 'honour' the image which acts as one half of another; 'O Divine Love', see Figure 5.6 here.

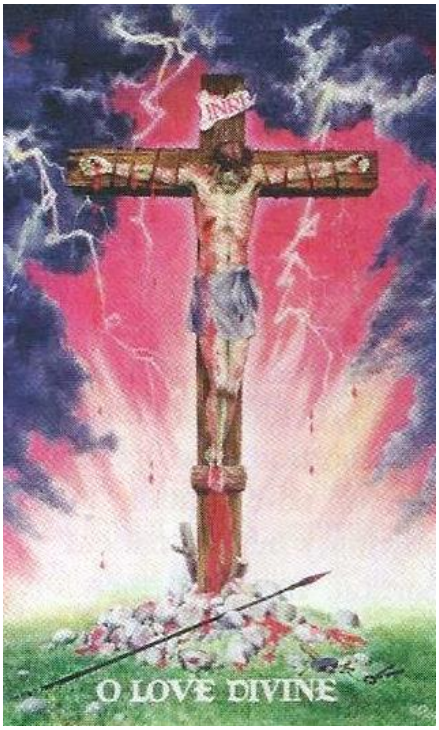


Figure 5.6: 'Oh Divine Love' © (*The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*)

This image is based on an apparition of Fiona's in 1997 at Benamore grotto, on the feast of The Triumph of the Cross. It shows a rather battered and bloody crucified Christ flanked by the instruments of the passion and a lightening flared red sky behind. An indulgence has too been placed on the use of this image, more or less the same as that attached to the 'Mother of Love' image and the request that it 'made known to the world promising to bring many souls to Him, by conversion'. The sisters have reproduced images of classical Christian iconography to take on a new meaning in the context of their apparitions. Here is a prime example of the universal being localised. This image is particularly linked to Benamore grotto for the SWIH, where Fiona received the vision and

has been reproduced in The Calvary Room at Doon with life-sized statuary. I noted the SWIH are especially fond of venerating the Passion and the suffering Christ, making the Stations of the Cross regularly in the course of their devotions. An interesting example of the impact this image has made upon them was revealed to me at St Joseph's house of prayer. There Margaret showed me two crucifixes; one in the hallway of the house and the other inside the oratory. The former was a large traditional Catholic crucifix which had been donated to the SWIH after its removal from a local secondary school. The second was a much smaller one, showing a bloody and deceased Christ. Margaret pointed out that this one better reflected the suffering of Christ because that is how he appeared to Fiona at Benamore.

In the context of Ballinspittle and Melleray I discussed the phenomenon of apparition photography and filmography, where I noted that for the believer these are thought to accurately depict Christ, Mary and the saints (see pp. 101-5 & 153-7.). The images based on the apparitions of Fiona Tierney do likewise for the SWIH and exert a powerful charisma for them and influence over the way they behave religiously. For example, one servant I spoke with hangs the image 'Oh Divine Love' in his living room, before which he recites the prayer before a crucifix each morning. This particular image inspires deep emotion in the SWIH and one in particular remembered crying when seeing it for the first time, whilst contemplating on the suffering of Christ. The final image I wish to discuss is 'Our Lady of Orsk'. This was the image which had immediately captured my attention when I first stepped into the oratory of the Inchigeela house of prayer. Again Margaret kindly gave me a small copy of this and the other images discussed here. It depicts Mary in a familiar stance; perched on the globe, hands outstretched and veiled, but in a wine/red colour rather that her characteristic blue. Her gown is star flanged, reminiscent of the image of Our Lady of Pontmain (an apparition the SWIH are especially fond of) and holding a rosary which forms the shape of a heart. One detects elements of longstanding Marian depiction in this image but in many respects it deviates from how one would typically identify Mary. Usually the Virgin appears more gracefully, more subtly with an air of humility and a refined despondency; a sombre yet serene figure. This is altogether missing in the depiction of 'Our Lady of Orsk', who stands confidently, rather boldly beaming out at the viewer, see Figure 5.7 below.

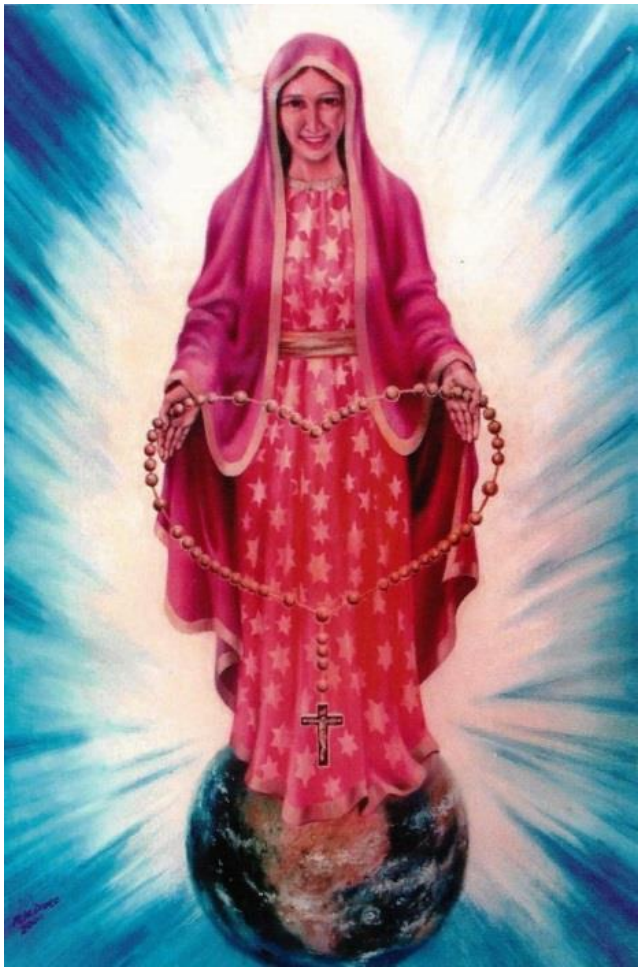


Figure 5.7: ‘Our Lady of Orsk’ © (*The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*)

The meaning of the picture is explained on the reverse of the small copies distributed widely by the SWIH. In 1993 Fiona and a small group of her followers ‘went on a mission to Russia at Our Lady’s Request’. On their first day in the city of Orsk, Fiona and the group attended mass, where she received the vision ‘after Holy Communion’. Mary appeared looking ‘radiant’, with the heart shaped rosary and standing ‘on the world, over the country of Russia’. The significance of this connection between the Virgin Mary and Russia will not be lost on the scholar of Marian apparitions. Since the famous request made at Fatima in 1917, the conversion of Russia to Mary’s Immaculate Heart (atheist Russia as is it is often called by devotees of the many apparition incarnations of Mary) has become an almost anticipated aspect in the messages of Mary via her apparitions. In her article for *Religion* in 2000, E. Ann Matter traces the evolution of this trend; ‘a number of Marian apparitions have followed Fatima’s focus on the evils of Communism’. She cites

the example of the apparitions of Mrs Mary Ann Van Hoof of Necedah in Wisconsin, 1950-62.[475] Once again Inchigeela is no exception to this trend.

Fiona and Marcia's connection to the conversion of Russia began, I was told, at Inchigeela in the 1990s, where the Virgin and Christ appointed both sisters into what is known as 'The Mustard Seed'. This is a small group, comprised of Fiona, Marcia, their husbands and other SWIH who at different intervals are dispatched to Russia to continue the work of promoting Roman Catholicism and devotion to Mary there. The image of 'Our Lady of Orsk' is the emblem which unites the group – The Mustard Seed and the SWIH – as a whole to the continuing mission of consecrating Russia to Mary and converting 'The Morning Star' (the name given to Russia by Jesus and Mary in the sisters' apparitions). It is the most popular apparition image amongst the SWIH. Images have the power to create a sense of unity and belonging and this is what the apparition images of Fiona and Marcia do for the SWIH, who keep them in their homes. In addition to the use of these apparition images, the SWIH also wear a special medal, 'The Medal of Truth' (see Figure 5.6), in accordance with the messages of the sisters.

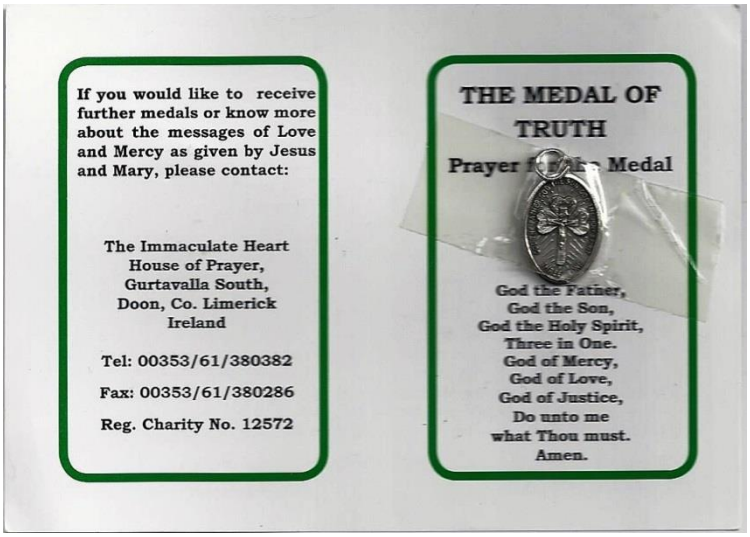


Figure 5.8: 'The Medal of Truth' and Prayer © (*The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*)

Fiona's booklet *Love and Mercy* records the origins of the medal and the prayer attached to it: 'We were asked to strike a medal depicting the Holy Trinity and the

[475] E. Ann Matter, 'Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics', *Religion* vol. 31 (2001) (pp. 125-53) p. 129

Triumphant Hearts of Jesus and Mary'.[476] It depicts the image of a crucifix surmounted on a shamrock with the untied hearts image on its reverse. On the shamrock side it reads 'God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, Three in One, God of Mercy, God of Love, God of Justice, Do unto me what Thou must'. On the reverse is the invocation used by The SWIH for the rosary; 'Precious Hearts of Jesus and Mary we love you'. As with their images, the sisters claim that those who wear this medal shall receive 'blessings' and 'graces': 'Wear it with love. Great blessings are bestowed upon it'. The medal is distributed freely with the prayer card shown in the image. Nicholas also presented me with a rosary bead, with the same medal as a pendant. This is just one of many medals that the SWIH wear because, I was told, they were specifically instructed to so do by Jesus and Mary. One of the first things I noticed about Margaret was the large clutch of medals she wears around her neck, as many of the SWIH do. When I met Marcia at Doon she was wearing a rather prominent Benedictine cross, which many SWIH too wear. These medals (see Figure 5.7) are another form of material mediation as discussed in the previous chapter (see pp. 151-2); a means to inspire devotion and invoke the saint's agency for protection.



Figure 5.9: Medals worn by a *Servant of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* (Photo by author, 2013)

[476] Tierney, *Love and Mercy* p. 73

The SWIH have another means of expressing their religious identity in addition to the medals and devotional objects they carry and wear; their dress. All SWIH are expected to dress modestly, especially women. As noted above they are not permitted to wear revealing clothing whilst in the oratories of the houses of prayer or at the grottoes. At Doon the SWIH I met with were wearing blue robes, monastic in style, with a corded belt. This is done in accordance with Mary's wishes. In *Love and Mercy*, for example, Fiona writes that on her ninth anniversary 'as a visionary' she received an apparition of Mary at Rossmore, where she was instructed how to dress henceforth; 'Fiona, I tell you now to make garments of sacrifice; red for you, blue for Marcia'. In addition both were asked to wear sandals 'for all time', with their rosary beads inside their garments and around their waists, and 'your hair long'. This practice is particularly interesting, in age where nuns and monks are increasingly abandoning the use of explicitly religious dress in the form of monastic robes and habits. Here the visionaries and their followers are making explicit their religious calling and belief, as well as making a clear statement about their sanctity. Figure 5.10 shows Marcia and Fiona, seen on the far right, in their monastic robes on the occasion of the visit of Patty Powell and her twin sister Eileen Giles, who run The Holy Family House of Prayer in Rockingham, in West Australia. The sisters came to attention in the early 2000s for their statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, which is believed to weep human tears and tears of oil.[477]



Figure 5.10: Marcia and Fiona at Doon in their monastic robes

[477] (http://weepingmadonna.org/) The picture was taken on 8 June 2005 at the Doon House of Prayer

Additionally both were asked to cover their hair whilst making devotions at the grotto.[478] This was one of the first things I queried with the SWIH, who told me that women were asked to do this in respect for Jesus and Mary, as it was traditionally done in accordance with the writings of St Paul. The use of dress, like imagery and other objects, is a marker of identity and also an expression of belief and faith. It is a material way of expressing oneself and thus for the SWIH it is important that they dress with modesty and humility in imitation of Mary, Christ and the saints; a material means of expressing faith in humility. Figure 5.11 shows Fiona during one of her 1990s apparition vigils at Rossmore, with her hair covered in accordance with the messages of her apparitions. The act of women covering their hair is too a material way of making a statement on religious belief, namely that to be modest and respectful women must cover their hair in sacred places. It is also a way of differentiating between the religious observances of men and women and the greater emphasis placed on the perceived importance of modesty in relation to the female as opposed the male, who is not required or expected to cover his hair or make a visual and material statement such as this regarding the state of his modesty.



Figure 5.11: Fiona wearing a scarf at Rossmore grotto

[478] Tierney, *Love and Mercy* p.67

There is one final element of material devotion at Inchigeela and the houses of prayer which I wish to analyse; the use of devotional texts and prayer books. The prayer book Margaret presented me with at Rossmore is the main devotional text used by the SWIH as composed by Fiona and Marcia based on their apparitions. It contains all the necessary prayers and reflections needed to make their daily devotions. It is a window on the life of a member of the SWIH and what it entails. Additionally, the sisters' apparition messages are daily incorporated into the devotions of the SWIH. Traditional devotions such as the rosary and the Stations of the Cross are repackaged to the SWIH with the reflections the sisters say were dictated to them by Jesus and Mary. Thus, universal staples of Catholic devotion take on a new vernacular veneer in the context of the houses of prayer. As for the devotional texts containing the messages of Fiona and Marcia's apparitions, these are treated with the greatest of respect by the SWIH because they contain the words of Jesus, Mary and the saints. They are treated with the respect afforded to the Bible in institutional Catholicism. In point of fact, many SWIH read these booklets side by side with the Bible in their daily reflections. Again it would be easy to overlook these devotional texts, but they are an integral aspect of religious material culture, not just in the Christian context. As John E. Cort remarks; 'Material culture is not devoid of words'.[479]

Of all the cults of the Virgin Mary to emerge from Ireland's 1980s moving statues and apparition phenomenon, only Inchigeela can boast its own distinct materiality in the form of the religious artefacts; from images to medals to clothing. To this end the SWIH have their own shops where they sell religious items, both those based on Fiona and Marcia's apparitions and more traditional Catholic devotional objects. They also sell knitwear incorporating motifs and symbols from the sisters' apparitions. This is another example which sets Inchigeela apart from Ballinspittle and Melleray, where grotto committees have shied away from establishing their own shops to cater for pilgrims' needs. In both cases I was told that they did not wish to face accusations of personal gain or capitalising on their miracles. As for the SWIH, Nicholas explained that the items sold in the shops attached to the houses of prayer are only used to fund the SWIH charity work in the Ukraine and Russia and to produce the SWIH booklets. It should be noted that similarly Christina Gallagher and her followers have established shops at their houses of prayer, which has attracted much controversy in the media. In the late 2000s Gallagher

[479] John E. Cort, 'Art, Religion, And Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 3 issue. 14 (September 1996) (pp. 613-32) p. 623

was accused of amassing a huge personal fortune on the strength of donations made by her followers and pilgrims, and the items sold in her shops. Gallagher has been accused of 'brainwashing' her followers, who have been branded a 'cult'.[480] Since the 1993 the Inchigeela visionaries have slipped under the radar of the media and have avoided the widespread media accusations of cultism now surrounding the controversial Achill house of prayer and Christina Gallagher, who has also come under increasing criticism from the hierarchy of the Irish Catholic Church.

While the SWIH have escaped media controversy, they too have to face accusations of being a sinister 'cult' and have come under criticism of the upper echelons of the Irish Catholic hierarchy since Fiona's apparition vigils at Rossmore in the early 1990s and the establishment of the houses of prayer. At the clerical level the response to the sisters' 'mission' has been more mixed; I have found priests who openly support and criticise them. In the final section I wish to explore the Catholic Church's response to the SWIH and the Inchigeela visionaries. Here I wish to analyse the attractions of the visionaries, or 'prophets' as the SWIH call Fiona and Marcia, especially for their female following. I will also consider the question of gender in the tension between the female visionary and the male priest. Inchigeela is by far the most complex site discussed in this thesis and the response of the Catholic Church to the sisters' apparitions and work reflects this. But apparitions are becoming more and more a common reality in the 21st century and are on the increase rather than the decrease. The significant impact which reports of Marian apparitions and the cults attached to them have made has led many scholars to posit, and convincingly so, that the Marian apparition phenomenon has led to establishment of a sub-culture within the Catholic Church and to this end I wish to make use of the theory of 'parallel rituals' as put forward by Thomas A. Tweed.

