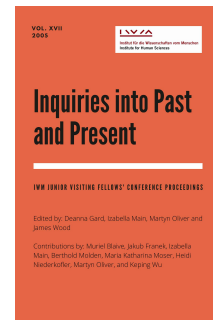


Performing Charisma: Construction of Religious Experience in the Catholic Charismatic Ritual of Prayer and Worship

Keping Wu

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A religion is a system of symbols, which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.
Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"

Introduction

This paper explores the way religious experience is constructed through ritual performance. Many studies of rituals have devoted their discussion to symbols and the meanings symbols connote.^[1] However, meaningful symbols alone do not explain how religion is able to clothe "these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1973:90). I am more concerned with the efficacy of the rituals in creating a religious experience that transforms the realities of individual participants. In a religious ritual, "what renders the performance compelling is not primarily the meanings embodied in symbolic material themselves ... but the way the symbolic material emerges in the interaction" (Schieffelin 1985:721). Interaction in a ritual can take many forms. It can be the exchange of words and symbolic actions among performers of the ritual, or interaction among the sequences of events, or interchange of past and present realities. Those kinds of interactions are especially important for the spontaneous and open-ended charismatic Catholic prayer rituals where the fulfilling of individual moods and motivations are of central importance.

The ritual of praise and worship is the dominant form of religious activity for charismatic Catholic communities throughout the world. Charismatic Catholicism is an experiential excursion for Catholics, who "claim to offer a unique spiritual *experience* to individuals, and promise a *dramatic* renewal of Church life based on a spirituality of 'personal relationship' with Jesus and direct access to divine power and inspiration through a series

of ‘spiritual gifts’ or charisms” (Csordas 1997: 18, emphasis mine). The ritual of praise and worship is the locus of this experience. What distinguishes the charismatic Catholics from regular Catholics lies in the ritual of praise and worship, through which the charismatic leader accentuates his authority when his followers experience spiritual and physical renewal, through such activities as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesying. Because of this individual, performative and experiential quality, the word “ritual” here loses its meaning of being a set of repetitive and controlled behaviors (such as Mass). Instead, it is spontaneous and interactive.

The Setting

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), also called the Catholic Pentecostal movement, a post-war and post-Vatican II movement, has incorporated many elements of the Protestant and Neo-Pentecostal practices. Although the CCR originated in the 1960s as a lay movement, many charismatic Catholic groups today exhibit more involvement of clerical members, usually priests, in the leadership structure (Csordas 1997: 17). Those priests often become popular as gifted healers and/or prophets. They might be controversial figures within the Church, but they secure their positions by having a steady group of followers who often proclaim a strong Catholic identity. Another characteristic of charismatic Catholic prayer groups, as they call their communities, is that they are voluntary organizations. Many Parishes have their own prayer groups that meet regularly, but it is common for people to travel to camp meetings, domestic and international conferences in order to listen to charismatic leaders speak, pray and be prayed upon, and participate in spirited worship services with thousands of people with various kinds of “spiritual gifts” or “charisms.”

This study is based on an eighteen-month-fieldwork in a Catholic charismatic community in the suburbs of Boston between December 2001 and August 2003. The field method is a combination of participant observation, archival research and focus interviews. This community, formed by people from various parishes and dioceses, is a voluntary organization under the leadership of a charismatic priest called Father Tom. They hold two weekly meetings both in his home parish and in a rented chapel. Different from the earlier CCR movement, which had a relatively young, well-educated and upper-middle class following (Bord and Faulkner 1983: 6), the current charismatic prayer groups attract more working class and older people. They are about sixty percent women and forty percent men, thirty percent are between age twenty to forty and the rest are over fifty years old. Their motivations differ, but here are some typical ones: seeking healing from terminal illnesses like cancer or AIDS, or chronic diseases like arthritis, diabetes, allergies, etc; personal issues, such as weight problems, career and school problems, and relationship and family issues; and spiritual quests, such as looking for a faith, a confirmation of faith, or seeking stronger spiritual commitment and experience. The motivations of the participants made up the social context in which the ritual takes place. The purpose of the ritual performance is to reenact and transform reality both communally and individually.

