Most anthropologists writing on ritual acknowledge its transformative power, that is, its ability to modify the subjective state of participants (Durkheim 1915; Lévi-Strauss 1958; Turner 1967; Douglas 2002 [1966]: 87–88; Csordas 2002; James 2003: 110; Severi 2005: 236). But they do not always agree on the nature of this transformation. The blessing and the use of ritual substances (known as sacramentals in the doctrinal language of the Catholic Church) are common practices in Ephphata. As Keith Thomas (1971: 29) rightly points out, the origin of the blessing of sacramentals can be traced back to early medieval Christianity:

By the early Middle Ages the ecclesiastical authorities had developed a comprehensive range of formulae designed to draw down God’s practical blessing upon secular activities. The basic ritual was the benediction of salt and water for the health of the body and the expulsion of evil spirits. But the liturgical books of the time also contained rituals devised to bless houses, cattle, crops, ships, tools, armour, wells and kilns. … There were procedures for blessing the sick and for dealing with sterile animals, for driving away thunder and for making the marriage bed fruitful. Such rituals usually involved the presence of a priest and the employment of holy water and the sign of the cross. Basic to the whole procedure was the idea of exorcism, the formal conjuring of the devil out of some material object by the pronunciation of prayers and the invocation of God’s name.

One of the long-term effects of the Reformation critique on mainstream Catholicism has been the marginalization (not the suppression) of some of these blessings in its ritual practice. But they still appeal to those who are interested in the immediate and temporal returns of Christianity, and ritual life in Charismatic Renewal in general is an instance of their revival.

The blessing of sacramentals is based on the belief that the words and gestures of a priest, acting in the name of Jesus Christ, have the power to transform ordinary substances (water, salt, oil, etc.) into sacred efficacious objects. As mentioned in chapter five, ritual performances in Ephphata display the predominance of utterances perceived by partic-
participants not only as mere locutions but also as ‘illocutionary’ and ‘per-
locutionary’ acts, to use terminology borrowed from Austin:

...We said that we also perform illocutionary acts such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, &c., i.e. utterances which have a certain (conventional) force. ... We may also perform perlocutionary acts: what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading. (Austin 1962:108; the author’s emphasis)

Indeed, most Charismatics believe in the power of the spoken word to do things, to endow people and things with new properties and powers. This is what some anthropologists have called the ‘magical power of words’ (Malinowski 1965; Tambiah 1968). I first consider the dual-
ist cosmological framework of blessing formulae before discussing the related problem of the demarcation of religion from magic with some focus on Weber’s concept of religious rationalization as disenchant-
ment. I further suggest that the resurgence of a ritual-oriented Pen-
tecostalism from within Protestantism shows that this rationalization is not irreversible. The chapter concludes with a few observations on the scope of the domestication of Pentecostal features within Catholicism.

Blessing formulae: the power of words

Besides the dazzling red uniforms, another striking feature of Ephphata major gatherings is the pervasive display of bottles (or even jerry-cans) of water, of packets or bags of salt, of bottles of oil (especially olive oil), etc. awaiting blessing. Why precisely these substances? The authority of the Bible is often invoked to defend the legitimacy of this selection. For example, to justify the use of oil for healing purposes, the following passage from the letter of James in the New Testament is often quoted: “Any one of you who is ill should send for the elders of the Church, and they must anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise him up again” (James 5, 14–15). For the use of incense to ward off evil spirits, the following passage from the book of Tobias (6, 17–18) is quoted: “Do not worry about the demon; take her. This very evening, I promise, she will be given to you as your wife. Then once you are in the bridal room, take the heart and liver of the fish and lay a little of it on the burning incense. The reek will rise, the demon will smell it and flee, and there is no danger that he will ever be found