12 From Ecstasy to Power: The Transformation of Fantasy into Religious Belief

IN THIS CHAPTER I want to explore some of the many ways in which what to begin with are highly imaginative and emotional experiences for one or a small number of visionaries, often children or adolescents, can at times become transformed into shared religious beliefs that have empowering consequences. I pay particular attention to two processes that seem of diacritical importance—the initial intensification of emotion frequently experienced by both visionary and devotee, and the role of narrative elaboration. These two processes are closely inter-related insofar as they constitute discernible stages in the transformation of feelings into images, images into ideas, ideas into beliefs and, at least in some cases, beliefs into empowerment. I contend that by focussing

1 My understanding of the importance of emotional intensification in the formation of religious belief has been much influenced by the recent insightful paper of Jon Mitchell (1997).
2 Over many years I have maintained a rewarding dialogue with Chris Eipper. a fellow Australian anthropologist who has carried out extensive fieldwork in Bantry, west Cork and is the author of two important books (Eipper 1986, 1989) based on that research. My thoughts concerning the importance of narrative elaboration in the formation and validation of belief have been much influenced by his recently published paper 'The voice of the virgin: Irish visionaries and their testimony' (Eipper 1997). In this stimulating piece Eipper engages in a detailed dialogue with my unpublished papers, lecture notes and video material resulting from my Irish research. In this paper I take up and yet further develop that dialogue.
on such processes we may begin to gain some understanding of the creation, maintenance and transformation of culture. I will attempt to contextualize these processes by examining some of the relevant events that occurred at Inchigeela, one of the principal visionary sites located in west Cork some 10 miles south of Macroom.

**Inchigeela**

Inchigeela is a small and pretty village and though once an important overnight stop for those travelling west from Cork to Killarney, it is today off the main tourist routes and its 300 or so residents mostly rely on a mix of small-scale farming and the supply of both hotel and modest shopping facilities for the scattered farms in the surrounding countryside. The population is wholly Catholic and almost everyone attends mass once a week in a substantial church that caters to a parish of some 1,500 persons. It boasts two modest hotels that stand opposite to one another in the centre of the village, one owned by a family that has been prominent in the religious events I am concerned with and the other by one of three brothers who collectively dominate the commercial life of the village. There are two Lourdes type grottoes owned by villagers, one, called Gortaneadin, located about 2 miles east, and the other, Rossmore, about the same distance north on the Macroom road. The Gortaneadin grotto was built in 1969 by an elderly couple called MacCarthy as a memorial to their daughter who at the age of fourteen had died a few years earlier of an illness that began when she was four years old. According to the MacCarthy's their daughter had a long series of visions of Our Lady, mostly in her bedroom, that began at the same time as her illness and continued until her death. But unlike the events that took place at the grotto from 1985 onwards, these early visions remained purely private events known only to the girl's most immediate family and friends. Nor, so far I am aware, were they accompanied by verbal messages.

The grotto remained in relative obscurity and of little importance to anyone but the MacCarthy family and the occasional devout passer-by until 5 August 1985. On that day two Inchigeela girls, one Rosemary O'Sullivan, the then eleven-old year daughter of the Lake Hotel’s owners and the second youngest of eleven children, and the other Marie Vaughan, the ten-year old daughter of a nearby farmer
and the youngest of five children, visited the grotto in order to say a prayer and see some repairs and alterations recently carried out by the MacCarthy family. Both girls were very much aware of the large crowds that were at that time visiting Ballinspittle, not more than about a one-hour drive from Inchigeela, and that many pilgrims were reporting strange movements in the statue. Marie in particular says that she was hoping that something similar would happen at the Gortaneadin grotto. Rosemary too had heard talk at home how somebody had recently been seen at the grotto at night with a torch, no doubt hoping to see the statue move.

On arrival at the grotto, on a shared bicycle, they were met by Mr. MacCarthy, the elderly constructor and curator, and spoke briefly with him. He told them that many years ago he himself had once seen the statue move. He also told them that just a week earlier two young men of the parish had seen the statue cry and that when they touched its neck it had felt warm and alive. Mr. MacCarthy then left the girls at the grotto, both of them quite clearly in a state of heightened anticipation and with their minds full of vivid images. They knelt for a while at the kneeler and after saying a few prayers went to stand beside the statue of St. Bernadette and began looking intently at the statue of Our Lady, some 20 feet away. As they looked they felt their eyes get very heavy and close momentarily and they also began to feel dizzy and light. When they eventually managed to get their eyes open again they noticed that the statue was changing. Then, in the place of the statue, Rosemary says that she saw a full-length, glowing and living figure which she assumed to be the Blessed Virgin. Marie looked only at the face and so did not see the full figure.