Ritual Processes

Father Tom's typical prayer meeting starts at 6:30 PM, lasts till around 11PM, and can roughly be divided into three parts: Rosary, Mass, and Praise and Worship. Although one can find the first two parts in regular Catholic churches as well, there is more room for innovation and variation in the charismatic assembly. Father Tom is constantly experimenting with different structures and techniques "according to how the spirit moves." What I am going to describe is a more typical occasion.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the ritual proper, I want to draw your attention to the space where the ritual takes place. Different from the familiar rectangular church interiors, this chapel is almost square. The entire arrangement is very simple and modern, but it has all the symbolic properties essential to a Catholic worship place: an altar, a cross, a shrine for the Blessed Sacrament and statues of saints on the walls. Four rows of pews form a semi-circle around the altar. This setting not only maximizes the capacities of the space, but also draws people closer to the altar and to each other in proximity. It is easier for the priest to communicate and interact with the rest of the congregation and vice versa, since the altar is only around ten inches above the ground where people are sitting, and those who sit at the first pew are only two steps away from where the priest stands. While the traditional setting symbolizes the hierarchy, the current setup corresponds to the charismatic Catholic ideas of equal blessings from God for every believer. If the solemnity of traditional churches makes people more conscious of their surroundings and the "appropriate" behaviors in those surroundings, it stops people from expressing themselves freely, or in their words, from "submitting" themselves entirely to the Holy Spirit. This is part of the reason why the early charismatic Catholic prayer groups and many others now hold their meetings in the basement of the church, people's living rooms and conference halls. In fact, between the two locations where Father Tom holds his two weekly meetings, the one with a traditional setting, though his home parish, only attracts less than one-fifth of the attendance at the rented chapel which I described here.

1. Prelude: the Rosary

The first hour of the ritual is devoted to Rosary. Regular Catholic churches only do rosary on certain months of a year. Strongly encouraged and advised by Father Tom, people say their rosary voluntarily for an hour before each worship meeting. The main participants of this voluntary part of the ritual are the music ministry and Father Tom's longtime followers, mostly women and men over fifty. Among them, the music ministry plays a vital role. Composed of two guitarists, one trumpeter and two percussionists, it directs the entire session. Steve, the lead guitarist and singer of the music ministry, improvises songs with very simple melodies and sings them with lines from the rosary. The words might be merely Hallelujah, or he might sing the stations of the cross in between the recitation of rosaries. He repeats them enough that the rest of the group could follow up with no difficulty even if his lines are newly improvised. Those songs not only punctuate the standard prayers but also lay down the theme of the prayer of the day: either gratefulness, joy or praise.

Those who have participated in rosary in regular churches might find it boring, but in Father Tom's chapel, the emotionally charged songs played by the music ministry in the meeting repeatedly transform the monotonous recitation into passionate chanting. As the director of the orchestra, the music ministry masters the sequence and rhythm of the performance. The efficacy largely depends upon the correspondence between it and the rest of the congregation. For instance, to comply with the music ministry, several Irish ladies often dress up in traditional robes and dance around the chapel, their heads covered with a white shawl, waving silk scarves with the music. Their dancing and waving add a visual impression to the auditory dimension of the rhythm that is created by the music and prayer. As Edward Hall puts it, "rhythm is ... a hidden force that, like gravity, holds groups together." (Hall 1983: 184-185). Together with repetition, it creates group cohesion (Goodridge 1999: 102-103). As a result, people realize the importance of rhythm and consciously or unconsciously employ different means to assist or accentuate its role. Another good example would be the use of tambourines. Once a lady brought a tambourine and danced with it. When complimented for such innovation, she proudly claimed that it gave her a sense of active participation and belonging. One week later, several other ladies brought tambourines with them and danced in the rosary.

