CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN GOD INTERFERES: RITUAL, EMPOWERMENT, AND DIVINE PRESENCE

It is common knowledge among members of the EPC in Valparaiso that good things only happen when God makes them happen. A fundamental theological principle, which is to variable extents characteristic of Pentecostalism in many parts of the world but is extremely outspoken in this particular church, is an understanding of human powerlessness and total dependence upon an almighty God as the source of all good things. As described in chapter 5 the theology of impotence informs Pentecostal discourses and understandings of politics and healing. When congregants tell each other about good things that have happened to them, God rather than human effort is given the credit, and terms like ‘miracle’ or ‘blessing’ are often used. Thus they may explain how God has given them new jobs, homes, or furniture without making any reference to the human agency and contacts that such acquisitions usually depend upon. When asked how they or a family member are doing the appropriate answer is ‘fine, thanks to God’ (bien, gracias a Dios), and I was often corrected when I answered with a simple ‘fine.’

In this chapter I explore how theological notions of human powerlessness and dependence upon God are actualised and unfolded, rather than symbolically represented, through the bodily and rhetoric engagement in Pentecostal ritual. I pursue my analysis by examining different strategies by use of which divine presence becomes manifest as a part of the ritual communicative community, and the active interference of God is established as the only true source of consequential action. I hope to demonstrate that important insights into the cultural micro-dynamics of Latin American Pentecostalism will emerge from an explicit focus on ritual, a topic sadly neglected in most of the existing literature (for an exception see Lehmann 1996). I conceive of Pentecostal ritual as an important arena for symbolic struggle over definitions and categorisations of social reality. I further argue that it is mainly through the engagement in different practices of worship that Pentecostal dispositions for orientation towards and communion with the sacred are acquired and exercised.
Members of the EPC commonly evaluate meetings according to whether or not divine presence and power could be felt rather than whether or not new wisdom or biblical insights were gained from a sermon. After meetings I sometimes heard congregants comment that their batteries had been reloaded or they would touch their chests and say that they felt strengthened by the power of God. The term most frequently used to describe subjective experience of divine empowerment is *gozo*, meaning sublime pleasure or enjoyment. Pentecostals describe *gozo* as a sensation of energy, warmth, and extreme happiness that can pervade the whole body but is mostly located in the chest. The most visible manifestations of *gozo* occur when congregants feel overwhelmed by divine power and start dancing, jumping, moving their arms, screaming, weeping, laughing, and speaking in tongues, but *gozo* is also experienced in less manifest ways by congregants who remain standing quietly on the spot.

An increasing number of anthropologists have come to think of ritual as a contested arena for creative social action, resistance, and negotiation of identity (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Hughes-Freeland & Crain 1998; Weiss 2004). In her study of South African Zionist churches during apartheid, Comaroff demonstrates how ritual provides actors for whom open political struggle seems like a distant option with an appropriate medium through which the values and structures of a contradictory world can be manipulated and addressed (1985: 196). Pursuing a related analysis in this and the next chapter I explore how Pentecostal ritual practices redefine the social world and not least the position of Pentecostals within it. The privileged access to divine power is an essential part of such defiance and redefinition. Not only is divine empowerment important as a fundamental contrast to the godless ‘world’ and the theologically important notion of human powerlessness, but by being the ones who activate transformative power through ritual practice congregants indirectly constitute themselves as spiritual subjects with the ability to act upon the world.

Another important trend in recent anthropological literature is a move away from earlier views on ritual as a symbolic expression and performative enactment of prior patterns of belief, thought, and social organisation. Csordas argues that ritual is better seen as structurally prior to the generation of such patterns (1997: 155) and similar