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Catholics Rich in Spirit: El Shaddai's Modern Engagements

Katharine L. Wiegele

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in the Philippines, this article argues that El Shaddai, a popular Filipino Catholic charismatic movement, offers a unique and relevant religious option by straddling a "modern" and Pentecostal-like approach to spirituality, ritual, and Christian life, on the one hand, and a Catholic social identity and communal life, on the other. Although El Shaddai members, unlike Pentecostals, maintain many of the traditional social attachments of Filipino Catholicism, El Shaddai's prosperity theology and mass mediated ritual forms contribute to divergent understandings of spiritual power and poverty, as well as a sense of demarginalization and self-determination.

KEYWORDS: *religion, modernity, mass media, culture, poverty*

David Martin (2002, 5) has spoken of the appeal of Pentecostal Christianity worldwide as a "potently ambiguous" combination of engagements with modernity and the practice of ancient structures of shamanism and healing. This article, drawing from ethnographic fieldwork done in the Philippines from 1995–1996, will focus on El Shaddai's relationship with modernity in contrast to mainstream Catholic religiosity in the Philippines (while also noting the appeal of charismatic ecstatic experience found in El Shaddai contexts). El Shaddai followers, like their Pentecostal counterparts, redefine who they are through their deliberate religious choices, which in turn may help them find their footing in the modern world (ibid., 26).

Martin has also argued that a significant aspect of the Pentecostal choice is the radical "walking-out" of "age-old and interlinked hierar-

chies of Church, state, and local territorial community" (ibid., 13, 199). Becoming Pentecostal involves "not a simple switch of denomination but a tearing of the social fabric, since people move out of a web of embedded relationships and choose to belong to a group of fictive brothers and sisters based on a shared moral ethos. . . . A new name and revised identity through second birth is brought at a price. . . ." (ibid., 23). El Shaddai members, while on the one hand "walking out" of old Catholic understandings of ritual, spiritual mediation, suffering, and material attachments (among other things), appear to be simultaneously "staying within" many of the traditional attachments of Catholicism, for despite El Shaddai's Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal features it remains, as a lay Catholic charismatic group, officially under the wing of the Philippine Roman Catholic Church. Through its use of mass media, El Shaddai is able to present itself as a world apart from old Catholic hierarchies and traditions of mediation, and yet does not require its followers to give up the "sacred canopy" of birthright Catholic identity that cross-cuts Filipino culture, family, and communal life. This ambiguous and delicately balanced identity may be an advantage both to followers not wanting or needing to completely sever old communal attachments, and to church leaders attempting to stop the flow of Catholics to Pentecostal churches.

This article focuses on two key aspects of El Shaddai religiosity that constitute significant differences between El Shaddai's and mainstream Roman Catholicism's engagements with modernity. The first aspect involves the movement's approach to material attachments, suffering, and class, as seen in its prosperity theology. The second involves the reformulation of sites of sacredness and modes of spiritual mediation, as seen in the group's use of mass media. It is through mass media that El Shaddai members are able, in a sense, both to "walk out" and "stay in."

Background

El Shaddai,¹ a popular indigenous Catholic charismatic movement based in Manila, Philippines, began in 1981 as a nondenominational Christian radio program. Within fifteen years, the group had become a

substantial movement with a following of approximately nine to eleven million people.² The group has chapters in nearly every province in the Philippines and in over thirty-five countries, with overseas participation comprising around 30 percent of the total.³ Hundreds of thousands of Manila's poor travel to massive outdoor Saturday night rallies to hear "healing messages" each week from "Brother Mike" Velarde, a wealthy businessman who leads the El Shaddai movement. His preaching inspires profound hope, life reevaluations, and millions of donated pesos from people who can little afford it, but who live for the miracles Velarde promises their faith-filled tithing will bring. These "prayer and healing rallies" are broadcast on television and radio stations throughout the country,⁴ while tapes of Velarde's sermons circulate widely among Filipino overseas workers. Velarde and his followers have been instrumental in national politics during successive presidencies beginning with the term of Fidel Ramos.

El Shaddai is officially recognized as a Catholic lay movement,⁵ although Velarde boasts that the group draws from other denominations as well. Members and participants need not convert to another denomination, nor opt out of *all* traditional Catholic cultural practices like godparenthood and barrio fiestas, although many are downplayed, such as All Soul's Day celebrations, rosaries, and the prominent role of Jesus' mother Mary. Through El Shaddai, however, members participate in new ritual forms that in turn bring about a new relationship with God. El Shaddai's ritual space consists primarily of *gawain* (prayer meetings) in local barrio chapters, open-air mass rallies (which draw 500,000 to one million participants each week), television broadcasts of such rallies, almost nonstop radio programming in Manila, and El Shaddai magazines.

As with other charismatic movements worldwide, El Shaddai religiosity emphasizes the Holy Spirit and experience over doctrine (Poewe 1994, 2). El Shaddai can be classified as belonging to a specific wing of charismatics called the "prosperity movement," also called "neo-Pentecostal" owing to its origins in Pentecostalism, its acceptance of material prosperity, and its appeal across social classes and religious denominations (Coleman 2000). Like other prosperity groups, El Shaddai's theology not only accepts material prosperity, but also

emphasizes healing, the personal elicitation of miracles through "seed faith," and what others have called "positive confession" or "name it and claim it" (*ibid.*). Seed-faith has at its heart the principle that giving tithes with faith will result in miracles. Members often believe that their donations will be returned to them a hundred fold. They practice positive confession in part through "prayer requests" (written requests for miracles), with the belief that specific statements can claim God's generosity in the present. In this context, life events are continuously interpreted as miracles, and those who have received miracles are encouraged to testify publicly at El Shaddai rallies and prayer meetings.