With a rhythm concordant across the chapel, a unanimous undercurrent of mood is established among everybody that is present. All of those instruments are going to appear in the later part of the service (praise and worship) again. Their appearance in the rosary can be regarded as a rehearsal for their later performance. It also comprises an indispensable process in rituals, as Arnold Van Gennep (1960) proposes: the transition of people from their daily routine to the spiritual world of the sacred. Although the participants do not plan ahead what they are going to do in the worship service as in a theatrical performance, they are preparing their mental, psychological and physical receptors. Even such a "spontaneous" religious experience as a charismatic one is not to be achieved without certain degree of preparation.

Another preparation is the stories that are shared. Many people use the loosely organized rosary session as a social occasion. They exchange greetings, news[2], conversion stories[3] and witnesses of healing miracles. Those activities not only allow the followers to bond, but also form the basis on which the later performance depends. It is with those miracles and conversion stories in mind that the actors enter into a performance that aims at creating a "communitas" through which their realities will be shaped and transformed. Therefore, this is a crucial part in the chain of events that is going to happen. For those who miss the rosary, Father Tom will make sure that he prepares them in the Mass.

2. Mass: Continuation and Communion

At 7:30, Father Tom comes into the chapel in his daily clothes, followed by one or two deacons and priests who assist him. The chanting and music zooms higher than ever. He walks directly into the little preparing room behind the walls of the altar, and when he reemerges with the vestment and stole, the entire chapel quiets down. By changing his clothes, he transforms his role to a priest's, which endows him with the kind of authority and authenticity a lay leader is not able to achieve.

The Mass retains the basic structure of the regular Catholic Masses, but has a charismatic twist to it. Before proceeding to the Mass, Father Tom often quotes witnesses to some healing miracles and conversions. For instance, on the Mass of the unborn, he told the congregation about a pregnant mother who was going to have an abortion because the doctors had detected a hole in the unborn baby boy's heart and had suggested it. When she was brought to Father Tom, he prayed with the mother and the baby many times, and a week later the child was born healthy with just a tiny defect in his heart. Although the baby was still in the hospital, they could now operate on him. He emphasized that the baby was going to live the life of a normal child. Upon hearing this story, the entire congregation clapped and exclaimed, "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord. Praise Jesus. Praise the Lord." Father concluded, "You never know what God's gonna do. You never know what Holy Spirit is capable of bringing us to do. All we could do is to pray. Pray and pray and things will happen." Some female followers were so moved by the story that they started crying. Others told me that those stories make them feel once more confirmed in their faith, and they were eager and excited to witness more things the Holy Spirit could do. More stories are shared and more testimonies and prophecies are announced. Following more clapping and praising of Jesus, the Mass formally starts.

One more thing that distinguishes the Masses here from regular Catholic Masses is Father's delivery of sermons. Unlike regular priests, Father Tom is everything but elegant. During his sermons, he puts his entire body against the podium and pushes it so hard it is tilted, as if he is going to knock it over. Sometimes he gets so hot that he rolls up his sleeves. But nothing seems to stop people from paying attention to him. When he speaks, his voice fluctuates high and low, fast and slow, but is never dull or innocuous. He attracts a steady group of listeners to his daily radio program. There are cases where people had a conversion experience while listening to him on the radio and flew thousands of miles to come attend his retreats. They say when he talks an hour it feels like ten minutes, whereas in other churches it often feels the opposite. He also tape-records his own sermons. Those tapes are later distributed among audiences when he travels and preaches outside his community. They are not merely teachings from the Bible, but serve as a means of evangelization.

The content of those sermons ranges from national and regional issues, to his personal experiences, to people's daily lives. Some of his sermons can be very provocative. For instance, one recurrent theme in his sermons is how the Church has failed to play its role in people's lives:

There was increasing evil within the Church. Satan has plotted a lie against the Church! Since Vatican II, three generations have been lost! The Shepard has not given God's word to people. If we don't preach, the world preaches. If we don't preach, the devil preaches!