Prophet and Priest; the rise of the Marian subculture within the Catholic Church

In her seminal article on the subject, E. Ann Matter has made some important points regarding Marian apparitions since the 20th century. Firstly, there has been a marked increase in Marian apparitions since Vatican II and followers of the many cults arising of these apparitions have been critical of Vatican II's reforms. Secondly, since the 19th

[480] Tom Shiel, 'Hierarchy denies House of Prayer its blessing', *The Irish Times* 28 February 2008 p. 2

century and increasingly so in the 20th, visionaries are expected to hail from 'ordinary' backgrounds, creating what Matter call the 'humble seer';

> Marian piety would lead one to *expect* that Mary would appear to a young girl in a remote and poor village rather than to, for example, the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan or even, for all his personal devotion to the Virgin, Pope John Paul II.[481]

Thirdly, Matter notes that when apparitions of Mary are reported the faithful expect that it is both to offer a reason for 'the seemingly inexplicable' and 'a goal for changing the world and saving it from some dreaded prospect'. She neatly sums up what Marian apparitions have become for Catholics when she writes that they have developed into 'a Janus-faced expression of Catholic identity'; one side looks back with nostalgia to the days of true Catholicism before the reforms of Vatican II and the other watches with 'dreadful anticipation' to the threat of an increasingly secular and therefore 'Godless' future.[482]

These trends are discernible in all Marian apparition claims in the modern context; from Medjugorje to Inchigeela, from Inchigeela to the American apparitions such as those of Bayside in the 1990s. I have already noted the SWIH's criticisms of Vatican II above and have considered this point in-depth whilst discussing the Ballinspittle phenomenon, (see pp.115-7). Here I wish to focus on the 'humble seer' and the challenge they create for the institutional clergy. Accordingly, I will also consider in more detail the role of Fiona and Marcia's followers, without whom the visionaries would not be in a position to function. Before I discuss this, however, I wish to call attention to some more important points made by scholars on the subject of Marian apparitions, so as to properly frame and contextualise this discussion. An interesting assertion has been made by Peter Jan Margry about the nature of Marian apparition messages since the Second World War, which he says have been criticised by the Church for their 'worldly' and 'personally expressed content' as well as their 'contentious and political character'. The sheer volume of Marian apparition reports since the latter half of the 20th century has attracted scorn from the institutional Church but has had the added effect, Margry writes, of establishing 'autonomous cults and shrines' which in turn have:

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[481] E. Ann Matter, 'Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics', *Religion* vol. 31 (2001) (pp. 125-53) p. 128
[482] Ibid pp. 139-41

> led to the creation of a sort of sub-culture, in which all these unacknowledged apparitional sites have become linked with one another in an informal network of visiting devotees. These are shrines which are less focused on physical healing and more on support and direction in times of social tension and the transformation of personal and social paradigms; shrines which in the eyes of the visiting devotees offer more support in relation to their questions, anxieties and existential uncertainties regarding the world, faith and life, than does the institutional Church.[483]

This point certainly carries weight in relation to what I observed in relation to Inchigeela and the houses of prayer. At Doon, for example, the SWIH have placed a statue of the Medjugorje Gospa (the incarnation of Mary there) in the garden adjoining the house of prayer which is reminiscent of the shrine on the grounds of the parish church at Medjugorje. The SWIH also work eagerly to re-promote the cult of Our Lady of Pontmain which has been in declining popularity since the 20th century and have forged links with other visionaries by establishing houses of prayer at Pontmain and Fatima. Moreover, I enquired about the work of Christina Gallagher and her followers with Margaret at Inchigeela. She is fully willing to believe that Gallagher is a legitimate visionary but one who has been given a different 'mission' than that of Fiona and Marcia. The SWIH are more than willing also to support the Medjugorje visionaries, regularly making pilgrimages there and reading their messages. In the Irish context Margaret told me that Fiona and Marcia were asked to re-publish the messages of Tom Cliffe and Barry Buckley as given at Melleray. One can see here the links Margry describes between visiting devotees to different apparition sites, a fraternal bond of sorts and a grassroots charisma. It bears repeating that no apparition site, shrine or cult exists in a vacuum and thus for the devoted followers of the Virgin Mary there is no difficulty in following one particular incarnation of Mary whilst making links to others.

Zimdars-Swartz makes a similar point to Margry's in *Encountering Mary* and explains the role of the Catholic Church within this sub-culture;

> In the case of Marian apparitions in a Roman Catholic milieu, the claim of privileged knowledge (which the Church has attempted to check but has in fact sanctioned by classifying apparitions as private revelations) has usually led to the rise of subgroups within the larger institution, with distinct patterns of belief and devotional practice.

[483] Margry, 'Marian interventions in the wars of ideology: the elastic politics of the Roman Catholic Church on modern apparitions' p. 246

> While persons in these subgroups participate in, and are often the staunchest supporters of, the Church's traditional rituals, they see themselves, by virtue of their apparition-based knowledge, as members of an especially privileged community, a church within a church, commissioned to impart their presumably crucial knowledge and understanding to the universal Church and the world as a whole.[484]

And it is this 'privileged special knowledge' of the visionaries and their followers which either attracts the support of sympathetic clerics and bishops or conversely their antipathy. A point made to me by Nicholas at Doon when I broached the subject of the Church's response to Fiona and Marcia's apparitions illustrates this. At Doon the sisters have found the support of the local parish priest to the point where he has celebrated mass there, but never on a Sunday. The sisters in turn participate in the parish services as readers and singers in the choir. Not so in Inchigeela. Some weeks before my visit to Doon and my conversation with Nicholas, I made my first visit to Inchigeela. At that point I had met no SWIH and the house of prayer was deserted when I arrived. Desperate for some kind of information I visited the parish office across the road from the house, at the back of the parish church where I found a priest. I was duly told that he knew nothing of the SWIH's work or 'the moving statues' and was not interested because his faith 'is based on a much firmer foundation…the word of Christ as revealed in the Gospels'. Making a pre-emptive strike, he told me that he did not wish to make any further elaboration but advised me to read the statement made by the Bishop of Cork twenty-years earlier. I shall discuss this below. With that he curtly withdrew himself.

I shared my experience with Nicholas to see how the SWIH would respond. He was unperturbed and certainly unsurprised. Some priests have always seen fit to lend their support to the visionaries and their followers, others have not. Nicholas had an interesting and telling explanation for this. He categorised Fiona and Marcia's clerical supporters as 'Marian priests' and their detractors as 'Scriptural' or Vatican II inclined priests. Simply put, in general priests who have a predisposition to Marian devotion are more of a mind to support the visionaries of Marian apparitions and promote the attached incarnation of Mary. Those who follow the Vatican II injunction to have a more biblically based faith, tend to downplay Marian apparition cults. It is worth noting that the priest who brought Fiona and Marcia to my attention is personally extremely devoted to Mary, so Nicholas's

[484] Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: from La Salette to Medjugorje* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991) p. 166

assertion is an invocative one. But on the other hand the scholars must be on their guard from making broad sweeping assumptions; priests can and do carefully pick which apparition and which visionary they are willingly to support and those they intend to censure. At Inchigeela, Margaret dropped a familiar name, a priest whom I had met as prayer leader at Melleray. In the interest of anonymity I will not name him. The priest, however, has been a strong supporter of the Melleray visionaries, which he has announced via the grotto's PA system, since their inception. Yet he has been very critical of Fiona and Marcia. Margaret explained that when he denounced the sisters via a popular Catholic clerically edited publication, Marcia decided to pen a letter to the same publication to defend herself, her sister and the SWIH. A back and forth followed, ending in a stalemate. The point here is that one cannot and should not assume that a priest, or lay devotee for that matter, who supports one apparition claim supports them all, but on the whole Nicholas's point is reflective of the motivations of some clerics who work so diligently to promote Marian apparitions and of others who work so hard to do the exact opposite.

Fiona and Marcia have established a network of supporting clerics since their apparitions began and some openly spoke out on their behalf when the sisters came under criticism from the Bishop of Cork and Ross. On 30 August 1993 *The Cork Examiner* reported that for the latest Inchigeela gathering 'over 1,000 people flocked' to the Rossmore grotto.[485] Two of the newspaper's journalists, Ann Cahill and Neans McSweeney, took a particular interest in the apparition vigils at Rossmore. Throughout the summer and autumn of that year they regularly attended to speak with Fiona, her supporters and curious pilgrims. Of particular interest is their report of 30 August, when a Dublin based priest who wished to remain anonymous, called on the Bishop of Cork and Ross, Dr Michael Murphy, 'to officially investigate the apparitions'. The priest was critical of the Bishop's refusal to acknowledge Fiona's apparitions, making the brusque remark that 'Ireland is the only place where apparitions are not investigated'. They also reported that two priests had led the prayers for the pilgrims while they waited for the sound of the bell rung by the visionaries' mother to announce that the apparition had begun.[486]

Dr Murphy's attitude to moving statues and apparitions had not changed since 1985 when he called upon the thousands congregating at Ballinspittle to use 'extreme caution', (see pp. 113-4) No priest had come forward there to call upon the Bishop to

[485] 'Grotto crowds', *The Cork Examiner* 30 August 1993 p. 1
[486] Ann Cahill & Neans McSweeney, 'Girl visionary claims to have seen Jesus: Bishop is urged to investigate apparitions', *The Cork Examiner* 30 August 1993 p. 3

investigate the moving statue but Fiona Tierney had sufficient clerical support for one bold priest to demand that the Bishop launch a formal investigation into the Inchigeela apparitions. This, however, cut no ice with Bishop Murphy. On 31 August 1993 the Bishop's spokesman made his formal reply via *The Cork Examiner* to the effect that that none of the apparitions, from the 'famous Ballinspittle' to the latest Inchigeela were being 'treated seriously enough by the Church here to warrant in-depth investigation'.[487] In a stinging statement the Bishop gave full vent to his opinion of the latest apparition claims in his jurisdiction, the visionaries involved and the damage they were inflicting on the Catholic Church. This statement can still be read on the diocesan website.[488]

He began with the same warning he had issued regarding Ballinspittle's moving statue; 'Direct supernatural intervention in this life is a very rare happening'. People needed, he advised, to look at the Inchigeela claims 'with extreme prudence and caution'. Murphy's patience had been strained by years of repeated claims of moving statues and apparitions and it showed. True to the Mary of Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, the Bishop described the Virgin as 'a woman is who is largely silent'. This is where the sting in the tail came out; 'Alleged apparitions in recent times have done nothing to enhance the person of Mary and her place in the redemptive plan of her Son'. In fact, the Bishop argued, what was happening at Inchigeela 'is bringing Our Lady into disrepute, and is distorting her true image'. It was natural, he understood, for people to seek out tangible proof for the existence of the supernatural, but they were looking in the wrong places and putting their faith in the wrong people. There was a danger of innocent persons being hurt and their faith being irreversibly damaged by those 'seeking self-glorification or commercial gain'. He appealed to these people to return to 'the genuine manifestations of faith that we have, i.e. Scripture, Sacraments and the teaching of the Church'. Grottoes were there only 'to be a help to prayer, not a place for the spectacular'.[489]

Even at a distance of twenty years one can feel the tension between the hierarchical ecclesiastical authority and the devoted followers, supportive priests included, of the visionary. The situation with the present Bishop of Cork and Ross, Inchigeela native Dr John Buckley, has not altered much. I happened to meet with him at Lourdes, where he

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[487] 'Church not issuing directive on 'unsubstantiated' visions', *The Cork Examiner* 31 August 1993 p. 22
[488] 'Bishop urges caution about Inchigeela apparitions: comments made by Dr Michael Murphy, Bishop of Cork and Ross on claims that Our Lady appeared in Inchigeela, West Cork (Posted 1 September 1993)' (http://www.corkandross.org/, 1 September 2013)
[489] 'Bishop urges caution about Inchigeela apparitions: comments made by Dr Michael Murphy, Bishop of Cork and Ross on claims that Our Lady appeared in Inchigeela, West Cork (Posted 1 September 1993)' (http://www.corkandross.org/, 1 September 2013)

showed a polite interest in my research but no more than that, I knew better than to request an opinion. When appointed in 1993 the Bishop told *The Southern Star* that the Church required 'a very substantial amount proof' before they could even begin to consider an apparition to be of 'supernatural origin'. Even then, all the Church is willing to say is that 'natural origin' cannot explain it.[490] To my knowledge the Bishop's opinion has not greatly altered since and no formal investigation for Fiona and Marcia's apparitions appears likely in the foreseeable future. They continue, however, to attract sympathetic priests, especially in their foreign missions to the Ukraine, Russia and elsewhere. Regularly priests from these countries visit the sisters' houses of prayer, usually at Doon, to thank the SWIH for their support to help in the construction of churches and the donation of religious artefacts to furnish them. For example in February 2014 a retreat weekend was hosted for the visit of Fr. Dariuz and Fr. Richard who came to thank 'all their benefactors who support the mission in Russia and Kazakhstan through Mass stipends which support the priests and the children's centre in Orsk'. The SWIH also assisted in the building of a church dedicated to John Paul II in Togliatti, Russia. The priests travelled with the sisters and the SWIH to their various houses of prayer and to Limerick city to promote their work.[491]

The response of the Church to the Inchigeela apparitions has not been as uniformly positive as is, more or less, the case with Mt. Melleray nor has it been uniformly critical as is the case in general with Ballinspittle. The hierarchy, as is the situation in many other examples such as Medjugorje, has taken a more sceptical view of the Inchigeela apparitions. The response amongst the clergy is more mixed, with some openly supporting the sisters and the SWIH and others following the directive of the bishops. In his case study of the Bayside apparitions, Daniel Wojcik makes a noteworthy point. The local ecclesiastical authorities in Bayside also took a dim view of Veronica Luken's apparitions and her followers, the Baysiders. Attempts, Wojick says, were made to curb the apparition vigils held at Bayside in the 1990s but these did not deter the Baysiders. Quite the contrary, they became more determined to work harder and spread the apparition literature containing the messages of Mary as revealed to Luken and promote Bayside as a pilgrimage shrine with the hopes of gaining 'ecclesiastical acceptance'. The problem for the Church, he writes, with such apparition cults is that 'encounters with the sacred' at the apparition site is not mediated by the priest or 'official religious texts' but is accessible to

[490] 'Prompted Russian Visit', *The Southern Star* 17 July 1993 p. 2
[491] *The Immaculate House of Prayer newsletter* (Issue 180) (January 2014) p. 24

all and spearheaded by the visionary/visionaries.[492] A contestation regarding agency and a fear of being muscled out by the visionary certainly accounts for the fear of the upper ranks of the Church regarding the apparition site and visionary. Control is the crux of the problem. The SWIH and the sisters are devout Catholics who pledge obedience to the authority of the Church. But the agency of the priest is diminished by the visionary who supersedes their authority by virtue of the fact that they can claim to see and speak directly with the divine and that is the attraction of these visionaries for their followers.

Before I assess the crucial role the SWIH play in supporting Fiona and Marcia, I wish to make another important point and that is that Fiona, Marcia and their followers are all committed Catholics, who genuinely seek the blessing of the institutional Church for their work. The Bishop's refusal to grant this has, as Wojick says, encouraged them to work harder to get it. At Inchigeela I asked Margaret how the Church had responded to Fiona's apparitions, to be told that they have 'kept away' but she justified this with the explanation that priests are busy with their own work in their parish, albeit adding that 'they should be here really'. The SWIH are simply waiting for a change of heart. Margaret went on to explain that in the future Inchigeela will be 'as big as Medjugorje' and the SWIH have made the necessary provisions to host the millions who will come to the village with the house of prayer. As for the local clergy, she had been continuingly asking the parish priest to visit the house of prayer but he steadfastly refused. Eventually by her own admission she said 'I had to trick him in'. On that occasion he simply commented on the 'beautiful chapel' (the oratory). It is interesting that Margaret had to go to such lengths for the priest to make the short distance of crossing the road to visit the house of prayer. Even more so, her criticisms of the Church for keeping its distance at Inchigeela but her need to defend the Church for doing so. Zimdars-Swartz posits that the individual who follows the visionary has a 'remarkable and probably personally satisfying way of reconciling the traditional authority of the Church with the authority of the apparition experience'.[493] This is certainly helpful when one seeks to explain how the SWIH attach such importance to Fiona and Marcia as 'prophets' and still call themselves Catholics who bow fully, in theory if not praxis, to the authority of the institutional Church.

In his extensive study of Marian devotion amongst Cuban exiles in Miami, Thomas A. Tweed discusses an interesting phenomenon which he calls 'parallel rituals'. To explain

[492] Daniel Wojick, ' "Polaroids from Heaven: Photography, Folk Religion, and the Miraculous Image Tradition at a Marian Apparition Site', *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 109 no. 432 (Spring 1996) (pp. 129-48) p. 131
[493] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary* p. 156

this he uses the example of a woman, named Mirta, who conducted her own rituals and held beliefs which the local Bishop did not approve of, but still identified herself as a Catholic. Tweed narrates how Mirta would pray the rosary aloud in her own style at the same time as the priest was leading the rosary at the shrine of the Cuban Madonna. This 'parallel ritual', he writes, creates 'a social space outside ecclesiastical boundaries just as it drew on shared symbols – prayers, gestures, beads and statues'. As a result of this, Tweed identified a contest between the clergy and the laity at the Marian shrine 'which involves competing notions of "Catholic" and more generally "authentic" religiousness'. The clergy negotiate religious identity as they grapple over 'the meaning of shared symbols, especially the image of the Virgin herself'. When Tweed asked the Bishop if Mirta was a Catholic, he was told 'Not really'. The majority of visitors to the shrine of the Cuban Madonna are blissfully unaware or unconcerned with this contest. Tweed concludes that the Church will attempt to impose Catholic orthodoxy at the Virgin's shrine while lay visitors will endorse, ignore or resist this.[494] Tweed's theory is both insightful and persuasive and helpful to Margaret's attitude to the Church's response to Fiona and Marcia's apparitions.

A case could be made to see the 'subculture' identified by Margry or the 'church within a church' Zimdars-Swartz describes as a case of Tweed's 'parallel ritual' theory. Inchigeela is a prime example. There a group has emerged dedicated to a particular incarnation of Mary, Our Lady Queen of Peace, who identify themselves as Catholics. They have in reality their own distinct way of being Catholic. In the past the Church has attempted to impose its orthodoxy on the SWIH which has been largely ignored. Despite the Bishop of Cork's criticism that the visionaries and their supporters were distorting the true meaning of Mary, they have continued to venerate and promote devotion to Our Lady Queen of Peace. Yet they continue to identify themselves as Catholics and to promote the Catholic faith, working to continue the conversion of Russia to the Roman Catholic Church. Some priests, the one I met in Inchigeela who certainly share the sentiments of the Bishop in Miami, would not consider the SWIH as true or proper Catholics but they continue to participate in institutional rituals such as attendance at mass and confession both in accordance with the apparition messages of Fiona and Marcia and the teachings of the Church. Thus, the Inchigeela shrines and houses of prayer are another example of ongoing contestation between the Church and the people regarding the symbolism of Mary

[494] Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) pp. 43-4

and what calling oneself a Catholic entails. For the remainder of this section I wish to move beyond the Church's at best mixed response to the Inchigeela apparitions and the SWIH, to assess what it is that attracts people to the visionary and the role pilgrims and followers play in the apparition experience.

Marina Warner's theory is a good starting point, for she argues that faith in apparitions and visionaries in the modern context 'reveals the desperate thirst believers have for assurances that their faith is still creditworthy'.[495] The assurance for this comes from the Virgin Mary herself but is transmitted via her mouthpiece, the visionary.