The prosperity gospel has been the most controversial aspect of El Shaddai. Its emphasis on worldly over eternal concerns has been a major point of contention with mainstream Filipino Roman Catholics and clergy. Velarde has also been criticized for preying on the needs and desires of a class of Filipinos for whom survival itself is often a struggle. According to Ed Bautista of El Shaddai's Social Services, approximately 80 percent of El Shaddai's membership falls below the national poverty line, and around 15 percent in a group he calls the "petty bourgeois."⁶ My own nonrandom survey of 259 people at several El Shaddai rallies (conducted with the cooperation of El Shaddai officials) supports Bautista's rough estimates.⁷ In response to some of these criticisms, Velarde has begun a variety of social services for members.

In local neighborhood chapters, part-time El Shaddai healers merge shamanic rituals with Roman Catholicism, prosperity theology, and charismatic Christianity through healing, exorcism, and spiritual counseling in homes and at local chapter prayer meetings. In a Manila barrio I observed two El Shaddai members who took on roles (in the context of the local El Shaddai chapter) that could be described as that of a shaman. "Counseling" house calls, for example, involve healing rituals lasting for hours in which these self-described healers channel the Holy Spirit by speaking in tongues, exorcizing evil spirits through "slaying in the spirit," healing, praying-over, and "binding" through prayers and holy water. Most of these practices are derived from charismatic Christian traditions that these healers observe in other (non-El Shaddai) contexts (workshops, conferences, and so on) not necessarily sponsored

by El Shaddai, but in which El Shaddai members take part. These can be considered shamanic because many El Shaddai members' own distinctions between Catholic priests and El Shaddai healers (including Brother Mike) closely resemble the anthropological distinction between priests and shamans. That is, they see the priests' authority as coming from study and from Church hierarchy (with a few exceptions), while they see Brother Mike's and other El Shaddai healers' authority as derived solely from their personal connection with the Holy Spirit.

For El Shaddai members, this show of "healing power" and miracles produces a revitalized spiritual arena in which "authentic" spiritual connections with God (so called by my El Shaddai informants) are made through El Shaddai, but not in mainstream Roman Catholic contexts. This "animated" El Shaddai expression, however, cannot be reduced to some universal or primal form of ecstatic experience, as Martin's use of the term "ancient" implies (Robbins 2004, 126–27). Instead, there are locally specific cultural engagements that make these practices powerful and resonant among the Filipinos I observed in Manila, both in form (such as the use of a folk incantation style and the incorporation of modified Catholic ritual elements) and in content (engaging, for example, local cosmology, the challenges of dislocation, changing family roles, and other specifics of the current cultural context).⁸ At the same time, calling this "ancient" animation in a localized or charismatic guise also fails to explain the El Shaddai healers' intentions of presenting a new, more powerful, and encompassing alternative to other local traditions, and engaging local cosmological entities by attacking them, not embracing them.⁹ Nevertheless, El Shaddai's emphasis on healing power and other experiential aspects of spirituality, together with its engagements with modernity, to which I will now turn, offers a compelling mix.

Prosperity Theology

Many scholars have noted Pentecostalism's roots in early Methodism. John Wesley's idea that "all things are possible" is emblematic of a theology of success and power that is well established in Pentecostalism (Martin 2002, 7). Early Methodism's sense of freedom of the

supernatural from established religious hierarchies, and the notion that the supernatural is accessible to ordinary individuals in everyday life, are also echoed in today's Pentecostals. El Shaddai shares these features, and, like early Methodism, "transcend(s) all barriers and empower(s) common people to make religion their own" (Hatch 1994, 185, quoted in *ibid.*, 8). Martin identifies this emphasis on religious autonomy and individual freedom as part of the modern message of Pentecostalism. The notion of personal choice is a significant modern element in this theology as well. Individuals' connections with the Holy Spirit depend more on personal initiative than mediation from established religious authorities. Anyone can understand the Bible and mediate with God. This autonomous religious self is *chosen* rather than inherited, in a marketplace of religious options (Martin 1990, 2002).¹⁰ Those who choose Pentecostalism, especially those within predominantly Catholic countries, are often "'walk(ing) out' from the linked mediations of socio-ecclesiastical hierarchies, into a movement led by energetic cadres of God-made men. . . ." (Martin 2002, 6). Martin (*ibid.*, 1) describes these as distinctly modern social forms, with their emphasis on autonomy, achievement, entrepreneurship, and "personal empowerment through spiritual gifts offered to all."

In almost every way, the El Shaddai option, like the Pentecostal option in the Philippines and elsewhere, echoes these modern trends. Both members and Brother Mike himself, for example, speak of El Shaddai as unfettered by Catholic traditions that "block" one's relationship with the Holy Spirit:

I have a revelation now that has not yet been pronounced. . . . The reason I haven't pronounced it yet is that it will upset religious institutions. . . . And it is this: "Set my people free so they can worship." People can't worship now because of religious bondage, because religion builds walls that try to block out the Spirit. Religion is binding people, holding them back from experiencing the Holy Spirit. (Mike Velarde, personal interview, 4 Nov. 1996)

Velarde discourages traditional Catholic mediators, such as the saints and the Virgin Mary, as images of devotion and intercession, and instead emphasizes an individual's direct connection with God. He also down-

grades another traditional aspect of normative Catholicism, saying that "praying the rosary will not save you, but only the words of God can save you" (12 May 1996 rally). (These practices are discouraged but not forbidden, unlike in some Pentecostal and Protestant denominations. Velarde is careful not to contradict official Church doctrine.) One follower described the sense of direct connection with God in terms of space: "At church, God is near. At the (El Shaddai) rally, he is actually there." The open air rally atmosphere, as well as the radio airwaves, welcome the free movement of the Holy Spirit, unhindered by church walls and overbearing tradition. Moreover, the feeling of God's presence, said my informants, follows them into their everyday lives. Going to church, by contrast, is seen as limited in space and time: "You go in, you go out" or "after one hour, it's over." The priest's education and religious training are thought to limit his ability to communicate with or be a channel for God as the Holy Spirit. He is there only because of his training. But Velarde and his preachers, precisely because they lack this formal religious training, are held to be more effective conduits for the Holy Spirit.