Father Tom is never afraid of invoking the evilness of the outside world – including the Church. Nonetheless, he is not opposed to the Pope or the Church itself, but to "those who dominate and corrupt the Church and stop the Church from reforming itself." The world-rejecting[4] content of his sermons unites participants in a community against the outside, secular and immoral world, and furthermore separates them from it. It also creates an ambiance exclusively shared among the members, without the need of coming

into contact with one another. Father Tom's sermons serve as a connecting point. In terms of style, his sermons are full of repetitions of words and phrases, which he repeats again and again in the rest of the meeting, sometimes sung, sometimes yelled out loud. These repeated catch-phrases become the titles of his TV and radio programs. Here are some examples: "When God is on the Move, Get out of the Way," "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh" "Will the Real Jesus please stand up?"

Following the stimulating sermons is the Holy Communion, which poses a contrast to the much more lively performance of the rosary and sermon. The charismatic Catholics claim to differ most from the Protestant Pentecostals over this part of the service. According to Joseph Fichter, seventy-seven percent of charismatic Catholics report that they receive Holy Communion more often than before they had become charismatic (1975:30). Those followers who were born as Catholics but were converted to Protestant Pentecostal denominations later in their lives came back to the charismatic Catholic meetings because they always felt something missing in Protestant churches: the Eucharist. They regard the Catholic communion as the only "life source," which "rejuvenates body and soul." They are thrilled to find out about Father Tom's prayer group because in it they can remain Catholic and at the same time worship in a charismatic/Pentecostal way. By taking the bread and wine after two hours of prayer, music and teachings, the participants not only enter communion with God in flesh and blood, but enter communion with one another in the conversion stories, healing witnesses and the sermons that are shared again and again.

Yet Father Tom and the music ministry have been the only performers so far. When Father announces, "The Mass is ended. May everyone go in peace!" the congregation jumps to its feet and starts dancing with the music. The music ministry starts singing "Fire! Fire! Fire!" The service enters into praise and worship. And now we enter the second and third stages of the rites of passage: transition and incorporation.

3. Praise and Worship: Transition and Incorporation

The last and most important process of the prayer meeting is called praise and worship. According to Father Tom and others, it is "what they do in Heaven." It is the most flamboyant part of the ritual that characterizes the charismatic experience. It involves a lot of singing, dancing, speaking in tongues, chanting, prophesying, waving, jumping, laughing and crying. It is above all a celebration.

At the first glance, it appears to be pure unstructured chaos, as if everyone acts for him or herself. Upon closer scrutiny, it is a balance of spontaneity and control. First of all, the priest is the absolute conductor, and the music ministry the orchestra. The priest announces the beginning of the performance and usually sings the first song, relating back to his sermons. The music ministry has followed him for more than 10 years and immediately plays exactly what he is expecting. Wherever he stands, the priest is the center of action in the room. When he steps down from the altar and starts laying his hands on some seriously ill patients, the entire assembly unanimously forms a circle around the patient and the priest, their arms in the air toward the patient, their hands

shaking, their mouths murmuring prayer in tongues. At other times, in the heat of ecstasy and joy, Father Tom cries out, "Let's be still!" Suddenly, the music stops, the singing and dancing stop, the waving hands stand in the air, the jumping stops, the speaking in tongues stops, and many people close their eyes. Like intervals within a symphony, those sudden changes of tempo contain great power. One can still feel the heat in the air, the end of the limbs trembling, but everything is still. Those sudden stops bring people back to the meditative prayers and also put a control over the ecstasy that might carry people too far. It is the reminder of the presence and authority of the priest.