Both girls were stunned and immobilized, so terrified they wanted to run away but could not. Rosemary recalls: 'I felt as if I were "locked" and suddenly the "lock" was free.' While looking at the figure, both girls felt light and weightless but, when released, they felt strangely heavy again. The 'unlocking' was accompanied by a kind of shock or similar sensation of force. The girls ran for their shared bicycle and a violent wind blew up, yet further terrifying them. When they looked back again, they saw neither the statue nor the figure and Rosemary pedalled as fast as she could back to the Lake Hotel.
According both to themselves and their parents their story was initially dismissed as mere childish fantasy. Rosemary’s mother, Mrs O’Sullivan, an intelligent woman who both manages the hotel and has successfully brought up eleven children, ten of whom have gone on to tertiary education and include amongst their numbers a doctor, a veterinary surgeon, a university tutor and a law student, commented as follows ‘It was just after Ballinspittle, and we thought they were having a laugh at the locals. No way did we believe it at all’ (Brown 1992:276). On the third evening, when the two girls again saw Our Lady, Rosemary became hysterical because she felt that no one believed her.

But from the very beginning at least some members of the family had begun to take Rosemary seriously, most notably her older sister Mary and not long after her mother also. Mary recollects the girls’ initial emotional state as follows:

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

Rose’s parents shared Mary’s recollection of the emotional intensity of the girls’ initial reaction to the events at the grotto. And indeed, both they and others who knew the girls well attached considerable importance to what they regarded as the authenticity of the girls’ emotional agitation in concluding that regardless of what had in fact occurred at the grotto they were most certainly not just ‘having a laugh at the locals’—that is to say, they quite truly believed that they had indeed seen Our Lady. The first vital stage in establishing authenticity had then been reached, and the key evidence was the presumed emotional state of the girls at the time of the claimed apparition.

But heightened emotion was simply the initial starting point for the subsequent development of belief that underpinned the growth and elaboration of the cult. Clearly, for the girls to be believed at all
they had to find a way of reporting their emotional encounter in a manner that might lead others to accept its veracity. That they themselves initially found such a task difficult is clear from Mary’s account of how their jaws tightened up and their speech became slurred. In attempting to make sense of the girls’ story Mary and other family members had to interpret it and in doing so to reconcile it with what they knew both of the girls themselves and of Marian apparitions elsewhere. And in this initial task of interpretation Mary’s role was pivotal. She was at the time of her sister’s initial visions a young woman of about 25 who, after a period of tutoring in Italian studies at University College Cork, was working as a secretary in a bank in Cork city. Deeply religious, she had spent several short periods in Italy, including a week in Rome. Her knowledge both of the scriptures and Catholic theology was considerable and in her own spiritual development she had been much influenced by press reports of the famous series of apparitions that began at Medjugorje in Bosnia in 1981.

From the very beginning of Rosemary’s visions Mary became the principal recorder, interpreter and publicist of the long sequence of visionary events that occurred at Inchigeela over an eighteen month period. Throughout that period she attended the great majority of visionary episodes at the village’s two grottoes, that is, at both Gortaneadin and Rossmore. On each occasion she recorded her conversations with the principal visionaries both during the visionary experiences themselves and in subsequent interviews. She also kept copious hand-written notes and when the biggest crowds and the greatest excitement occurred during August 1986 she arranged for a number of local film crews to record events. Long segments were broadcast on television from Cork city and a documentary film company from Galway made an hour-long film that was broadcast nationally (Our Lady of Inchigeela). By 1989 Mary had also written and published a small illustrated book in which she described the main events that occurred during the initial visionary period (O’Sullivan 1989).