El Shaddai is one of many options in the contemporary religious marketplace in the Philippines. El Shaddai participants come to the group through a variety of avenues, such as personal invitation by friends and family, personal revelation through radio broadcasts, curiosity, and the need for healing or other miracles. Participation is a distinctive choice set aside from the Catholic religion and communal culture most have inherited. Followers are eager to tell how they "found El Shaddai," and how the new, "found" life contrasts with being "just Catholic." Being "just Catholic" is standard talk for being nominally Catholic but lacking any individual and personally inspiring relationship with God. Choosing, rather than passively inheriting, one's own religion is one way of "making religion your own," as well as expressing a modern, independent, entrepreneurial approach to spirituality. Many El Shaddai members describe an involved process of shopping around and choosing the religion that appeals to them, that somehow fits their needs, or that "works" in solving their specific problems.

Furthermore, El Shaddai's prosperity gospel¹¹ sets it apart from mainstream Roman Catholicism through its specific affirmation of

people's desire for upward mobility and the material signs of modernity. It teaches that God's plan for us is prosperity, good health, and success in this life. Paradise is to be achieved here and now, not postponed until after death. Suffering and poverty are not in themselves virtuous, in contrast to some mainstream Filipino Catholic norms. Catholic clergymen often urge "taking up the cross"—the idea that there is spiritual value in suffering and hardship. As Cardinal Jaime Sin, the archbishop of Manila, told me, "you cannot follow Christ unless you deny yourself, take up the cross, and follow Him." Velarde's prosperity gospel, in contrast, is nearly identical to that of the American preacher Pat Robertson, creator of the television show 700 Club. Both teach that suffering can be alleviated by following God's principles, which include, prominently, tithing. This is also part of the accommodation to modernity and even capitalist moralities that Martin sees as integral to Pentecostalism—the idea that a person can, and should, rise above their inherited status in life. Members experience this as a different sort of metaphysical view on life, summarized by the words of a song sung at nearly every El Shaddai gathering I attended: "Let the weak say 'I am strong,' let the poor say 'I am rich.'" Mike Velarde explains to a rally congregation the transformation these words express:

Many are coming to me saying, "Brother Mike, for four years my husband and I lost our jobs, and until now we cannot find jobs." And I ask her, "How many are your children?" She says four. "What are they doing?" "They are studying." Then praise God and be thankful to God because for four years you had no job, and yet your children are able to go to school and until now you are still alive. [Applause] Praise God! Alleluia, glory to God! These are the things we cannot see. We cannot see the good news of the Lord to all of us because our mind and soul was [sic] blinded by the spirit of darkness so that we would not see the greatness and love of God for you and for me. Brothers and sisters, this is where new life begins, so that it will grow and be strong, so that the evil spirit will not defeat you anymore. . . . He can drive away the spirit of hunger, He can drive away the spirit that robs you of your work. (Feb. 1986 rally)¹²

Velarde speaks here of a change in one's outlook, in the way in which one views events in one's life. The woman who is now jobless is told to review her life for the past four years, seeing blessings where before she saw hardship. "This," Velarde says, "is where new life begins." El Shaddai and other religious bodies even retell the story of the EDSA "People Power" revolution in Christian language, stating that "what happened . . . was not the result of people's power, but of God's Power—the power of the Living God—Yahweh-El Shaddai" (Velarde 1993, 16). In a similar way, El Shaddai members' stories of transformation involve retelling or reevaluating one's life in the newly-acquired Christian language of El Shaddai: prosperity, Pentecostal and charismatic. Their testimonies, as is true of many Christian conversion narratives, are not solely or even primarily stories of things that occurred in the past. They are the creation of something new: the reinvention of one's past, present, and future (Stromberg 1993, 3). Religious discourses and narratives within them can constitute a reality that resonates with some aspect of one's present reality.

Full engagement with El Shaddai's prosperity theology involves choosing an apolitical and ahistorical interpretation of inequality, emphasizing personal action, self-reliance, and faith in divine action over other ideologies, such as those that emphasize structural, societal, or historical causes of and solutions to poverty and sickness (or, conversely, those, like mainstream Catholicism, that accept suffering as an aspect of spirituality).

Clearly Velarde has found a fit between his theology and many Filipinos' desires for security in the modern world and for the material signs of that modernity. While dining with a small group of friends after a rally one Saturday in 1996, Velarde hinted at a link between one's conditions, needs, or ambitions and the attractiveness of a particular theology. He made the observation: "People are more receptive to God when they are weak." Velarde's followers, many of whom are "weak" in more than one sense, are receptive to the message that prosperity is God's plan; faith and tithing will bring about miracles and prosperity for individuals; and that speaking and affirming one's ideals (e.g., "I am rich!") will make them true through the power of Yahweh

El Shaddai. But people whose lives have not improved materially in any obvious way are still convinced of the transformative power of Velarde's teachings. For many it is because they now *see* prosperity or blessings where before they saw poverty or suffering—the way they view their lives has changed. This change may also have positive effects in other areas of their lives, which in turn can confirm the validity of the transformation.

Vangie, an El Shaddai member, understands this transformation in the following way. Comparing El Shaddai to other religious groups like the Bread of Life group:

Those in the other groups do not preach about prosperity, unlike Brother Mike. . . . But for me, I like that prosperity. At least I can see if I'm prospering, while instead they say, "I'm so poor." The Lord doesn't have children who are poor. You want to have it, but you just don't want to rise from poverty. The Lord has given you to rise, but you are the one who doesn't want to. You will not really prosper if you will not work. But in prosperity, I know the Lord is giving prosperity to us. He did not create a person to become very poor.

