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(Re)Inventions and (Dis)Continuations of the Catholic Tradition:

Community-making in a Spanish Village.

Josep Almudéver Chanzà

THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been solely composed by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous publication for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic portrait of the return and re-invention of religious traditions and festivities in a Spanish village. Through participant observation, interviews, and archival research, I explore the inventive return of public expressions of religion in the context of local and global geographies of religion, secularism and cultural representation. The thesis is framed by the oral histories and everyday experiences of villagers, which encompass memories of the country's past, including the involvement of the Catholic Church in the Spanish Civil War (1935-1939) and the consequent dictatorship (1939-1975); the consequences of austerity policies born out of the 2008 global financial crisis; a preoccupation with the preservation of material practices against a new iconoclast movement that is gaining force in the village; and the quiet contestation of Church doctrine and democratisation of faith which go in parallel with the social changes undergone by Spanish society in the last few decades. The chapters examine the manifold and often contradictory attitudes and theologies that accompany changes in public religiosity, community dynamics that affect and are affected by the villager's narratives of the present, past and future. Central to this account of laity-led religious innovation is gender: women are the majority of villagers intent in re-populating the streets, the marketplace and the village square through, effectively, a public re-sacralisation of space. Religious rituals adapt to the new and increasing demands made by sexual and gender minorities, precisely those who the Catholic Church has historically marginalised. Some of the questions the thesis answers are: what are the dynamics and nature of intra-religious co-existence? what is the socio-political impact of faith-based organisations in local economies of care in purportedly secular states? what role do religious leaders (both lay and ordained) play in these developments? what does the democratisation of sacraments entail for the secular spaces it infiltrates and for Catholic doctrine? Drawing from feminist scholarship, critical theory and theology, this thesis contributes innovatively to debates on the geopolitics of religion in 21st century societies.

Lay summary

This thesis is about the return and re-invention of Catholic traditions and festivities in a Spanish village. I lived in Benaigua, the village I write about, for nine months between 2017 and 2018, observing and participating in religious rituals. I also interviewed people who told me about their memories of religious festivals and traditions in the past, in particular about their memories of the Spanish Civil War (1935-1939) and the dictatorship that followed it (1939-1975). They also told me about how government cuts to public funding had affected religious festivities, as well as their worries about a new Catholic movement in the village that is, on the whole, opposed to traditional versions of public religiosity. All in all, the thesis is about how lay people (people who are not ordained) adapt Church rules and regulations to their life experiences, making Catholic traditions more democratic. Importantly, the majority of people leading the come-back of religious traditions are women. There are also gay and trans men that are influencing the way in which traditions are kept and re-invented. Women and sexual minorities such as gay and trans men have historically been marginalised by the Catholic Church. So, some of the questions I answer in the thesis are: how do different versions of Catholicism exist together in the village? how do religious organisations help the community through the provision of care, and how does this affect our ideas about the state, which is in theory non-religious (secular)? how do villagers understand leadership when it comes to their lived experiences of religion and the organisation of religious festivals? what does it mean for tradition to be democratised? This thesis is based, theoretically, on feminist studies, critical theory and theology, trying to make sense of how religion is involved in politics, society and culture in the 21st century.

Valencian Glossary

Benaigua	the anonymised name of the village this thesis is based on.
casa abadia (fem. sing.)	in Benaigua, the house of the priest, opposite the church, also used for meetings and teaching.
casa parroquial (fem. sing.)	in Benaigua, a building adjacent to the *casa abadia*, owned by the bishopric and used for various purposes, including teaching catechesis and meetings.
clavariessa (fem. sing.)	lay organiser of a religious *festa*. *Clavariesses* (fem. pl.) are normally nominated yearly or two-yearly in teams of people roughly the same age by a previous team of *clavariesses*, thus passing festive traditions on. The masculine is *clavari/clavaris.*
confrare (neut. sing)	member of a *confraria*.
confraria (fem. sing.)	lay religious organisation akin to a fraternity or sorority. In Benaigua they are responsible for the continuation of festivities and other expressions of public religiosity. *Confrares* differ from *clavaris/clavariesses* in that the former's membership is permanent.
festa (fem. sing.)	festivity, festival. The plural is *festes*.
poble (masc. sing)	*El poble* is the collective noun for village. It may also mean 'the people'.
torró (masc. sing.)	traditional sweet made of peanuts, honey, sugar, lemon and cinnamon. The plural is *torrons*.

transició (fem. sing)	*La transició* comprises the period in Spanish history between the end of the dictatorship and the consolidation of the current parliamentary democratic system. The dates are contested, but roughly it applies to the period between 1975 (the death of dictator Francisco Franco) and the ratification of the constitution in 1978, or the transfer of executive powers after the 1982 general elections.

Acknowledgements

I write these lines in April 2021 from a room looking into a courtyard overtaken by the London spring: tulips, budding rhododendrons, a curious squirrel, the noise of children screaming like swallows in a nearby school. The progressive re-population of streets, schools, bars and art galleries after the terrible year of the COVID19 pandemic fills me with hope: the possibility of moving forward having learnt something about who we are, what and who we value. Similarly, thanking people for their help, their love and their committed support during the past few years becomes, firstly, a task of looking back in order to move forward.

As I finish this PhD project, I think of my dad and my maternal grandmother, who I still miss after all these years, even though they're in my thoughts and in my words daily. I also think of the people who lent me their time generously during the fieldwork stage of the project and who passed away during the writing of it. In particular, I think of Fernando Lumbreras, who affectionately took me through albums of old photographs of past Pride demonstrations at the *Casal Lambda*, the LGBTQ+ centre in València. His death, tragic and untimely, shook many in the collective; it made us think of the fragility of life and the importance of continuing to fight for our rights, our safety.

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INTRODUCTION

i.i. Homecoming

The squat trees glistened green under a cerulean sky. Rows and rows of them. I had returned home for Christmas all of the 20 years I had lived abroad. And each time, the evergreen of the Valencian landscape surprised me anew compared to the barrenness of the British winter. My brother had picked me up from the airport, and we were now driving to our mother's house in the village of Benaigua. The familiar landscape of orange and persimmon orchards shocked me with its colour. 'How's mum?' I asked him. 'Fine. In pain. But fine.' Days before I was due to leave Edinburgh for my home village in Spain to conduct fieldwork for my PhD thesis, my brother had called me from hospital. Mum had had a fall while watering the plants in the patio and had fissured two of her lumbar vertebrae. She had been caged in a rigid corset and told not to move for at least a month. Just as I had nursed her two years before while she had fought and defeated breast cancer, I saw myself once more as her carer, at least for a while. I looked out of the car window, my boyfriend's words before departure still rang in my head, 'How is it that gay sons always end up looking after their mothers?'

An aspect of the Eastern ravine that delimits Benaigua from other villages. Photo by author.

I tried to think about something else. ‘How’s work?’ I asked my brother as we sped down the motorway. The radio was on. Carlos Herrera, a popular radio presenter, questioned the end to the long financial crisis as announced recently by the government. ‘You hear him?’ he said as he turned the volume up. ‘I like him. He doesn’t take sides. He criticises the left, the right and everyone in the middle. Work is as always. Short contracts. No rights.’ My brother said this without any rancour. Being a father of two, as well as having a precarious blue-collar job with long hours meant that he could not dedicate as much time to mum as I now could. My family knew I was going to spend short of a year at home. They knew it had to do with my doctorate; I had explained what I intended to do. But I got a sense that, for them and for my village friends, what was important was that I would be spending more time with them. This worried me: how would I separate the time I dedicated to research from the time I dedicated to looking after my mother? ‘The only thing about this radio station’, he continued, ‘is that at noon every day, they say the *Angelus*.’ ‘Really?’ I asked. He nodded. ‘So, what do you do when the *Angelus* is on?’ I asked my brother, knowing he was not religious. ‘I leave it on until they finish. I don’t mind.’

The *Angelus* is a Catholic devotional prayer to Mary, the mother of Jesus, in commemoration of the mystery of the Incarnation, that is, the fact that the son of God was made flesh in her womb. The radio station which still honours this ritual twice-a-day is popularly known as *la Cope*[1], and it is the second most tuned-in radio station in the country (Orús 2020). The station is also owned by the Spanish Episcopal Conference, the national administrative organ of Catholic bishops. Although, like many Spaniards, my brother and I had been raised Catholic, we lived largely secular lives, not attending Mass other than at funerals. Like around 50% of the Spanish population (*Europa Press* 2019), we may have called ourselves *católicos no practicantes*, that is, non-practising Catholics (out of a total of about 70% of Spaniards who consider themselves Catholics). And many of those *católicos no practicantes* tuned in to listen to *la Cope* regularly.

[1] COPE stands for *Cadena de Ondas Populares Españolas* [Spanish Popular Waves Station]

The lives of Spaniards are still punctuated by Catholicism. Although my brother had not married, his kids, my niece and nephew, had been baptised and had received their first communion just as we had when we were around eight years old. Sacraments continue to mark the life course of those in Benaigua and in the country at large: baptism, first communion, weddings and funerals are still celebrated and attended following both Catholic doctrine and local cultural inflections. Spain, akin to the rest of Europe, has undergone a secularisation process, accelerated by the end of the dictatorship in the 1970s. Yet Catholic ritual performances persist in time and over generations, mingling with the secular and the profane. Churches have been emptying progressively but public religiosity fills the streets, and indeed, cars. Even if raised in a different faith or in no faith at all, religious rituals, performances and festivities continue to have an effect in the everyday lives of Spanish society: the yearly calendar is peppered by celebrations that inevitably occupy the streets in a frequent attack of the senses: processions, fireworks, culinary fairs and public holidays centring around saints or holy invocations of Mary or Jesus.

There is a long history of migrants like me returning home yearly in time for the summer or winter festivals, and to participate in sacraments (weddings and funerals). Over the years, and as I went back home to visit relatives and friends, I saw a resurgence in public expressions of Catholic religiosity in the village: festivals did not just persist, they thrived. In particular a younger generation of women and members of the LGBTQ+ community were increasingly invested in this renaissance of festivals. This piqued my curiosity and motivated the present thesis. In recent years I had witnessed a capacity for religious performance to re-invent itself and to seep into corners of civil society, blurring the lines between the public and the private, the secular and the religious. These were aspects which, when I was growing up, were finely delineated, or so I thought at the time. My friends, relatives and acquaintances in the village had brought back *festes,* processions and forms of public religiosity and piety that had, in some cases, disappeared for decades. My return to the village signalled the beginning of a process in which I would come to understand these and other returns, continuations and discontinuations that compose the central themes of this thesis: identity, memory, gender, the democratisation of religious leadership, and the re-invention of religious traditions and sacraments in Spain.

As my brother negotiated the last roundabout before heading into the street where we grew up, I could already see familiar images: two women chatting to each other while pushing their purple shopping trolleys; further along, an older woman wearing an apron sweeping the front of a house, the florist unloading a circular crate of red gladioli out of his van. The car slowed down and my brother parked in front of my mother's house. In my head, I quickly ran through the possible reactions from my mum. After all this time living abroad, she still cried with each homecoming.