Here Max Weber's theory of the priest in competition with the prophet in his seminal work *The Sociology of Religion* is most helpful. In the foreword to the 1993 edition, Ann Swidler argues that laypersons are constantly searching for 'promises of immediate relief from suffering and guarantees of ultimate salvation'. They can turn either to trained religious clerics or self-appointed prophets in this regard. Swidler contends that priests aim for 'orderly obedience' as they attempt to keep in check the laity's 'demands' for the miraculous. Alternatively, she argues breaking through 'priestly routines' are self-appointed prophets who 'reawaken unfulfilled spiritual needs and restore religious vitality'. She concludes that: 'The interaction of these competing religious interests' pushes religions to order, unify, and deepen their (the laity's) religious understandings.'[496] Weber contended that the priest and the prophet may in fact have much in common. They may even draw upon the same sources to justify their claim to religious authority. It is their interpretation of these sources, however, that puts them in juxtaposition.[497]

In essence the priest and the prophet are engaged in the same ultimate goal; the worship or, as Weber interpreted it, the 'coercion' of a deity to a particular motive or end. How they achieve this though can be starkly different. He identified priests as 'functionaries of a regularly organised and permanent enterprise concerned with influencing gods'. Priests act as the arbitragers of 'doctrine', drawing upon a fixed tradition of 'a rational system of religious concepts and the development of a systematic and distinctly religious ethic based upon a consistent and stable doctrine which purports to be a "revelation". They are armed with 'a rational training' based upon 'discipline'. As functionaries they are 'associated with some type of social organisation' in which they act

[495] Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary* (London; Pan Books, 1990) p. 311
[496] Ann Swidler, 'Foreword', Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Beacon Press; Boston, 1993) p. xii
[497] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Beacon Press; Boston, 1993) p. 29

as ‘employees or organs operating in the interests of the organisation’s members’.[498] Weber identified ‘charisma’ as being the key factor which sets the prophet apart from the priest: ‘We shall understand “prophet” to mean a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or commandment’. Prophets, he argued, have a deeply personal and intimate relationship with their followers or disciples as the prophet becomes a ‘teacher of ethics’. He believed it was the ‘fixed doctrine’ and ‘vocational qualification’ of the priests which brings them into conflict with prophets who exert their influence by virtue of ‘personal gifts (charisma) made manifest in miracle and revelation’.[499]

It is a rivalry for a monopoly over acting as an expression of religious authority which Weber identified between the priests espousing a disciplined and fixed tradition versus self-appointed prophets who often offer alternative understandings of the priests ‘traditions’ or even completely new ideas. The charismatic appeal of the prophets lies in the personal relationship they offer followers and perceived ability to better ‘coerce’ a deity/deities than the withdrawn priesthood focusing on tradition. The visionary or prophet is attractive simply because they have the necessary charisma to convince their followers that they are tangibly in communion with a higher power; they are a means for soliciting the assistance of that higher power. The ‘humble seer’ Matter identifies is also crucial in this. As Michael Carroll comments ‘to the believer, nothing so testifies to Mary’s importance as the fact that she intervenes directly in the affairs of this earth by appearing face to face with ordinary Catholics’.[500] For their part, visionaries are always careful to emphasis their ordinariness and humility. In her own extensive literature Fiona is at pains to stress that she was a normal little girl when her apparitions at Inchigeela began. The same is true of the Melleray visionaries. Ursula O’Rourke assured me that she was just a typical teenager when she saw the Virgin at Melleray and Jimmy Buckley told *The Irish Times* that the people of the surrounding area were ‘not over religious people’.[501] But as Carroll and many other scholars on the subject assert it is precisely because such visionaries are ordinary that they are perceived as extra-ordinary.

In their informative article on this topic, Philip W. Davies and Jacqueline Boles discuss the visionary’s identification of themselves as ‘ordinary’ in what they call ‘seer

[498] Ibid pp. 25-9
[499] Ibid pp. 46-52
[500] Michael P. Carroll, *The cult of the Virgin Mary: psychological origins* (Princeton & Surrey; Princeton University Press, 1986) p. 115
[501] Helen Shaw, ‘Church cautions on statue ‘sightings’, *The Irish Times* 22 August 1985 p.7

work'. This involves pilgrims constructing and making use of 'general ideas or typifications about the visionary'. Pilgrims, they argue, play a fundamental role in creating the means for a successful visionary because of how they perceive them, why they do and do not accept, and what they are willing to accept of the visionary's claims. Thus, those who accept the apparition usually describe the visionary as 'unselfish, simple, and sincere'. This is certainly in keeping with how Margaret described Fiona and Marcia to me when I had not yet then met them myself. She praised the fact that both 'live on providence' and have dedicated their lives to their apparition work. Additionally, Davies and Boles argue that visionaries have charisma because of 'the idea that the apparitions conferred power on the seer'. The identification of visionaries as 'ordinary', 'regular', and 'insignificant', they write, helps to outline them as 'a symbol of divine intervention that is unpredictable, ironic, and inclusive'. Moreover, it serves to make the visionary 'seem approachable'.[502] The fact that Mary and Jesus would design to make themselves known to such ordinary women is attractive to Catholics the world over because it creates the feeling that these divine figures are on the side of the ordinary and thus it makes the average believer feel special and more importantly, wanted. The followers of visionaries in turn give them their all-important audience and a means of spreading their messages through a network of supporters. In short, the visionary needs her or his followers and they in turn gain satisfaction from contact with the visionary.

William A. Christian identifies the 'typical follower' of visionary cults such as that of the Inchigeela visionaries as 'a quiet, anguished person, often with a personal life marked by tragedy'. They are striving to find God and for these individuals apparitions 'provide information on divine will, confirmation of divine justice and reassurance of divine love'.[503] Part of the vocation of the SWIH involves work with individuals suffering from drug addiction and depression. Nicholas described this to me when I met him at the SWIH's prayer room in Limerick city. As result I was told they had 'saved' many and 'brought them back to God from a life of drug and alcohol abuse', attempted suicide and other social issues. In his assessment of the Inchigeela apparitions, Michael Allen offers another interesting element in the charisma visionaries such as Fiona Tierney have for their followers; self-empowerment.

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[502] Philip W. Davies & Jacqueline Boles, 'Pilgrim Apparition Work: Symbolisation and Crowd Interaction when the Virgin Mary appeared in Georgia', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* vol. 32 (2003) (pp. 371-402) pp. 386-7

[503] William A. Christian Jr., 'Holy People in Peasant Europe', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 15 no. 1 (January 1973) (pp. 106-14) p. 112

In *Ritual, Power and Gender*, he writes that the visionaries are empowered by their direct contact with Mary and the missions they are charged with. Their devoted followers are empowered by making contact with the visionaries and joining their campaign to save souls for the true religion: 'In their own eyes they are truly empowered by Our Lady', although in reality, Allen asserts, they remain in fact 'disempowered and marginalised in an ever increasing secular everyday world'. Nevertheless, the feeling that they share some of the visionaries 'more direct empowerment by Our Lady' is sufficiently satisfying for the followers of Fiona and Marcia. This is why Allen believes that in the wake of the moving statues phenomenon, there was an upsurge of apparition claims in the Republic of Ireland. It was, he comments, the 'constituting processes of direct religious empowerment sought by laity without the necessity of priestly intervention', which attending grotto vigils and assisting in the work of the visionaries allowed in addition to their regular attendance at mass and other Church rituals. In fact Allen found, as I too experienced, the followers of Fiona and Marcia dedicate more of their time to attendance at grotto vigils and the work of the houses of prayer, which is then merely supplemented by attendance in regular Church rituals.[504] The sense of empowerment, however indirectly, is satisfying enough to meet the pilgrim's needs.

When one looks at this globally, it would account for the rise of a sub-culture of Marian apparition based piety within the confines of the Church. The upsurge in apparitions since Vatican II tends to suggest that they are considerable numbers within the fold of the Catholic Church who desire the kind of empowerment Allen describes by following a visionary or group of visionaries while nominally at the very least adhering to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Medjugorje is one of the largest examples in the modern context. There are scores of others. To close, I wish to examine the gender aspect of the contestation between the male clergy and female visionaries. William Christian Jr argues that it is in the Church's interest to deemphasize the visionary or 'holy person' and focus attention on the apparition shrine and 'approved message'. Ultimately Christian argues, the Church either accepts and co-opts the apparition claims, in so doing institutionalising them by building a shrine and 'retiring' the visionary after waiting for the claims to end, or they reject the apparitions.[505] This was the pattern in the 19th and early 20th centuries, evident at both Lourdes and Fatima, with both Bernadette Soubirous and

[504] Michael Allen, *Ritual, Power and Gender: Explorations in the Ethnography of Vanuata, Nepal and Ireland* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000) pp. 364-5
[505] William A. Christian Jr., 'Holy People in Peasant Europe', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 15 no. 1 (January 1973) (pp. 106-14) pp. 106-8

Lucia de Santos joining enclosed convents outside Lourdes and Fatima. The latter half of the 20th century changed this and now visionaries generally do not enter the religious life. Many, including Fiona and Marcia, go on to marry and have families, thus eliminating any possibility of retiring to a secluded monastic life. This has also been a factor, I contend, in the Church's increasing refusal to sanction apparitions since the latter half of the 20th century. A married visionary cannot follow the example set by Bernadette Soubirous and Lucia de Santos in becoming cloistered nuns, shut away from the public gaze and curious pilgrims freeing the Church to 'co-opt', as Christian says, the apparition cult and shrine.

Another feature of modern Marian apparitions has become the 'house-wife' visionary and the wandering visionary. In 1998 an interesting article appeared in *The Southern Star* reporting that:

> As the Church lurches from one scandal to another, it is not without significance that a new kind of popular devotion is emerging – one led by women and based on shrines, supernatural messages, and special Houses of Prayer.[506]

There follows a sceptical bemusement with the establishment of Tierney's house of prayer at Doon, Gallagher's at Achill and the continuing reports of Ballinspittle's moving statue. The common thread in all of these for the author is the high presence of women.[507] Since the 19th century there has been a notably higher level of female visionaries as opposed to male visionaries. There are of course male visionaries but they are certainly outnumbered by the presence of female visionaries. There were, for example, eight women to seven men at Knock, two girls to one boy at Fatima, four girls at Garabandal and four women to two men in the case of Medjugorje. Female visionaries continue to outnumber male visionaries.

Scholars too note that apparition shrines and cults tend to attract larger numbers of women than men.[508] In the case of my own research I found that this varied from site to site and that while women usually outnumber men, it is not by as wide a margin as is notable in visionary numbers. The numbers of followers involved in the SWIH is more or less equally divided between women and men. The number of men involved tends to be elderly, whereas women are middle-aged to elderly. There are far fewer members in the 20-30 age groups. Since 1985, Irish journalists have been perplexed as to why so many

[506] 'Women lead a new kind of popular devotion', *The Southern Star* 17 January 1998 p. 5
[507] Ibid
[508] Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary* p. xiv

women should be attracted to visionaries such as Fiona and Marcia, apparition vigils at grottoes, pilgrimages to houses of prayer and why so many women are reporting apparitions to begin with. One obvious conclusion seems to be that women are forced to find alternative leadership roles in a religion with an exclusively male clergy. Many of my female participants, not just at Inchigeela but at Ballinspittle and Melleray also, are passionate about the promotion of the Catholic faith and especially devotion to the Virgin Mary. This is not surprising when one considers that the Virgin Mary is the premier female figure within the Catholic religion, second only to the figure of Christ.

In her study of Marian devotion amongst women in east Canada, Michelle Spencer-Arsenault makes two important points that are worth bearing in mind. Firstly, she asserts that people do not feel the need to completely believe in or accept all the doctrines and teachings of the Catholic Church to identify as a Catholic. Secondly, women are, she writes, often 'active participants in negotiating and exercising their own agency in the context of patriarchal religious structures'. Women, she continues, make active choices in picking and appropriating 'the messages they find meaningful in their lives'. In particular she found that the rituals attached to Mary's cult are especially important for women because they accentuate the Virgin's image as 'a feminine icon', which binds women to their Church. Her participants explained the importance of the Virgin of Mary in the context of rituals such as the recitation of the rosary, processions and the veneration of Marian images. Spencer-Arsenault drew the conclusion that the importance the Church continues to afford Mary is interpreted by Catholic women as 'continuing evidence that women are highly regarded in the Church', especially for their roles as mothers and for their duty to teach their children about the Catholic faith.[509] In the context of my own research at the shrines of the moving statues and Irish apparitions, I found like Spencer-Arsenault, that Marian rituals are especially important to women. Many of my female participants urged the recitation of the family rosary in the home and the proper recognition of Marian feast days to strengthen family ties and as a mother's duty. Involvement in grotto committees, affiliations such as The Legion of Mary and The Blue Army and *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* are all means for women to take on a more active leadership role in the context of their Catholic faith which is more restricted at the institutional level.

[509] Michelle Spencer-Arsenault, 'Mother Mary: The (Re)Construction of a Female Icon', *Sociology of Religion* vol. 61 no. 4 (2000) (pp. 479-83) pp. 479-82

Here I return to Allen's theory of empowerment. Firstly, it is empowering for women to act as visionaries in direct communication with the divine and appointed to a special mission and to spread the apparition messages to the wider world and to the Catholic Church. In turn it is empowering for female followers of these visionaries to take a more active role in the promotion of the Catholic faith, leadership in a ritual context and via the apparition experience a deeper connection with the Virgin Mary. In a nutshell, involvement with groups such as the SWIH offers women more than the institutional Church can. It is not surprising then that involvement with visionaries like Fiona Tierney and her sister, as well as Christina Gallagher and, more recently Joe Coleman, should be so attractive to women hungry to play a more active role within the Catholic Church.

What is most interesting is that involvement with a group such as the SWIH or even on a local grotto committee is something of a double-edged sword for women; at the one time both empowering them but also promoting conservative patriarchal ideals regarding women and men. In the context of Ballinspittle and Melleray grotto committees, for example, I noted that women tended to fill roles such as secretary and men roles such as chairman and treasurer. Women are responsible for planting flowers and shrubbery, whilst men are made responsible for more manual labour such as lawn mowing and heavy lifting. This is even more evident in the case of Inchigeela and the houses of prayer. Above I noted how women are expected to dress modestly, cover their hair during vigils and remain silent. In addition, great emphasis is placed on women's role as mother and wives in the apparition messages of Fiona and Marcia. Conversely St Joseph is held as a role model for male SWIH as the patron of fathers. Traditional morals also hold sway concerning issues such as abortion and homosexuality. I found that it is because of such values that some have come to see the SWIH as a sinister 'cult' and the visionaries as charlatans. This was certainly the opinion of one middle-aged woman I spoke with, a social worker from nearby Tipperary. She visited the Doon House of Prayer shortly after its opening in 1995 and was deeply disturbed by what she saw and experienced there. She was especially critical of the fact that 'the men seemed to do all the talking' and of the sisters' 'messages of doom and gloom'.

She found that SWIH endorsed a very 'old style…Old Testament based faith…a very angry God'. Furthermore, she was extremely critical of pre-Vatican II practices such as women covering their hair and the fact that the visionaries have their own shops. The lady left with the firm intention never to return; 'I'd run a mile from it…the local feeling is that they are a very strange cult'. Other sceptics I encountered felt likewise and accused

the visionaries of ‘brainwashing’ their followers, bullying them and as one lady put it ‘taking advantage of the vulnerable’. The media scandal surrounding the Achill house of prayer and Christina Gallagher has also hardened attitudes to Fiona and the SWIH. For example, one gentleman I spoke with had seen the SWIH newsletter and was suspicious;

> They have a couple of shops and sell religious books. I can't see anything that is visibly damaging in this but this "House of Prayer" terminology associated with Christina Gallagher makes me wary. That was newsletter No. 123 that I saw so they obviously have some kind of a following. I wonder what the Church makes of it all; I don’t suppose they would be too impressed after what came out in the papers about that Gallagher one.

It should be remembered that much of the criticism levelled at the SWIH and the foundation for judging them as a ‘cult’ is undisputed tradition at the institutional level. Two sceptics I spoke with, for instance, were very critical of the amount of time a day that the SWIH pass in prayer, deeming it ‘obsessive’. They also criticised the remote locations of the houses of prayer; ‘they’re like hermitages…it’s like they want their followers to break ties with the outside world’. The life of the SWIH does have a monastic veneer and yet the sceptics I spoke to did not see fit to criticise Catholic nuns and monks for engaging in virtually the same prayer routines and dress as the SWIH. Nor were they critical of the many monasteries that have their own publishing houses and shops selling religious goods in Ireland, such as the Cistercians at Melleray.

Sceptics are also critical of the conservative morality endorsed by the SWIH. But this is a prominent feature amongst the devoted followers of particular visionaries, and was something I noted at both Ballinspittle and Mt. Melleray as much as I experienced it at Inchigeela. The accusation of ‘cult’ and ‘brainwashing’, are reflective of a wider battle going on between fundamentalist Catholics and devotees of Mary and secularists. One side endorses traditional Catholic morality and bemoans the decay of this morality in both the modern world and the post-Vatican II Church. The other laments the restrictive morality of Catholic fundamentalists who unite under the banner of the Virgin Mary and her apparition messages of a looming chastisement for those who fail to adhere to her warnings. The ‘oppositional content’ of modern Marian apparition messages is what has led, Margry argues, traditionalist and fundamentalist Catholics devotees to join the cults of various incarnations of Mary and ‘turn away from or disassociate themselves from the Catholic

Church'.[510] The SWIH have not fully turned their backs on the institutional Catholic Church but they look to the visionaries of the Inchigeela shrines to justify their Catholic identity which endorses a pre-Vatican II style of Catholic morality and veneration of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints. The Inchigeela apparitions, like all Marian apparitions since Fatima, has taken on a militant tone, calling the faithful to prepare for the looming end of days by adhering to traditional moral values. In places this causes them to criticise the Church for moving away from some of these conservative morals and traditions.

Conclusion

To conclude I wish to address a point made by Irish priest and theologian Joseph S. O'Leary in his article on Ballinspittle for *The Furrow* in 1986. The point he makes is true of the apparition phenomenon in the wider context. Trying to deduce what the attraction of a moving statue like Ballinspittle or apparitions like those of Melleray and Inchigeela have over the doctrines and teachings of the Catholic Church, O'Leary came to the conclusion that these things addressed gaps in the theology of the institutional Church. Moving statues and apparition cults, he wrote, 'point[s] to things theology neglects, such as the vitality of a people's Church, the spirituality of pilgrimage, visionary imagination, simple faith, and the need to reassert our spiritual heritage against the encroachments of secularized culture'.[511] All of this is what makes apparition cults such as that of Inchigeela attractive for people such as the members of the SWIH, because all of these things are important in the context of vernacular religion, religion as it is lived.

In this chapter I discussed two important developments in relation to Marian devotion in the modern context; the question for the formal recognition of the Fifth Dogma by the Catholic Church and the rise of a subculture created by Marian apparitions within the Catholic Church. *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* is reflective of this subculture, the 'church within a church' as Zimdars-Swartz so aptly identifies it. This Fifth Dogma could prove the straw which breaks the camel's back between devotees of the

[510] Margry, 'Marian interventions in the wars of ideology: the elastic politics of the Roman Catholic Church on modern apparitions' p. 243
[511] Joseph S. O'Leary, 'Thoughts after Ballinspittle', *The Furrow*, vol. 37 no. 5 May 1986 (pp. 285-94) p. 285

various Marian apparition incarnations, such as Inchigeela's 'Our Lady Queen of Peace', and the Catholic Church. Debate over the proper role and symbolism of Mary between the Church and laity has become more heated since the increase of Marian apparitions in the wake of Vatican II. Lay followers of apparition cults such as Inchigeela's SWIH openly challenge the Church's decisions since Vatican II, justifying their criticisms based on the apparition messages of visionaries like Fiona and Marcia. It is feasible that in the future this 'subculture' may reach a breaking point and cause a schism within the Catholic Church. Equally the Church may bow to popular opinion regarding Marian apparitions as it has in the past and formally promulgate the controversial Fifth Dogma, thereby satisfying the hopes of many devout Catholics such as the SWIH.

As for a formal investigation into the Inchigeela apparitions, this is more difficult to predict. In recent decades Fiona and Marcia's apparition vigils no longer attract the kind of crowds the sisters could boast from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Their devoted band of followers, however, continues to push for a formal investigation. Inchigeela is certainly no Medjugorje where millions flock each year in the hopes of an earthly miracle. The case of Medjugorje is much more difficult for the institutional Church to simply ignore and bowing to the wishes of millions, lay Catholics and priests alike, the Vatican has begun its investigation into the Bosnian apparitions. Fiona and Marcia, though, still prove attractive to Catholics whose full needs and wants are not being fulfilled completely at the institutional level and so the sisters continue in their capacity as visionaries channelling the messages and agency of Jesus, Mary and the saints and giving their followers a sense of empowerment and fulfilment as a member of *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart* to address the gaps O'Leary describes in institutional theology. Given that Fiona and Marcia are still active visionaries, the Church cannot 'co-opt', as Christian says, the Inchigeela shrines and this further strains their relationship with the institutional Church, hardening the attitude of the hierarchy to something they cannot fully hope to control, especially with the development of houses of prayer beyond the original apparition sites and simultaneously creating others. Thus far, I have examined the four sites of the moving statues phenomenon which have made a deep and lasting impact in the context of vernacular religion in Ireland, but these are just four of over thirty sites to claim a moving statue, an apparition or both in 1985. In the next chapter I wish to examine the key factors that were missing in the other cases of Ireland's moving statues which prevented them from creating the kind of apparition cults that Ballinspittle, Melleray, Carns and Inchigeela have. To do this I will primarily focus on the claims of a moving

statue made at Mitchelstown in September 1985, whilst making reference to other similar examples where informative.