Vangie has been with El Shaddai for six years, and is a member of the core group of a local El Shaddai chapter. Like many others, she believes one must work in order to be prosperous; in fact, Velarde preaches this. But it is clear that, to Vangie, prosperity is about more than work. After all, "the Lord is giving prosperity to us." As one El Shaddai preacher said, "If we strive hard to earn money, we should acknowledge the One whom that money comes from because it all came from Him. We should thank him." Financial success, even when it results from personal effort, comes from God. What Vangie describes here, however, is also a new self-image. "At least I can see if I'm prospering, while instead they say, 'I'm so poor.'" The others still see and speak of themselves as poor, but "The Lord doesn't have children who are poor." The problem lies in the others' outlook: "You just don't want to rise from poverty. . . . you are the one who doesn't want to."

Luz, an El Shaddai member and a 52-year-old ambulant newspaper vendor, has a chronically ill husband and has been homeless in the past. Responding to my question "What kind of people are drawn to El Shaddai?" she said, "The poor, because the poor don't know God. They think that because they are poor, they'll remain poor. But the Lord doesn't want you to always be poor. He also wants you to progress." Seeing oneself as poor signifies a state of distance from God, of being "blinded by the spirit of darkness," as Velarde puts it. A person who "wants to rise from poverty" is seen as being closer to God. When God blesses this person, as Velarde says, "good things are going to happen." Later, Luz said that she tithes to the El Shaddai foundation because "it is good to give to the poor." Although her neighbors would describe her as poor, she no longer identifies herself with "the poor." She has embraced a religious language that allows her to articulate her needs and desires, while opening up a space for an alternative identification. Luz's poverty now represents potential—a miracle or blessing waiting to happen. As such her poverty becomes temporary and personal, rather than determining. (Here it becomes apparent that El Shaddai's prosperity theology shares much with Liberation Theology, developmental economics, and other discourses on "culture" in the Philippines that identify an infamous "culture of poverty"—an attitude of hopelessness and fatalism—that in their view prevents "the poor" from rising up, organizing, or striving for upward mobility.)

Through the prism of prosperity theology, which reframes discourses of poverty and oppression such as leftist discourses of struggle and mainstream Catholic discourses of suffering, Filipino Catholics are able to articulate—or even create—retooled understandings of their present social and economic situations. The faithful lower- and aspiring middle-class Filipinos who embrace prosperity theology no longer see themselves as poor and the oppressed, but as "rich and strong." Far from just giving members a way to elicit miracles, Brother Mike's prosperity message and seed-faith principle provide a language with which people resist older, determining class labels and emerge as the newly self-made "rich and strong." Not surprisingly, Velarde offers a more

triumphant vision of Christ as well. For example, he regards the contemporary practice of self-flagellation and crucifixion during Holy Week, done in some areas of the Philippines, as deeply offensive to Christ. He says at a rally, "Those things should not be allowed by our Church! And if you know those who do these things, encourage them to come to El Shaddai so that their minds may be cleared and opened up to the fact that the words of the Lord give life—His words that free and heal and can save!" (4 Apr. 1996).

Martin (2002, 10) notes that "Pentecostals belong to groups which liberals cast in the role of victim, and in every way they refuse to play that role." Aside from their prosperity theology, Velarde and his retinue also resist entrenched class identifications by emphasizing a lack of social class distinctions and discrimination in El Shaddai gatherings. Velarde often points out that at rallies "you can see an engineer standing next to a domestic [worker]," and that one of El Shaddai's preachers was illiterate when he joined the group (but learned to read while training to become a preacher). One local El Shaddai healer "counseled" his subject that she should not donate to the Church something that "is seen" (such as a statue) because it is not from the heart. Others described a dispute in the local Catholic parish that was resolved in a discriminatory fashion—upper class church-goers had a voice but, said an El Shaddai member, "They did not listen to our side. They were well dressed, of course, while some of us were even wearing slippers." Many El Shaddai followers express the belief that "we are all equal in the eyes of God." One woman at a rally, for example, when asked by the researcher about the composition of the huge assembly, expressed this ideal ambivalently, saying "[Here at the rally] we are all from different walks of life. No one is rich nor poor in the eyes of God. But I see mostly the poor ones here." A recently unemployed lower-middle class woman, who each weekend travels seven to nine hours from Baguio City to Manila for the rally, spoke of her first rally experience. "I felt something I can hardly express, the feeling I had," she said, crying. "Because I felt that I was one of those people, that I was already in the community. They don't mind who I am or what I am. . . ." While she may have felt an identification with her "own kind," this feeling is most often expressed as being in an atmosphere where social and class

distinctions are leveled or made irrelevant. Although no one denies that the group attracts the “poor,” the *masa, mga mahirap*, both El Shaddai members and Brother Mike downplay the group’s demographics and resist identifying with any specific class, or, moreover, with the struggle aspect of any class-oriented ideology or theology (i.e., Marxism or Marxist-influenced Liberation Theology).¹³

Positive evaluations (from outsiders) of the El Shaddai movement see El Shaddai as helping the poor become self-reliant: they say it gives poor people a positive attitude, something to hope for, and teaches them to save their money, to not gamble, and to be responsible. An article in *Asiaweek* (1996) reports that “Velarde is doing to Philippine Catholicism what [President] Ramos is attempting on a national scale: focusing energies on development and material well-being.” Many also note, however, that prosperity theology itself has a capitalistic morality, a market approach to religion that goes beyond competing in the religious marketplace. As Vic, a former member put it, “The people are giving [money] in order to receive. More capital, more return. [Velarde] is motivating the people to give more. Does the Lord ask for payments?” Vic feels that El Shaddai followers’ material aspirations and the seed-faith principle, motivated by the desire for “returns,” has polluted what he sees as an authentic relationship with God.