A narrow street in the centre of Benaigua.
Photo by author.

i.ii. Motivations, themes and questions

In this thesis I seek to understand ethnographically who and what animates the return and re-invention of public Catholic traditions. I do so from the standpoint of the lay members of a village congregation in Spain, including its priest. In doing so, this thesis questions and critiques classical sociological theories that have foretold the demise of religion, both in public

domains and in the private lives of individuals (see Berger 1967; Bruce 2002; Weber 1958; Wilson 1966). Far from quietly dissipating among the cacophony of non-religious concerns besetting the individual in advanced capitalist societies, and far from being superseded by scientific and technological metanarratives, religion continues to inform and shape the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics of human societies in different regions of the planet and at different scales. The growth of Islam and the aggressive expansion of certain Christian denominations across the globe (see Berger 1999; Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008) pay testament to the enduring influence of religion on 21st century geopolitics. But it is the optics afforded by the Catholic Church, the largest and oldest continuously running institution in the world (Holy See 2019) which, in this thesis, make Catholicism a choice model to explore how religion persists over time. Why does the persistence of religion matter, and how does it inform the scope of this thesis?

Faith and spirituality remain factors strongly tied to the dynamics of individual subjectivation not only through doctrine or official dicta, but also through (religiously informed) moralities. Religion continues to play a formative role in how communities and individuals define themselves in terms of identity, culture and politics. Thus, I contend that religious belief and practice are central to understanding and contesting socially and historically constructed gender norms and inequalities, in particular the marginalisation of women within religious institutions. Along these lines, the increasing presence of new and evolving sexual identities in the global arena continues to be influenced by religious discourses, some of which have the capacity to talk back to normative (often discriminatory) notions of gender and sexuality. Further, the continuation and renewal of religious traditions and festivities matter because lived experiences of religion influence the way in which post-authoritarian societies in which religion played a central role (such as the Spanish) organise themselves, including the organisation of time and space, and in this vein, religion informs how communities and institutions make sense of justice, forgiveness, peace and belonging. Finally, it matters because processes of democratisation (and ultimately of modernisation) cannot be understood without the religious. That is, the politics of tolerance, inclusivity and sustainability influence and are influenced by the way religious practitioners deal with hierarchies, leadership and power. Circumscribing the remit of tradition and modernity, of religion and secularism is still central to how nation-states function. These global concerns

reflect the themes of the present thesis, particularly at the time of writing this introduction, as the COVID19 pandemic recalibrates the way people around the world 'do' religion.

Thus, this thesis sits at the intersection of the geographies of religion and gender, and the anthropology of Christianity. Specifically, I show how women of different generations are at the forefront of religious renewal. I elucidate how and why the aforementioned return of traditions has occurred by contextualising the villagers' lived experiences of religion and faith through the political, economic and cultural changes which have affected the lives of Spaniards in the intervening decades. These changes, as well as revealing indigenous traits of religious expression, connect to global shifts and dynamics; in particular, the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crash, and how it precipitated a change in attitudes towards public displays of religiosity that had been crystallising for some time in Spanish society. I also document how the crash has shifted the priorities of local religious organisations, which have started paying attention to charitable outcomes beyond the performative and spiritual ones, and how women's theologies and knowledges are central to how religion matters in the community in times of need.

Religious expression in the public domain, I contend, becomes fundamental in the making of individual and community identities. Local collective memories and imaginaries are concomitant to the construction of local identities. Although I write about the village I grew up in, Benaigua, and where my family continues to live, the events and circumstances that hastened the renewal of public rituals which I document began at different points in, and differing versions of, the past. The oral histories of those involved in the return and re-invention of Catholic traditions, emanate from a past rooted in conflict. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the following fascist regime (1939-1975), both of which the Catholic Church played a decisive role in, influence the depth and range of memories about the village's past. Beyond foregrounding these memories and experiences in the context of religious expression, I aim to elucidate how memories, remembering and memorialising are themselves tools for the (re)construction of not only public religiosity, but also, and through them, of local (secular) imaginaries and knowledge repositories. In this process, the past is re-defined with the aim of 'modernising' tradition. 'The modern' emerges as the lens through which the past is re-interpreted in the present with the aim of continuing traditions in the

future. Parallel to this re-interpretation of the past, conceptions of the private and the public are constantly re-evaluated in relation to the role of religion in everyday life. The concept of the sexual closet is studied to this aim, perhaps the epitome of an (often unstable) dialectical push-and-pull between the public and the private.

Over and above identity and meaning, I consider ritual renewal from the point of view of spatial power struggles, providing new angles on religious reformism and leadership. I trace the intra-congregational tensions that arise from the myriad attitudes towards innovation and tradition. On the one hand, the thesis follows the strains in the relationship between the laity and the local priest, and the struggles for religious leadership that ensue. The thesis hence pays attention to the modalities of faith in the community and how these modulate the presence (or absence) of religious expression. On the other hand, I document the existence of a Catholic reformist movement in the field (led by the local priest), whose theological attitudes and ritual characteristics enter in direct confrontation with the rest of the congregation. The different and differing lay expressions of sacramental practices such as confession that result from this conflict are also examined, highlighting how collective spiritual practices in the field democratise and pluralise normative understandings of religious orthodoxy.

Importantly, this thesis explores these tensions explicitly through the productive critical lens of gender and sexuality. I trace how women of different age cohorts on the one hand, and gay and trans men on the other, are involved in the renewal of public performances of religion. This was one of the initial motivations behind this project, that is, to document the ways in which gender and sexuality are both affected by and affect religious expressions and renewal. This work thus interrogates notions of agency in the context of communities of people, women and sexual minorities in this case, who have been historically perceived as marginal in the Church's *longue durée*. In particular, the thesis reconfigures the concept of 'the closet' in looking at the negotiations that those marginalisations entail, contributing to timely debates on spirituality and sexuality, secrecy and tolerance. All, in all, the main themes of the thesis reflect a refusal to see religion as an isolated phenomenon and embed it in how we understand, not only a small community in Eastern Spain, but also the world.

The thesis explores the following questions:

1. How are the new and increasing demands made by sexual and gendered minorities affecting religious practice? What are the reasons for these demands? How is faith gendered and what does this entail for the continuation of traditions? How is tradition *queered*?

2.What is the socio-political impact of the work of faith-based organisations in local economies of care? What are the products of devotional labour and how do they contribute to understanding issues of knowledge, identity and place-making?

3. What role do religious leaders (both lay and ordained) play in the continuation and renovation of traditions? How are agency and leadership constructed in parallel to and away from hierarchical understandings of power (exemplified by the Catholic Church as institution)? How can different and differing theologies co-exist spatially in the community?

4. How are the democratisation of modern nation states, secularism and heterodoxy of religious practice connected to the return and reinvention of religious festivals and sacraments? How are Catholic confessional practices diffusing into the secular public arena and why? What role do the laity play in this?

i.iii. Religion at the intersection: public materialities, gender and sexuality, the concept of tradition.

Academically, this project draws on and contributes to three bodies of scholarship. First, I draw from interdisciplinary efforts to understand public religion. These include the critical interventions of social anthropologists and social and cultural geographers. Second, the multidisciplinary literature in gender studies and, in particular, works that attend to productive re-workings of concepts such as leadership or agency, have helped to shape the critical approach I take to the study of religion. Third, I pay attention to debates that spring from the encounter between the contested terms ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, which has affected the way in which I see Christianity as one of the many *longue durées* that help

explicate Europe's contemporary social and political quandaries. The following three sections give an overview of the literature that grounds the thesis following these three bodies of scholarship.

i.iii.i. Public Religion

As it soon becomes apparent in the ethnographies that sustain each chapter, the villagers I worked with invoked objects and embodied practices constantly when practising and talking about Catholic faith and traditions. Public religiosity cannot be understood without recourse to materiality. In documenting a plurality of experiences, I have tried to understand not only how the divine is made real for people, but also how different perceptions of the material move beyond the individual and become cornerstones in the formation of local and communal identities in and through public interventions. Thus, clothes and the religious paraphernalia that accompanied them, music, food, processions, forms of memorialising through flower offerings or photographs, and religious images (life-sized images of Mary, Jesus or saints, gold crosses that hang from one's neck, or domestic statuettes) are some examples of the material horizon of the village. Even those in the village that wished to move away from a material-based understanding of Christianity, still relied on bibles, crucifixes, songs and flowers to make sense of their spirituality. 'Religiosity', 'tradition', 'performance', 'ritual' and '*festa*' [festivity] are emic terms that feature prominently throughout the thesis, while terms such as 'faith', 'piety' or 'belief', although attendant to the former, are either presupposed or implicit in the ways in which Catholicism is lived in the community[2]. This emerges out of my interlocutors' central preoccupations with the body and objects, and their interplay in public expressions of religion on the one hand, and out of my own interests in the importance of materiality, practice and power when making sense of religion in the 21st century on the other.

Thus, the thesis works alongside a definition of religion in which embodied, material and social dispositions locate villagers in a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) in which Catholic traditions

[2] However, see Pals (2015) for a history of the debates about the centrality of concepts such as 'faith' or 'belief' in the definition of religion. 'Belief' or 'believing' are unstable concepts, enacted through changing forms of life throughout history (Asad and Martin 2014)

and rituals continue to play a role in organising life and in communicating ways of being. But these regulatory dispositions that structure social life, as well as being passed on, are contested and re-formulated through heterogenous religious (and secular) praxis. For me, writing about Catholicism necessitated an understanding of religion that encompassed the presence of the divine (or of a beyond) becoming tangible in the everyday. Having grown up in the religious tradition that I write about (more on this later), faith was communicated and invoked, among others, through prints of the Sacred Heart hanging in sitting rooms and tapestries of Our Lady of Mount Carmel swelling from balconies; through the cassettes that my grandmother listened to, some with the voice of the Pope reciting the rosary in Spanish, others with phantasmic voices of supposed Marian possessions warning of the end of the world; and through the mystery of the blood and flesh of God emerging from a golden cup during transubstantiation. The rich material practices that emanate from lived Catholicism, documented in multidisciplinary scholarship (Herradón Figueroa 2009; Mitchell 2015, 2017; Norget 2006, 2017; Vincent 2009, 2013), took me to foreground the body and the senses in understanding belief, beyond abstract or immaterial ideologies.

The definitional move towards the material follows from a long-standing 'material turn' in the study of religion. Materiality in religious expression has always been part and parcel of theoretical debates about religion. Émile Durkheim (1915) paid scrupulous attention to totems, piercing and tattoo practices (see Keenan and Arweck 2006). Sigmund Freud (1955 [1913]) and Karl Marx (1906 [1867-1883]) wrote extensively on totems, fetish and fetishism and their relation to religion and society. However, these accounts of the material elements of religion owed to modern, particularly Protestant/Calvinist understandings of faith as a matter of abstract relations between the divine and one's conscience (or consciousness) (see Weber 1958 [1904-5]). In this view of religion, meaning trumped over matter, spiritual interiority over external expression of piety. Religious material practices foregrounded by this thesis such as kissing, touching, dressing, and anointing images and objects, were considered 'primitive' or belonging to the (Western) working classes (Orsi 2012a). It is no coincidence that the birth of the philosophical concept of *natural religion* (which advocates for a personal, interiorised capacity to believe), the Protestant Reformation, and the dawn of modern nation states (in which the religious sphere is gradually separated from the governmental sphere), were largely simultaneous (Lebner 2016).