Mary’s role as recorder and interpreter was thus of vital importance in the initial task of constructing a story from the visionaries’ experiences that might lead others, initially close family members, then other villagers and finally a growing body of visiting
pilgrims, to believe that Our Lady had indeed appeared and had something of import to say to the people of Ireland. But first, Mary herself needed to be convinced. An important part of her initial conviction clearly came from her prior acceptance of the possibility that the Blessed Virgin does indeed at times appear to visionaries and imparts to them messages of import. A further predisposition for belief no doubt came from the national publicity that had recently been accorded to the moving statues phenomenon at Ballinspittle. And yet another possible predisposing factor, though of a more mundane kind, may have been Mary's concern at the way in which Inchigeela had been largely by-passed in the growing tourist industry elsewhere in west Cork leading to stagnant business and poor trade in her family's hotel. If crowds of the size that were at that time descending daily on Ballinspittle should come to Inchigeela then business would clearly prosper, especially at the hotel owned by the parents of a principal visionary. However, were such a factor indeed relevant I am in no doubt that it in no sense constituted a conscious motivation. Furthermore, what increase there may have been in trade was undoubtedly both modest and short lived. The kind of pilgrims who came to Inchigeela were mostly elderly and not given to lavish expenditure, especially at hotel bars.

But in addition to such predispositions Mary needed to be persuaded that her sister and her friend were not only not 'having them on' but were not suffering from some kind of delusion or fantasy. And to begin with there were certainly some grounds for suspicion. Most notably, Marie's family members were well known in Inchigeela for both petty thievery and heavy drinking and from the beginning her parents put heavy pressure on her to 'stop play-acting'. Furthermore, just a few weeks earlier the two girls claimed that they saw 'a horrible hag' at Rossmore, the village's other grotto—a story that had been widely treated with scepticism. Nevertheless, for Mary, with her considerable knowledge of Marian apparitions elsewhere, details provided by the girls concerning initially, the physical appearance of Our Lady, and at later stages, her actions, messages and behaviour in general, assumed critical importance in her initial evaluation. On many occasions when I was talking to Mary about various reputed visionaries she would either
approve or disapprove according to how she judged the veracity of their various statements. Errors or inconsistencies in descriptions regarding Our Lady's physical appearance, the clothes she wore, the kind of things she said could lead to curt dismissal. In other words, movement towards either belief or disbelief depended very largely on the extent to which the visionaries' narrative accounts or 'stories' cohered with the listeners' pre-existing body of relevant religious 'knowledge'. And this method of testing for authenticity assumed ever-increasing importance as the process snowballed from family, to local religious personnel, and to a rapidly increasing body of ardent followers.

For Mary, the first and most important step towards belief occurred on the very first day when the two girls struggled to find words to describe their experiences at the grotto. In her published account she noted that '... with much questioning, a convincingly detailed description of what they had experienced emerged, so vivid and alive that one was very much inclined to believe their story' (O'Sullivan 1989:6). In a letter she subsequently wrote to me she elaborated further

... the most impressive thing about Rose and Marie was that the figure they described was too detailed and too original to have been concocted by them. It was multi-dimensional, with movement, emotion, tangibility and a sense of humour. Rose and Marie were not 'pulling strings' with it; there was much they did not understand, much they had difficulty putting into words.

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

Rosemary and Marie were examined in such a manner by a Cork doctor on 4 June 1986. At the time the two girls were kneeling at the Gortaneadin grotto, supposedly in a state of trance whilst seeing Our Lady. The doctor’s published report (O’Sullivan 1989:37-8) states that their gaze became fixed on the area of the statue. Blinking became either non-existent or infrequent and rapid. Their eyes did not react to light, to sudden movement or to touching. They could be pushed, pulled, have pins touch their flesh, be pinched, at times even kicked—all apparently unnoticed. And finally, efforts to move their heads proved futile through extreme rigidity of the neck.

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

I would like to pause here a moment in the account for I regard this first movement towards belief by others as the vital turning point in the subsequent gradual transformation of what I myself regard as a child’s highly imaginative and personal experience into what subsequently became a publicly accepted religious veracity by a significant population of others. Just as many young children are prone to invent imaginary mother-like confidantes who reside in some secret place, so too may these potential young visionaries come to believe that the Blessed Virgin has befriended them in a very special way. But whereas the average child who invents such a perfect ‘mum’ or ‘friend’ is soon disillusioned through universal lack of belief, the ‘visionary’ child may instead find that some important adults, including both family members and maybe even a local priest or nun, begin to take their ‘story’ seriously. In the case of Bernadette of Lourdes a similar initial fantasy eventually became transformed into an officially legitimated belief of the whole Catholic church. In the case of Rosemary and Marie, though it
certainly has not yet and probably never will achieve anything like that degree of objective veracity, nevertheless it has progressed well beyond their families to be accepted today by many thousands, probably tens of thousands, of Catholics in many countries who have read books or seen videos that refer to their experiences. Furthermore, as the claims of the visionaries gained increasing acceptance by others so too must it have become increasingly difficult for the girls themselves to openly express any lingering doubts or uncertainties. That is to say, the greater the degree of narrative elaboration the greater the corresponding commitment to belief.