Mass Media

The El Shaddai members I became familiar with for this study dwell in a world of contested spaces. The cramped interior city slum where I have done most of the fieldwork for this project is home to many El Shaddai members. Most residents of this neighborhood live below the poverty line. They struggle to retain their claim to the ground on which they have built their homes, where most of them have lived for decades. Most cannot afford to purchase this land, but they preserve the right to do so, and hence resent the term squatter. And as part of the El Shaddai congregation, each week they occupy land that embodies the history of marginalization of their class—the open spaces on the grounds of the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) on the coast of Manila Bay—to praise and petition their God, Yahweh El

Shaddai.¹⁴ Yet through open-air rallies, El Shaddai's ritual forms of congregation create a distinctive sacred and quasiphysical space from which critique of traditional mainstream Catholic practice is possible, where old hierarchies, structures, and modes of mediation can be bypassed. It is also here that they discover their own critical mass, and mediate not only with the Holy Spirit, but with the nation and beyond.

From its inception until now, the El Shaddai community to a large extent has been a mass-mediated community. The El Shaddai movement began as a radio program, and has not constructed an actual physical church or worship center of its own. The dispersed radio listening audience ("on the air") eventually came together physically as an actual congregation of people. In other words, the mass mediated community began to materialize as groups of people congregated in particular times and places. As the radio audience grew, so did the actual assemblies of people. The physical assembly did not exist independently of the radio "ministry," but was an extension of it. These assemblies evolved into huge mass rallies. The radio (and now TV) programming expanded greatly as well. Both El Shaddai's radio and TV broadcasts and their mass rallies have become hallmarks of the movement. Local El Shaddai chapters, members of which gather for smaller prayer meetings, were later formed in Manila and in other parts of the country, and in Filipino communities overseas.

Radio and TV continue to be the first exposure to the group for many El Shaddai followers. A survey conducted in 1995 reported that DWXI, the El Shaddai station, was the third most popular AM radio station in Metro Manila. The foundation buys air time from other radio stations in nearly every province in the Philippines as well as in other countries, and buys broadcast time on several TV stations. It also publishes and distributes its free Tagalog-language and English-language magazines.

The use of mass media, particularly radio and television, gives El Shaddai certain distinctive features. The mass rally congregation, even today, is in effect an extension or continuation of the radio listening audience, and the borders between the two types of experience are blurred rather than distinct. The particular qualities of one's interaction with El Shaddai through the radio (or TV) are evident too in the ritual

of the mass rally and in the followers' religious orientations in general. Participants perceive significant contrasts between these practices, which are particular to El Shaddai, and those of mainstream Catholicism in the Philippines.

In Manila the El Shaddai movement is experienced and operates through three forms of community: (a) the mass media audience, (b) the anonymous assemblies at mass rallies (of usually 500,000 to a million attendees) featuring Brother Mike as preacher and healer, and (c) smaller local prayer groups. Going to an El Shaddai mass rally on a Saturday in Manila involves bridging the world of the mass media community with the anonymous but physically manifest congregation of El Shaddai devotees in the PICC field, the huge open field that El Shaddai rents for its rallies. The boundaries between these two "communities" are blurred both conceptually and spatially. The radio and TV broadcasts extend the ritual sphere of the actual gawain beyond its immediate locale because radio and TV are played constantly, before and after the event. Because the broadcast is live, one begins experiencing the event even while still at home. Listeners at times "tune in" electronically at the rally as audience-members far from the stage listen to radios and watch oversized film screens on the perimeters of the massive rally lawn. Many watch or listen to rallies without even attending them, but go through the motions, the songs, and the prayers as if experiencing it "live."

Radio and TV broadcasts of gawain, as well as other El Shaddai radio programs, are often a person's first contact with the El Shaddai community. DWXI announces the upcoming gawain all week long, orienting followers to the stage where Brother Mike gives his "healing message." The journey that followers undertake each week, from areas of Metro Manila, or from far-flung provinces, is oriented toward Brother Mike, who becomes, in effect, a locus of miracles.

Within the PICC grounds, radios serve as links with Brother Mike at the center, focusing attention on Velarde and on the events on stage. The mass-mediated community is gradually transformed into the more immediate, physical community of the rally. While leaving the rally, the opposite occurs. The rally community is transformed once again into the media audience. Even within the rally context itself, mass media

help to create a “live” feeling. The rally becomes “live” when participants enter the sphere they understand to be mediated to others—where cameras pan the audience and broadcast images to others.

As in the beginning years of the movement, radio and TV are still channels for blessings and miracles. It is common for El Shaddai participants to use a radio or television to keep evil spirits away from the house. One woman testified during a local prayer meeting that keeping the radio on in the house (tuned to DWXI) would keep evil spirits from bringing illegal drugs into the neighborhood. Hearing “praise songs” in the house (e.g., from the radio), she said, can also cure youths of drug addiction. Others said that keeping the radio or television on all day drove away the evil spirits that caused them to argue with their relatives. A local El Shaddai healer regularly told his patients that the “words of God” from the radio are protection from the Devil. A local *hilot* or midwife-healer holds ritual objects up to the television to be blessed by Brother Mike.

The radio, TV, and even El Shaddai magazines serve as links to the spiritual power of Velarde and of the Holy Spirit. In addition, Brother Mike calls followers to a center of sacredness or power during rallies through radio and TV, and establishes the link to this power for his followers even before they are close to the actual rally site, thus expanding the ritual center. By expanding the boundaries of ritual space through the airwaves, El Shaddai can bring sacredness and ritual blessing into the home, and into a very personal sphere. El Shaddai prayer and counseling sessions on the radio, and the implication that blessing can travel through the airwaves, allow for a personal relationship with God that is not mediated through traditional Catholic channels such as priests, saints, the Virgin Mary, the Eucharist, statues, crucifixes, or the Catholic mass. As mentioned, Velarde is explicitly against such attempts to communicate with God or the Holy Spirit through these types of mediators, stating that people should communicate directly with God. At the same time, he still supports the sacraments and the practice of attending mass on Sunday and regards the El Shaddai movement as a Catholic movement whose goal it is to “bring the Church closer to the people.”