Thus, this thesis supports and expands the recognition of materiality as more than epiphenomena in the study of religion, and as such is firmly rooted in the ‘new materialism’ turn (Chidester 2000). Liberated from the yoke of evolutionary frameworks, media and mediation have become central and operative in disentangling dematerialised understandings of religion associated with modernity and secularism (B. Meyer and Houtman 2012). “[M]aterialising the sacred” (Orsi 2012b, 147) has been seen as intrinsic to Catholicism through, for example, the ‘invention’ of the Baroque during the Counter-Reformation (see van de Port 2012). Closer to our times, readings on the material outbursts around the devotion of the Sacred Heart were also productive (Herradón Figueroa 2009; Morgan 1998, 2010, 2012). However, this thesis is influenced by important works on the role of media and mediation in Protestantism (Engelke 2010; B. Meyer 1997, 2010, 2011, 2014). In the context of Orthodox Christianity, Tom Boylston’s work on mediation and food (2013), and feeding and commensality (2018), paved to way for many of my reflections in Chapter Two on how food activates social relations and creates meaning. Boylston’s work on mediation, as well as Meyer’s (2017) have compelled me to move away from dichotomies such as material=Catholic vs mental=Protestant in order to make sense of the variegated *Catholicisms* that presented, in the field, a multitude of practices. Thus, I have paid attention to decolonial critiques of Freud and Marx which take objects, images and historically embodied practices as fundamental to any understanding of religion (see Matory 2018). This thesis, therefore, makes interventions in debates about religion, the body, and formations of the self and/with others (Mahmood 2005).

The idea of “ambient faith” (Engelke 2012; Kaell 2016) has been influential in making sense of the relationship between the public and the private through religion. For Matthew Engelke (2012), faith has a capacity to exist both in the background and the foreground because of the material and sensual practices that accompany it. Beyond the political discourses that specific religious objects (such as hijabs or crucifixes) provoke, in this thesis I concentrate on material modes of religiosity which speak of the politics of bodies and objects that “filter in and out of sensory and conscious space” (Kaell 2016, 136). The practices I document amount not only to a certain cultural context, but also and more importantly to “modes of sociality and imaginings of community” (Engelke 2012, 158) that contribute to the construction of

subjectivities in the field. In this respect, I foreground lived Catholicism through both, the everyday as observed during fieldwork, and the on-going religious trajectories articulated by my interlocutors.

Writing about contemporary religion necessitates an engagement with secularism and the secular, and a recognition that religion is not their opposite. Following Talal Asad (2003, 191), "secularism builds on a particular conception of the world", a conception that includes historical narratives of religion and religious expression. In this way, the secular as an epistemological category, is ontologically grounded in specific places and spaces, shaping what religion can or cannot be. This is why the documenting of practices, sensibilities and the social relations that ensue is central to this thesis. Yet secularism can also be understood 'as process'. This can be done from the point of view of those who advocate for a gradual but sure (both descriptive and prescriptive) disappearance of religion from political and social matters at large (Berger 1967; Bruce 2002, 2006; Habermas 1989; B. Wilson 1966), or from the opposite quarter, that is, those who have advocated for the continuous importance of religion in the political and social fluxes of modern nation states (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Mendieta and Vanantwerpen 2011). This thesis, for example, looks at how women in Catholic organisations engage in acts of care in the community in the aftermath of state cuts to public expenditure (Chapter Two), and explores issues of sexual visibility through belonging to prayer groups (Chapter Four). In so doing, I elucidate how 'public' public religion is, that is, the extent to which individuals' lived experiences of religion have a capacity to shape (and be shaped) by public affairs. In this vein, the work of geographers of religion has illuminated my understanding of the hybridity of secular and religious spaces (Holloway 2003; Holloway and Valins 2002; Olson et al. 2013; Tse 2014).

Specifically, the theoretical drive of this thesis owes importantly to Casanova's (1994) influential thoughts on public religions, in particular his comments on the de-privatisation of religion in Spain (and other Catholic countries such as Poland), and the ways in which Catholicism remained relevant to the development of public discourses of democracy and pluralism in Spain in the latter part of the 20th century. Writing against the grain of secular theories, he suggested that the involvement of the Catholic Church hierarchy during *la*

transició[3] in assuring a smooth political transition onto a democracy was suggestive of the continuous role played by religion in the public affairs of a modern nation state. I develop more of a historical thread below, but it suffices to say for now that, as well as being central to issues of village identity, belonging and collective memory, religiosity, public traditions and the performance of rituals are also important to understanding political affiliation and ideology in the field.

Thus, from the outset, I understood religion as inhabiting the realm of the political, the social and the cultural. In this way, this thesis is a continuation of Durkheimian debates on the social function of religions. What interests me about Durkheim's position is that rather than anticipating that religions in the West would wane and disappear as their content changes, thus secularising societies and robbing the world from its "enchantment" as Weber proposed, Durkheim saw these changes as conducive to the transformation and perdurance of religion and religious rituals, always adapting to wider social changes (Davie 2006). Following on from Durkheim's functionalist view, Erving Goffman (1973, 1982) saw ritual performance, religious or otherwise, as capable of condensing social reality. Clifford Geertz's (1973) influential definition[4] of religion encompasses sacred symbols as functioning as synthesisers of "people's ethos" (89), that is, their way of life. For Geertz, religious symbols and the systems that ensue provoke a set of dispositions ("moods" and "motivations" (94-98)) that compel people to act within a common set of social meanings that are shared and contested (98-108). I am reluctant, however, to settle on one static definition of religion for the purposes of this thesis, if only because of the essentialist character of Western conceptions of religion (see Asad 1993b).

Public rituals and festivities mean different things for different people: for participants, they are prescriptive and representative of their faith; for observers, rituals are informative of other people's faith, and are merely descriptive (Grimes 2012, 30). However, Catholicism

[3] *La transició*, in Spanish history, refers to the period of transition between the death of the dictator in 1975 and the elections of 1977, with the consequent approval of a democratic Constitution in 1978.
[4] "A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (Geertz 1973, 90)

allows for myriad practices in which participation comes in both forms: from direct action to by-standing observation. In this thesis I consider religious practice as part of a common vocabulary that makes, unmakes and remakes the community's identity through the re-invention and performance of religious traditions (a performance that includes the act of watching). In this respect, parts of the thesis echo Victor Turner's (1979, 1984) concern with religion and ritual as metalinguistic genres that allow for the enactment of "social dramas" and their ability to become the source for reflexivity and, ultimately, for social and cultural transformation.

Marian invocations, saints and Christ ready to exit the church for an annual procession around the streets of Benaigua, which marks the height of the summer festivals. Photo by author.

Over and above seeing religious phenomena as social phenomena, in looking at the return of 'the public' to the study of religion, I attend to Asad's (1993a, 53–54) injunction to pay attention to power and historical discourses when studying religion, particularly given the importance of the Catholic Church in the history of Spain. During the early stages of research, the multidisciplinary work of historians and social scientists was particularly helpful in tracing the historical material genealogies that continue to shape public expressions of Catholicism in Spain (Morcillo 2007; Muñoz 2009; Vincent 2007, 2009, 2013). Thus, authority, discipline and power are used in this thesis as productive lenses through which the ethnographic fabric of this thesis is read and written about, embracing the particularity of the data. In looking at the 'capillarity' of power in the community, I have tried to move away from conceptualising

both religion (Asad 1993a, 42) and secularism (Howe 2009) universally. Hence, engaging with the secular, the public and the material, this thesis contributes to a return to focus of religion in scholarly debates (Derrida 2001, 72,78). I look at the return of religion to the public sphere in a post-secular time and place, that is, not as a phenomenon that is necessarily on the rise after a historical decline, but as "a change in the mindset of those who, previously, felt justified in considering religions to be moribund" (Joas 2004, in de Vries and Sullivan 2006, 2–3).

i.iii.ii. Gendered spaces

Feminist ideas and works, borrowed from theology, sociology, social anthropology, geography and media studies, influence the way I write about religion in contemporary Spanish society. It means that my own lived experience of conducting research, particularly in the field, is at least in part conditioned by a research agenda where gender is central. But in so doing, I follow Braidotti's (2008) signposting in the direction of a feminist post-secular attention to agency understood as other-than oppositional. During fieldwork, I did not encounter the radical or the radically counter-hegemonic. Instead, this thesis locates the drive behind repetition and change (no repetitions are exactly analogous) in the everyday, in gestures, and in the embodied experience of those who are still at the helm of religious tradition: women.

The involvement of women, and young women in their late teens and early 20s in particular, in the return of Catholic expressions of piety to the public arena was one of the factors that pushed me to look into the topic in the first place. As Davie (2006, 2013) and others have indicated, nowhere is the failure of secularism more evident than in the fate of Christian women of all denominations in contemporary societies: rather than jumping the ship of a patriarchal set of doctrines and practices that have marginalised women historically, their number and importance in religion and religious organisations has not only stayed stable, but increased in some cases. At least this was the case in my home village. At this stage I need to point out that the present review of literatures and ideas is mostly confined to the Christian West, including US and Europe. Importantly however, it is in the context of studying women in Islam that some of the most fruitful debates on agency emerge. In particular I consider the

seminal works of Leila Abu-Lughod (1999, 2002) and Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) as foundational texts in my own reflections on women, religion, agency and subjectivity (more on these later).

So, why is it that women are disproportionately the majority practising, transmitting and continuing religious beliefs and practice (see Pew Research Centre 2016)? Some point to the life cycle: (child) birth and death have required traditionally women to deploy care, whether physical or spiritual (Davie 2006, 2013); and women's labour has, also traditionally, been seen as the remit of the private, the domestic, where women have had more access to religion (Woodhead 2002). Both Davie and Woodhead are quick, however, to contextualise these sociological takes on Western late-modernity: women's labour has in the last half century at least, entered the sphere of the public through other-than-domestic work, which, they point out, perhaps explains the acceleration of processes of secularism. At the same time, they also indicate that a commodification of care together with longer life expectancies explain why women, particularly older women, are still over-represented in the realms of everyday spirituality and religion. Here we encounter issues of generation and life cycle (Mayblin 2017a; Ramji 2008; Williams 1990), networks of sociality (Orsi 1989, 2002) and care (Durán 2018; Flaquer and Escobedo 2009), which are central to this thesis.

Over and above the sociologically descriptive representation of women in religion, this thesis intervenes in the productive body of literature on religious women and agency, making an original contribution to contemporary articulations by foregrounding post-secular experiences of lived Catholicism. Originally, however, this body of literature spoke back to the idea of a universal patriarchy influenced by the Judeo-Christian politics of women's representation, where God was codified as male and Western, doctrine had primed misogynistic readings of scripture, and teachings exhorted women to be submissive wives at large (Daly 1968, 1973; Friedan 1963; Saiving 1976). The resultant ideologies of gender and their concomitant practices "(re)produce a corollary of women's spaces of inclusion, exclusion, and containment, regulating women in particular ways both discursively and materially" (Morin and Guelke 2007, xix). Scholars have made sense of these different technologies of discipline and control from a number of approaches, and the preparatory readings for this project reflected this multidisciplinarity. From feminist theologians, I learnt

how the same texts (scripture, doctrine, and other material written mostly by men) could be interpreted from a number of points of view, some of them radically emancipatory of women's place in the Church (Radford Ruether 1983; Schussler Fiorenza 1993).