CHAPTER SIX: Lacking continuity: Mitchelstown and the other moving statues

Academic scholarship on the phenomenon of Marian apparitions has tended to focus on topics such as the shift from private to public revelations, the role of the visionary, the response of the Catholic Church, and the particular patterns of Marian devotion which constitute individual vision based Mary cults. Thus far, I have focused on these key elements myself in the context of those apparition and moving statue claims that have had resonance; that is to say have created enduring sites of pilgrimage. In this chapter I wish to explore why it is that only four shrines of out a total of thirty-nine[512] where moving statues and apparitions were claimed in the Republic of Ireland in 1985, have had the necessary charisma to withstand sceptical and clerical opposition and the passage of time to become notable, if minor, places of pilgrimage. To explore this I have chosen one grotto in the North Cork town of Mitchelstown as a case study. I have a number of reasons for doing so. Firstly, it is a shrine I have been familiar with since childhood, having grown up in the locality. Secondly, of the lesser known moving statues it is one of the better documented examples. The local media, *The Avondhu* and *The Corkman* newspapers, made detailed reports of the moving statue and visions claimed at the grotto in September 1985. John D. Vose also dedicated a chapter to Mitchelstown in *The Statues That Moved A Nation*, and local histories also briefly mention it. In addition to these document sources, I conducted ethnographic interviews with the local clergy, the secretary of the grotto committee, the editor of *The Avondhu* and some other local residents who could recall the events of 1985. I could not find a single individual who believed they saw the statue move or experienced any other unusual phenomena at the grotto, which is an illuminating insight in itself as one has very little difficultly doing so in the context of Ballinspittle, Mt. Melleray and Inchigeela.

A number of factors contribute to making an apparition claim believable and the site of the apparition a place of pilgrimage. Anthropologist Chris Eipper explores this topic in detail in his article; 'The Virgin, the visionary and the atheistic ethnographer'. Eipper uses Michael Allen's fieldwork at Inchigeela as the basis for his argument. He places prime importance on the visionary and the visionary's testimony as the prime stimulus in

[512] This figure is based on contemporary press reports, lists given in *Ballinspittle: Moving Statues and Faith* and *The Statues That Moved A Nation*, as well as some names that arose in the course of my own fieldwork which are not mentioned in the contemporary document sources; Avoca in Co. Wicklow being an example.

making an apparition creditworthy for others. 'Those visionaries', he writes, 'who fail to find an echo are soon forgotten', as are the details of their apparitions. The principal visionaries of the Mitchelstown moving statue are a case in point. The substance of the vision and the visionary who relates it are the necessary conditions for an apparition claim to possess 'a special resonance'. It is not that the pilgrims who attend a public apparition vigil need to see or hear the Virgin Mary for themselves. Quite the contrary writes Eipper:

> It is no impediment to a vision acquiring social significance that it remain invisible to most of those who believe in it; indeed the opposite would seem to apply. It is not its visibility that matters but its intelligibility: the visionary has to be able to make sense of what has been seen and heard, to envoke and convey the meaning as well as the mystery of the phenomenon.[513]

Eipper identifies three key factors in making a visionary successful; (1) they must be socially available, (2) they must find an interested audience, and (3) they must act as a satisfactory 'vessel' to retain a following.[514] The first important factor then in a successful apparition is a visionary who possess the necessary charisma and skill to convince people that they are actually seeing and speaking with Mary (the visionaries' messages become more important once people believe the visionary can see the Virgin). A number of factors play a secondary but significant role in making an apparition experience sustainable. Prime among them is the location of the apparition shrine itself and belief that it is a sacred place, which manifests visibly via signs and emotionally via feelings for the pilgrim.

Finally, the response of the local clerical authorities is important. Ballinspittle and Inchigeela are examples of where a belief that Mary is appearing at a particular place is powerful enough to trump clerical scepticism. A willingness to ignore clerical strictures does not always win out where an apparition is claimed. The ultimate failure of Mitchelstown's moving statue to make a more lasting impression can be in part attributed to the local clergy's resistance to the grotto becoming a pilgrimage site. I will use the example of Mitchelstown, with some references to other contemporary examples, to explore how the necessary conditions were missing in the case of the majority of moving statue claims to make them anything more than fleeting pilgrimage sites in 1985. Beforehand, I will begin with a very brief historical account of the moving statue claim in

[513] Chris Eipper, 'The Virgin, the visionary and the ethnographer: Anthropological inquiry in the light of Irish apparitions', *Anthropological Forum* vol. II no. 1 (2001) (pp. 21-37) p. 21
[514] Ibid.

Mitchelstown to inform my analysis of why in the end it came to be nothing more than a footnote in the local community's history.

'Messages from the Blessed Virgin'; Mitchelstown's moving statue

Mitchelstown's Lourdes style grotto was erected in 1954 at Cahir Hill on the Limerick Road at the cost of £1,500. The grotto's statues were carved from Italian marble,[515] and its railings were made in the town at Dennehy's forge. Ornamental stones from the ruins of Mitchelstown Castle[516] and the old Catholic Church were incorporated into the shrine.[517] Figure 6.1 shows Mitchelstown grotto as it looked in 1985.

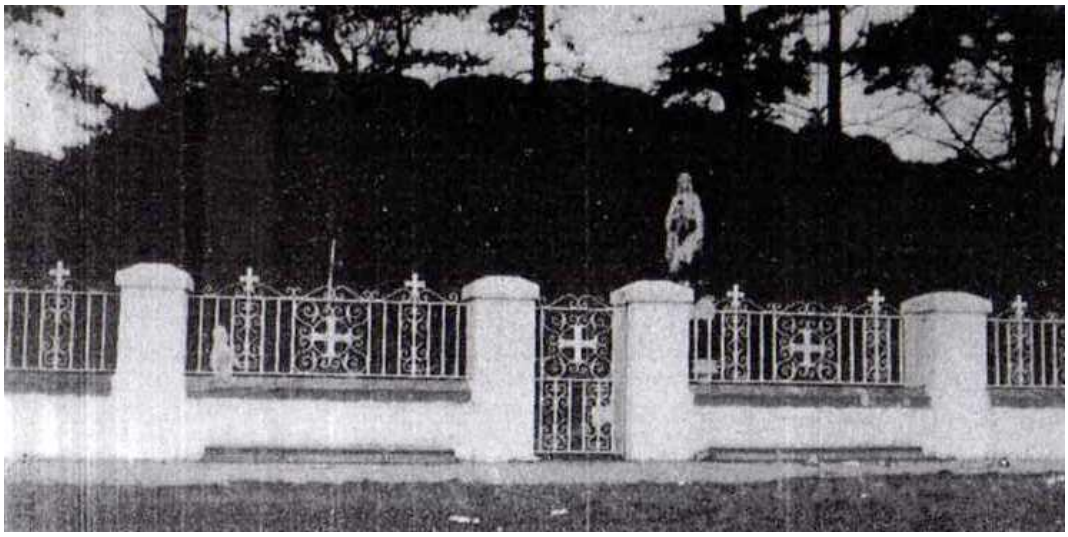


Figure 6.1: Mitchelstown grotto (*The Avondhu*©, 1985)

The original grotto was demolished when construction on the Cork to Dublin bypass began. I was told by one local that the shrine's committee 'had to fight hard' to have the grotto re-established. The new shrine was rebuilt a few meters from the site of the original. It was rededicated on the 15 August 2006, where the grotto committee and residents gathered with the local clergy to recite the rosary and sing hymns. Figure 6.2 shows Mitchelstown grotto as it looks today.

[515] 'Mitchelstown Grotto', *The Avondhu* 12 September 1985 p. 13
[516] The beautiful Mitchelstown Castle was looted and burnt in the Irish War of Independence. It stood as a shell of its former glory until the 1930s when it was demolished and its stones used to construct the present Cistercian Abbey at Mt. Melleray.
[517] Bill Power, *Another side of Mitchelstown* (PsyOps Books: Mitchelstown, Cork, 2008) p. 140



Figure 6.2: Mitchelstown grotto (Photo by author, 2013)

On the occasion of the grotto's rededication, *The Avondhu* reported that 'the Cahir Hill grotto has been a place of worship to Our Lady for generations of Mitchelstown people' and noted that locals were pleased with the shrine's openness as well as 'the new look structure'.[518] No mention was made of the moving statue claims of twenty years earlier. Today the grotto attracts only small numbers for the annual recitation of the rosary each evening throughout the month of May and on the 15 August. The largest numbers to congregate before the shrine were reported in 1985, where *The Cork Examiner* stated 200 hundred people had gathered 'after three children claimed to have heard messages from the Blessed Virgin'.[519]

On 12 September 1985, *The Avondhu* reported that 'Mitchelstown's shrine joined the seemingly never ending list of moving statues last Wednesday (4 September 1985) and since then the site has seen nightly quite large crowds of people coming to pray'. Most were purely curious but others came 'in the hope of witnessing some form of apparition or paranormal event'.[520] The newspaper noted that the claims were predominately made by children and in general resembled 'the form of that sighting at other shrines, such as movements and changes in the colour of the eyes'.[521] A report in *The Irish Press* states that some described seeing the devil there, 'in various forms with horns, black and green

[518] 'Mitchelstown Grotto rededicated', *The Avondhu* 17 August 2006 p. 1
[519] Donal Hickey, 'Pranks at the "moving" statues', *The Cork Examiner* 6 September 1985 p. 1
[520] 'Near Hysteria at Mitchelstown Grotto', *The Avondhu* 12 September 1985 p. 1
[521] 'Mitchelstown Grotto', *The Avondhu* 12 September 1985 p. 13

profiles and black blood'.[522] Following the initial claims made on the 4 September, *The Corkman* reported that 'over the weekend many people, occasionally numbering 200 or 300 at a time, visited the grotto'. By then public rosaries were being recited and visitors remained until the early hours of the morning 'waiting for a "sign" '.[523] Judging from the contemporary press reports, this seems to have been the pattern of events for approximately a fortnight before interest in the grotto receded. Editor of *The Avondhu,* Liam Howard confirmed this for me in our interview. At best, he said, locals went to the grotto for two weeks, if not less than that. The more specific details of what people had seen and experienced there did not surface until Vose's book was published in 1986.

I will not give a blow by blow retelling of Vose's account of Mitchelstown's moving statue here as it is not necessary to ascertain the basic points. He noted 'a strange mixture of suspicion, embarrassment and enthusiasm' on his arrival at Mitchelstown regarding the moving statue in the local grotto. Teenager Geraldine O'Grady shared how she visited the grotto at 9:30 pm with friends. There she encountered a strange man, who she said 'looked really evil' and who 'shouted out that the devil is the true leader and if you follow him you'll have 'enteral life'. On the 8 September, the feast of Mary's nativity, she described seeing the statue's hands open, its eyes open and close, the mouth smile, the statue being replaced by a vision of Christ (at which she fainted), seeing the statue cry real tears and finally hearing it speak the words 'Peace and more prayer' in a 'soft, sweet and gentle' voice. She also described a feeling of protection and peace whilst praying at the grotto. Vose too spoke with housewife Monica Scully who saw the statue smile and its face change to an old woman's and then to the face of Christ, which she recognised by his 'beard'. Her daughter, Philomena, saw the same and she was aware of others who had seen this too and others who had seen tears falling from the statue's eyes.[524]

Their testimony bears striking resemblance to what locals and pilgrims described seeing at Ballinspittle, and roughly thirty other grottoes nationwide. And yet one will not find a committee dedicated to promoting Mitchelstown grotto as a special place of pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary as is the case with Ballinspittle. Nor will they find busloads of curious tourists or pamphlets outlining the details of messages from Mary or details of miraculous cures attributed to making pilgrimages to the shrine. Today Mitchelstown's moving statue is for the most part remembered as a moment of mass hysteria. This at least

[522] Don Leavry, 'Moving Statues', *The Irish Press* 16 September 1985 p. 1
[523] 'Mitchelstown statue move claim knocked', *The Corkman* 13 September 1985 p. 1
[524] John D. Vose, *The Statues That Moved A Nation* (Cornwall: United Writers, 1986) pp. 87-90

is the sentiment expressed by historian Bill Power in his local history *Another side of Mitchelstown*.[525] Nor is he alone. Barring two, the majority of my participants described it thus and as the contemporary press reports show, this belief can be traced back to the very beginning. And it is this belief which is one key factor in explaining why Mitchelstown grotto has not joined Ballinspittle in being famous for having a moving statue. The fact that most of the visionaries, if one can even call them that, were young children or teenagers who were felt to be insincere was the first stumbling block to the shrine becoming reimagined as a special one; as a place where the presence of the Virgin Mary could be visibly and emotionally engaged with. This prevented Mitchelstown's moving statue from having the kind of resonance Ballinspittle's has enjoyed and it is the first and arguably the most important factor in explaining why Mitchelstown's moving statue was, as Liam Howard put it to me, 'lacking continuity'.

'Near hysteria': the lack of a creditworthy visionary

The majority of visionaries who claim to see and speak with the Virgin Mary are subjected to a period of familial and communal doubt in the early stages of their apparitions. Thérèse Taylor, for example, notes in her biography of Bernadette of Lourdes, that her family received the news of Bernadette's encounter with her vision at Massabielle 'very unenthusiastically'. In fact, her mother beat both her and her sister with a cane when Bernadette's sister relayed the girl's experience, believing that Bernadette's eyes had deceived her.[526] In *Looking for A Miracle*, Joe Nickell writes that the mother of Fatima visionary Lucia de Santos refused to believe that her daughter was experiencing apparitions of Mary, denouncing her as 'nothing but a fake who is leading half the world astray'.[527] At Inchigeela I was told that Fiona Tierney's father refused to believe that his daughter was seeing the Virgin Mary at Rossmore, believing that the apparitions of the other local girls had sparked something in her imagination. He removed all the religious statues in the family's home to the attic but eventually he relented and joined his sister and wife in believing that Fiona is a visionary. The histories of Lourdes and Fatima show that initially much of the local community dismissed the visionaries' apparitions before later

[525] Power, *Another side of Mitchelstown* p. 140
[526] Thérèse Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: her life, death and visions* (Continuim: London, 2008) p. 61
[527] Joe Nickell, *Looking for a miracle: weeping icons, relics, stigmata, visions & healing cures* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993) pp. 90-1

accepting them. Thus, the initial disbelief and scepticism surrounding Mitchelstown's moving statue was not unusual or out of character in the pattern of such occurrences.

Unlike the more famous examples, however, the disbelief that something miraculous was genuinely happening at the local shrine did not give way to later acceptance. When Vose spoke to Monica Scully, for instance, she explained that she was 'emotionally upset and embarrassed about going out because I was sorry I'd spoken to the papers and the townspeople put it down to imagination'. Mitchelstown was she told him 'a very critical town'.[528] The idea that the moving statue was childhood fantasy took root in the town almost immediately, and respected individuals attached to the grotto were instrumental in establishing this belief. The secretary of the grotto committee, Ms Josephine O'Connor, was very critical of the local youths who claimed to see the statue move. I was assured by Liam Howard that Josie, as she was called, was a woman respected for her piety and that had she believed that a miracle was manifesting at the grotto others would have been less sceptical. Instead O'Connor believed that the moving statues phenomenon as a whole was damaging 'our faith and beliefs'. She told *The Avondhu* that she 'firmly' believed in apparitions but what was happening at the shrine she lovingly tended was 'nothing more than illusions' and 'children's pranks or imaginations being taken too seriously' by adults who ought to know better.[529]

An interesting article under the title 'A disturbing movement' appeared in *The Avondhu* the week following the moving statue claim. The author made some significant points regarding what was 'hysteria or near hysteria' at the local grotto which reflect the wider mood of the community. Moving statues, they wrote, 'questions logic'. What was happening was either an optical illusion or 'children's vivid imaginations'. The author called for the townspeople to be on their guard:

> We have to be watchful of children passing through that strange period which takes them on to puberty. It is a time when they see and hear many strange things, and is quite natural. Then we have to beware of those youngsters who play pranks, make up stories of movements, voices, devils and blood stains. Never underestimate the ability of the young to see the weakness of the most vulnerable aspect of the adult world. Children can be unthinkingly very cruel.[530]

[528] Vose, *The Statues That Moved A Nation* p. 89
[529] 'Near Hysteria at Mitchelstown Grotto', *The Avondhu* 12 September 1985 p. 1
[530] 'A disturbing movement', *The Avondhu* 19 September 1985 p. 3

The article called upon people to exercise their common sense, as many others did that year, and to remain calm in the face of apparition claims because when they were exposed as the optical illusions or cruel pranks which they were it would be the vulnerable who would be hurt and angry.[531]

Almost thirty years on, the general consensus that Mitchelstown's moving statue was childish hysteria at best or a cruel prank at worst has not abated. One lady, whom I spoke to, Mary, was particularly dismissive of the Mitchelstown case. Mary lives five or so miles outside the town. She remembers the year of the moving statues well, as she referred to 1985, having seen movements and visions at Ballinspittle. Mary, however, did not go the local grotto when she heard the rumours; 'I think Mitchelstown just got caught up in the hype of it all…it was really getting out of hand at that point, with moving statues here and everywhere…I think it was just hysterical'. She went on to explain how there is a story that local dubious characters of note orchestrated a prank at the grotto. One dressed up as the devil, while the other positioned himself behind the statue. When people arrived to pray at the grotto the men made voices, and one 'shook' the statue whilst the one in the devil custom jump out from behind the trees near the shrine to frighten the locals. Mary accepts this story because 'the original grotto was sheltered by the trees and it would have been easy for them to hide up there'. But as the current secretary of the grotto committee, Margaret, pointed out to me it would take someone of Herculean strength to shake the grotto's marble statue, which had to be removed by crane when the original shrine was demolished.