Here we note several key connections between Velarde’s use of radio and his ambiguous and ambivalent relationship with the Church.

First, through rallies, radio, and television Velarde creates a relationship between the listener and the Holy Spirit that bypasses traditional mediators. He does this by bringing the Holy Spirit, God, or Yahweh El Shaddai directly to the individual. Second, by locating the channels of sacredness and blessings in radio and TV airwaves and in open-air rallies, Velarde avoids constructing a physical structure—a church. This is significant because, if his group constructed its own church structure outside the Catholic institution, it would no longer need the Catholic churches and cathedrals and, therefore, would be enacting a symbolic separation from the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, the very nature of mass media allows the group to transcend specific geographical, social, and institutional boundaries (Babb 1995, 17). El Shaddai's coexistence with the Catholic Church, then, is unproblematic on this level because from its inception it has occupied a wholly different sort of religious space.

In 1982 (some sources say 1989), Velarde had blueprints made for the construction of his own church—a “worship center”—which he had blessed by the Pope in Rome.¹⁵ He even later collected investment shares and donations from his followers for the financial capital. Eventually he abandoned the idea, probably realizing the implications of building such a structure: a separation from the Catholic Church. He explained his decision to the public by saying, first, that El Shaddai followers don't need a physical structure, because the church resides in each and every one of us—we are the church. Second, he said that, because we are part of the Catholic Church, we don't need another structure—there are plenty of Catholic churches everywhere for us to use. With these statements, he freed El Shaddai ministries from the Catholic institution in some respects by locating sacredness within the self (a sacredness, nonetheless, to be achieved through a personal connection with God that is mediated by El Shaddai ministries). At the same time, he adhered himself to the Church as an institution by deferring to Catholic church structures.

In effect, Brother Mike gives El Shaddai ministries the privileged position of being spiritual mediators, and relegates the Church to the position of repositories of tradition. While he acknowledges the need for certain “traditions” such as the sacraments, he nonetheless says that

the Church and its clergy are bogged down with intellectualism and ritual. Velarde himself, as he often points out, is "just a businessman." Having never formally studied religion, he is able to establish a direct link with God. In other words, while Catholic priests' connections with God are gained through studying, and therefore "man-made," Velarde's connection is "spiritual"—the result of a more authentic connection with God. As Velarde wrote in a newsletter, when God healed him of heart disease, he became "a channel of God's grace and power to heal," and "a channel of countless miracles by appointment and prayer request. . . ." (Velarde [1991?], 3). "This [El Shaddai movement] is no longer the work of man," Velarde told me. "We are just willing vessels. Like me. I have a covenant with God that no man can ever understand." Furthermore, Velarde speaks in Tagalog, with what many have described to be a provincial accent, giving others the feeling that he is "common tao" or "of the masses," as opposed to priests, who often speak in both English and schooled Tagalog, and who are often viewed by my informants as having connections to intellectuals and elites.

El Shaddai's imagined community crosses geographic as well as institutional boundaries as can be seen in the following radio program. *Alay Pagmamahal* (Love Offering) is a live radio program that airs several times a week on DWXI in which Velarde usually makes announcements, leads prayers, interprets the Bible, and takes calls from listeners asking to be counseled, "prayed over," and blessed. The following excerpts were taken from a program that aired on 13 February 1996. He is addressing the general listening audience as well as the followers in and around his office building who have gathered to listen. The program is translated here from Tagalog, with the exception of the words in quotation marks, which were spoken by Velarde originally in English. Velarde has just asked the listeners to stand up, raise their hands, and bow their heads.

Praise God. You'll never walk alone. And if you have companions—those standing—your hands are blessed. Put those hands on top of the head of the one beside you. Even those who are outside, downstairs, and all those who are listening to this program, "wherever you may be." The hands you lifted earlier were blessed by the

Lord. Don't worry, the hands of Brother Mike and your hands have no difference. "If only I had a million hands. I'd put them on your heads, but there is no way." Your hands have been blessed by the Lord, so offer them to Him. Put your hand on top of the head of the one beside you. Bow and I will pray for your requests. "It's just impossible for me to touch your foreheads." . . . Ask now while those hands are laid on you whatever you wish to receive from the Lord. And I believe the hands laid on your heads are the Lord's hands more than the hands of Brother Mike. All those healed are because of the Lord's miraculous and wondrous hands. . . .

Place yourself in the presence of the Lord. "Just continue to meditate right now. It's healing time." If you have brought oil or if you have [bottles of] oil in your houses, get them out. Bring them out. Lift them up and we will pray over them. After that, rub the oil on the forehead of the one beside you in the name of Jesus our Savior. And on their palms. We're together and one now. The Lord is rubbing your foreheads. Lift the oil and we'll pray. This seldom happens in our program—the Lord's Spirit is moving now. He knows all your needs. If you have no doubts, I believe everyone here right now is receiving an extraordinary strength and miracle in their lives. Almighty God and Father . . . right this moment Lord it is our prayer that you give them strength, freedom. And heal them from all illness in mind, bones, blood, flesh, in Jesus' name. Open the oil and rub the one beside you on the forehead and palms. Brothers and sisters, that's all you need—not Brother Mike. The Lord is with us now. . . . "Let the weak say 'I am strong.' Let the poor say 'I am rich.' And you will become rich and you will become strong."