But this is not an easy task, Christianity has a track record of deprecating not only women, but also those who did/do not conform to strict gender roles which are determined largely by biological traits and choice readings of scripture that have solidified into tradition over the ages. Spain's long history of repressive (torturous often) practices of conversion and control, concomitant to the building of a modern nation state, is often taken as exemplary of the darkest passages of the Church's past. Institutions such as the Inquisition (1478-1834) persecuted and punished at length the many incarnations of non-normative sexual desire autochthonous to Iberia. The racial politics of representation of the Other that emerged from the *(Re)Conquista*[5] of Al-Andalus (711-1492) vehemently opposed ambivalent forms of gender fluidity in a pursuit of fixedness and determinacy characteristic of the Christian fight against Muslim rulers, who were seen as disorderly and unruly (Blackmore and Hutcheson 1999). However, the Catholic veneration of, and prime spiritual place occupied by a woman, the Virgin Mary, has on many occasions been used as a textual and embodied site of hope and strength by the faithful (Elenes 2014; Warner 2013). In the same vein, at the heart of the Catholic world in Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, *castrati* singers defied gender binaries (Wilbourne 2018). For some, there is nothing more *queer* than an institution which mandates celibacy for its ordained members (Isherwood 2006), or which has historically (and silently) condoned homosexuality among its priestly leaders (see for example Martel 2019). This ambiguity is reflected in turn in the body politics of the Church and the scale of its interventions: from the bodies of the faithful regarding issues of reproduction or sexuality to a body of knowledge that considers itself "an expert on humanity" (Paul VI 1965). Elizabeth Olson (2013a) points out how this ambiguity is particularly productive in the gender geopolitics of the contemporary Catholic Church, whose documents act as "technologies that

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[5] The debate still rages between historians who posit that the bellicose push against Muslim rulers had its origins in a certain idea of a Christian nation pre-existing Al-Andalus, and those who see no proof for this. For the former, the process (an 800-year war) would be called *Reconquista*. For the latter, the centuries-long struggle amounted to a conquest, a fresh 'taking over' without reference to a common past. In addition, the term *Reconquista* has been used since the 19th century to support fascist/nationalist ideologies (during the Civil War and, more recently, by VOX, a far-right party, during the 2018 provincial elections). See, for example, de Ayala (2019) or González Jiménez (2000).

transgress [the] borders of the secular and the sacred… in establishing the legitimacy of the Church as a relevant global actor…" (152).

Readings in cultural studies and women's studies, in particular from Latina and Chicana scholars have taught me about the capacity for lay women to organise themselves and reinvent spiritual practices (sometimes spirituality itself), seeking to enfranchise not only their position within the Church, but also in society at large (Anzaldúa 2015; Elenes 2014; Lara and Facio 2014; Medina 2004). 'Herstories' of colonialism emerge from these accounts, which encourage me to consider decolonial spiritual practices and the tensions that emerge from contesting the often-brutal genealogies of one's faith. Critiques of the term *marianismo* (Stevens 1973) and literature on *mujerista* politics and theology (Isasi-Díaz 1993, 2002) illuminate and guide this thesis, as does work on the wealth of women-led organisations that embed(ed) their activism against repressive states in religious symbolism and practice in Latin America (see for example work on *motherist* struggles such as the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina (Bosco 2006; Bousquet 1983; Navarro 2001) or the *Madres de la Candelaria* in Colombia (Tamayo Arango 2013; Giraldo Lopera et al. 2015)). The thesis, however, emerges out of a concern for the everyday practices and experiences of faith in the field which happen 'from the inside', that is, within the perceived homogeneity of the Church-as-institution.

Thus, although interested in the ways in which the faithful contest power structures within an organisation such as the Church, it is in the commonplace and the ordinary that my ethnography finds its home, including 'quiet' practices of confrontation and competition. Nadia Seremetakis' (1991) monograph on burial rituals in rural and urban Greece was the first complete ethnographic account which I read for this project. Key themes for this research were to emerge from that first reading and consecutive ones in which quotidian gendered practices reveal everyday social practices of resistance, the importance of place-making, and embodiment in various geographical settings, from North Africa (Abu-Lughod 1999), to Brazil (Mayblin 2010) or Micronesia (Flinn 2010). This thesis does not only aim to update this material through the lens of southern European societies, but also to bring to it a spatially attentive analysis.

More recent works in the burgeoning field of geographies of religion has informed the thesis in revealing how religion is spatially gendered. But religion and gender do not stand by themselves in any given society, they are two of many flows that intersect in the life of its individuals, including age, class, sexuality, ability, and generation, to name some. Doreen Massey (1984, 1994, 2005) and Linda McDowell (1999, 2009), as well as some of their Spanish counter-parts who write about gender, labour, class and care (Durán 2011, 2018; Iglesias Fernández and Llorente Heras 2011; Mier Villarías et al. 2007), illuminate the analytical paths that this thesis takes. Spaces and places, be it a church or the marketplace, the townhall or the school, are themselves gendered, and "in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood" (Massey 1994, 179). In particular, geographers have paid much attention to issues of gender and identity in diasporic and migrant Muslim communities in the UK (Dwyer 1999a, 1999b, 2000; E. Green and Singleton 2007; Hopkins 2007, 2009; Marranci 2007), and elsewhere (Falah and Nagel 2005; Gökariksel 2009). Out of this literature, a concern with subjectivity, identity and place-making emerges, issues that have informed the way I write about religious traditions and festivals and how their history and performance contribute to community-based ways of being and thinking. In many of these texts, the capacity for religion and religious ritual to highlight the instability of the boundaries between the public and the private spheres comes through in interesting and important ways. But in deploying this body of work, this thesis aims to push the debate it generates towards interventions on knowledge and women-led epistemologies, a theoretical terrain mostly left uncharted by existing literature.

Sometimes, thinking 'against' a scholarly work has helped to make sense of agency and dissidence in the context of religion. Giselle Vincett's (2013, 2016) work with UK Christian feminists has pushed me to consider the nature of dissent and rupture. She charts women's ability to create alternative sacred spaces that adapt to their own (gendered) spiritual needs, which cannot be fulfilled by the purportedly misogynistic practices of established Church (Vincett 2013). By instituting alternative places of worship and spiritual gathering, she shows how the "performance of resistance and subversion also has spatial consequences" (Knott 2005, 162). In this thesis I look at these consequences but focus on the times and spaces when resistance is exerted from the inside, within organisations and spaces belonging to the Church but led by lay people. In this sense, the work of Maya Mayblin (2017, 2019) has been decisive

in framing 'insider dissent' theoretically, and what it entails for concepts such as tradition, succession and difference. In looking at secessionist movements within Catholicism in the community, as I do in Chapter One, Vincett's work highlighted that religion can still be relational even when this does not necessarily demand cooperation or togetherness. Yet when exploring, in Chapter Four, how the porosity of the sexual closet affords gay men in the community visibility and participation, yet bars transgender men from it, Mayblin's (2017a, 143–45) work discusses how a Catholic dualist anthropology manifests itself in discussion about gender, sexuality and authority.

Elizabeth Olson (2013b) carefully dissects what this relational, social aspect of religion entails for Peruvian communities in which different Christian denominations co-exist. The tensions that emerge between Evangelical and Catholic ideologies and practices are negotiated through the concept of *miramiento*. *Miramiento* entails the power of the gaze, of judgement through gossip or looks, which contributes to the continuation of social order (85-86), a concept that I also encountered in the field in the Valencian equivalent of *mirament.* Olson shows how being attentive to the religious other creates a number of (unstable) boundaries which circumscribe ritualistic spaces and that can be used by different groups within the same community (90). Olson's observations have contributed importantly to my understanding of differing yet co-existing religious landscapes in the field. In highlighting an awareness of others in the context of practising one's faith, *miramiento* (or *mirament*) makes me consider, on the one hand, secularism and religious pluralism in the field. On the other hand, however, this concept also raises issues about who is included and who is not in the moral landscape of relationality, and in particular the exclusion of non-cis members of the congregation from ordinary technologies of *miramiento*.

Finally, in this section I turn to academic material on the Spanish context, which has allowed me decisively to re-calibrate my outlook on women's agency within Catholicism. Spain has its own history of feminist movements and women-led dissidence. These include women who identified both as Christian and feminist and that played a role in the push for democracy in the 1960s and 1970s (Moreno Seco 2005, 2008), continuing a tradition of Catholic women who took advantage of the Church's social teachings to step out of the sphere of the private and into caring/social action in the community (Blasco 2006). A considerable amount of

scholarly work of late has concentrated on the historical development of women's consciousness from within organisations and movements that ran counter to such an outcome, be it the Catholic Church at large or Francisco Franco's fascist regime. Aurora Morcillo (2000) and Inbal Ofer (2009a, 2009b) write astutely about the women in the *Sección Femenina de la Falange*, that is, the women's branch of the fascist political faction that provided crucial support for Franco's regime. Scholars mark a general return (a push back) to traditional gendered-segregated roles led by the traditionalist regime, and the regime's close affiliate, the Catholic Church (Folguera Crespo 1997). Womanhood was reconstructed in a way that paralleled the reconstruction of the nation (Morcillo 2007; see also Radcliffe and Westwood 1996). However, Morcillo (2000) and Ofer (2009a, 2009b) document how the purported push into the private sphere did not stop women from seeking ways in which they could pursue their desire for education, training and women's consciousness-raising from within the organisation. Accelerated by changes in the national economy such as the entry of women into the labour market, women achieved positions of leadership and activism within organisations endorsed both by the Church and the regime (see also Belosillo 1986; and Conde and Carballal 1986).

Overall, the Spanish material on women in religion points to the importance of 'infrapolitics' (Scott 1990) when looking at action and agency that are not overtly oppositional, confrontational or strictly anti-hegemonic. So, I take inspiration in Anzaldúa's (2015) provocative "spiritual activism", always embodied and threatening to burst from the dark into the light. Yet this thesis owes importantly to Mahmood's (2001, 203) quieter definition of agency, latent and expectant, in which agency is understood "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create". Contextualising this capacity for action in the realm of lived experiences of religion, this thesis contributes to discussions of everyday practices of faith as counter-hegemonic gestures (de Sousa Santos 2015), thus proposing these practices, embodiments and sensibilities are capable of engendering pluralist and progressive people-led theologies.

i.iii.iii. Modern traditions, traditional modernities

Tradition is a term with abundant connotations and genealogies within Catholicism: it indicates the body of theological work accepted by the Church as (moral and law) canon, written by a host of 'fathers of the Church' as well as other theologians, thinkers, and saints. This canon guides doctrine and influences the positions that the Church takes on matters that affect the person, society, and the organisation of the Church itself. Tradition thus informs the position of the Church on abortion or same-sex marriage, as well as women's exclusion from priesthood. It clarifies philosophical and practical matters on sin, atonement, and personhood.

But tradition is not a fixed set of formal theological works. Theologian Terrence Tilley (2000) proposes that tradition has been informed over centuries by political, social and economic discourses that, like tributaries to a river, have affected it, sometimes swelling or draining it, other times determining its direction. Tradition has thus been a dynamic, ever-changing, concept and practice, despite persistent perceptions of its fixedness. For Tilley (2000, 45), tradition is "best understood as an enduring practice or set of practices including a vision (belief), attitudes (dispositions, affections), and patterns of action". Influenced by this definition, I consider tradition always in the plural: as well as the practices that constitute it, the precepts and ideologies that sustain it are always diverse and shifting. This thesis looks at how practices that are perceived as established and historical are re-interpreted, producing a circle of action in which the community and its members are both moulded by traditions and festivities and mould them through re-interpretation and re-invention. And yet, although the process is a dynamic one, traditions are perceived as timeless, endowing the community with a sense of stability (Ibid, 43).

When I started thinking about the parameters of this project, I saw the re-enactment and reinvention of traditions in my home village as running counter to a conventional understanding of secularisation. This understanding paired up secularisation with late modernity unquestioningly: I saw recent Spanish Catholic history as an example of the way in which a society which had been governed in equal measure by a fascist regime and the Catholic Church for four decades, progressively became less religious, both from the point of view of personal belief and of the separation of state and church, guaranteed by the democratic constitution ratified in 1978 (incidentally, the year I was born). In many ways,

sociological work that explains the fate of religion in Western, post-industrial societies still relies on this picture. In this way, detraditionalization entails the loss of traditional (divine) authority and the proliferation of individualised subjectivities, which account for the questioning and rejection of heretofore accepted religious institutions or conventions (Heelas, Lash, and Morris 1996). This detraditionalization has purportedly been accompanied by a purge of "practices of presence" (Orsi 2012a, 156), that is, a purge of spiritually mediated practices, objects and spaces that is characteristically 'modern'.