Running parallel with the beginnings of belief amongst close family and some friends was a process of increasing visionary elaboration at the grotto itself. On the second day the beautiful lady reappeared and after smiling radiantly at the two girls while they were reciting the rosary pronounced her first word 'peace' (O'Sullivan 1989:7). This subsequently proved to be the first of a long sequence of almost daily apparitions and messages experienced by these two girls over the next nine months with one of them, Marie, continuing for yet a further twelve months, that is, until March 1987. Meanwhile, huge crowds, at times almost as great as at Ballinspittle came in cars and buses to the grotto to witness the two girls have their visions. A number of other visiting visionaries also received messages and saw strange sights during these sessions, most notably an older girl called Kelly Noonan from near Limerick, Mary Casey, the wife of a prosperous farmer near Macroom and the mother of eleven children, and two near adult Cork sisters, Sally Ann and Judy Considine. The formal messages to all of these visionaries, though mostly brief and generally confined to making just one or two simple points, together constitute a reasonably coherent set of inter-related propositions which may be summarized as follows:

The world is full of sin and unless you all pray, fast and perform penances, a great catastrophe will shortly occur. Beware of the devil who is trying to take over the world—he will constantly fight for you with temptations, but I shall be with you always.
Thus far, the events that I have referred to occurred prior to the commencement of my fieldwork in 1988 and hence my knowledge of them is based on a mix of secondary sources and informants’ memories. I would now like to briefly outline some of the main developments that have taken place in recent years. Though the heady days of the early years have long since gone, both of the Inchigeela grottoes nevertheless continue to attract pilgrims, often in considerable numbers. Though all of the original visionaries have ceased to see Our Lady, many continue both to receive what devotees describe as inner locutions, and to prominently participate in regular prayer groups which they themselves set-up on instruction from Our Lady. Furthermore, at both grottoes many pilgrims periodically report having seen Our Lady and other religious personages, such as Padre Pio, various saints, guardian angels and at times even Jesus himself—though the last is but rarely reported. At Gortaneadin small groups of devotees gather for prayers every Sunday, and the grotto is now festooned with written statements from pilgrims reporting visions, miraculous cures and other strange happenings, such as rosaries that have turned into gold. A hose from the grotto’s small stream supplies pilgrims with a steady stream of holy water that has been blessed by Our Lady.3

3 In a personal letter dated 15 January 1998 Mary O’Sullivan made the following interesting comment on the issue of holy water:

‘It is understood that this [the holy water] was blessed because it came from a Holy Well up on the hill behind the grotto at Gortaneadin. While Mary certainly encouraged us to drink, my current thinking is that She could see just how de-hydrated we all were! After all, She just said ‘drink more water’ and merely looked at the brook, never specified it verbally or said She had blessed it or was seen to bless it. I guess the understanding was mixed, dependening on who you talked to. Certainly Mr. McCarthy [the grotto’s custodian] would have declared the water blessed by Our Lady but others, more educated perhaps, would have difficulty accepting Mary as having the priestly faculty of blessing sacramentals (though she did bless sacramentals at Rossmore later on). Mary blessing sacramentals in the same way a priest does is pretty progressive theology, certainly not the kind of thing that would be expected in Inchigeela but, in current thinking (esp. among feminists!), it is quite acceptable. At the time, we were troubled by this behaviour and challenged the girls on it but they persisted with it in spite of our objections’.

one or two charter buses from as far away as Cork, Dublin, Galway or even Belfast or Londonderry.

A number of other visiting visionaries have also received messages and seen strange sights during these sessions, and as the narrative accounts of their visions, personalities, achievements and reputed miracles accumulated and were circulated both by word of mouth and through the press, pamphlets, videos, TV programs and in a few instances published booklets (O’Sullivan 1989 and Our Lady Queen of Peace 1989) and even books (see especially, Brown 1992:276-8 and Zimdars-Swartz 1991:12-18) so too did the credibility accorded to all of the events associated with the Inchigeela grottoes increase. In other words, emotions, moods and experiences were transformed, principally by means of narrative elaboration, to become, for an increasing number of devotees, matters of faith and belief.