This program segment demonstrates not only a personal relationship with God, but also formulates an El Shaddai community that crosses geographic boundaries. Not only is the community implicit in the mass media audience, but Velarde asks them to imagine the community, for example, when he says, "We're together and one now," and "If only I had a *million* hands, I'd put them on your heads." By blessing his listeners in this way, he is shifting sacredness and the power to heal away from traditional ritual space (the church, for example, or that designated by the priest through his presence, his ritual dress, or incense), to

Velarde's hands, which become God's hands, and which then become each and every individual's hands. "I believe the hands laid on your heads are the Lord's hands more than the hands of Velarde," he says. The blessing and the Holy Spirit also seem to flow from Velarde, through radio, into each person's home, into each person's own hands, and in this case into the healing oil. One's body and one's home become sacred, and ordinary people are empowered to handle God's power and blessings—to enact grace and blessings themselves. Through radio, he is able to bring "the Lord's hands" to people. Yet his own hands are still there to mediate this process. Followers, especially Filipinos working overseas, have described establishing a similar sacred point of contact while reading *El Shaddai* magazines or listening to tapes of Velarde's preaching.

The laying-on-of-hands is also done at rallies and can likewise be seen in other Catholic charismatic rites. These actions occur in specific ritual spheres, however. Performing the laying-on-of-hands and the blessings through the radio waves (or magazine pages and tapes) implies an even more available, free flowing spirit, ringing true to the sense of socioreligious autonomy of Pentecostalism, and well suited to dispersed communities and displaced peoples.

Simply by turning on the radio, people become part of a community through which they can receive constant reassurance and hope, all day long. The medium of radio lends itself well to Velarde's style of talking—a conversational, direct style that never loses track of the individual who is listening. This style is even more apparent when Velarde does "counseling" on the air. Listeners can call in with personal problems, and receive personal advice and counseling on the spot and on the air. Their stories are often emotional, revealing feelings and experiences that might not normally be revealed to neighbors.

This friendly atmosphere contributes to an image of a community that is close to them, and familiar. The advice, counseling, and "prayers" people receive in response are also personal. I was told by *El Shaddai* members that this is in direct contrast to the impersonal event of attending the usual Catholic mass. Aside from feeling little, if any, personal connection to the priest or to God during mass, many of the standardized prayers and rituals of the mass, according to *El Shaddai*

followers, are not even fully understood by those who practice them. In addition, El Shaddai followers, through the medium of radio, are able to share their problems with others and get responses. During Catholic mass, however, they neither speak nor are spoken to directly. Even if one never "calls in" during an El Shaddai radio program, hearing others do so creates an atmosphere of intimacy. As with the "live" aspect of the rally, where participants feel connected to others when they enter the sphere of the movie cameras and spotlights, a sense of intimacy emerges when radio listeners feel connected to other listeners.

Furthermore, followers regard the open space of the airwaves and the open-air rally context as conducive to the free movement of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at the rally, they say, in part because of the open space. Informants consistently associated the rally with God as spiritually manifested, and the church with "just tradition," devoid of the efficacious presence of the Holy Spirit. Many rally-goers feel they actually experience a real presence of God. They say they can "feel" God at the rally, in the open space—as energy, as heat running through their veins, as rain water on their skin (when it's not raining), or as wind (when there's no wind blowing). Moreover, they say the feeling of God's presence follows them into their everyday lives, whereas going to "church" (i.e., in a Catholic church) is seen as limited in space and time: "you go in, you go out," or "after one hour, it's over."

It is understandable that El Shaddai followers enjoy the rallies in the open space at the PICC grounds where they gather, and that they "feel God" there. One emerges from cramped, tunnel-like *isquinita* and streets of semi-squatter neighborhoods, where a typical El Shaddai member might live, to a rare, wide open space with a view of the sunset and, on the horizon, a partial view of the Makati skyline. The fresh air, sea breeze, open space, and stars signify a different, liberating sort of existential state to many of those who come to spread blankets on the PICC grounds.

In this space, El Shaddai members get a perspective not only of the city, but of themselves and their own critical mass. They are able to express the force of this mass to outsiders by disrupting the city and its imposed "order" and by occupying, even reclaiming, public spaces. They create massive traffic jams, and take over the clean, posh

segments of the city. In the interior barrios, El Shaddai's mass is dispersed and unseen, but a rally crowd is a totality that can be seen and felt. As part of this collectivity that is simultaneously broadcast on national TV, El Shaddai members are in a sense demarginalized. Seeing El Shaddai's impressive assembly, especially from atop the steps of the compound's Film Center across the expansive lawn, or through the TV cameras above the stage, gives participants a sense of significance, even empowerment. This view of "the numbers" is, in part, what makes El Shaddai seem awesome to outsiders as well, which in part facilitates communication with the world beyond. In this El Shaddai space members seem able to assert themselves in a society where they are otherwise invisible.

Emerging from the barrios to gather at the open fields of the PICC grounds, El Shaddai members also enter a space where mediation with the elites and the power brokers of Philippine society seems possible. People in the rally audience are courted by politicians and candidates who "perform" for them on stage, address them directly, and banter with Brother Mike. Hence, in El Shaddai rally space, formerly invisible people now *exist* for the nation—they are on the national political map and in the national consciousness. Not only do politicians, candidates for political office, high officials of the Church, and prominent businessmen regularly visit them, but these visits reach a national audience through mass media. It is thus not surprising, either, that El Shaddai followers from other provinces in the country make long trips to be part of these national rallies. It is here, not in a church, where they feel they directly encounter their God, a God that both transcends and directly confronts the harsh realities of their existence.

By using mass media and open air rallies, Velarde puts El Shaddai ministries in a strategically favorable position with the church institution, allowing El Shaddai to remain both independent from the Catholic Church and under its wing at the same time. This gives El Shaddai a perceived distance from Catholic orthodoxy, while allowing it to capitalize on the sense of legitimacy that comes from its Catholic identity. This ambiguity also opens up a space for the El Shaddai practices and ideologies that significantly diverge from mainstream Filipino Catholic practice and belief, such as El Shaddai's prosperity theology, its empha-

ses on financial and material gain through tithing and miracles, and its disapproval of the use of mainstream Filipino Catholic mediators. Likewise, the fact that El Shaddai religious practices occur mainly outside Catholic structures makes it easier for Church officials to overlook or downplay unorthodox practices, and to keep these enthusiastic devotees within the Church and away from the increasingly popular Protestant groups in the Philippines.