The return of (traditional) material practices and festivals in Benaigua conforms to a pull/push dynamic that is never quite resolved, a tension between subjectivity and collectivity. In a market of competing ideologies and cultural values, the individual villager chooses religious practices and beliefs, making up their own personal religious *bricolage* (Varga 2012). My interlocutors' moral and ethical compass, although informed by Judaeo-Christian principles, has long been unmoored from the institutional. Individuals make up their own mind about things like same sex marriage or abortion, regardless of the Church's position. Authority resides in the self, yet it is collectively negotiated. Rather than acting as a determinant in one's religious expression, tradition functions as "a resource or commodity that religious individuals and organizations choose to use as they attempt to find or construct authentic selves and communities" (Ellingson 2008, 24). In this thesis, thus, the ethnographic material serves as a springboard to make sense of the present: do my interlocutors live in a post-traditional world (Ibid) where religion is, in a Marxian sense, a response to a lack, in this case a lack of authenticity in a globalised world? Or are they living through a historical moment of retraditionalization (Varga 2012), that is, if not a return, a rethinking of the role of religion in the public sphere through popular acts of piety?

In this study, I combine these observations on secularisation, late-modernity and tradition, with things that are central to the Spanish social and cultural contemporary collective imaginary: memory and heritage (Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017; Ruiz Andrés 2017). An early read of Danièle Hervieu-Léger's (2000) "Religion as a chain of memory" compelled me to think of religious traditions, not as competing with or alternative to modernity, but as its constitutive. According to Hervieu-Léger, (late) modernity brings with it a (renewed) capacity to believe, something that was central to it all along: faith in meta-narratives, in rationality as

a mode to explain all human phenomena. But meanings and ideologies are myriad: globalisation presents the individual with vast choice. In the face of this cacophony of choices, religious belief emerges as a tool through which a community justifies its existence appealing to its continuation with the past. In this way, tradition entails "the body of representations, images, theoretical and practical intelligence, behaviour, attitudes and so on that a group or society accepts in the name of the *necessary* continuity between the past and the present" (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 87; emphasis in the original). Continuation, furthermore, is only possible because traditions respond to the demands of the present by being reinterpreted, reinvented, and reconstituted, contributing to the reworking of collective meanings.

Invention and inventiveness are central to tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). What I do in this thesis is to foreground the role of religion and religious expression in the way in which we think of traditions, contextualising the debate within one of the many *catolicismos* (Mallimaci 2008) that exist simultaneously in the world, indeed, within many of its *modernities* (Eisenstadt 2002). This thesis ultimately contributes to the knowledges created through this productive tension: between the continuities and ruptures performed by 'modern' religious actors who see their actions as independent and free, and the existence of Catholicism as a centralised institution, globally hierarchised and which continues to engage its faithful in their everyday political, cultural and eschatological identities (Mallimaci 2008, 112).

i.iv. Overview of the chapters

Chapter One opens with the competitive intra-religious tensions at the heart of religious innovation. The Neo-Catechumenal Way is a new, iconoclast Catholic movement that has irrupted in the life of the villagers, unsettling notions of faith and tradition, openly challenging long-standing expressions of piety such as processions or the importance of religious artifacts such as images. The tensions that ensue place the priest at the centre of the dispute, as he is both the only priest that looks after Benaigua's congregation, and a vested member of the Neo-Catechumenal Way. The Way's agenda of conversion and spiritual interiorization through demanding regimes of study, together with a vehement detachment from material

practices, conform to a process of “purification” (Keane 2007; Latour 1993) that enters into direct conflict with the embodied rituals and cultural traditions that the rest of the village congregation are in the process of updating and renovating. Confrontation shapes the spiritual subjectivities of the villagers and spurs the drive for the innovation of traditions and festivities. Heterodoxy, iconoclasm and anticlericalism become markers of a certain (in)tolerant elasticity of beliefs and practice, characteristic of the Church at large. The chapter signals an intervention in the seldom explored study of religious innovation, specifically examining how religious innovation is multi-faceted yet demands coexistence, expanding current notions of absence and presence from the spatial point of view.

In Chapter Two the continuation of religious festivities and traditions places older women in command of religious leadership. Devotional labour in the form of making and selling *torró* (a local sweet) to raise money for a Marian devotional festival, is central to women-led *centres of calculation* (Latour 1987) and the concurrent production of village-based knowledges through the exchange of gossip. Knowledge about the spiritual, economic and wellbeing needs of the community is gathered and contested continually, crystallising in physical maps that women draw once a year as part of the preparations for the festival. All in all, this chapter puts forward the possibility of knowledge-making processes in a religious habitus through women-centred cartographic rituals. In the context of literature about labour geography, faith and gender, I explore the interplay of various conceptions of women’s agency in the context of the Catholic Church, an institution that has been perceived both as historically marginalising of women’s spiritual and physical labour, and as utilising a particular gender theology in order to transcend the boundaries of secular states. By documenting women’s everyday spiritual practices, the chapter contests established notions of (purportedly secular) knowledge and knowledge-formation, exposing the complexity of devotional labour, finally contributing to the study of maps and map-making as epistemological tools.

Chapter Three challenges established notions of ‘festival’ and ‘festive time’ (Lefebvre 1991), proposing a diffusion of ‘the festive’ into the everyday lives of Benaigua’s people, a process again led by its women. Memory and memory-making emerge as central to understanding the significance of *festes* for the villagers’ identity and sense of belonging. Maurice Halbwach’s (1992) classical notion of collective memory is explored together with more

recent work on memory, kinship and identity, adding significantly to the body of recent literature that has emerged on the spatial dynamics of remembering (see Jones and Garde-Hansen 2012). But festive time is not only conducive to social cohesion; it is also capable of contesting established ideas of tradition. For the villagers, continuation emerges as a key dynamic involving renovation and re-invention in the context of Spain's particular political economy. The chapter thus makes an intervention in discussions around religion and the economy (see Rudnyckyj and Osella 2017), shifting it away from dominant discourses around the so-called (Protestant) "gospel of prosperity", and foregrounding multifocal experiences of faith that take transmission, belonging and place-making into consideration.

Chapter Four lets us into the lives of gay and transgender men in the community who are active members of local Catholic congregations. The aim of the chapter is to answer, in part, one of my initial motivations in studying the return and continuation of traditions in my home village: why and how those who have been perceived as historically marginalised by the Catholic Church, women and sexual Others, are at the vanguard of the renewal and continuation of Catholic traditions? In order to elucidate an answer, the chapter pays attention to the optics of *the Baroque* and *Camp* in relation to Catholic material cultures. But beyond the realm of practice, the ethnography foregrounds lived experiences of faith in which the presence of gay men in the community allows for the de-stabilisation of gender norms. The concept of 'the closet' is used methodologically to unpack a critique of both heteronormativity and homonormativity. At the same time, Catholic doctrine as well as papal pronouncements (formal and informal) are appraised in order to make sense of the gender and sexual politics of the Church-as-institution and how it affects/is affected by the lived experiences of its lay members.

In the final chapter, Chapter Five, I suggest that a silent revolution has been taking place in confessional practices, a revolution that is not being documented ethnographically and that changes the way in which we understand lived Catholicism. Benaigua's religious practitioners' innovations do not stop at public religiosity: sacraments, which only priests can administer, are being 'democratised' and transformed into communal spiritual exercises. The chapter looks at how the sacrament of confession has diffused into secular spaces and practices such as the law, justice or medicine. The work of Michel Foucault is engaged with as one of the

very few theoretical treatments of confession, together with the prolific work that media scholars have undertaken in relation to confessional TV acts and performances. The chapter aims not only to extend this literature, but also to critique its overreliance on a single, unchanged interpretation of confession, one that is Foucauldian at core and which does not account for the developments of the sacrament among the laity.

PLACES AND METHODS

The thesis comes out of a methodological regard for my interlocutors' voices, actions and experiences. This is what compelled me to get on raucous buses to the city on hot summer days and to parade in peaceful processions in chilly winter nights. Ethnography and its attendant, participant observation, have been central to my methods from the very start of the research design process. In this section I outline the methods employed in the writing of this thesis, dwelling later on my particular position as an "insider". But before that, I offer a brief account of the history and geography of my field site: Benaigua.

ii.i. Benaigua: *història i geografia*

ii.i.i History

Villagers pride themselves in the history of Benaigua. In the collective memories and imaginaries of the village, two moments of ancient history are prominent and common: its late Roman origins and the consequent presence of *moros* (literally "moors"). These memories are accompanied often by gossip about past treasures stumbled upon by farmers as they ploughed the land: coins, pottery and gold that testified to their presence. These rumours are far from untrue. Valuable artifacts have been recovered from different areas in the locality, indicating that Benaigua indeed started as a homestead during the times of the Romans and established itself as a village during the Islamic period (between the 8th and 13th centuries). The elderly (and some blurry photographs) confirm the existence of a watchtower in the centre of the village, erected during the early medieval period. No trace either has been left of the mosque that existed attached to the tower and which was tarmacked over long ago. Over and above these important periods, the history of the village, in the style of that of the province and the country at large, is a history in which the Catholic Church plays a constant and complicated role.

I do not have the space for a full historic discussion of this entanglement (see for example Brassloff 1998; Callahan 2000; Payne 1984), but for the purposes of the thesis I will give some

selected socio-historical brushstrokes which will contextualise the resurgence of festivities and traditions in Benaigua. This resurgence needs to be understood as part of a waning and waxing in public religiosity that, after studying local histories of religion and comparing them to their national and global dynamics, seem to be characteristic of the *longue durée* of the Catholic Church in the West. Periods of maximum expression seem to proceed from moments of social and theological crisis. Some argue that the Baroque, with its profligate display of art and architecture, entailed a response to the uncertainty brought about by religious wars (see de Certeau 2000, 2–6), a grand gesture paying testament to the existence of God following the "discovery" of people in the Americas who worshipped unknown divinities (Del Valle 2002).

The presence of *confraries* (then called *obreries*) in Benaigua dates back precisely to this time, including the one dedicated to the Assumption of Mary, the Mother of God in August as it's still popularly known and whose festivity is central to Chapter Three. Initially set up to secure the proper burial of its members, *confraries* also took on the role of educators in/of the faith, particularly those dedicated to Marian devotions up and down the Iberian peninsula (Arboleda Goldaracena 2010). Forms of popular Catholicism had already started to bloom in Spain as a reaction to the heterodoxy manifested by the presence of Jews and Muslims. The Counter-Reformation (beginning with the Council of Trent, 1545-1563) accentuated the way Catholics expressed orthodoxy through participatory expressions of faith, which gradually became affairs that were organised and performed communally. In the interface between faith and society, *confraries* also began to care for those in need in the community, a task that continues in the 21st century (see Chapter Two).