The truthfulness of Mary's story is not important. It is the fact that such explanations are deemed more plausible than the belief that locals actually saw the statue move in the grotto which is illuminating. Scepticism, as I have noted in the previous chapters, is a factor in all the cases of all Ireland's moving statues. But it has not prevented everyone from believing that miracles have happened at Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela. Mary, for example, while dismissive of Mitchelstown is a firm believer in the Melleray apparitions. Scepticism, however, has the power to stop an apparition claim in its tracks in cases such as Mitchelstown simply because those involved are deemed to be either hysterical or mischievous by the wider community. They may initially find an audience but they cannot convince sufficient numbers that they are a genuine visionary. For instance, one Mitchelstown resident described one of the two persons who spoke to

[531] Ibid

Vose as a 'headbanger' who no one in their right minds would believe. Part of the rejection of the local youths who claimed to see the statue move was their demeanour at the grotto. Josephine O'Connor told the local press that she had received 'complaints about the conduct of children at the grotto which rather upsets me'.[532] They had turned it into a 'playground'. The committee placed signs there asking visitors not to 'trespass on the grotto grounds'. [533]

O'Connor went on to say that 'The committee knows perfectly well the children say they saw things they never saw and children have a big imagination'. She appealed to the parents not to take their children there at night, and if they must go to at least treat the grotto with the 'respect' it deserved. For good measure she pointed out that she herself had noticed nothing unusual at the grotto either before or after 'the stories of the statue moving' while she worked there daily. Moreover, she said when the committee had 'challenged' the children about the 'so called apparitions and movements' they admitted 'it was only a joke'. Thus, she concluded 'The Grotto Committee firmly believes that Our Lady has not appeared and the statue has not moved at the Grotto'.[534] And therein lays the principal reason why Mitchelstown's moving statue 'never caught on' as one local man advised me. Unlike Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela, the testimony of those who claimed to witness movements and visions at Mitchelstown grotto failed to impress locals or inspire them to believe that the local grotto was anything other than average. A credible visionary is the foremost necessary prerequisite in making an apparition believable to a wider audience, since as Eipper points out, the vast majority will experience the apparition via the visionary's messages and performance rather than actually seeing the Virgin Mary for themselves. Many of my participants throughout my fieldwork had not seen statues move or visions at Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela but they were willing to believe that apparitions had taken place there on the strength of the visionaries' testimonies and because they felt there was something special, usually described as 'holy' about the shrine. And this is the second factor missing in the case of Mitchelstown.

[532] 'Mitchelstown Grotto', *The Avondhu* 12 September 1985 p. 13
[533] 'Mitchelstown statue move claim knocked', *The Corkman* 13 September 1985 p. 1
[534] Ibid

‘Just your average shrine’; lacking topophilia.

‘A Small Shrine in the Country’; that is how Tim Ryan and Jurek Kirakowski described Ballinspittle in the introduction to *Ballinspittle: Moving Statues and Faith.*[535] To the outside world, the grotto there was just like the hundreds of others which dot the Irish landscape. The same was true of the Melleray and Inchigeela shrines. They were nothing special in the eyes of the wider world until the events of 1985 made them so. And this reality dawned on the collective shrines’ committees as soon as they became the centres of mass pilgrimage. For example, when asked what the committee’s plans for the future were regarding Ballinspittle grotto, the chairman told one reporter that they had a special shrine on their hands; ‘As far as we are concerned we have a place of pilgrimage here, probably forever’.[536] At the time thousands were gathering at Ballinspittle and it looked set to become Ireland’s second national Marian shrine. The numbers may have since fallen to a fraction of the multitudes which descended on Ballinspittle in 1985, but the shrine still acts a place of pilgrimage for some devoted pilgrims and locals as something other than the average country shrine. Mitchelstown grotto was another average ‘small shrine’ but no one it seems believed that they had ‘a place of pilgrimage’ there that was going to last forever.

The fact that very few actually believed that Mary was appearing there was sufficient to prevent the shrine becoming associated with a lasting trace of the Virgin’s presence as is the case elsewhere. Thus, no one in town today promotes the grotto as a shrine where miracles take place. Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela all have a scenic, tranquil and off the beaten track factor because they are located in the countryside, a mile or more outside small and sleepy villages. Mitchelstown grotto on the other hand has always been located on one of the main roads leading out of the town. The current shrine is situated on a very busy roundabout, with a constant stream of bustling traffic rushing past. One will not find pretty waterfalls and streams flowing there, nor will one hear the sounds of birds chirping away or even a bench to sit on. As noted in the previous chapters, a shrine’s location is of fundamental importance when creating the belief that it is a sacred place. Many people I spoke with in the town were critical of the grotto’s location as a place for peaceful prayer and reflection, describing it in general as ‘too open’. The fact that the shrine is positioned on a busy roundabout has put many off praying there. Alison aged twenty-five, for example, put it thusly;

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[535] Tim Ryan & Jurek Kirakowski, *Ballinspittle: moving statues and faith* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1985) p. 9
[536] Ibid p. 21

> It's in a very public place, on a very open and busy road. I think this has a lot to do with why grottos may not hold significance in people lives. I personally like to pray in quiet places and would certainly not stop by this grotto and pray.

Alison is a Home Economics and Religion teacher, who grew up in the town. She was completely unaware that people had seen the statue move at the local grotto, her knowledge of the moving statues being based solely upon 'television programmes that would have made a skit about it. I had no idea how significant or huge an event it was at the time'. She is sceptical of all apparition claims but the more devout and elderly members of the town share her antipathy towards the grotto's location. One elderly woman I spoke with is a devout Catholic and is especially fond of the Virgin Mary and grottoes. She regularly stops to pray at them and attributes a number of conversions to prayer before Marian shrines. Yet like Alison, she feels that the Mitchelstown Marian shrine location is a deterrent; 'if someone saw you praying there, they'd probably say that one is at it again'. Another said she stopped visiting the shrine a number of years ago 'because you can't hear yourself think up there let alone say a prayer'. But there is another shrine in town which locals feel is special.

St. Fanahan's holy well is located a mile or so outside the town, nestled in the fields which border the town's margins. Fanahan is the local patron saint. Beautiful beech trees line the footpath to the well, and three streams join together to circle to it. Through the trees one can see the Galtee Mountains in the distance, and the well is not adjacent or near any major roads as the grotto is. The well is a beloved feature of the town and the local saint's cult is steeped in vernacular tradition. Figure 6.3 shows Fanahan's well.



Figure 6.3: St Fanahan's Well (2012) (http://liminalentwinings.com/st-fanahans-well-2012/)

The well long outdates the presence of the local grotto, with local historians suggesting it has pre-Christian origins.[537] Many legends surround the well, one being that an eel resides within it and that if the pilgrim's faith is strong enough it will dart from side to side in the form of a cross to show that their prayer has been 'heard'. Most, however, concern miraculous cures from the use of the well's water; in particular cures for lameness and blindness. St Fanahan's feast day is celebrated annually on 25 November. The local schools are given a half-day to attend mass and visit the well. A nine day novena is celebrated there with the local clergy presiding.

The Nationalist newspaper describes the importance of the local saint's feast day for the townspeople as being akin to what Christmas is for Christians worldwide, remaining 'a local holiday and a day of special devotion dear to the hearts of the people of the North Cork parish'. It continues to attract pilgrims from neighbouring counties, including Tipperary, Waterford and Limerick who come there 'to visit the shrine of St Fanahan, to pray and take waters from his famous well'.[538] I observed pilgrims making 'the rounds' of the well whilst reciting the rosary in November 2012 and 2013. Cups are provided to drink from it, and many bottle its water to take home. A special committee, larger that of the grotto's, maintains the shrine and locals indeed feel a great sense of pride in it. Alison, for example, visited the well each year with her mother for the annual mass

[537] Power, *Another side of Mitchelstown* p. 38
[538] 'St Fanahan's Day', *The Nationalist* 24 November 2010 (Http://nationalist.ie/, 7 July 2013)

and joined the local brass band in playing hymns there. She says of the well; 'it is a far bigger landmark of our town than the grotto. I have more memories of the well as a child than I have of the grotto'. One local middle aged woman goes to the shrine each week to recite the rosary there because 'it's just so peaceful here…I find time stops here…it's a holy place for me'. Many other pilgrims I spoke with described the well thus and one elderly gentlemen lamented that the grotto was not rebuilt there; 'I think this would be a much nicer spot for it'. A lady in his company agreed that were the grotto located at the grounds of the local holy well, more people would visit it.

The local clergy enthusiastically support the well and its traditions. A sense of maintaining tradition is deeply embodied in pilgrimage to the well, something the local community is desirous to keep alive. A report made by *The Avondhu*, for instance, described the annual nine-day pilgrimage and novena as a time when community spirit comes 'alive' because 'people come together to pay tribute and pray to their patron saint'.[539] This a point explored by Susan J. Crawford O'Brien in her article, 'Well, water, rock: holy wells, mass rocks and reconciling identity in the Republic of Ireland'. She contends that the ritual devotions expressed at holy wells and mass rocks 'reflect and reconstruct contemporary Irish identities'. In an age of swift cultural changes, she says these places 'comprise a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition'.[540] This is certainly in keeping with my own fieldwork at the well, with one man saying 'it's part of our history, young and old…it's part of being from Mitchelstown and it's important that we keep it going for as long as we can'. The local clergy are equally anxious to keep the traditions of the well observed, with the parish website describing it as a 'still and quiet place to pray', hailing it as a site of pilgrimage since the Saint's death circa 660 BCE.[541] The local grotto, however, is not promoted via the parish website. Locals described the well in virtually the same ways pilgrims had described Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela to me and its longstanding presence in the town trumps that of the grotto. Thus, Mitchelstown had a pre-existing and important pilgrimage site with its own distinct topophilia and traditions well before the erection of the local grotto.

There is one person for whom the grotto remains an important place; secretary of the grotto committee, Margaret. Since Josephine O'Connor's death, Margaret and her

[539] Sandra Quinn, 'St Fanahan remembered in Mitchelstown', *The Avondhu* 28 November 2013 p. 10
[540] Susan J. Crawford O'Brien, 'Well, water, rock: holy wells, mass rocks and reconciling identity in the Republic of Ireland', *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* vol. 4 no. 3 (November 2008) (pp. 326-48) p.326
[541] 'About our parish' (Http://mitchelstownparish.ie/, 7 July 2013)

husband have tended to the grotto. She was deeply upset by the demolition of the original shrine and housed the grotto's statues in her garden whilst awaiting the construction of the new shrine. Happy as she is that the grotto was eventually returned, she is nevertheless made unhappy by the fact that the current shrine is only visible from one side of the roundabout. She was also annoyed by the fact that the halo of electric bulbs, the original foundation flagstone and the railings were not returned to the new grotto. Some years ago the statue was vandalised during the town's annual music festival. To Margaret's horror a crude moustache had been drawn over the statue's face and broken beer bottles disrespectfully scattered around the shrine. Had the original railings been returned and a greater effort made to protect the shrine, Margaret feels it would not have been so rudely belittled. For her, the re-establishment was necessary for two reasons; firstly because people had worked 'hard in poor times' to erect the grotto in the Marian Year, and secondly 'to remind people to pray'. For her a relic of the original shrine, the flagstone bearing the inscription 'Marian Year', still resides in Margaret's garden. She was unwilling to dispose of it because it was 'blessed at the opening of the grotto' and so it remains in her garden, set amongst flowers, as seen here in Figure 6.4.



Figure 6.4: Flagstone of Original Mitchelstown grotto (1954) (Photo by author, 2013)

As for Mitchelstown's moving statue, Margaret remembers the stories but did not have the time to visit the grotto personally in 1985. Whether there is any truth in the reports of 1985 is of little importance to Margaret. She maintains the grotto as a part of the town's and Ireland's Catholic history and will continue to do so with the hopes that the mantle of secretary will one day pass to another who shares her beliefs. Although the grotto plays a secondary role to the local holy well at best and is not known as an apparition shrine, it is unlikely that it will fall by the wayside. A dilapidated grotto is a very rare sight in the Irish context. Mitchelstown's grotto may be 'just your average shrine', as one local described it to me, but for all its lack of topophilia it remains important to Marian devotees of the town and has its place in the practices of local Catholics in honouring Mary for the month of May and the 15 August, when locals gather to recite the rosary, albeit in declining numbers. In the final section I wish to assess the important role the local clergy played in preventing Mitchelstown grotto from becoming another Ballinspittle.

'Not amused'; the clerical opposition

In the greater majority of cases, local clergy refused to give comments to media when moving statues and apparitions were reported in their parishes. At best they would make only the most guarded comments, usually praising the spirit of the pilgrims but calling for them to exercise caution and common sense. Mitchelstown stands out in stark contrast because the local clergy there were quick to issue a statement denouncing what was happening at the local grotto. *The Corkman*, for example, reported that the parish priest and his curate, Canon Patrick Sheehan and Fr. Denis O'Connor, had joined the grotto committee in their 'critical' attitude. The local clergy, the newspaper bluntly stated, was 'not amused and have cast critical distrust on the "apparitions" and "movements" '. As far as Sheehan was concerned, the media had hijacked the moving statues phenomenon and were having 'a joy ride', implying the claims of Mitchelstown were nothing more than an excuse for attention for some and a frenzy for others. Happy as he was to see people praying, he nevertheless was not impressed by their motive.[542] Almost three decades on and the local clergy remain bemused and cautious. I contacted the local parish priest regarding the moving statue claims but was told that he could not find anyone 'to verify it'

[542] 'Mitchelstown statue move claim knocked', *The Corkman* 13 September 1985 p. 1

and since he was not present at the time felt he was unable to pass comment. As noted in Chapter 4 (see p. 161) Fr Fitzgerald is a great supporter of the Melleray apparitions, and also publishes the monthly messages of the Medjugorje visionaries on the parish website.[543]

The contemporary press reports show that the local clergy were instrumental in dismissing Mitchelstown's moving statue as a case of hysteria and childish imagination. Fr O'Connor blasted the claims from the pulpit at Sunday morning mass. He advised parents not to take their children to the grotto at night because it 'only made them more hysterical about the whole thing'. His greater fear, however, was that the moving statues phenomenon was crossing the line between the use of a statue to inspire devotion and idolatry: 'You do not pray to the statue. It is just a lump of plaster or marble. If people go the grotto, they should go to pray and not expect to see the statue move or hear it talk'. The statue was just a 'visual aid' and nothing else. Far better, he concluded, for the people to come to the parish church where there was a statue of the Virgin Mary and at least 'there they would be in the presence of God'.[544] He then made a most interesting comment, suggesting that the intention in the erection of the Marian Year shrines was to help people to pray 'and until lately, very few people prayed at them' at all. The moving statues had brought a revival in a lost practice but the clergy, post Vatican II and cautious of apparition claims, was not impressed. The altar servers had told Fr. O'Connor that they had seen the devil there at night and so he advised parents to have 'more sense' and not to let the children who had mistaken something they had seen in bad lighting for something more sinister influence them.[545] For good measure the local clergy and the committee arranged to have the floodlights and the halo of electric bulbs returned to the grotto to put a stop to the children's stories. These had been removed owing to the 'activities of children' but the local clergy hoped returning them would 'serve to lighten the darkness around the site'.[546]

The townspeople seemed to adhere to the clergy's directive because Monica Scully told Vose that she decided not to take her children to the grotto at night because they were upset by the claims that the devil had been seen there.[547] Today, the local clergy continue to promote Marian devotion in the town, but it remains more centred in the local parish church than on the local grotto. The parish priest, Fr. Fitzgerald, is especially devoted as

[543] http://www.mitchelstownparish.ie/medj_message.html
[544] 'Mitchelstown Grotto', *The Avondhu* 12 September 1985 p. 13
[545] 'Mitchelstown statue move claim knocked' p. 1
[546] 'Mitchelstown Grotto', *The Avondhu* 12 September 1985 p. 13
[547] Vose, *The Statues That Moved A Nation* p. 89

we have seen to Mary. In October 2008 he took the step of 'entrusting the parish' to her. A special mass was held for the occasion. As I was researching Marian devotion at the time, I attended. The Bishop of Coyne resided over the ceremony, at which a statue of the Immaculate Heart was taken on procession through the church and solemnly crowned while the congregation sang Marian hymns. A special altar, decked with flowers, was arranged for the occasion and is re-erected each year on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. *The Avondhu* recapped the Bishop's homily. Mitchelstown would 'have great blessings and a sense of protection by entrusting our homes, businesses, schools, families and friends to Our Lady'. The 'great turn out', he said, was a 'testimony of the faith that is alive in Mitchelstown'[548].

A special image, Figure 6.5 below, was printed by the clergy for the occasion and distributed to the parishioners.

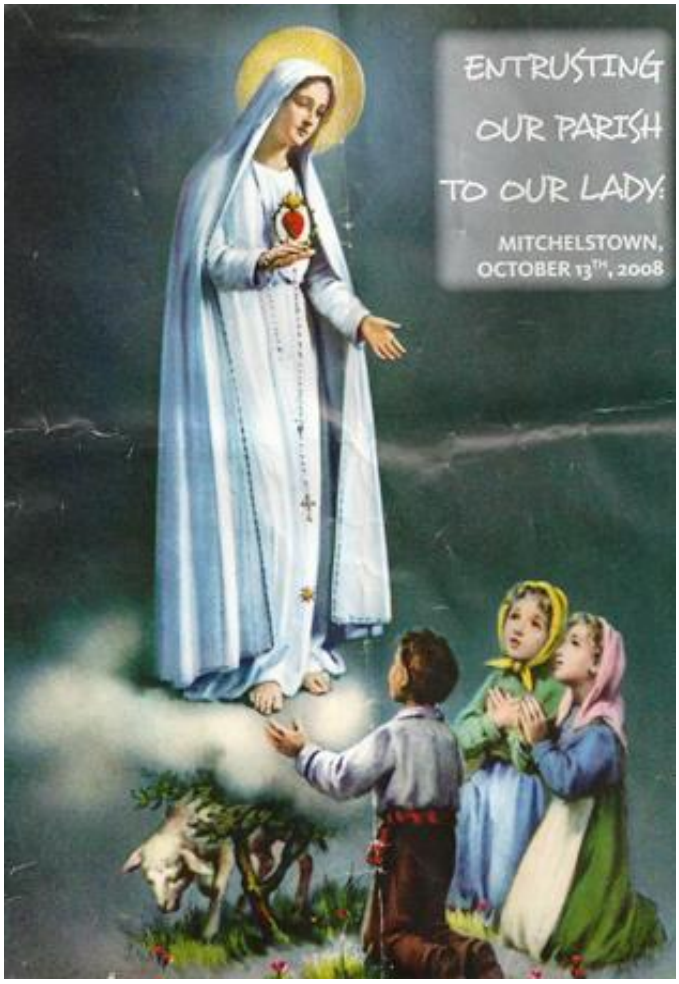


Figure 6.5: 'Entrusting Our Parish to Our Lady, 31st October 2008' (Commemorative Image)

[548] 'Large attendance at Mass to entrust the parish to 'Our Lady', *The Avondhu* 16 October 2008 p. 24

This image was framed and hanging in many of the homes of my Mitchelstown participants, much as many of my other participants keep framed pictures of the local grottoes in their homes. The mass is now celebrated annually on 13 October and the church's Marian shrine is constantly flanked by lighting votives and flowers. It is the town's principal Marian shrine, as Fr. O'Connor had hoped it would become in 1985. The ceremonies I observed on 31 October 2008 on the dedication of Mitchelstown parish to Mary's care were not so different to those which I observed at Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela over the course of my fieldwork. In fact the only real difference was that what I observed in Mitchelstown was in a church rather than a grotto but the same Marian hymns and prayers were sung and recited and the same faith in Mary's agency and reverence of her image was to be seen on that occasion.