Thirty seconds or a minute later, Father Tom suddenly breaks the silence again with very loud speech, either prophesying or singing. At first only his voice is heard and soon the congregation follows him to prophesy or sing. Again he puts control over the impromptu performance of the participants. These prophecies are very concrete images, "I see a liver being healed." Or "I see the holy spirit working on someone's toe." Many people who have similar problems will respond either immediately or report in subsequent weeks that those prophecies have been realized in their lives. It is the demonstration that the Holy Spirit truly comes upon them and God works on them through the Holy Spirit. The music ministry transforms those prophecies into songs almost instantaneously. The entire congregation enters into another peak. When writing about rituals of Muharram in Iran, Frank Korom remarked, "[those rites] have a metacommunicative quality resulting from the constant interaction between performers and audience" (Korom 2003: 33). In this case, the audience is at the same time the performers. For a performance to be effective, the interaction between performers and audience and the interaction among performers are very important. We often have the experience of sitting through a performance where the actors and actresses are individually trying so hard, but in vain, to elicit responses from the audience. Likewise, the way Father Tom directs the entire performance ensures "constant interaction" among the participants of the ritual and therefore keeps the performers concentrated on creating a unity.[5]

This unity is also achieved by performative techniques, such as rhythmic body movements and emotionally charged expressions like laughing and crying. Almost everyone in the chapel is engaged in some sort of bodily movement. Several women in their thirties and early forties dance in front of the altar, on the altar, sometimes right below the statue of Jesus. Some circle the chapel in dancing moves. They thrust their heads and upper bodies back and forth, their feet tapping the floor very hard. They often wear skirts and no shoes. As a result, when they twirl, the entire chapel feels like twirling with them. Some followers move their bodies moderately, their eyes closed, their hands up in the air. Others thrust their hands toward the sky back and forth. Still others who are less gifted with dancing jump up and down, as if in a rock concert. No matter how they dance, they all dance according to the same music that is playing, and they follow the "lead dancers," as they are the most conspicuous. As Royce observes, "Our bodies are caught up in the rhythm and repetition whether we are performers or merely spectators" (Royce 1977: 9). The whole purpose of it is as Radcliffe-Brown puts it: "[The p]rimary function of the rhythmical nature of the dance is to enable a number of persons to join in the same actions and perform them as one body" (1922: 247).

Another way of communicating with each other is to laugh or cry. Those behaviors are so distinctive of charismatic Catholic rituals that they name them “Holy laugh” and “Holy Cry.” According to Beeman, “Laughter and tears, though seemingly opposite emotional expression, may indicate alternate, but equivalent ways of dealing with similar emotional and social situations” (1981:304). Whether dancing, jumping, laughing or crying, the goal is to “render the entire building a performance space” and to achieve the feeling of “being encircled by the dramatic action” (Korom 2003: 39), and thus to “produce an intensive emotive unity” (37). It is by those dramaturgical means that “communitas” is created, which means they not only share the same rhythm but also the same empowerment and same catharsis, even the same blessings as those who are blessed with healing in the stories they hear throughout the service! But unity does not mean uniformity. Everybody performs differently, reacts to the performance differently and comes with different motivations to start with. Therefore, everybody has a different transformation of reality, depending on his or her respective motivations.

The peak of the evening comes when Father Tom lays hands on people[6] and they fall down to the ground. His hands are warm and sometimes shaking. When he lays his hands on a person’s head, or the place where the affliction is, he murmurs words of prayer. This is the closest interaction and communication between Father Tom and individual followers, who wait for this occasion. While laying on hands, he continues crying out prophecies, such as “someone’s left leg is being healed!” The falling symbolizes the helplessness of the followers, their complete submission to the Holy Spirit through the charismatic leader and their opening up to all possibilities. All are inseparable. Those prophecies once again confirm for the followers the kind of reality they are seeking to identify with. Lying on the ground and contemplating the entire evening, the participant feels entirely “overwhelmed,” “empowered” and “completely transformed.”