With the influence of rationalist ideologies from other European countries, and the challenge of liberalism to Catholic traditionalism, some public expressions of religion declined. From the end of the 18th century onwards, differing forms of government ensued from a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, to (monarchic) absolutism, to liberal governments, back to absolutism, then a short democratic period in which a republic is constituted followed by the re-institution of a constitutional monarchy, its demise via a dictatorship that lasted seven years and a subsequent (second) constitutional republic. The Catholic Church was not only affected by this dizzying back and forth, but was itself, through its ecclesiastic institution and

parallel lay organisations, an actor in the political dynamics of the country. At large, it sided with conservative governments, including monarchies, which guaranteed their financial privileges. The Church played then a decisive role in education and health provision. Liberal governments on the other hand separated Church from State, taking away the former's privileges, promoting the secularisation of religious orders, the closure of monasteries and the expropriation of land. Each time a form of government was reinstated, its ideologies and policies became more radical than the time before: conservative governments became ultra-conservative and traditionalists and liberal governments became some of the most socially advanced, sometimes precociously so (Payne 1984). Anticlericalism, which had existed for centuries in the form of an internal critique of the Church by its clerics, became a popular form of social and political criticism, in some cases violently (see Delgado Ruiz 1992). How did these changes affect Benaigua's inhabitants?

The restrictions on privileges and funding avenues imposed by successive liberal governments in the 19th century meant that rural parishes like Benaigua started a period of physical decay, which included the personal penuries of local priests whose salary (which had depended on the state) was suspended. For the first time the local townhall started directly contributing to the running of the local church, diverting part of the municipal budget to the maintenance of the priest and liturgy, a source of funding that would later extend to fund part of the religious festivities. In addition, throughout the 19th century the custom of leaving money to the local church for masses and prayers to be said after one's death perdured among the wealthy classes of the village, alleviating some of the economic struggles of the local parish. Notwithstanding these struggles, the tradition of singing and playing instruments during festivities solidified into the creation of a formal church choir and church orchestra, the latter a precursor of the (lay) music band and society in Benaigua today. Perhaps as a consequence of the aforementioned decline in ecclesiastical affordances, from the 19th century onwards *confraries* became predominantly in charge of public religiosity. However, the organisation, continuation and cost of major religious festivities, particularly during the unstable periods of the Second Republic and the Civil War, fell on the municipal corporation.

This briefest of overviews takes us to the beginning of a critical period in the collective memory of the villagers: the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the 40-year-long dictatorship

that followed. In the mind of many villagers the Church is remembered as a crucial ally to the fascist coup that began and won the war. Francisco Franco (1892-1975), the leader of the coup and consequent head of state, referred to the war as a crusade where religion and Spanish nationalism were "consubstantial" (Payne 1984, 219). Written and oral histories of Benaigua pay testament to the violence of the conflict. València was one of the republican strongholds, and part of the local reaction against the coup and the fascist brutality that followed was the looting of Benaigua's church, including the burning of its effigies and relics. Anticlerical violence claimed the death of 7000 clerics across the country during the three-year conflict. Yet most of the stories about the war in Benaigua are about the penuries of men who were made to fight in the conflict, about the famine that lasted well after the war was over, and about the lack of resources. "With one egg, my mother made an omelette for my two brothers, my two sisters and I", my grandma told me often while I grew up when I refused to eat my very own two-egg omelette.

The period immediate after the war was marked by poverty and a return to traditionalism. The Church sought expiation from God for the evils caused during the war (evils that were portrayed as always emerging from the republican side): processions, pilgrimages and other public demonstrations of faith returned to the streets with force (see Vincent 2009). *Nacionalcatolicismo*, the state ideology of the dictatorship, encouraged a religious renaissance. In Benaigua, religious festivities were again taken over yearly or two-yearly by groups of *clavaris* o *clavariesses* (see Chapter Three) who worked throughout the year to raise enough money for the celebrations (both religious and profane). *Confraries* also returned to lead the organisation and continuation of other festivities along traditional gender delineations: men were mostly in charge of male saints or Christological devotions while women led on Marian devotions. The cultural life of the village was supplemented by talks, dances and plays organised by *Acció Catòlica*, the local branch of a nation-wide lay organisation for the development and continuation of Catholicism. All in all, the social life of the villagers was for decades centred around the Church, with the villagers themselves continuing and updating traditions and festivities. Consecutive priests encouraged this entanglement of the social, the religious and the cultural, sometimes "creating" new devotions. The table below gives us an idea of the Benaigua's religious-festive calendar in recent times.

Time of the year in which the *festa*[6] is celebrated	**Devotion**	**First record of devotion in Benaigua**	**Gender and age**	**Character (*confrares* or *clavaris/clavariesses***
February	*Sant Blai* (Saint Blaise)	1949	Girls and boys under 15	*Clavaris* and *clavariesses* (change every year)
March	*Sant Josep* (Saint Joseph)	17th century	Boys and girls, women and men of all ages.	Self-organised collectives completely detached from the church.
Easter	*Sant Sepulcre* (Saint Sepulchre)	*Confraria* est. 1990s	Older women-only until 2017 when it became mixed, different ages	Permanent *confrares*
June	*Adoració Nocturna* (Nocturnal Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament)	1893	Men and women, different ages	Permanent members
June	*Cor de Jesús* (Sacred Heart of Jesus)	Mid 19th century	Women-only, normally married or widowed.	*Confrares* that change every two years
July	*Mare de Déu del Carme* (Our Lady of Mount Carmel)	End of the 19th century	Women-only. When the festa was done by *clavariesses*, the women were in their early 20s, late teens. At present, confrares are in their 40s and onwards.	*Clavariesses* (yearly) until 2001. *Confrares* (permanent) from 2002 onwards. The festivity is taken over by young *clavariesses* again in 2018. See Chapter Two and Three.
August	*Mare de Déu d'Agost (de l'Ascensió)* (Assumption of Mary)	16th – 17th centuries	Women-only. Married and in their 30s-40s.	*Clavariesses* (yearly) until 2013. The festivity practically disappears until a cohort of *clavariesses* takes over in 2018. See Chapter Three.

[6] Missing from this calendar are a number of festivities that were organised at street level and that have all disappeared. Some of these were in honour of Saint James, Saint Anne and Saint Martin, and they were organised by the neighbours of the streets which bore the names of the saints. See Chapter Three for more on this.

July/August	*Sants de la Pedra (Sant Abdó i Sant Senent)* (Saints Abdon and Sennen)	Sometime in the 17th or 18th century.	Men-only.	*Clavaris.* This *festa* has a very small religious element to it: a mass, seldom a procession. The main festivity is taken by a popular 10-day long bull festival.
August	*Crist de la Fe* (Christ of the Faith)	*Confraria* est. 2002 (although veneration begins 17th century)	Mostly men, with the recent exception of three women.	*Confrares*. The festivity is mostly organised and paid for by the municipal corporation, that is, the local government.
December	*Puríssima Concepció* (Immaculate Conception)	End of the 19th century.	Women-only. Early 20s or late teens.	*Clavariesses* (yearly) until the mid 1990s. This is not a public festivity any more in Benaigua.

By the end of the dictatorship, the institutional Church had radically changed course: many of the clergy at the top of the hierarchy not only advocated but also were crucial actors in the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic state, much to the chagrin of conservative factions of Spanish society. As I Indicate above, during *la transició* priests, bishops and cardinals became active institutional players in the public political arena of the country (see Casanova 1994). The church was liberalised and legally emancipated from the state, accelerating an already on-going process of modernisation and secularisation (Requena 2005).

In Benaigua, the arrival of the present priest in Benaigua in the 1980s signalled a shift in the continuation of religious festivities. Proficient in the theological politics of the Second Vatican Council (popularly known as Vatican II, 1962-1965), the priest advocated for a more personal relationship between God and the faithful without the need for intermediaries (be they material, such as images, or divine, such as the Virgin Mary or the saints. See Chapter One for the ramifications and social consequences of this particular theology). Many of the members of the congregation pointed to the priest’s ideology as one of the main reasons for the

disappearance of public festivities (see Chapter One). This animosity was/is exacerbated by the fact that the priest belongs to a new charisma of the Catholic Church with a small but mighty presence in Benaigua, The Neo-Catechumenal Way, which advocates for a streamlining of beliefs and practices away from visual, public and material expressions of faith. All in all, the priest became a true "agent of secularization" (Brandes 1976), while the villagers tried/try to keep public religiosity alive in the background of a re-framing of religion as informing of local identity and as cultural heritage (Astor, Burchardt, and Griera 2017). This means that part of the yearly local municipal budget (under the umbrella of expenditures in sports and culture) is dedicated to religious festivals. Even though different political parties have differing opinions about the role of the Church in public affairs, Catholic traditions and festivities are seen as part of the social and cultural heritage which must be continued.

ii.i.ii Geography

The province of València in red in a map of Spain (above) and the province of València (right). From wikicommons.

Benaigua is the pseudonym that I have chosen to refer to the village where I grew up and where all my family live, the village I went back to in order to write this ethnography. Benaigua's population was approaching the 10,000 mark in 2017, and although this perhaps would qualify it as a town in the English-speaking world, in the vernacular, Benaigua is still a village, *un poble*. This could well be because there is no equivalent to the English *town* in Spanish or Catalan, that is, there are *pobles* (villages, towns) and there are *ciutats* (cities,

bigger towns), at least in common parlance. But the practice of calling Benaigua *un poble* is also indicative of the way the villagers see themselves: as a bound community, where people (mostly) know each other and where many people know the names of most streets, important buildings and landmarks.

During the first half of the 20th century Benaigua grew well below the national average, and so from 1910 to 1960 the population went from 3422 to 4693. However, in the following 50 years, the village expanded in size at double the national average, getting to 9459 by 2010. This change, according to some villagers, was brought about by a brief surge in industrial jobs in the 1960s, which attracted people from other villages. Agriculture has been a source of wealth for villagers through the centuries, but it was from the 1980s onwards (coinciding with Spain's entry in the EU in 1986) that it began attracting migrants from outside Spain. In addition, during the construction boom which spanned from the 1980s to the mid 2000s, the village expanded considerably with new roads and new properties. The latter, after the 2008 crash, became available at cheap prices. This and the fact that the village is well connected by road to major towns and cities in the province, attracted young couples who settled in the village.

Among a cluster of villages and towns, Benaigua lies in the Eastern coast of Spain to the south of València, the third largest city in the country. It belongs to the villages that conform the *comarca* [county] *Horta Sud* (see map above). With an extension of about 9km2 and at 15m over sea level, Benaigua is on a plain crisscrossed by two ravines which fill up periodically during the rainy season. The climate is typical of the Mediterranean, temperate, with mild winters and hot summers. Humidity and mosquitoes are two constant topics of conversation in Benaigua during the long summers. The land is fertile, an intense red, and predominantly partitioned in small plots due to the distributive dynamics of inheritance practices in the area. Villagers have a special relationship to the land (see Chapter One), reflected in a wealth of collective memories and oral histories of its past, and consistent with a wider Valencian imaginary. The village is surrounded by orange groves, and much of their produce ends up at two local factories where they are manufactured for export. One of these factories is a co-operative, created in the first half of the 20th century, when the cultivation of oranges was at its most lucrative. Before then, oral histories point to a more varied agricultural panorama:

wheat, maize, tobacco, cotton and olive oil. The co-op was central to the memories and personal histories of many of my interlocutors over the age of 50, as they had worked in it, or had been members during its apogee. Orange farming has been in crisis for some time, however, mostly due to global competition, and many of the fields have in the last few decades turned to growing persimmons, pomegranates and kiwis, more competitive crops in the international market.