This begs the question why the local clergy could be so against the events of September of 1985 whilst promoting the importance of Mary in acts such as entrusting the parish to her care. The answer, I contend, lies in clerical agency and control. By invoking Mary's agency via the ceremony of mass, the clergy were the principal personalities involved in the rituals with the laity following their lead. In the context of the parish church and with the local bishop present, the clergy were firmly in command. Mary's agency was sought through clerical assistance rather than in the absence of it, which was essentially what was happening on an unprecedented scale in the Irish Republic during the summer and autumn months of 1985 and at Ballinspittle since. The call of Mitchelstown's curate to have locals return to the parish church rather than going to the local grotto for 'signs' was sounded in many places around the country. In other cases the local clerical authorities attempted to dampen the fervour for moving statues and apparitions at local grottoes using similar objections to those raised by the Mitchelstown clergy. Cahermoyle in Co. Limerick is a good comparison. The replica Lourdes grotto there was erected by the Oblate fathers near the main gate on their property. The Oblates had been in Cahermoyle since 1922 and Brother McEntee was credited with the erection of the Marian Shrine in 1925.[549]

In early September 1985, around the time of the Mitchelstown moving statue, it was claimed that the statue of the Virgin in the grotto had been seen to move 'by at least four persons'. After the initial rumours *The Kerryman* reported that people were 'coming from all parts to pray and watch' suggesting that as many as three hundred were present at

[549] 'Oblate Fathers leave Cahermoyle', *The Limerick Leader* 9 September 1989 p. 10.

1 am on one Sunday night. The paper also stated that since 'the news of moving statues spreads more and more people are visiting the grotto'.[550] A follow-up report a week later stated that thousands were making their way to Cahermoyle 'to see the moving statue of Our Lady'.[551] One lady, now living in Cork, was a young teenager at the time. She remembers visiting the grotto. The Oblate Fathers, in her words, 'took a dim view of such things'. The attraction, she explains, may have stemmed from a desire 'to be part of that summer's action', as well as the grotto's 'atmospheric' location. The Oblates, though, did not share this enthusiasm and placed signs at the grotto asking people to 'calm down'. The lady remembers 'hanging around' with the other local children, watching 'as the crowds started to build up' and the rosaries began. After which she says it then 'drifted away'. The Oblates have since left Cahermoyle and their former residence is now a nursing home. The grotto remains and an annual mass is celebrated there each year. Like Mitchelstown, however, Cahermoyle's moving statue is remembered more as a moment of mass hysteria rather than divine intervention; that at least was the impression I was given.

It is interesting to note that there are more Marian prayer groups in Mitchelstown than is the case with the better known shrines of the moving statues phenomenon; The Legion of Mary, The Lourdes Carmelites, Two Hearts Prayer Group and a separate rosary group who gathers on a Sunday morning before 10am mass. There is a strong emphasis on Marian apparitions and devotion to Mary on the parish website, especially those of Medjugorje, Fatima and The Lady of All Nations.[552] The deep-rooted Marian piety of the town is reflected in the fact that the parish church was rededicated to Immaculate Conception to mark the papal declaration of the dogma in 1854, having previously been dedicated to the local patron saint. And yet despite the high presence of Marian piety in the town both before and after 1985, Mitchelstown's encounter with a Marian apparition has gone down as a moment of mass hysteria and embarrassment in the town's religious and social history. Mitchelstown is an example of where the clerical opposition to a moving statue won out, aided by the shrine's location and by the fact that the visionaries and personnel involved failed to convince locals that a miracle was happening at their local Marian Shrine.

[550] 'Ardagh/Carrickerry: Moving Statue', *The Kerryman* 6 September 1985 p. 5
[551] 'Ardagh/Carrickerry', *The Kerryman* 13 September 1985 p. 5
[552] http://www.mitchelstownparish.ie/lady_of_all_nations.html

Conclusion

In the end there are more moving statue and apparition cases akin to that of Mitchelstown than the highly publicised and in many respects unforgettable Ballinspittle. It is not that the people of Mitchelstown are unwilling to believe in the possibility of apparitions and Marian intervention. Two of my participants were happy to believe that Ballinspittle represents divine intervention and Melleray is a popular pilgrimage destination amongst the Mitchelstown community, *The Avondhu* reports on the ceremonies there annually. The general consensus of my participants was that Mitchelstown's moving statue was a case where overwrought imagination arose owing to the widespread interest in Ballinspittle and Melleray at the time. The contemporary local press reports show that buses from the town were running to Ballinspittle and Melleray in the weeks before the local claims surfaced. This led one local I spoke with to suggest that people returned from these shrines looking for something to happen at their own local grotto. As I have outlined in this chapter, a number of factors prevented Mitchelstown and thirty-three others, from becoming the kind of pilgrimage destinations which Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela have become. A small note in *The Avondhu* on 29 September 2005 in the archives section, 'This week…20 years ago', bests sums up how Mitchelstown's brush with the moving statues is now remembered; 'well known Mitchelstown lady, Jospehine O'Connor was worried about the spate of claimed sightings and reports of voices at the grotto at Cahir Hill'.[553] In the end her worries proved unfounded, for Mitchelstown's moving statue is an afterthought in the history of a phenomenon which has since become synonymous with only a handful of the shrines initially involved.

[553] 'This week…20 years ago', *The Avondhu* 29 September 2005 p. 6

CHAPTER SEVEN: Conclusion

> *It is, you sense, one of those stories that will never really go away. The sceptics will never be persuaded by the faithful, and in turn the scepticism leaves the faithful wholly unmoved.*[554]

Almost thirty years on, Ireland's moving statues and apparitions remain as polarising as ever. The significance and meaning of the moving statues phenomenon remains subject to debate by academics, journalists, the Church and the Irish people as a whole, leaving opinion to be divided into three camps; the sceptical, the faithful and as the BBC's Dublin Correspondent, Kevin Connolly, put it the 'much larger body of opinion that is simply left strangely unmoved by it all'. Indeed, the moving statues phenomenon is truly 'one of those stories that will never really go away'.[555]

The future of the shrines I have described and discussed in this thesis is not easy to predict; nothing is ever certain where religion is concerned and as the example of Knock serves to demonstrate even an apparition which has been all but forgotten can be resurrected and go on to reach the very highest ecclesiastical honours that can be bestowed on Marian shrines. Whether Ballinspittle, Melleray or Inchigeela will ever join Knock is impossible to definitely predict. If there were a forerunner among them, then Melleray seems to be the most likely candidate simply because the apparitions there have been met with the least clerical resistance, actually receiving an unofficial acknowledgement of sorts by virtue of the fact that priests openly officiate at the annual anniversary devotions. In the context of Inchigeela, Fiona Tierney and Marcia Mooney have received their share of clerical support but the upper ranks of the Catholic hierarchy have not been supportive of their 'mission', with the late Bishop of Cork going so far as to suspect them of 'self-glorification' and seeking 'commercial gain'.[556]

As for Ballinspittle, it is most unlikely that the Church will ever bestow an institutional blessing on the moving statue, which is essentially a contradiction in terms for the Church. A moving statue blurs the lines between the use of an image to inspire

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[554] Kevin Connolly, 'A Moving Tale From County Cork' BBC NEWS (http://news.bbc.co.uk/)
[555] Ibid
[556] 'Bishop Urges Caution About 'Inchigeela 'Apparitions' '(1 September 1993) (http://www.corkandross.org/)

devotion and idolatry, undermining the agency and authority of the priesthood at the same time; from the clerical perspective at least. The fate of shrines such as Mitchelstown is captured in Colm Tóibín's description of his visit to Glenbrien grotto, Co. Wexford in the autumn of 1985. The shrine had been a hive of activity a few days earlier but he found 'just two men' there; 'There was no one else around and there was a feeling that whatever excitement had occurred at the grotto in Glenbrien was now over. The statues had moved on'.[557] While grottoes such as those of Mitchelstown and Glenbrien may not be remembered as shrines which once hosted the kind of apparition vigils which have made Ballinspittle so unforgettable, they nevertheless have local significance for Marian devotees and have their place in Marian devotion, if on a more muted scale. Four shrines – Ballinspittle, Mt. Melleray, Inchigeela and Carns – are remembered as the most significant of the entire moving statues phenomenon, because they each remain important centres of Marian devotion, pilgrimage and apparitions in their own right.

There are many conclusions to be drawn from this thesis. The first, and in many respects the most obvious, is simply that the moving statues phenomenon has had a far more wide-reaching and lasting impact upon not only Irish religiosity, but also culture and identity, than has previously been acknowledged. As this thesis has demonstrated, it continues to inspire passionate devotion and scepticism in equal measure. Contrary to popular opinion, most of it stemming from media circles, these shrines do not represent a footnote in the history of 1980s Ireland. The multitudes may have come and gone, but Ballinspittle, Mt. Melleray, Inchigeela and Carns, continue to attract a significant, even if small, segment of the Irish population. Pilgrims continue to see the statue move at Ballinspittle, describe strange visions at Melleray, and listen faithfully to the visionaries' messages at Inchigeela and the houses of prayer. In short, the moving statues phenomenon, which burst on the Irish landscape with amazing force in the summer and autumn months of 1985, has not gone away. The initial curiosity which attracted the thousands has certainly passed, but it has given way to the faithful minority who continue to believe that each grotto was and is the site of something supernatural and it is they who have been the principal subject of this thesis.

In her conclusion to the volume *Moved by Mary*, Jill Dubisch writes that, 'Marian pilgrimage, is often undertaken by the marginal and less powerful, it represents an affirmation by such pilgrims of their possibility and ability to gain direct access to the

[557] Colm Tóibín (ed.), 'Wexford Statues Move Away', *Seeing Is Believing: Moving Statues In Ireland*, (Dublin: Pilgrim Press, 1985) p. 87

sacred'.[558] This is exactly what pilgrims are setting out to do, consciously and unconsciously, when they visit Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela. It is also why the moving statues phenomenon was and remains so hotly disputed by the institutional Church. Direct engagement with Mary, Christ and the saints at these shrines undermines, although pilgrims do not necessarily see it in this light, the clergy's role as the mediators and point of contact with the sacred. What pilgrimage to these shrines reveals is the desire to have personal and direct access to the sacred, as witnessed by one of my participants explaining that he went to Ballinspittle to speak directly to the Virgin Mary (see p. 97) or all those who seek Mary's graces at Melleray and Inchigeela. When a pilgrim snaps a photo of Ballinspittle's moving statue…or drinks from the holy water well at Melleray…or offers personal religious objects to Fiona Tierney to have them blessed by Mary and Jesus in the houses of prayer, they are affirming their right to seek out and directly engage with the sacred. When the clergy attempts to censor or repress this, bitter disputes follow; the controversy surrounding the KKS's campaign in the 1930s/40s to promote Knock as a major Marian shrine and the continuing clashes between the Ballinspittle grotto committee and the local clergy are testament to this. If the clergy will not tolerate any act which undermines their authority and agency, neither will the laity suffer any attempt to limit their own direct contact with the divine. Try as the Irish Catholic Church has to jettison sites where moving statues and unconventional apparitions manifest, people continue to affirm their right to engage with Mary, Christ and the saints at shrines such as Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela.

Scholars can ill afford, as the ethnography of this thesis shows, not to pay attention to the question of the power play at the level of institutional and vernacular religion. An emphasis has been placed on the importance of creativity; as well it should, in the scholarly discourse discussing vernacular religion. Creativity, however, cannot be seen in isolation from the power relations between institutionalised and vernacular religiosity. All too often the more creative aspects of vernacular and individualised religion are a response of some kind to power relations with institutionalised religion. Apparition photography and videography are a good example. In the case of Ballinspittle sceptics and the Church alike denied that something genuinely supernatural was manifesting at the grotto. To counter these claims, the faithful employed photography to capture any movements or

[558] Jill Dubisch, 'Epilogue: The Many Faces of Mary', Anna Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen & Catrien Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power Of Pilgrimage In The Modern World* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009) p.231

visions on film. Out of this creative response to the Church, the media, academics and sceptics came what are to the faithful miraculous images of the Virgin Mary. But one should never forget that the origin of these images lies in the shifting balance of power between all involved, for sceptics too made use of photography to voice their opinion that the statue was not physically moving in Ballinspittle grotto. The parish priest's sign at Ballinspittle grotto, (see p. 118), is another example of creativity; this time an institutional religious functionary responding to vernacular power holders. In a nutshell, creativity does not exist in a vacuum, the power relations between institutional and vernacular religion both shapes and impacts the religious creativity of an individual's or a group of individuals' religion. Creativity is simply another affirmation of the individual's direct engagement with the sacred and one of the ways in which, Dubisch argues, Marian pilgrimage overflows 'official boundaries',[559] leading to 'direct confrontations' where that creativity does not reflect institutional theology. Equally, criticism and confrontations arise where an individual concludes that institutional theology does not accurately reflect the divine and their beliefs; the lay backlash to Vatican II reforms is a prime example of this. It is in the context of these 'direct confrontations', where Weber's theory of the monopolisation of religious power is most illuminating, as I highlighted in my discussion of Inchigeela and the houses of prayer (see pp. 211-2). Confrontations in the religious context are inevitable where institutional and vernacular power holders are grappling for power and agency. People live and shape daily religious lives in the interchange of the shifting balance of power between the institutional and the vernacular.

Material based devotion is a corner stone of both vernacular Irish religiosity and Marian piety. Because of the Marian Year shrines, the figure of the Virgin Mary is literally impressed upon and tied to the Irish landscape. Mary's image is an inescapable reality in both Irish religiosity and culture; one can find it in the remotest corners of the land and in the heart of Irish cities. Irish based Marian piety, and this is largely true of global Marian piety, is a sensory based one, thanks to the strong materiality which underpins Marian devotion. Mary's image is seen and touched, inspiring deeply felt emotions; from sadness to joy, contentment to anger. Nothing better illustrates this than the October 1985 attack on the Ballinspittle Madonna, which stirred every emotion one can think of. Mary's image, via statuary, has, in the minds of her pious followers, sacralised the Irish landscape. Her apparitions at certain locations have left a physical and spiritual imprint on certain sites, in

[559] Ibid

which both a manufactured and a natural materiality comes strongly into play. Melleray grotto is a prime example of this; the shrine's holy water well is as much a beloved feature of the grotto as is the statue of the Virgin there, for both are linked in the minds of pilgrims. In this thesis I have focused on grotto based materiality, but the place of Marian and Catholic material religious artefacts at the domestic level in the Irish context is as yet an under studied area, one which has great potential for future research.

The moving statues phenomenon challenges long held views regarding devotion to the Virgin Mary in the Irish context. In *Gender: Ireland and Cultural Change*, Gerardine Meaney describes the 'special relationship between Ireland and the Virgin Mary' which was so 'heavily promoted in the early decades of southern independence'.[560] To do this, Meaney focused on ecclesiastical 'Mariological' literature and 'Episcopal pronouncements', which followed Pius XI's address for the Eucharistic Congress of 1932, describing Mary as 'Queen of Ireland'.[561] Venerating Mary as the Queen and Mother of Ireland suited the construction of Irish identity in post-colonial rule, as described in the introduction (see pp. 32-3). Mary was used by the Church as something of a symbol for a united Catholic Ireland; one nation under the unifying figure of the Virgin Mary. For the most part historians and scholars have focused their assessments of Marian devotion in Ireland on ecclesiastical sources, and as a result have obscured the complex nature of Irish Marian devotion, largely ignoring it at the grassroots level. They have failed to notice the gaps between what the Church teaches and how people live their daily religious lives. This thesis has proffered many examples of where the laity's beliefs concerning Mary have been at odds with the Mariology of the Catholic Church. The ecclesiastical Mary is submissive and silent, a passive mediator. But the vernacular incarnations of Mary, as described throughout this thesis, are anything but submissive and passive. Even the silent Madonnas of Knock and Ballinspittle are venerated as powerful and active mediators in their own right.

In general scholars have focused their attention on the homogenous ecclesiastical Mary, used to forge and to maintain Irish Catholic identity in the 20th century. They have not considered the local variants. The silent but playful Ballinspittle Madonna, for example, bears little resemblance to her more sombre and talkative Melleray counterpart. *Our Lady of Orsk*, in turn, bears little resemble to the Ballinspittle and Melleray

[560] Gerardine Meaney, *Gender: Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2010) pp. 13-4
[561] Ibid p. 13

Madonnas; being a more trans-national incarnation of Mary with links to both Fatima and Irish based Marian piety in equal measure. What these Madonnas have in common is that however different and unique their characters are, they still fit into the general pattern set in motion at the foundation of the Irish state; that is Mary as Queen and Mother of Ireland and transnationally Mary as the Mother of God. When social, cultural and ecclesiastical changes and reforms threatened this image of Mary as the regal mother figure of the Irish, Ireland's Marian devotees found comfort at their grottoes, where they believed that Mary herself was calling to them to protect their Catholic identity and traditions. Following the ecclesiastical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, grotto based ceremony became more attractive because it retained cherished ornamental elements removed or downplayed by the Church's reforms.

Much of the impact of this, however, has been neglected as there remains a basis in academic scholarship which focuses on what the Church teaches about Mary. The impact with which apparitions have shaped and influenced the faithful's beliefs about the Virgin Mary continues to be a neglected subject in academic scholarship concerning Marian devotion in Ireland. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, these apparitions have not only spawned their own vernacular Mariology but their own distinctive materiality and mode of being Catholic as well. To fully appreciate and understand the complex and multifaceted nature of Irish Marian devotion, scholars need to move beyond the narrow ecclesiastical basis and appreciate the fact that, as William Christian Jr. writes in *Moving Crucifixes In Modern Spain*, Marian apparitions are 'part and parcel of modernity'.[562] Ireland shows this more clearly than many other places, which journalist Michael Barry hinted at when he described Ireland as 'a nation preferring visions' in *The Irish Times*.[563]

In fact Marian apparitions have become such an important element of the Irish religious landscape, that some have devoted their entire lives to following them, such as Inchigeela's *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*. Houses of prayer have been built, both nationally and internationally, to welcome all those who wish to hear the Virgin's messages or seek an earthly miracle. Grottoes continued to host prayer vigils and elaborate ceremonies to honour the Virgin. There is then more to being an Irish Catholic than mere attendance at ecclesiastical sacraments and ceremonies. A visit to the local grotto, or an apparition shrine, or a retreat to a house of prayer is as important to the

[562] William A. Christian Jr., *Moving Crucifixes In Modern Spain* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1992) p. 14
[563] Michael Barry, 'A nation preferring visions to realities', *The Irish Times* 1 January 1990 p. 12

faithful as is attendance at mass and in reality they often devote a far larger amount of time tending to and praying at their local shrines or making pilgrimages to others than they do in their local church. Many of my participants attend mass each morning, spending up to an hour in the church, but could devote as much as two to three hours a day to their local grotto. More ethnographic research into Marian devotion in the Irish context would go a long way into debunking the long established view of the Irish as the submissive followers of the Church's teachings. Nothing, I believe, challenges this better than the bitter debates between the Church and the laity concerning Marian apparitions in the Irish context; from Knock to the moving statues and the rise of the houses of prayer. Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn here is that much of what we think we know about the relationship between the institutional Church and the laity in the Irish context and what it means to be an Irish Catholic could benefit from being reappraised. Ireland is still, as Michael P. Carroll pointed out, 'that troubling little fact that so often kills the grand theories relating to the history or psychology of European Catholics'.[564]

Much more ethnographic research could to be done to show the rich diversity and importance of the local in Irish Catholicism. Greater attention too could be placed upon the fundamental importance of material religious devotion in Irish Catholicism and the unique relationship created between material-based devotion and the Irish landscape. The history of Marian devotion in Ireland is also a neglected subject, especially from the 19th century onwards. The examples of the Marian Year and the moving statues and apparitions discussed in this thesis also have resonance for the wider scholarship on Marian apparitions. In general scholars have tended to focus on the globalised contents of apparition messages and the commonalities between them. Few studies have paused to consider the importance of the local in Marian apparitions. Certainly there are commonalities between Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela and the wider Marian apparition phenomenon but there are key and defining differences between them at the local level, which is all the more interesting, because geographically speaking, these three shrines are in close proximity to one another. One wonders what localised differences could be unearthed, for example, in France between La Salette, Lourdes and Pontmain? As important as it is to identify global patterns in Marian apparitions, so too is it to pinpoint local variances and idiosyncrasies.