The Russian/Ukrainian episodes

But it is at Inchigeela’s other grotto, that of Rossmore on the Macroom road, that the major action is currently located. During the exciting days of 1986, when large crowds were regularly coming to both of Inchigeela’s grottoes, a 40-year-old Cork woman, a devout Catholic who claimed to have seen the Ballinspittle statue move, began to regularly attend the sessions at Rossmore with two young nieces, then aged 10 and 12. When the older of these two girls, Fiona Bowen, talked to me some six years later about those early months at the grotto it was quite clear that she had been fascinated by the claims of the three star visionaries, by the huge crowds present, by the many hours of prayers, and above all else by the profound belief of her aunt that Our Lady was indeed appearing and giving messages to the visionaries.

And sure enough, about two months after their first visit Fiona herself had a vision. It occurred after a long session at Gortaneadin grotto when the aunt took Fiona, her sister Marcia and one of the star visionaries, Kelly Noonan, to say a few prayers at Rossmore grotto prior to driving them home to Cork city. But when they got back into the car Kelly announced that she felt that the statue, that is

to say, Our Lady, had put her arms around the three of them. Straight away the aunt told them to get out of the car and return to the statue to say a rosary in the hope that something more might happen. After saying the rosary Fiona claimed that she saw the statue go up into the sky and down again, but now looking alive and infinitely more beautiful. And instead of being in the grotto she and Our Lady were now in a field. But when Fiona tried to get closer to Our Lady in order to ask her where she was and what was going on, she kept moving further away. This puzzled Fiona and she decided enough was enough and returned to the car with the other two girls. Fiona claims that during this experience she felt just as usual, but her aunt and some other onlookers knew she was having a vision because she had gone into a trance-like state and was walking dangerously about the grotto and twice nearly fell into its small stream.

For the first four years Fiona’s experiences closely paralleled those of her predecessors, though initially the emphasis was more on elaborate visual experiences, including terrifying visits to hell and purgatory, rather than on verbal messages. Her graphic accounts portray her relationship with Our Lady as intimate and very personal—she became her best friend, her mother and her confidante. Again like Rosemary O’Sullivan, she initially met with strong parental resistance, especially from her father who initially was so convinced that she was suffering from an overwrought imagination that he told his sister to stop taking her to the grottoes and removed the numerous religious objects in the family home to the loft. However, this tactic soon backfired for the removal of the icons so distressed his wife that he was soon obliged to relent and replace them in their original positions. The unfortunate father knew he was beaten when his wife also began to see strange things right in the family home—including Our Lady in the corridor and a waterfall in the lounge room. He too now proclaimed himself a believer and from then on all of the family regularly accompanied Fiona on her fortnightly visits to Rossmore grotto for her encounters with Our Lady.

Word gradually spread that Fiona was having exceptionally powerful visions and the fortnightly crowd grew from an initial 50 to 70, mostly from Cork city, to three to four hundred throughout
most of 1992. One bus load came regularly from Limerick, another from Portlaoise and on big days the northern buses also visited Rossmore. Amongst the original Limerick devotees was an elderly and wealthy widow who soon established herself as Fiona’s chief patron and believer. This woman had apparently visited Russia briefly in 1971 and after the collapse of the communist regime became convinced that the Fatima prophesies concerning the ultimate conversion of Russia to Catholicism was on the verge of becoming reality and she determined to contribute in some way to such an event. She soon received confirmation for early in 1992 Fiona was told by Our Lady that she must organize a group of Irish pilgrims to go to Russia to spread her messages in that country. Over the next few fortnightly sessions Fiona received an elaborate series of precise instructions from Our Lady as to how this was to be achieved. Twelve of Fiona’s adult followers, three priests, four farmers and five women from various parts of Ireland, though mostly from Limerick, Portlaoise, and Cork, were recruited to form part of the missionary group. Referred to by Our Lady as the ‘Twelve Apostles’, they spent some months travelling around Ireland visiting monasteries, convents and various other religious establishments where they collected donations of holy statues, vestments, rosaries and other religious objects to distribute in Russia in twelve cities, the names of which had also been supplied by Our Lady. The twelve apostles each purchased their own air tickets from Shannon to Moscow, whilst the wealthy Limerick widow purchased Fiona’s ticket. Finally, in August the group set off accompanied by over a ton of statues, etc., though sadly without the widow who had died of a heart attack only weeks prior to departure.