Conclusion

Prosperity theology reveals the deeply divergent understandings of Christian life, poverty, and engagements with modernity that constitute the significant fault lines between the Philippine Roman Catholic Church and El Shaddai. El Shaddai directly engages and affirms desires for the material signs of modernity, and provides a potent spiritual and personal language for rejecting deterministic class labels. Its theology of success and power enable people to remake themselves "in spirit," which in turn may help them cope with the modern world.

Through radio, television, and open air rallies, El Shaddai members connect with an imagined community, and make modern parasocial connections extending beyond their parishes and neighborhoods, to the nation and beyond. Mass media and mass rallies enable, in a dramatic form, the Pentecostal sense of freedom of the supernatural from established religious hierarchies, and make the supernatural accessible to ordinary individuals in their everyday lives. By embracing new sites of sacredness and modes of mediation of spiritual power, anyone can "grab the microphone" and turn traditional power structures on their heads (Martin 1990, 2002). "Faith gives divine permission to speak without certification" (Martin 2002, 6). El Shaddai members feel that the Holy Spirit is closer to them in ritual spaces outside the cathedral, not only in the open air rally, but also on the radio, in the pages of magazines, and in everyday life. Furthermore, the congregation's engagements with public spaces in Manila contribute to a new sense of power and critical mass for its members, who hail from traditionally marginalized sectors of society. And yet this very ability to leave the confines of traditional religious structures and forms of worship creates

a particular space in which El Shaddai members can both “walk out” of old structures and understandings of religiosity, while “staying within” many aspects of Catholic-based culture, communal life, family life, and even identity. This makes the El Shaddai option different from Pentecostal and charismatic Protestant churches that demand a change of affiliation and a more complete separation with the many strands of cultural life that bind people and communities together. Thus, El Shaddai may attract people with a wider range of motivations because it allows for flexibility in the intensity and degree of involvement, conversion, and lifestyle transformation.

Notes

This article is based on thirteen months of ethnographic research in the Philippines in 1995 and 1996. The majority of the research was done in Metropolitan Manila, both in national El Shaddai contexts, such as rallies, and in local settings in residential neighborhoods where I lived for the latter half of this fieldwork. Interviews were done in El Shaddai groups in four provincial settings outside Manila and in Rome, Italy. The project was supported by grants from Fulbright-Hayes, the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, as well as the Program for International Studies, the Graduate College, and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Some of this material has been published previously in Wiegele 2005.

1. Formally called El Shaddai DWXI Prayer Partners Foundation International, Inc. (also called El Shaddai Ministries).

2. This number is an El Shaddai approximation based on crowd estimates at mass rallies and other events, prayer requests and tithes, prayer group attendance, chapter membership, radio listenership surveys, and official membership. This number, according to El Shaddai officials, was also confirmed through presidential election results. Given the nature of El Shaddai participation, and the fact that official registration of members is not stressed by the group, many participants/followers are not “official” members. Therefore, official membership numbers are much smaller: 252,463 as of 19 September 2005 (Personal interview at El Shaddai headquarters, Makati City, 19 Sept. 2005).

3. As of April 2002, Mel Robles, then Brother Mike’s spokesman and liaison to the government, reports that the group’s membership has remained relatively stable since 1997. However, the percentage of participants who are living outside the Philippines (30 percent, as reported to me at El Shaddai headquarters in September 2005), has increased in recent years from the previous 20 percent.

4. Velarde owns dozens of radio stations nationwide that air El Shaddai content, and he is part owner of a television station in Manila.

5. Velarde is a layman and has had no formal religious training.

6. Interview, 29 Mar. 1996, El Shaddai headquarters, Makati City.

7. I was permitted to conduct this survey by El Shaddai DWXI PPFI, Inc., and was urged to accept their assistance in structuring the questionnaire and in administering it.

8. For a more detailed discussion see Wiegele 2004, n.d.

9. See Robbins 2004 for additional references on this issue.

10. See Martin (2002, chap. 1) for a more detailed understanding of how these religious forms are aspects of modernity and parallel other modern social forms.

11. Prosperity theology, also known as "health and wealth," "faith," "faith formula," and "word," originated in North America and can also be found among Pentecostal and charismatic Christian groups in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia (Coleman 2000). The influence of prominent American prosperity preachers on Brother Mike's theology is discussed in Wiegele 2005. Although many observers have been critical of prosperity theology and the El Shaddai movement, it is not my intention here to evaluate the sincerity of the movement's leaders or their theology. Nor is my discussion here on poverty and class intended to ignore, diminish, or "explain away" spiritual experience and transformation, which have been significant for many of my informants.

12. The exact day of the rally was not indicated on the original tape recording obtained from El Shaddai offices.

13. Indeed, resisting class identification (e.g., "no one is rich or poor in the eyes of God") is itself part of a class-based discourse, as the dominant discourse is deployed in its very resistance.

14. See Wiegele 2005 for a discussion of the ironies of El Shaddai occupying this space for their rallies.

15. Personal interview with Velarde. See also Velarde 1995: the back cover of this booklet contains a short piece in which Brother Mike describes how he misinterpreted a "mysterious voice" that told him in 1982 to "build me a center." He thought God was asking him to build a church or basilica, and so prepared plans for a large basilica with seating for 7,000. "Then I had the plans blessed by the Pope in Rome in 1982 and prepared myself for its immediate construction." Three or four years later, however, the Spirit of the Lord revealed to him the real meaning of that call: "It is you whom I need to be built as a holy temple and serve as a living sacrifice in order to renew the Church." It was not an actual church but Velarde himself that would be the temple. The piece also contains a picture of Velarde holding the plans for his church, with the pope looking on, with the caption: "Taken at St. Peter, Basilica Square, Vatican City."

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