[564] Michael P. Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Wells and Popular Catholic Devotion* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) pp. 5-6

In August 2012 *The Belfast Telegraph* published the results of 'a massive global survey on faith' by Win-Gallup, which revealed that the Republic of Ireland is 'abandoning religion faster than almost every other country'. Breda Heffernan and Colm Kelpie reported that in a 2005 survey 69% of Irish people described themselves as 'a religious person', but by 2012 only 47% of the 1,000 Irish people included in the survey described themselves thus. In 2005 only 3% of the Irish population had identified as atheist, rising to 10% by the 2011 census. The impact of the Church abuse scandals were noted as being a key contributor to the changing statistics.[565] One could add argue that both secularisation and changing ideas of what it means to be 'Irish' too are contributing factors. As Claire O'Sullivan commented on the survey in *The Irish Examiner*; 'From the island of saints and scholars to this; Ireland now ranks as one of the world's least religious countries'.[566] Malachi O'Doherty has explored the rise of secularisation and the ever widening gap between Church and State in Ireland in *Empty Pulpits: Ireland's Retreat from Religion*, where he describes the signs that Ireland is becoming more and more secularised on par with other European nations which were once overtly Catholic, such as France. One 'simple' sign, he writes, 'is the reduction in the numbers of people going to church. A more stark one is the reduction in recruitment to the priesthood, ministry or religious orders. Another is the relaxation of the felt need in government to defer to the institutional church or religious sensibilities of the electorate'.[567]

As O'Doherty states these trends, which are 'strongly evident in Ireland', do not mean that Ireland can now be described as an atheist country. But many of those who were raised in Ireland and identify as Catholics are in reality 'lapsed Catholics'. That is to say that Ireland has gone from being an explicitly Catholic nation, once so openly proud of that fact, to a nominal one at best with the distinct possibility that in the future, going on the increasing trends described above, Ireland maybe become an atheist nation.[568] Certainly the key role which the Catholic Church once enjoyed in the socio-political life of Ireland has gone, with one report in *The Irish Examiner* accurately describing the Church's public voice as increasingly 'peripheral'.[569] While secularisation and an increase in the

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[565] Breda Heffernan & Colm Kelpie, ' Republic of Ireland abandoning religion faster than almost every other country', *The British Telegraph,* 12 August 2012 (Http://belfasttelegraph.co.uk)
[566] Claire O'Sullivan, 'Only 47% consider themselves religious', *The Irish Examiner* 9 August 2012 (Http://irishexaminer.com/)
[567] Malachi O'Doherty, *Empty Pulpits: Ireland's Retreat from Religion* (Dublin; Gill & Macmillan Ltd., 2008) p. 62
[568] Ibid
[569] T.P. O'Mahony, 'Can religion find its voice and preach to the masses again?', *The Irish Examiner* 1 December 2014 (Http: Http://irishexaminer.com/)

numbers identifying themselves as 'non-religious' is evident in censuses and surveys, some of the impact of secularisation in the Irish context has been somewhat overstated. Recent reports, for example, have noted that spirituality is not dead but is changing and that as Ireland is becoming more multi-cultural, thanks in part to mass influx of refugees and immigrants into the country during the Celtic Tiger era, many are converting to alternative faiths. Islam, for instance, is currently described as Ireland's fastest growing religion, with a recent report in *The Irish Times* suggesting that as many as 500 Irish people a year are converting to the Muslim faith. [570]

Catholicism, though, continues to be the faith practice, nominally at least, by the majority of the Irish nation and despite the increase of secularisation, Catholic traditions remain deeply embedded into the fabric of Irish culture. Those who still wish to identify as Catholics are, however, faced with a more complex situation and it is they who are most unnerved by the increase of secularisation in Ireland and the distancing of the drafting of legalisation from the morality of the Catholic Church by successive Irish governments in recent decades. They are too challenged by the falling lack of leadership caused by a shortage of priests owing to the markedly decreasing numbers joining the religious life. Alternative sources of religious authority and inspiration, however, have been found at places like Ballinspittle, Mt. Melleray and the houses of prayer, where charismatic visionaries are proving attractive, as is membership in committees and affiliations promoting apparitions. While the continuing falling attendance rates at mass since the 1980s have led scholars and journalists to posit that religion, or more accurately Catholicism, in Ireland is slowly dying, there is evidence that Catholicism will have a future in Ireland. One of the clearest indicators of this are the crowds that have thronged the many places where apparitions have been claimed in Ireland since 1985. In an increasingly secularised Ireland, with a noted shortage of priests to minister to needs of devout Catholics, they have been forced to find new ways of being Catholic and as has been the case in many European countries since the twentieth century, they have found solace, inspiration and motivation at Marian apparition shrines. As Miri Rubin notes 'the habits developed in the nineteenth century, of apocalyptic devotional mobilization around shrines, in reaction to perceived attacks by liberal and democratic movements, served

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[570] Liza Caulfield, 'Lifting the veil on Ireland's fastest growing religion', *The Irish Independent* 21 September 2014 (Http://independent.ie/)

some Catholics well during the "Godless" twentieth', and will continue, as Ireland and this thesis have shown, into the twenty-first.[571]

The practice of the Catholic faith may no longer enjoy the special position, as formerly endorsed by the Irish government, it once did in the Irish context but the continuing devotion to Marian apparitions in Ireland, both in the native context at the shrines discussed throughout this thesis and demonstrated in the international context by the ever increasing numbers of Irish Catholics making pilgrimages to Medjugorje[572], shows that there is still validity to describing Ireland as 'a nation preferring visions' or devout Irish Catholics at least as a people 'preferring visions'. And as this thesis has shown, for devout Catholics at least, Catholicism remains a key element of Irish identity, and as I have demonstrated throughout this devotion to the Virgin Mary is a means to express, maintain and even defend this. To devotees of the Virgin Mary Ireland is still 'Catholic Ireland' and it is these their duty, by making reference to the messages of Marian apparitions, such as those of Melleray and Inchigeela, to both sustain and preserve this.

An increase in apparitions in post 1985 Ireland witnessed further vigils at Marian shrines and Marian cults across the island of Ireland, and acted as rally points for those who continue to equate Catholicism as synonymous with Ireland and Irish identity. The claims of moving statues were replaced by the kind of apparition vigils I described in relation to Mt. Melleray in Chapter 4, and particularly those of Fiona Tierney at Rossmore, Inchigeela in Chapter 5. Contemporary press reports detail apparition vigils at various Lourdes grottoes around the country, including; Letterfrack in Co. Galway (1987),[573] Bessbrook, or Bessborough in Co. Armagh (1988),[574] Grantstown in Co. Wexford (1988),[575] a bizarre apparition or vision appearing on a wall in Fahy church, Co. Galway drew pilgrims for a few weeks in 1990,[576] and finally a 'bleeding statue' of the Virgin Mary attracted a brief spell of pilgrimage at Grangecon in Co. Wicklow. The media dubbed it 'The Weeping Madonna of West Wicklow'.[577] During the Celtic Tiger era (the

[571] Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: a history of the Virgin Mary* (Allen Lane; London, 2009) p. 418
[572] In 2014 *The Irish Examiner* reported that over 20,000 Irish pilgrims visit the Bosnian apparition site annually. (Emma Sisk, 'The pilgrim's progress: Why this 24 year old chose to go to Medjugorje for her summer holidays, 6 October 2014, Http://irishexaminer.com/). There are many Medjugorje prayer groups across the Republic of Ireland and many of my interviewees had made the pilgrimage or intended to do so in the future.
[573] Don Lavery, 'Local Bishop 'dubious' on apparition claim', *The Irish Press* 18 June 1987 p. 7
[574] 'Tubbercurry's "Medjugorje Day" attracts 700', *The Connaught Telegraph* 10 February 1988 p. 6
[575] 'Bishop warns on Wexford 'apparition' ', *The Irish Times* 19 August 1988 p. 12
[576] Michael Finlan, 'Priest, parishioners report images on church wall', *The Irish Times* 8 June 1990 p. 12
[577] 'The weeping Madonna of West Wicklow', *The Irish Independent* 24 May 1994 p. 12

mid-1990s to the mid-2000s) apparitions seemed to wane somewhat, although the controversial Achill House of Prayer continued to make media headlines.

Then in 2009 it seemed, to sceptical and disdainful journalists at least, that history was repeating itself. 'Miracles are a sign that we're in trouble', *The City Tribune's* Richard Chapman commented on the 'Holy Tree Stump' of Rathkeale and Joe Coleman's apparition vigils at Knock. The kind of spirituality the moving statues had inspired in the mid-1980s, he bemoaned, was about to make a roaring comeback.[578] In fact it could not make a comeback because as the ethnography of this thesis shows it had never truly vanished in the first place. Nevertheless, journalists and the Church were once again confounded and annoyed by the outpouring of devotion at Rathkeale, where hundreds began making their way to the stump which workers discovered in the grounds of St Mary's church, see Figure 7.1.



Figure 7.1: The Rathkeale Holy Tree Stump (*The Irish Independent* © July 2009)

The Rathkeale incident shows how little the greater majority of Irish journalists have come to appreciate the complexity of lived religion. As far as they were concerned the Irish had learned nothing since the moving statues phenomenon. Their condescending attitude showed that they too had learned little either, with Ian Doherty snidely remarking in *The Irish Independent*:

[578] Richard Chapman, 'Miracles are a sign that we're in trouble', *The City Tribune*30 October 2009 p. 17

> We really are a strange country. Readers of a certain age may remember the hilarious hysteria caused down in Ballinspittle in the 1980s, when a bunch of gullible fools managed to convince themselves that a statue of the Virgin Mary had taken to dancing for them. Now fast forward a few decades and what do we have? We have people worshipping a bloody tree.[579]

The Church took an even more dim view of the Rathkeale phenomenon than they had reserved for the moving statues. 'You can't worship a tree', said the baffled parish priest barely masking a thinly veiled disgust. One can only imagine the exasperation the local clergy must have felt when locals circulated a petition, amassing 2,000 signatures, to prevent the removal of the stump.[580] A request for information to the County Council informed me the stump remains in the church ground, evidently the Church bowed to the wishes of the people, albeit reluctantly. As much as the media and the Church may decry it, the case of Rathkeale's Holy Stump, as much as Ballinspittle's moving statue does or the grotto vigils of Melleray or the work of *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*, speaks volumes of religion as it is lived and practiced in the Irish context. The faithful continue to find comfort in them, because even a stump with admittedly the barest resemblance to a silhouette of an image of the Virgin Mary can be a sacred object and a revelation of a supernatural higher power for the ordinary believer. And many lay Catholics continue to seek out the Virgin Mary as the source of that power.

This is why pilgrimage to Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela continues to the present and this is why Carns visionary Mary McGuiness, attending the 25th anniversary of her apparitions, could tell *The Sligo Champion* 'This is something that will never leave us and is part of who we are'.[581] She may have being speaking for the people and pilgrims of the Sligo shrine but the sentiment is reflective of the beliefs of the committees and visionaries of Ballinspittle, Melleray and Inchigeela also, and all those pilgrims who continue to find faith and consolation at those shrines. The Irish, truly are, it seems, 'a nation preferring visions'.

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[579] Ian O'Doherty, 'All hail the…tree', *The Irish Independent* 13 July 2009 p. 16
[580] Kathryn Hayes, 'Residents attempt to save tree stump they say depicts Our Lady', *The Irish Times* 9 July 2009 p. 1
[581] Michael Moran, '25 years on, Carns visionaries remain steadfast as ever about apparition', *The Sligo Champion* 29 November 2011

Appendix: Interviews/Letters

Below are samples of the kind of interviews which I have conducted in the course of my ethnographic research for this thesis. They are reproduced here so that the reader can appreciate how I conducted my ethnographic research, and the kind of responses made by my interviewees and participants. Here I have tried to give equal weight to the believer, the sceptic and the non-believer. My Inchigeela and houses of prayer based interviews were semi-formal and not recorded, in accordance with the wishes of *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart*. Thus, I have not produced any of my interviews for Chapter Five here, but in general the same style was employed. In general I tried to let my participants share what they wish to say, with as few open questions as was possible. To avoid confusion regarding names, I have referred to myself as 'interviewer' so that my participants' voices can speak for themselves. Below is a table summarising the numbers of formal recorded and semiformal interviews conducted in relation to each case study.

Grotto/Location	No. of Recorded Interviews	No. of informal interviews
Ballinspittle	6	30 (approx.)
Mt. Melleray	8	20 (approx.)
Inchigeela♦	3	10
Mitchelstown	5	7

Interview One

This interview was recorded with Pat aged 75, in his home in Dublin on 21 March 2013. Pat shared his many, many experiences with me in connection to Ballinspittle and Lourdes. Here I provided the section of the interview where Pat described his experiences of visiting Ballinspittle.

Interviewer: How did you hear about Ballinspittle?

Pat: *News came through of wonderful happenings there and I was organiser for the Church Folk group. One of the members had went there and come back. And so we*

♦ I visited Rossmore and Gortaneadin grottoes in Inchigeela as well as St Joseph's House of Prayer. I also visited the Immaculate Heart House of Prayer at Doon (Co. Limerick) and *The Servants of The Way of The Immaculate Heart's* Prayer Room in Limerick city.

decided to visit Ballinspittle and I organised a bus and went there with a bus load of women. We arrived at 5:45pm on an October evening and as soon as we got off the bus it all started happening. One of the women with me, Nuala, asked me if I saw anything and I was about to say no but was stopped before the word got out and I saw the halo of lights moving. Nuala saw nothing and she told me I was blessed to see it. I also saw a petal in the statues hands and it fell away from it. Another girl in the group, Rose, could see nothing and she was frustrated and was asking herself 'what's wrong with me? Why can't I see anything?' Rose was a Padre Pio fanatic and as she got up from her knees as she was praying, she got upright and suddenly fell back to her knees and said 'Oh my God' and nobody what she saw, but she saw something. Rose got her wish. They all had happy experiences and discussed them later over a pint in Glanmire. On that first visit I also saw the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart. It was blinding and it was only for a second but it took over everything.

Interviewer: That's interesting and it comes up a lot in relation to Ballinspittle.

Pat: *Absolutely.*

Interviewer: Many people say they saw the Sacred Heart at Ballinspittle or Padre Pio.

Pat: *I definitely saw it. Without a doubt.*

Interviewer: The Sacred Heart?

Pat: *The Sacred Heart.*

Interviewer: And was this at Ballinspittle?

Pat: *It was yeah. It was like a fella with a, a camera full of technology, you could zoom in and out. That's what it was like. The extraordinary thing is…We were there praying and I said this and I want you to take note of this word 'acknowledge' and you'll know why I am telling you later on, ok. Anyway I am kneeling down praying and I said to Our Lady I didn't come down here to see you dance like they're all talking about. I just came down thank you for all the blessings I've had and I swear to God there was a little petal of a rose between her fingers and every time I looked up it flapped over and there was no wind. It never came back. Every time I looked up it flapped over. Anyway so I come along and there was busloads of people still coming, coming from the North and Sally, me mate Sally*

*and I said Sally isn't it about time we made the tea. And she said we would love a cup of tea now. So me self and Sally got up off our knees and the two of us were shoulder to shoulder walking across the road to the bank and we walked up the embankment on the far side and don't ask me why but both of us were made to turn around at the same time. Shoulder to shoulder…Anyway we both turned around and faced the cross towards the grotto. That's when the, when the eh, the exposition of the Heart of Jesus came out at us. I said to Sally that's wonderful isn't it. She said it surely is. So I assumed what I saw she did, I never knew. I meant to ask her and one day this neighbour who had cancer, I got her to Lourdes and the following year she wanted to go back in thanksgiving because she had been temporarily remission if you like. Eventually it…of no avail. She passed away recently but anyway she rang and said Pat do you know that bottle of wine I got a present of recently, will I open it and you come around and enjoy it with me. I said certainly Mary, I'll be around in five minutes. She only lived up the road and when I get in Sally was there, Sally the very woman, remember that time in Ballinspittle when two of us turned around just before we made the BBQ and I said to you isn't that wonderful Sally and she said it definitely was. I said what did you see and her description was exactly the same as mine. What made us turn around I'll never know. Anyway we got the BBQ, went over to the far side and we got it going anyway and we were feelin' it all made with the smell of barbequed sausage and rashers coming down, toast and all, we had flasks of tea and all. We had a real picnic anyway. And one girl Rose was very frustrated because the whole time from a quarter to six to that supper time she saw nothing and she kept saying what's wrong with me I've see nothing. You's are seeing everything. What I did see Will was the changing of the statue's face from a young person, from a young boy, from young girl to a fuzzy bearded person who could be described as Padre Pio. That was regular. It was like a cycling event, one minute you saw it and it slowly disappeared and I kept saying what's wrong with my eyes and you rested em and looked up again and I could see nothing and then after a while it all came back again. And that little petal I got that so often. Every time I looked up it was there for me. That's the only way I can say it. Anyway at a quarter to ten it was time to be heading for home, it's a long bus home and we had to go and Rose still hadn't seen anything and I'll never forget I said to her are we right Rose and she still portrayed that she was seeing nothing after such a long time praying. She was a Padre Pio fanatic. She couldn't even see him d' you know. Any way she got up off her knees, I'll never forget it and as she, as she got up standing upright juts fell back down on her knees and uttered the words 'Oh my God'. And whatever she saw we never knew but said 'Oh my***

God' it was so startlingly comparison because she had seen nothing and suddenly at that last minute to say 'Oh my God' d' you know.

Interviewer: So she saw something extraordinary?

Pat: *She saw something extraordinary there's no doubt. But anyway they were all happy to make the trip anyway, that's for sure. I think they all had similar experiences and we recounted afterwards with a nice pint in Glanmire pub.*

Interviewer: That's interesting because the grotto in Glanmire, just as you go through the village, Ballinspittle was based on that grotto in Glanmire. You say when you were in Ballinspittle 'acknowledge me' was something big?

Pat: *But anyway that's more or less what happened on the first visit. But the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament (Sacred Heart) that was a highlight and then Rose saying 'Oh my God' I thought that was particularly…ah an answer to her wish to see something. To take home something with her.*

Interviewer: And did much time pass between your first visit and your second visit?