Unfortunately I don’t have time to present even a fraction of the remarkable account that I recorded from Fiona of the group’s adventures as they travelled extensively in Russia and Siberia delivering their goods to most of the cities named by Our Lady. It is a truly astonishing tale of seemingly miraculous coincidences, good fortune, misadventure, and much discomfort. Suffice to say that Fiona continued to have visions of Our Lady in hotels, on trains and in buses, in which she received further detailed instructions concerning their travels and how to overcome obstacles. Statues, vestments and rosaries were delivered to astonished priests and laity
from Moscow to Omsk and even more remote places in Siberia. On their return to Moscow one of the priests decided that it would be a good idea to crown the remaining statue of Our Lady in the Red Square. At the time a television crew was shooting in the square and the group’s crowning ceremony was incorporated in the shoot and then shown that evening over much of Russia. Needless to say, this was interpreted as constituting yet another significant step towards the fulfilment of the Fatima prophesy that Russia would eventually become the jewel in Our Lady’s crown.

Fiona and Our Lady did not, however, intend leaving this to chance, for the following June, that is in 1993, the young visionary set off with yet a further group, this time numbering 21, and another great cargo of religious objects. And yet again, the tale as recounted by Fiona and other members of the group is an amazing saga of arduous travel with minimal resources in remote areas of central Russia and Siberia distributing statues and other religious objects to whoever would accept them. Furthermore, throughout both journeys Fiona was in regular communication with Our Lady who reputedly told them where to go, who to see, what to do and how to overcome obstacles.

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

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

But perhaps most remarkable of all was the story I was told of yet a third visit to what was the old USSR, this time to the Ukraine. The inspiration for this mission did not come directly from Fiona, but rather from another visionary, a man in his late 40s who was then living with his wife and six children on the remote island of Achill off the coast of County Mayo. Again cutting a long and truly remarkable story very short, this man, Tom Lennon, after marrying in 1972 and moving from employee to manager of an electronics company in Drogheda within the space of a few years, went on to become the successful co-owner of a metal fabricator company in Dublin.

Meanwhile, he had begun to develop a major concern for the terrible problems in Northern Ireland and after doing volunteer work in a civil rights movement in 1979 he decided to join Sinn Fein as the only party he felt was on the right track. But even that was not enough and a short while later he joined the Provisional IRA and became one of their explosives experts making bombs. He was convinced that the right way forward was to kill as many police and British army personnel as possible. On one occasion he even succeeded in personally planting and exploding a bomb in a military post in Newry, which he presumed killed a number of soldiers inside it at the time.

But then, about 1982, a moral crisis developed when it was time for his son to be prepared for communion. Despite having long
given up attending mass he still believed in God and the Eucharist, but for his son to take communion both of them would have to confess their sins. After much agonising, for he had a very poor view of priests as worthless hypocrites, he finally decided that a belief in the Eucharist necessitated a belief in confession also. This in turn soon led to a questioning of his whole life-style, most especially the killings that he had been involved as a Provo and his regular drinking with republican friends.

So he confessed, took the pledge and a short while later resigned from both Sinn Fein and the Provos. Resignation was, of course, a daring act for it clearly risked retribution to ensure silence. And it was about then that Tom began hearing a voice, which he immediately knew was Our Lady, telling him to leave his work and instead work for her—that is, to resign from his well paid job as manager of an electronics factory. After negotiating a redundancy package he did so.

Before long he was travelling all over northern Ireland giving talks to schools about the wonders of Fatima, and it was Our Lady who told him what to say, for he had never been to Fatima and knew nothing about it. But meanwhile, he remembered that his uncle, who had been a devout Catholic, had left him a Rosa Mystica statue—it was, he claimed, the very first Rosa Mystica statue that had been brought into Ireland in 1981. He remembered what peace this statue had brought to his family when left in his house, and he decided that he must devote his time to taking it to other houses and places that especially needed peace. So he set off travelling all over Northern Ireland accompanied by another woman visionary and by the Rosa Mystica statue sitting between them on the front seat of his van. In house after house it brought faith, peace and healing. Then one day he got a message, in the form of an inner locution, from Our Lady, telling him that they must now take the statue to all of the Protestant graveyards throughout northern Ireland where the victims of recent IRA shootings were buried. They also took the statue deep into loyalist areas where Protestants had been killed during the 1993/4 period. By simply driving through such places in company with the statue they believed that all the souls of these tormented people were being released from purgatory.
But a short while later, not long after he had moved his family to Achill island in the hope of escaping the attentions of a possibly vengeful IRA, God told him that he must now take the Rosa Mystica statue to the Ukraine, specifically to the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, so that it might release all the tormented souls that had been killed in the explosion. And it was then that Our Lord told him that in addition to himself and his wife he should take Fiona, her sister Marcia and her husband Donal. Though he had not met any of them at this stage, he had heard about and been impressed by their earlier travels in Russia and Siberia.