Although younger generations seldom live exclusively off the land, they still own or part-own plots, and so either work on them during weekends, contract others to run them, let them or have long abandoned them. Two industrial centres give some employment to local men and women (more on this on Chapter Three), while others have jobs at a major *Ford* automotive factory and the adjacent industry that it generates. In conversation with men in the cusp of retirement from working in these factories, it became clear that the younger generation have more precarious contracts, fewer pension rights and/or subsidies, and so someone like my brother (see Introduction), who works for plants auxiliary to *Ford*, has had sporadic contracts that last for weeks at a time for more than two decades. The caring industry seems to give more secure sources of employment: nursing homes have sprung up around the village in the last decade which offer longer contracts. Job security is perceived to go hand in hand with education. But this is not enough, as even those who are employed on a permanent basis by the state as teachers, administrators in the local townhall, social workers, architects or cleaners, have to successfully pass competitive tests and exams. This creates a social dynamic in the village where work, securing it, the threat of a dismissal, or training to apply for a job, are constant sources of information and gossip exchange (see Chapter Two).

People from Benaigua are eminently social. A plethora of bars and restaurants host villagers for coffee or a drink any time of the day and night, and the buzz in its many bars and streets are a testament to this, particularly in spring and summer. Formal and informal organisations abound which cater for the social and cultural life of villagers: walking and cycling clubs, a music society, an alliance of retired men and women with their own catered premises, football groups, groups that are fans of bullfighting and anti-bullfighting groups. All meet regularly to organise events, to have a meal together or simply to have coffee. Many are funded partially through the municipal budget and partially through their own initiative,

mostly the sale of lottery tickets. Although the social life of the villagers takes many forms outside the boundaries of Benaigua (often family units have second homes in the mountains or by the beach), during festivals, the main square delimited by the townhall, the music society and the church, is still the centre of ceremonies, rituals and gatherings.

ii.ii. Methods

As the discipline of human geography in the 1980s and 1990s started advocating for qualitative methods as a way to counteract the quantitative turn that had dominated human geography research after WWII, there was a recognition "of issues of meaning, perception, values, intentions, motivations, and understandings — issues that demand methods of inquiry that can access the subjectively experienced, ever-changing world 'live,' and in the places where those meanings and interpretations emerge" (DeLyser et al. 2010, 6). An interest in the positionality of the researcher also emerged (Acker 2001; Gilbert 1994; Katz 1994; Merriam et al. 2001; Mullings 1999; Rose 1997; Sharp 2005; Wolf 1996). Scholars working on culture and society asserted that quantitative methodologies failed to account for the complexity of everyday life through a lack of engagement with the personal experiences of those we work with and of ourselves-as-researchers. In unison with post-modern theories, they also called for an examination of the role of the researcher as the perceived producer of truth and objectivity (Kobayashi 2001). This thesis is informed by the wealth of feminist scholarship in geography that paralleled the development of subject-centred research through qualitative means. Looking into the lived experiences of faith and religion in a small community necessitated of a methodology that placed an emphasis on dialogical processes of speaking and listening, on empathy towards the people I worked with, and on validating their personal experiences, particularly those belonging to peoples whose knowledges have been perceived as 'marginal' in the past (McDowell 1999).

In this way, ethnography, being both "highly particular and hauntingly personal" (Van Maanen 2011, xiii) has the potential to represent the knowledges that members of a group share, shape and are shaped by, and which inform and constitute the behaviours and activities of a certain culture. The ethnographer needs to be able to read and see culture and,

in writing about it, make it visible, bearing in mind that the end result will also be a reflection of her personal attitudes, behaviour, prior knowledge and presentation (Ibid). In this way, by documenting the lives and practices of those who reinvent Catholic tradition in Spain, this ethnography "describes processes of innovation and structuration" and, as it becomes part of scholarly debates, "is itself part of these processes" (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 2–3). And all of these processes and meanings that we end up writing about begin with observation and participation. Ethnographic methods in geography have been promoted as part of the qualitative 'turn' I refer to above, yet geographers at the turn of the new century documented how "although participant observation is now a standard approach in the discipline's methodological literature" (Cloke et al. 2004, 170), the number of publications that claim it as their foundation is very small (see also Herbert 2000).

Before I explore the role of ethnography in this thesis, a necessary note. The social sciences have entwined histories in which ethnographic (participant) observation is fundamental. Particularly in the case of human geography and social anthropology, this is a historical development that went (goes?) hand in hand with colonial practices such as exploration, analysis and control of other cultures. Ethnographic research and ethnographic writing have been central to colonial projects, whether documenting how indigenous peoples live through observation and learning of their languages in the dawn of the Spanish empire (see for example, Bartolomé de las Casas (2014 [1552])), or extracting geophysical information that can be used later for consecutive voyages in the era of exploration (see Latour 1987), through the research practices of Alexander von Humboldt and Georges Cuvier who combined 'cabinet' and 'field' methods (see Massey 2003), and the eventual shape of 'modern' ethnographic fieldwork established by Malinowski (1922). This is why, when defending ethnography as a particularly suitable method to study cultures and societies, it is of importance to attend to these pasts and the knowledge-production differentials that ensue(d) thereof. The aim is to learn from those racist epistemologies that saw (see) the Other in terms of Western moral values and White-centred social and cultural constructions. Researching and writing this thesis has been at least in part shaped by the literatures that tackle these histories, as I outline in the literature review above. I also pay attention to the decolonial agenda below, when making sense of my own position in the field as both researcher and villager.

ii.ii.i The ethnographic path

The materials that form the bulk of this thesis were gathered on a fieldwork trip between December 2017 and September 2018. Yet the fact that I write about the place where I grew up means that I draw from a wider time-space pool of personal memories, embodied experiences and information (Davies and Dwyer 2007). These have joined those of my many interlocutors: lay members of the congregation, villagers at large including heads of charity organisations, religious groups and of the local government, key informants from outside Benaigua (in particular members of the LGBTQ+ collective in València), and a number of priests from the region. Access to them, their stories and experiences, was also influenced by my being a villager with connections to the church and the congregation through kinship, friendship and by virtue of community membership. In the next section I explore in more depth what it means to enter the field through the hand of close relatives and friends, and importantly, of my mother.

Neighbourly commensality: a *berenar* (mid-afternoon snack) at my uncle's house during Easter. Photo courtesy of David G.

It was through these closely-knit yet expansive network of friends and relatives that by the end of my fieldwork in Benaigua, I had spoken to more than 300 individuals, both new and established acquaintances. I conducted around 50 semi-structured interviews and worked with a number of organisations, groups and *confraries* in myriad roles such as helper, locum

teacher, co-organiser or observer. For nine months I helped dress and undress holy images, made sandwiches for young adults attending Catholic youth groups, went on visits to other congregations and participated in their processions, taught prayers to young children preparing for their first communion, made *torró* once a month with *confrares* (see Chapter Two), went on a two day retreat with members of the Neo-Catechumenal Way (see Chapter One) and attended a wealth of masses, rosaries and prayer meetings with the general congregation. Participating gave me the key to understanding the emotional, social, and spiritual worlds that my interlocutors inhabited (Crang and Cook 2007; Herbert 2000; Watson and Till 2010). It was in the *doing* that rapport got knitted into my relationships with interlocutors, letting me learn from/with them (Wall and Stasz 2010).

As well as working with interlocutors in the village, I ventured out further. I interviewed and spent time with priests and congregations in neighbouring villages. My intention was to compare my interlocutors' experiences to those of other religious practitioners in the area. I spent many an evening and late night participating in solemn events organised by local charters of the *Nocturnal Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament*. I visited a number of church vestries in nearby villages where I carried out informal interviews with priests. Through one of my interlocutors, I attended two *Opus Dei*[7] men-only prayer meetings in the city of València. With him, I also participated in some of the popular events celebrating the 600th anniversary of the death of Saint Vincent Ferrer, a renowned Valencian saint. In the city too, I spent time with LGBTQ+ Christians who met once a month to celebrate a LGBTQ+ Eucharist at the *Casal Lambda* (the provincial centre of the national LGBTQ+ flagship organisation). Although I do not write about my experience with *Opus Dei* or with my *Lambda* interlocutors, spending time with them, chatting, observing their rituals and being part of them gave me a global awareness of the astonishing range of contemporary Catholic practices and beliefs. Of all of these visits, observed rituals, and the plethora of events I participated in, I took copious notes.

[7] *Opus Dei* is an institution of the Catholic Church originating in Spain in 1928, but with a contemporary global presence, made up of mostly lay people who advocate for ordinary life as a path to holiness. In the Spanish imaginary, *Opus Dei* are characterised by its conservatism, secretism and exclusive membership.

Initially, I went everywhere with a little notebook and a pen in my pocket. I had read many accounts of ethnographers and their fieldnotes and I was keen for my writing tools to become part of my personality in the field (Jackson 1990). Gradually, however, I learnt to use memory as a way to record ethnographic detail. Not that the presence of pen and paper intimidated my interlocutors, quite the contrary. Many, if not everyone I spoke to showed a keenness to be recorded and to talk that I had not anticipated. However, "building memory" (Bernard 2011, 274) came in handy because the activities I participated in were hands on, often alarmingly so. Lifting a 40kg image of the Lady of Sorrows onto a moving float and then holding it at a slant so the affixing mechanisms could be put in place left no room for holding a pen. During these moments, important conversations were had about the past of certain traditions, memories were exchanged about the fate of dresses and sacred paraphernalia over the years. Remembering these conversations and then writing them down became increasingly comfortable. But not all conversations were about traditions or festivities. Being part of the life of one's own village entails participating in conversations in myriad topics both related to the thesis' themes and not. During the organisation of religious events, talk amongst my participants revealed the politics of church leadership, of (religious) material heritage, and of the reproduction of festivities, for example. But conversations were also about any and all aspects and minutiae of village life: from births to deaths, from gossip about wealth and inheritances to the reciting of an individual's ailments, from celebrity TV programmes to the politics of Catalan nationalism. *All* of them informed this thesis, highlighting the complexities of what can and cannot be shared in it.

During interviews I collected oral histories of the religious past of the village and looked for views on the contemporary revival of religious traditions, particularly from those who had been involved in their organisation. Different people were differently positioned to talk about certain aspects of religious festivals: from those who organised them to members of the local government who allocated funding, to the priest who supervised unwillingly. The semi-planned questions posed during interviews were thus determined by the interviewee. Talk about the past and present was often accompanied by photographs. People always took photographs with their phones, as did I. As it becomes clearer in the thesis (see Chapter Three), memory and memorialising through photographs were part not only of the inventive processes of ritual renovation, but also of community identity. The gesture of taking one's

phone out and pointing at people or processes was part of my research participants' everyday practices. Whenever I used my own in similar contexts, I would be encouraged to focus on a certain aspect, or moment. In this way, memorialisation (my own as part of the research process, and my interlocutors') went often hand in hand with pictures and videos, of which I took and made several hundred (see Watson and Till 2010).

My notes rested in two repositories. On the one hand, by the end of my fieldwork I had a small shoe box full of notebooks of different sizes and colours, all with fragments of conversations and interviews, drawings, programmes and prayer cards. In the reading and re-reading of these notebooks towards the end of my fieldwork and, with more of an analytic eye, during the writing stage, unexpected memories relevant to the theme of each chapter revealed themselves. Accompanying these small notebooks, I kept an ethnographic diary in a word document in my computer. Most days I would spend some time typing what I had done during that day. In this way, I ended up with a cornucopia of ethnographic material. A considerable part of this amounted to "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973), that is, detailed descriptions of the context for an event, an anecdote or a gesture that included people's personal accounts and collective narratives. Some of it also became more of a personal diary in which I wrote the impressions that words, actions or gestures had left in me, sometimes about things that had little to do with the topics of my thesis *per se*. Re-reading these reflections over time has made me think about how my personal circumstances, my background at large, may have played a part not only in the way I conducted fieldwork, but also in the themes and topics I eventually wrote about. There are passages in my ethnographic diary, for example, where I write about my mother's health, about the trips to the hospital to check a lump in her thigh and the relief in knowing it was benign. This may have directed me towards thinking and worrying about how women look after each other formally and informally through the work of religious organisations (see Chapter Two).