Pat: *Quite a bit of time. I am a founding member of the cycling club here. So we did a trip down south to Cork and Kerry and all that d' you know. We did a lot of camp sites coming towards Cork City itself and one was very close to Ballinspittle. We had 42 cyclists on the trip between girls and boys, including me own wife and the organiser's wife of the trip as well. But anyway it came up Pat you were up in Ballinspittle weren't ya. I was says I. Would you bring us up tonight. I said on one condition I says that ye don't think this a joke like the papers are making out of it. I said there will be a lot of people up there who will be very reverent about asking funny questions and if you feel like it is a joke walk away and do it discretely. Don't make it obvious that it is a fun place because it's not. And we'll behave ourselves that's the only way I'll bring ye up and I had 42 youngsters in me Volkswagen van, they were sitting inside, up on the roof and everything and up we went anyway. Anyway the same again. They all picked their spots. One of the girls was with me, her name was Tracey and she was kneeling beside me and she kept saying Pat I can't get over this, this is absolutely beautiful. It was so powerful. That was what she was saying. So anyway I was studying the scene for a few minutes. And even though I had seen what I had seen the first time there was no difference with that like. Anyway what I did notice was if you studied the position of the statue you could see the outline even though you were*

seeing things that were blocking out all that was behind, you could still see the outline of the statue. I could pick it out and whatever I was seeing was projected from the statue but the statue wasn't moving. But anyway everyone was up on the [hill] praying the usual prayers again and every time they looked up the thought came down to me 'I have acknowledged you'. I thought I must have said it about ten times through the course of the night. I tell ya it struck me you know. But anyway ……. we said listen folks we better get back to the camp. Anyway we got into the van. Because it was so pitch dark and we couldn't see and we didn't know where we was and I took the wrong turn. I found myself going into Kinsale. Anyway my friend's wife was sitting beside me, her name was Mary. And she noticed that the colour of the moon was extraordinary. I never saw the colour of the moon go…what's the word…I say attractive and Mary said to me I was just thinking it isn't it a lovely thank you from Our Lady for calling up. I said it's funny Mary that is exactly what I was thinking. And it was reflected in the water and the little boats in the harbour were bouncing up and down. And it was like we were taken on a tour, that's what it was like and even though we took the wrong turn, everything seemed to be…..to be a thank you. A gift if you like. That's the only, that' the only way to see it, it was a gift. And Mary was right and I remembering thinking that she was saying exactly what I was thinking. But anyway the next morning we were up for breakfast and I was the repair man on the trip. I had all the spare parts and this lad who his name was Jonathon. His brother was…his father was a Dublin Catholic, his mother was the daughter of a Welsh Protestant minister and he said to me I don't know how to say this Pat, he said to me will you have a look at me bike. I said no problem. He sat down on the box of parts and I…the breaks of the bike was all wobbly, all over the place but I said it's gone in too far and I can't get a tool in at it. You'll have to wait til we get home. I said it is still…it will do the job for ya. And he is sitting on the box and I don't know how to say this and he is doing this (rocking back and forth) and he had me tormented. He kept saying I don't know how to say this. I says Jonathan for Christ's sake will ya spit it out whatever it is. It's about last night he says. What about last night says I. You know I'm always slagging you over the religion. He says I am always slagging ya. I know you are, sure I knew that but this was from the heart d' you know. I said Jonathan what about last night, that's what really hit me, that's why I make a point of it because I felt (Jonathan) that I was being acknowledged last night. (Pause). So I was delighted that he was being acknowledged and he waited until the next morning (pause)… He was afraid I would laugh at him. Anyway he got it out of his system anyway. It was one other chap there in the cycling club. He was a hardier

attitude….character. He wouldn't be taken too much with what he saw. But I knew he did and he was looking up and I said Ken what do you think and he said if you're looking up at something long enough you think it's moving. I said Ken that's not moving, that's bloody dancing. And he just kind of said mmm like that and he said I'll give you that.

Interviewer: Have you encountered many sceptics?

Pat: *I'll tell ya you could tell me a lot of things and you wouldn't put me off what I saw and believe I saw. And the fact that the thought came down 'I have acknowledged you'. It was very personal d' you know. And for him (Jonathan) to remark on it the next morning….(pause). But anyway that was the next morning but the day after was cycling we weren't going anywhere only staying at camp and they could get the train into Cork and do what they like. But anyway the lady that was with me in the car, the organiser's wife Mary, said if yourself and Jean me wife are going for a cycle, me self and me wife Jean would go cycling on the days off and I says we're planning and she says can I go with yous, would you mind going by the grotto. I says certainly no problem it is only down the road it won't be out of our way. Anyway we arrived anyway. Parked the bikes. Pulled up to say our morning prayers if you like at that stage and as I knelt down the first thing that struck me was the rose that was…that had been a petal was now thick as a [bunch] of flowers if you like. It struck me. Of course me wife was sitting beside me, kneeling beside me and she takes out the camera and I says typical florist, she was a professional florist, to take a photo of this magnificent sight if you like d' you know. But anyway we paid our respect anyway and headed off on our cycle. More or less that was the end of it if you like because it was daylight we saw nothing. But anyway I came home from work. She was in the front room and she says the photographs are inside in the kitchen and of course I couldn't wait to look at them and see the one of the grotto. And I just put in me notes here that the photograph taken of the grotto, just some of what we saw didn't make it in the photograph.*

Interviewer: Why do you think people in the summer of 1985 suddenly all across the country started seeing moving statues or apparitions?

Pat: *Probably the psychological aftermath to the initial discovery. I think they want to be the first on the scene when there is anything special going to happen. I think it was making herself [Virgin Mary] known to people who were lukewarm about what she needs the world to do. I mean look at the conversion of Russia.*

Interviewer: Were you surprised at the Church's response. They didn't outright condemn it but they recommended extreme caution.

Pat: *I would say I was. I was surprised that there was no one who took up the challenged to those who tried to make it a place of ridicule.*

Interviewer: And you think it was the Church's duty to do that?

Pat: *I was down at a prayer meeting that me daughter was going to down in Drogheda and I'd been handed a little a sort of thing similar to that (holds up a small copybook). And it was a journalist who decided to bring Ballinspittle out of the darkness again if you like. But she was never there and what she wrote I couldn't believe it. I said she doesn't even know what she is talking about. I tell ya my memory of Ballinspittle was nothing compared to what she is writing about. And it had sadden me. Because she demeaned it and like hundreds of people came from the North on a regular basis. The first time we went down I think there was six busloads that came during the night. I suppose that…how do I say it.. it is a measure of our belief that we there from a quarter to six til a quarter to ten, without moving only to dig the BBQ.*

Interviewer: Why do you think so many came there? On the 15 August 1985 they had somewhere between 15,000 to 20,0000. Ballinspittle was one of hundreds of grottoes like it, there is one in Glanmire, very similar to what it looks like. It was not something that people would not have seen before. Why do you think 15,000 to 20,0000 people turned up there?

Pat: *Because they needed it….they were troubled people and it probably was that some way they might find the answer they were looking for.*

Interviewer: I always ask people if and how did Ballinspittle change their life?

Pat: *It never goes away. For me anyway to tell you the truth… Somebody up there likes me.*

Interviewer: Looking back on Ballinspittle did it make a big difference in your life?

Pat: *It was an impact from start to finish.(Pause). I must say I was delighted with the experience.*

Interviewer: Do you think in the future will people continue to visit Ballinspittle and see unusual things there?

Pat: *I know I would. (Pause)*

Interviewer: Do you think that Mary accomplished what she wanted? Many see Ballinspittle and the Moving statues elsewhere as a call to prayer.

Pat: *They all are.*

Interviewer: The word acknowledgement is interesting.

Pat: *She was letting me know she knew I was there. She'd be aware of the effort…of some people to get there. Some had come from the North. One end of the country to the next you might say. You'd have to think about that. That's quite a lot before you take it on. But anyway the BBQ was the highlight of that night and we stopped in Portlaoise then for a takeaway. Great memories.*

Interview Two

This is a small sample of one of my many interviews with Mrs Patricia Bowen, former secretary of the Ballinspittle Grotto Committee. I met with Patricia on several occasions between the summers of 2012-2014 in Ballinspittle and Kinsale. She is a wealth of local knowledge and her descriptions of the Ballinspittle phenomenon, the relationship between the committee and the local clergy and her memories of the events of 1985 were among some of the most helpful and illuminating in my ethnographic journey. This interview was conducted in the cabin adjoining the grotto. Inside Patricia showed me photographs of the original committee, identifying founding members and deceased friends. I was also shown some of the religious items, such as statues of the Immaculate Conception, which have been left behind by visiting pilgrims.

Interviewer: The events of 1985 must have been very exciting for the committee?

Patricia: *The crowds grew every night until 15 August, the feast of the Assumption, when 20,0000 people descended upon the grotto. There were sixty-two buses from all over Ireland…The Grotto was the place to be every night for almost everyone in the parish and*

the neighbouring parishes. People finished work early to be there, cars lined the road for miles and miles, rosaries were said until two and three o'clock in the morning and people walking back to their cars, which were miles away, sang hymns and were very happy after visiting the grotto. It was some sight to behold and cherish.

Interviewer: Do you think that what was happening here at Ballinspittle was bringing people back to religion?

Patricia: *What happened here at our grotto was like a festival of faith which went on for months. War was raging in the North of Ireland at the time and I believe Our Lady brought the people in bus loads down south to our grotto to have a bit of respite and to pray for peace. They really prayed their hearts out imploring Jesus and Mary for help. The committee took them to the community centre on many occasions for tea, listening to their sad stories and praying with them. They also went to Mount Melleray and I think that all the prayers there (Melleray) and here (Ballinspittle) helped to bring peace to the North.*

Interviewer: Do you think Ballinspittle has helped the lives of many?

Patricia; *I think so…there have been many cures and conversions here over the years. Those who are sick are always remembered at the grotto in a special way. Many novenas have been said for people who are seriously ill and with masses and prayers many have been cured.*

Interviewer: The grotto is obviously a very special place for you, as, I imagine, is being a member of the committee?

Patricia: *I am very happy to be a member of the grotto committee for over thirty years now. We are like one big family really. When I joined it was all men, the most of them were the founding members. I enjoyed working with them and they were an inspiration to me. Brendan Murphy was elected chairman in 1985 for the new committee. We had a huge task on our hands but we managed. We had meetings in the mornings and evenings and the main agenda was to ensure the people's safety and thank God no one was hurt. We all pulled together.*

Interviewer: What are you hopes for Ballinspittle in the future?

Patricia: *Well to keep a committee here to maintain the grotto and we hope to keep the spirit of prayer alive here for as long as we can.*

Interview Three

This interview was recorded with Mary, aged 61, in her home in Kilworth, in North Cork on 16 June 2013. Mary shared her experiences of visiting Ballinspittle in September 1985, her visits to Mount Melleray Grotto and her memories of the local moving statue in Mitchelstown. Mary was certain that what she witnessed and experienced was not an optical illusion or hysteria but neither was she in any way certain that what she had seen and experienced constituted a miracle. Her opinions and descriptions are representative of many who have visited Ballinspittle, Mt. Melleray, Inchigeela and other apparition sites in Ireland since 1985.

Interviewer: How did you first hear of Ballinspittle and the moving statues?

Mary: *Well, there was a big interest in Ballinspittle in the papers and the national news. Everyone was talking about it and there were buses going down there every night for a few weeks. And in September a couple of neighbours were going and so I decided to go too. The whole thing made some of us nervous. We said the rosary on the way up and down. The bus was full, mostly women and a few men and it picked people up on route. We arrived around 7:30 pm and the place was mobbed. To me it looked like any other grotto…it was well kept but to me it looked nothing special. Our group were across the road, up on the hilly field, crammed in and people were coming and going all night. There was anything up to twelve buses at a time.*

Interviewer: And did you see anything unusual?

Mary: *I was there twenty minutes before I saw it. There were gasps…people saying it was swaying, moving…that the hands were moving and some people saw the statue's mouth talking as if she was joining the prayers. I saw a bling in the star in the crown…just one star lit up. On and off for a while…the image of the rosary as on prayer cards…the*

mysteries of the rosary appear around the statue...kind of flashing in and out. And I saw the Calvary scene too…it was like an old wax crucifix…black and white and his loincloth blew out in the wind. And I saw the old Sacred Heart image…the old kitchen picture (Mary was referring to the Sacred Heart Enthronement image which is popular in Irish Catholic homes) and sometimes I saw the frame and an image of Padre Pio too. I didn't see any shaking or movements.

Interviewer: How did this make you feel?

Mary: *I wasn't frightened…I didn't know what to believe really. One thing that struck me was the small children and how excited they were…they thought the statue would fall. Some I went with saw nothing…we discussed it later on the way home, my friend saw more or less the same things I did.*

Interviewer: Did you feel anything special about the grotto; did it feel holy to you in any way?

Mary: *There were rosaries being said all the time. I said at least two. We seemed to lose track of time…we were there roughly two hours, but it felt much longer. I was a bit nervous and curious going and I don't know why I saw what I saw there but I know I didn't imagine it. I didn't really get a holy feeling about the place…there was an air of excitement but no sense of peace there.*

Interviewer: Do you think there was a message behind the images you saw?

Mary: *Well the Sacred Heart is my man and I was happy to see him but I never really liked the Virgin Mary…she's always scared me ever since I was a child. The story of Fatima always frightened me and everywhere she appears people seem to die and are frightened. I think the things I saw were the things that were important to me, but I was never big on saying the rosary. It didn't really change me in anyway. I am always slow to believe in things like moving statues and apparitions to be honest. I prefer the Sacred Heart…I have more confidence in him.*

Interviewer: What do you think of the Church's response?

Mary: *I agree with how the Church handled it all and to be cautious. I think gathering in prayer is a good thing but I don't think apparitions happen lightly. For a while it looked as*

if Ballinspittle would become a new Lourdes or Knock. I am not surprised the Church stayed out of it.

Interviewer: Why do you think so many people turned out at Ballinspittle and the other sites where moving statues were claimed?

Mary: *Everyone has a longing to find something and are searching...I think it was mostly curiosity that brought people out. In the end though I think Ballinspittle and the whole thing got out of hand to a point where the people's reactions…as if they were in ecstasy. People are looking for a sign or proof and it was such a bad, wet summer and there was a recession at the time and I think people were desperate for something.*

Interviewer: Have you ever returned to Ballinspittle?

Mary: *I didn't make a return visit at the time…I have visited four or five times since when I was in the area but to be honest I wouldn't go out of my way to see it…I'm not big into grottoes and it didn't make a huge influence on my religious life after…I can manage with prayer to the Sacred Heart.*

Interviewer: Have you ever visited the other places where apparitions and moving statues have been reported?

Mary: *I have been to Melleray many times. I didn't go at the time the apparitions were claimed but I had been there before it and we use to take the family there every year in the summer. I have never seen anything there myself but I have heard stories over the years from neighbours who have. I do like the grotto there…I find it peaceful; it's the only grotto I really like. I never saw anything but time stands still there.*

Interviewer: What do you think of the Melleray apparitions?

Mary: *I am unsure about them…they were even more intense than Ballinspittle but I found the grotto peaceful ever before those apparitions. There is something in Melleray that intrigues me. I would prefer Melleray to Ballinspittle and Knock. I use to love the holy pictures and statues that were in the shelter there…I missed them because they gave the grotto reverence. I do like the holy water in the grotto and I like that it is consecrated to the Sacred Heart. Some of my neighbours have smelt roses there…when my brother died, he had been praying to Padre Pio, people said that they could smell roses in the room where he was laid out…they got this beautiful smell…kind of soft. Other people said they*

saw the sun miracle at Melleray but I wouldn't know what to think about that. I like the Abbey in Melleray. Our neighbour, growing up, was from Cappoquin and she would go home, Melleray was only over the road, and she would go up there and we use to go sometimes, so in the back of my mind I always associate Melleray with her.

Interviewer: Do you remember any other moving statues?

Mary: *I remember there were rumours that the one in Mitchelstown was supposed to be moving…but it came at the end of the hype and I was never impressed by it. It was a bit dramatic…I would never be 100% sure that people did see things there…Mitchelstown was hysteria. It got to the point that people were afraid to look at a grotto or go into a Church. I remember talking to our local sacristan and she was even saying that she was afraid to go into the church at night for fear she might see something. There was a dismal feeling in that summer…a feeling of doom and gloom and there were various rumours about Mitchelstown. There were a few characters trying to frighten people and making a skit of it…having fun. They say they got in behind the statue and shook it. The grotto was in a sheltered area; near trees and a wall behind it…they could sneak in and do it. I didn't like the claims of people seeing the devil in these areas where people were praying and they were children. Some people said they saw the men there.*

Interviewer: Do you remember the response of the local priests?

Mary: *They were annoyed by the whole thing and I can understand why. You can't believe everything. Maybe there was something in Ballinspittle and Melleray, but the rest I think were hoaxes…certainly Mitchelstown anyway.*

Interviewer: If these moving statues and apparitions were supernatural, what do you think was the point of it all?

Mary: *God has his way of sending a message to your conscience…I remember my mother was a very devout and genuine woman but she was not impressed by the whole thing and didn't agree with it. Statues and images were to respect to God and Mary but not for what they became that year. I mean I would always keep a picture of the Sacred Heart and a Cross and some holy water but I think these moving statues were hysteria and got out of hand. When it happened in Mitchelstown everyone went in to have a look but I didn't*

bother. The priest in our parish never spoke about it. It's always happening somewhere. I suppose if there was something supernatural in it…it might be to bring people back to God…but you don't need a moving statue phenomenon for that. It was a good thing in that it got people together to pray but still I can't explain it and I am still unsure about it all. It was all about Our Lady really…a lot of people have great devotion to her.

Interviewer: What do you think of the international attention the phenomenon attracted?

Mary: *It's nice to see the tourists in places like Ballinspittle and I can understand the international attention at the time…I mean it seemed at one point that all the statues in Ireland were moving and everyone has relatives abroad and it was all over the media. Sceptics went there (Ballinspittle) and got a shock…I can see why some people abroad maybe thought the Irish were going crazy with all the statues.*

Interviewer: What do you think of the miracle claims which have circulated in relation to these places?

Mary: *Maybe there have been miracles because of all the prayers in those places…I don't know…maybe it's possible. It took many years for Knock to be recognised so maybe in the future Ballinspittle or Melleray will be, if there is evidence or a want…anywhere there is a load of prayer it is possible…maybe.*

Interviewer: In the end how far would say the phenomenon personally impacted you?

Mary: *Well it didn't really change me in any way or the way I feel about Our Lady…I still have mixed feelings about it all but I would say the gathering in prayer is a good thing.*

Letters

In addition to my formal and semi-formal interviews, I received a number of letters, six in total, in which the authors shared their experiences and opinions regarding Ballinspittle and Mt. Melleray. Here I will produce in full a short letter I received from a Waterford based Evangelical Christian, who in the interest of anonymity I will not name. While the author does not name a particular shrine, it is most likely that he is referring to Ballinspittle and Mt. Melleray in particular and the entire phenomena of Marian apparitions in general. The remainder of the letters were in connection to Ballinspittle and described similar phenomena, beliefs and opinions as shared in the interviews above.

As to moving statues one has only to look at what God say[s] of statues; they cannot move, see, hear, speak or help anyone. So would God or Mary use statues to bring people to God? The rosary is recited at those places. Again see God's word on prayers. He doesn't listen to recited words. So who then is drawing people away from God but Satan. Did Jesus ever say pray to Mary? No. He said to pray to the Father, as he did. So that is what I know to be true [to] God's word. Hope this is of help to you.

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