Though Fiona was at first reluctant to accept, Our Lady told her that she wanted her to do so. Also included in the group, again on Our Lady’s instructions, was a young woman called Theresa, the unmarried daughter of Delia, the widow from Limerick who long ago had become Fiona’s chief patron and had directly encouraged the whole Russian saga. Again cutting short a long and complex tale, which was subsequently recounted to me in great detail by both Fiona and Tom, the six of them set forth in a ten-year old transit van that had cost a mere £900. In addition to the precious Rosa Mystica they took all of the food they planned to eat for the two-week trip, all of their bedding, for they intended sleeping in the van, plus a few dozen statues, chalices, vestments, holy pictures, holy water, crucifixes, medals, scapulars and pamphlets.

The journey began with a ferry trip from Cork to Roscoff in France and from there they set off on the long overland journey across Europe to the Ukraine. Whilst travelling through Belgium they visited all of the major World War Two battlegrounds, once again praying and hoping that Our Lady would release all the souls of the dead. Finally, a day later, after non-stop day and night driving, they reached the Polish/Ukraine border where, surprise, surprise, they were told that they could not enter without visas. But the guards told them that if they drove 100 miles south to another entry point they might find the officials there more co-operative. In a state of extreme exhaustion off they went only to be told that no one, not even those with visas, could enter at this point and they must go back to where they had just come from. By dawn they were back and told that their only hope now was to find someone living in the Ukraine who could both vouch for them and issue a formal
invitation. And it so happened that Tom then remembered that he had some months earlier met a Ukrainian United Nations translator, Vitaliy, in the ecumenical centre of Taize in France. So, a fax was sent to Vitaliy in Kiev and within hours they had a formal invite from The Ukrainian Orthodox Church. After paying substantial visa fees they were let in and some hours later they reached Kiev where they were warmly welcomed by Vitaliy.

When Tom told Vitaliy that their intent in coming to the Ukraine was to visit Chernobyl so that they could pray there in the hope that Our Lady would release the souls of all those who had been killed in the disaster, he replied that this might be difficult for the danger of radiation was such that no one without special permission and special clothing was allowed closer than 35 km. But Our Lady once again came to their rescue for Vitaliy had a friend, a biologist, who had been in charge of all of the Chernobyl scientists at the time of the explosion. He agreed to help and after collecting the Deputy­Minister in charge of Chernobyl they were allowed into the prohibited area and drove right up to the reactor offices where they were joined by some high-ranking military officers, including a five-star general. They got a long speech from the general about Chernobyl’s great need for medical and other practical assistance. Tom replied that the only help they could offer was through Our Lady. The general then took them on an extensive tour of the site, including the place where the remains of the exploded reactor had been encased in concrete. Promptly the Irish group broke into prayer whilst standing around their Rosa Mystica statue. They also shook holy water and salt and placed miraculous medals around the site.

Over the next few days more wondrous events occurred for the Irish group in Kiev but suffice to say that on their way back to Ireland whilst driving through Poland they visited both Auschwitz and Dachau so that Our Lady could again release all those tormented souls. In all, a truly remarkable pilgrimage in an ancient van that safely covered over 5,000 kms through France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Poland and the Ukraine. The occupants were, of course, convinced that all went well because Our Lady was looking after them.
Postscript

Needless to say, when reports of this remarkable venture began to circulate in visionary circles back in Ireland, Fiona’s prestige increased yet again. The crowds that came to bear witness to her encounters with Our Lady and to hear the latter’s ever-increasingly complex and gloomy messages so increased over the next two years that many locals protested at the traffic disruptions generated in what had previously been a quiet rural backwater. There were also indications that the local clergy, including the Bishop of Limerick, were concerned at the extent of her following.

Some two and a half years after the Chernobyl saga an English newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, reported that at a visionary session held by Fiona at a Limerick grotto in late November 1998 and attended by more than 2,500 devotees, she publicly announced that there would be no more appearances because Our Lady was ‘being taken back from Earth to her rightful place in heaven’. Our Lady’s final message was as follows: ‘Children, I come this day as mother of all nations. I am a sorrowful mother for there is a lack of peace in your world. I pray that you will harken to the voice of your mother, Mary, patron of the aborted’. According to the press report ‘Our Lady ... indicated there would soon be a warning to the world which would come in the form of all machines stopping. If people did not change their sinful ways there would be a “chastisement.”’