At this point the prayer meeting has completed its three stages of rites of passage: Rosary as separation of prayerful moods from mundane everyday lives; Mass as further separation of the sacred community from the outside world that is secular, evil and immoral (which is completed with sermons and Holy Communion); praise and worship as the transitional period when moods and motivations of individuals are unleashed, participants enter into a state of complete submission of themselves to the will of the Holy Spirit and the priest prays upon participants with blessings from the Holy Spirit; and finally incorporation into new realities, as healed, blessed or confirmed individuals when they fall down “bathed” in the Holy Spirit. The chain of events composes an entirety of a ritual that generates efficacious religious experience. Every step is indispensable. Even though the charismatic Catholic ritual is known for its spontaneity, it is not entirely without structure and control. The key is the priest leader, Father Tom, who virtually determines many aspects of the ritual: the sequence of processes, the rhythm of performance, the theme of the music, and even the authenticity of individual attestation.

Interactive Performance: A Conclusion

What marks the birth of the charismatic renewal is the birth of the charismatic ritual. Reacting to the rigidly controlled Catholic rituals, the charismatic Catholic prayer meetings are characterized by spontaneity and innovation. The charismatic Catholics may

search for individual and personal connection with God through the Holy Spirit but they are by no means individualistic when it comes to the celebration of their rituals. On the contrary, they are collective and interactive. I argue that unity and interaction are the most important qualities of rituals that aim at transforming individual realities. One fulfills the other. As shown earlier in the paper, the participants of charismatic Catholic prayer meetings all have their separate agendas. The only chance those separate agenda have of being met is if the entire community is prepared for this kind of transformation. If Geertz calls that process “ clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations *seem* uniquely realistic ” (1973: 90 emphasis mine) in his definition of religion, I argue that the purpose of the ritual is for those moods and motivations to be transformed in *reality*. In other words, individual participants weave a web of interactions, directly or indirectly, through the narrations of conversion experiences, Holy Communion, responses to music and prophecies, testimonies of healing miracles, innovation and borrowing of dance movies, etc. When one individual in this web gets a conversion experience, the entire web oscillates, and another individual who is weaved into the web also get a conversion experience. In this process, the charismatic religious leader accentuates his authority through the coordination and performance of the ritual which constructs a unified emotional response that transforms reality.

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Notes:

1. See Victor Turner (1967): *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

2. Usually news about Father Tom and the community: what is happening in Parish, who needs prayer, a new healing miracle Father just performed, his trips, his new hospital visits, the pro-life work he was involved in, his retreats, pilgrimages, etc.

3. Followers of charismatic Catholicism often use the phrase “conversion experience” generally to refer to the experience when they feel touched by the Holy Spirit and have a direct interaction with God. It can happen more than once in one’s life, and the accounts of those experiences are widely shared and circulated among participants in the community, especially in retreats and prayer meetings. I use “conversion stories” to refer to the narration of those stories.

4. See Roy Wallis: *The Elementary Forms of New Religious Life*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984. For Wallis, there have emerged three types of new religious movements in the post-war West: world-rejecting (Krishna Consciousness, Children of God, People’s Temple, Manson Family), world-affirming (Transcendental Meditation, est, Scientology), and world-accommodating (Neo-Pentecostalism). Although charismatic Catholicism “condemns urban industrial society and its values” (10) as the world-rejecting people do, Wallis puts Neo-Pentecostalism in the world-accommodating category, because it does not reject the world to the degree of submitting individual needs entirely to the good of the movement. At the same time, although members of Father Tom’s group are deeply committed, the majority of them still have regular jobs and other worldly engagements. The world-rejecting religions, on the other hand, often require a full-time commitment from the members, leaving them with little private time (9-39).

5. Leadership does matter. Sometimes when Father Tom is away, some other priest friends of Father Tom’s replace him as the organizer, but the efficacy is never as pervasive as when Father Tom is there. Followers often say “with Father Tom, there is a flow.”

6. He used to lay hands personally on everyone. But since the group has grown too big, he also has other priest friends who lay their hands on people. Theoretically, anyone can lay hands on anyone else, because the Holy Spirit is equal for everybody. However, people still much prefer to be prayed upon by Father Tom than anyone else.

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