In the following analysis I will present the major means of accessing spiritual power in both popular religion and Pentecostalism. In each case similar categories are treated i.e. powerful entities, people, places and techniques, but in a different order. The order of presentation is the apparent order of relative importance in each religious movement. This once again reveals the relative importance of techniques in popular religion and of people in Pentecostalism, highlighting the clientelistic nature of popular religion and the communal nature of Pentecostalism.

1. Accessing spiritual power in popular religion

Accepting the assessment of Latin sociologists that popular religiosity in Latin America is about finding spiritual solutions for everyday problems we can progress to saying that people must access spiritual power in order to obtain a solution to their problem. Leaving aside the evil power of Satan, to which only a very tiny minority make any claim, God the Father is recognised as the power source of the universe, all other spiritual beings in the heavenly pantheon are intermediaries. A person in need of a miracle must therefore access this power; that is they must get God’s attention and persuade God to act on their behalf. Many people do indeed pray directly to God themselves, but most also seek help from a heavenly intermediary, who gives a sense of security;

“When I read the prayer of the Saint what drew me most, and what I liked was, ‘by your mediation before God’. What I thought in that moment was that Gauchito Antonio Gil could be an intermediary so that I could come to God. Maybe I was with God, but you don’t know with certainty whether you are with God or not.”

1 Don Fernando, owner of a shrine for Gauchito Gil, recorded interview 26th May 2003.
We will now consider the various means that people use to access spiritual power, analysing these in terms of powerful patrons, powerful techniques, powerful places and powerful people.

1.1. Powerful patrons

The role of powerful patrons can be illustrated through the following ethnographic story.

“SAINT RO”

A long black plastic wall shielded the site from the curious gaze of passing motorists. There was already an official signpost indicating where to exit the highway, and as we followed along we were amazed to find that we were on a properly paved road. With our own curiosity mounting we cruised up the long drive to the enclosure to see the phenomenon that had filled the newspapers.

At first glance it looked like a combination of a rubbish tip and a graveyard. Sheets of paper and cloth, crosses and flowers were everywhere. The inner side of the black plastic wall was draped with a profusion of hand painted banners, competing boldly for their place. Messages like, “We will never forget you Rodrigo”, “Angel”, “Stallion, we love you wholeheartedly”.

Others were prayers.

Prayer to Rodrigo: I am from Salta where the people need you. Wherever you are with God, I want him to give you power so that Nicol Flores will be healed, and I ask you for health and work for my whole family and for the person that I love, my son Lalo and Cynthia, his son and for me, Mary. Give me health to go on during the years. I ask you for a promise. The beautiful city of Salta remembers you.

Another reads:

Rodrigo. You who are so close to God: Help us by opening the door to work, and never letting it close again. For my children Galva and the dream of Abel, which is to be on the small and big screen, make it a reality … A kiss, a hug, you will never be forgotten.

Yet another:

Thank you for protecting my child in the operation. Thanks Ro.

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2 This ethnographic story is based on a visit to the shrine, 18th October 2000.