A local priest was reported as saying that he was relieved that the visions seemed to have ended. He particularly regretted ‘that the message received by Mrs Tierney has been one of lack of hope rather than the joy and salvation that is proclaimed by the Gospels. That is a great shame’ (Hamden 1998:3).

However, despite the cessation of messages, ‘The Immaculate Heart House of Prayer’ continues both to draw devotees to prayer meetings and to act as a collection point for the considerable quantities of food, medicines and clothes regularly sent to Christian contacts made by Fiona on her visits to Russia and Siberia.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion I would now like to return to my opening comments concerning the process of empowerment that I believe both visionaries and devotees seek through participation in the kind
of activities that I have briefly outlined. Though the seeking of power of any kind, whether worldly or other-worldly, is a motive that participants would emphatically reject as applicable to their actions, it can nevertheless be inferred in a number of contexts. First and foremost is the clear evidence of a desire for such empowerment in the central claim of the visionaries—a claim that they can in fact see and communicate with the mother of God and in so doing receive instructions which if faithfully followed will have the remarkable capacity to forestall the wrath of God, foil the plans of Satan and lead to the redemption of sinners. Furthermore, as signs of the capacity of Our Lady to thus empower her devotees, claims are made of miraculous events occurring at the grottoes where she appears—such as spinning suns, dramatic cures, the transformation of metals, etc. It is, of course, the visionaries themselves who are most directly empowered by Our Lady, and this is clearly seen in the eagerness of devotees to see them, to hear their pronouncements and even to touch them. Visionaries are also revered as specially empowered individuals through their capacity to take their devotee’s holy objects, such as rosaries, crosses and icons and offer them to Our Lady to receive her blessing. Most devotees indeed regard such blessings as more effective, that is, as imbued with greater potency, than similar blessings regularly available in churches through the agency of the ordained clergy.

But it is most especially when large numbers of devotees have become such ardent believers in the veracity of visionaries’ claims that they are prepared to form prayer groups, contribute towards the construction of prayer houses and participate in major pilgrimages, that more substantial empowerment occurs. It is, indeed, no exaggeration to interpret the totality of events associated with these visionary claims as constituting processes of direct religious empowerment sought by laity without the necessity of priestly intervention. Many of those who attend readily assert that though they have no desire to minimize in any way the central importance of church attendance, especially participation in the Blessed Eucharist, they nevertheless devote far more time, energy and enthusiasm to grotto visionary experience, even though such experience is for most of an indirect rather than a direct kind—that
is to say, they only vicariously share something of the visionaries more direct empowerment by Our Lady.

Participants are also acutely conscious of the fact that they are subscribing to a belief that is given scant credence by their bishops and priests—and even go so far as to pray, on instruction from Our Lady, for the salvation of all religious personnel. In other words, they feel quite strongly that many clergy have gone seriously astray, not only the obviously errant, like Bishop Casey, but the vast majority who are clearly sceptical regarding lay visionary activity. In short, devotees mostly see themselves as a small band of true believers hopefully destined one day, perhaps very soon indeed, to save the whole world from horrendous catastrophe and in so doing to lead the faithful to heaven. In their own eyes they are truly empowered by Our Lady, though in fact they mostly remain disempowered and marginalized in an ever-increasingly secular everyday world. And throughout this process of empowerment-seeking a key ingredient is that of narrative elaboration, a process that usually begins with a child’s fantasy whilst alone in a grotto in a state of heightened emotional expectation, moves on to the initial tale developed in response to the interrogation of family, community, devotees and eventually perhaps also the press, clergy and even anthropologists, in some instances yet further developed in the stories that circulate in connection with the success of visionaries and their supporters in establishing prayer houses and in organizing major pilgrimages, and finally reaches its peak in the production of pamphlets, books and even films. By then, idiosyncratic and emotion-charged fantasy has been truly transformed into collective representation.

5 In May 1992 Eamonn Casey, the formerly popular Bishop of Galway, resigned from his bishopric and went into hiding when it became public knowledge that he was the father of a 19 year-old son living in the United States. The case was given immense publicity and undoubtedly contributed much towards the contemporary decline of the church’s formerly high moral repute in Ireland (Broderick 1992).
References


Our Lady Queen of Peace, St. Joseph's Church, Cork (Video Recording) 1988.