Self-reflection brings necessary ethical issues to the fore, issues of sensitivity, and of the perils of essentialising those we study (Kobayashi, 2001). At the same time, there is no amount of reflection that can equalise power relations between the researcher and those we work with. Much as it is important to look at these relationships from a number of lenses, intersectionally (Yuval-Davis 2011), belonging, representation and meaning are (should be) contested terms

in this thesis and I am open to discussing them with potential readers, including my interlocutors. Some sections of this work have been shared with the groups and individuals with whom I worked and whose words and lived experiences pertain to the themes explored in each chapter. Feedback was mutual and mutually formative. Collaboration continues as I write the thesis: digital technology allows for permanent communication with my interlocutors, who keep me updated on their lives and concerns. But the writing is done solely by me. Representing those with whom I work is something that comes out of *my* fingers as I type. Thus representing them is representing my own messy entanglements of anxiety, worry, love, sexuality, and uncertainty that went/go together with fieldwork and in writing this thesis (Cupples 2002). Reflexivity, again, is important, but without the present work becoming a self-absorbed description of my positionality vis-à-vis the project: acknowledging that this thesis amounts to a partial understanding of the affairs I document should be sufficient (R. Butler 2001; Haraway 1988; Kobayashi 2001).

Yet in part at least all research processes involve a constant reflection on what we can and cannot write, which can be seen as some as "managing loyalties" (Myers 2010). In the case of the present work, I thought long about using some testimonials, particularly those that came from the local priest. I was aware that presenting him in a certain light would make my ambiguous position as a researcher-and-villager more acute in ways that could be seen as critical of the priest, even overtly so. Those testimonials that did not add value to my argument I discarded, but those that did, have stayed. In thinking about representing some of my interlocutors, I have taken into consideration the (my) community as a whole and how they (we) make claims about each other, including critical (sometimes judicious, sometimes slanderous) ones. In the long run, I found the priest held an ambiguous position himself. His claims oscillated between the religious and the secular, between representative of God on earth and secular citizen of the estate, expert in humanity and one more among the children of God, an ambiguity that can be seen as representative of the Catholic Church at large and which is explored in depth in different chapters of the thesis (see Mayblin 2017, 2019; Olson 2013). This ambiguity, in turn, made me think about my own ambiguities and about those that my interlocutors embodied in their relationship with the divine, the community, and the state. And about how their interplay motivated loyalties that also shifted and changed.

ii.ii.ii. A note on archives and language

Although I make sparse direct use of archival material, three archives opened their doors for me and the dusty boxes containing newspaper cuttings, programmes, photographs, books, pamphlets and self-publications helped me gain an invaluable insight into different expressions of faith and piety. In the first place, the *Lambda* archive and Jordi, its voluntary librarian, together with some of the members of the collective who I talked to regarding Valencian queer histories were of crucial help, not only as a way for me to develop parts of the thesis, but also in making me feel now part of those histories. As well as the *Lambda* archive, the door of two more collections outside Benaigua opened for me: the *Centro Ecuménico Interconfesional de València* (Interconfessional Ecumenical Centre of València), and the *Arxiu de Religiositat Popular de l'Arquebisbat* (Popular Religiosity Archbishopric Archive). The latter was run single-handedly by a priest passionate about the history of public expressions of religiosity, and which held printed pamphlets and *festa* literature about the province, including Benaigua, that he himself had started collecting in his youth. Over and above these collections, the most significant archives that I was given access to where those containing photographs and past *festa* pamphlets in the cupboards and drawers of the villagers' houses.

Language(s)

Working in my village, I got to use my mother tongue full time. Walking around Benaigua, you will hear the inflections and timbres of different languages, however. The main spoken language in the village is Valencian, a dialect of Catalan, itself one of the four recognised languages in Spain. Non-Spanish languages in Spain are only official in the geographically delimited regions where they are spoken, in the case of Valencian, the provinces of Alacant, Castelló and València, which conform the Valencian Autonomous Community. The use of "regional languages" for public purposes was banned during the Franco dictatorship, and so the use of Valencian as a vehicular language in schools, the media, and (by) the provincial government is relatively recent. Valencian was only included in the educational curriculum in 1983 and it began having its own TV and radio channels in 1989. This means that although Valencian was the mother tongue of most of whom I spoke to, many had not been schooled

in its written form. This, and the fact that Spanish continues to be the dominant language in the media and elsewhere, is one of the main reasons for most of the written religious literature and social media communications produced in the province to be in Spanish.

Thus, Spanish is also widely spoken in the village. As well as the socio-linguistic circumstances that I have just referred to, recent migration from Spanish-speaking provinces and Latin-American countries has contributed to an increase in the presence of spoken Spanish. Unlike other Catalan-speaking regions, migrants in Benaigua tend to learn Spanish first. Congregationally, Spanish is also the liturgical and ritual language of the congregation. Although sanctioned by the regional bishopric, Mass is rarely said in Valencian. Only the occasional sermon by a locum priest was said in Valencian while I was in the field. Prayers are mostly taught, memorised and said in Spanish, although many of my interlocutors switched to Valencian when voicing personal petitions. Because of the politico-historical fate of Valencian, however, the direction of this switching can be political. Spanish has also been historically the preferred language of communication among conservative political parties and their sympathisers, while the use of Valencian publicly may indicate a commitment to more liberal (if not outright leftist) ideologies. As I outline elsewhere in the thesis, the Spanish Catholic Church played a crucial role under the fascist regime. To many Spaniards, this link is still difficult to undo, especially in the light of a conservative re-entrenchment of the Catholic Church in the region. This means that a special linguistic sensibility needs to be exercised when entering Catholic spaces in the region.

All translations, unless indicated, are my own.

ii.iii. My interlocutor is my mother: studying 'home'

While I was in the field, I was teased lovingly during interviews, informal meetings or when taking pictures in a procession: "Take good pictures of me!", "Write everything I say, do not leave anything out!" The entreaties, which came from the many voices of relatives, friends and acquaintances, were said partly in pride, the pride in being documented and written about. One of the motivations to work on this thesis was the keenness with which my initial

interlocutors received the idea of me writing about their devotional practices as members of a *confraria*. "Nobody has written about what we do, and all this needs to be written before it disappears", was one of those comments which I still have written in my oldest notebook, a tiny bundle of papers I took with me on a pilgrimage to Fatima with my mother (a *confrare* herself) and those who would become my close interlocutors the following year. The original remit of the thesis, looking at lay women's role within the Catholic Church, quickly expanded partly through conversations during my upgrade paper, and partly because of the ever-unpredictable fluctuations and vicissitudes of fieldwork. This meant that my circle of interlocutors also grew, and eventually included some of my closest and oldest friends, neighbours and close relatives, as well as new acquaintances and friendships that sprang along the way, all of whom I still treasure.

After my return to Edinburgh my supervisors, friends and peers asked about my fieldwork experience. Often, I would retort with a feeling that I had not really left, and that fieldwork had not really finished, even though I had flown 2500km away from it/them (for, what is fieldwork but an amalgam of people and places?). I explained that my interlocutors, that is, my mother, my friends, my aunts and neighbours, were still near me through social media and on the phone, keeping me updated with the latest gossip, about church matters or otherwise, a sentiment shared by many of my PhD peers. This 'keeping in touch' is not uncommon among researchers (Norman 2000). In fact, if researchers have learnt anything from the "reflexive turn" (A. Coffey 1991; C. A. Davies 2008; England 1994) is that the field and home are not divisible and separate places, and that researchers' lives (should) remain porous to emotional, kinship, and even financial flows between the two (see, for example, Dalsgård 2018). Parallel debates about the insider/outsider status of the researcher in the field have echoed from the very start (Merton 1972) the interactive nature of the different positions the researcher occupies in the field, and the instability of boundaries that try to separate 'in' from 'out'.

Preparing for fieldwork, I found useful the wealth of literature that tackles and pokes at that instability, particularly work at the intersection of feminist and qualitative methodologies and which acknowledges positionality and the politics of representation as fundamental to the issue (Acker 2001; Gilbert 1994; Katz 1994; Merriam et al. 2001; Mullings 1999; Rose 1997;

Sharp 2005; Wolf 1996). Later, in the process of writing, and the concomitant reading that propels it, I came to realise that there are many of us who write about our own cultures and societies in one way or another. Some are encouraged by a desire to put forward first-hand accounts that can work as counter-narratives to established knowledges and assumptions (Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2019; Amadiume 1993). Others like me, a self-funded doctoral student, are also compelled by more practical reasons such as ease of accessibility (geographical and linguistic mainly) and economy of cost. Overall, this is work that scrutinises the position of the researcher as insider beyond the traditional assertion that being part of a certain society affords one ease of access to and rapport with its people and culture.

Leila Abu-Lughod (1988), for example, questions her insider Arab identity and writes about how being in the field, living with a Bedouin extended family, placed her in different positions vis-à-vis her interlocutors, positions that were negotiated in terms of gender, age, nationality, ethnicity and marital status. Kirin Narayan (1993) probes the concept of "native anthropologist", foregrounding colonial perceptions of authenticity in relation to those who studied their own (non-Western) societies, therefore revealing the pernicious link between the pairs insider/outsider and 'primitive'/'civilised'. Instead, Narayan proposes paying attention to the hybridity of our backgrounds (679-682), situating our knowledge(s) among and within the relationships that we establish with our interlocutors.

In this vein, more recent work by researchers that study their own societies explores and acknowledges the negotiations of commonalities and differences with our interlocutors, and how these are managed in the name of neutrality or to minimise conflicting (political) views (Ergun and Erdemir 2010). Some scholars pay attention to the advantages of living religion from the inside and reporting on it (Engelke 2002; Seremetakis 1991), but also the potential pitfalls of methodological assumptions that foreground normative understandings of the concept at hand (Sekerdej and Pasieka 2013). Contemporary work also pays attention to processes of de-familiarisation of the researcher with their own culture that can affect the research experience (Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2019; Mughal 2015; Munthali 2001). Much of the literature that I encountered on the topic is by scholars who have been educated or hold a position in Western institutions but write about their own non-Western societies. The de-familiarisation I refer to is reportedly affected by education (often in another language to that

of the researcher) and by the long absences from 'home' that this education or one's professional appointments entail (McFarlane-Morris 2020). This resonated with my own entanglements as a researcher, entanglements in which my concept of home is polyhedric, but in which I can be expected in challenging ways to be answerable as both scholar and informant (Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2019). Part of these entanglements, in addition, are given by the fact that we are working alongside members of our family and with friends, negotiating these relationships as we research, mixing the personal and the professional and sometimes becoming "observers observed" (Cupples and Kindon 2003, 211).

I found a handy way of referring to those of us who, in the context of research, have migrated and who feel that we are answerable to calls from both the 'home' in which we were born and grew, and the 'home' in which we exist and write now: I am a 'halfie'. Abu-Lughod (1991, 137) calls 'halfies' "people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage". For Abu-Lughod, the work of halfies and feminists, by virtue of our everyday dilemmas entailing self and other, has the potential to question over-generalising concepts of culture and its concomitant objectifying practices. In advocating for "ethnographies of the particular" (138) she calls for a subversion of "the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness" (154). My research experience was undeniably particular. My position in the field as son, friend and neighbour in addition to that of researcher, added particularities to the experience of the thesis (below), particularities that were and continue to be productive in a way different than generally 'reflexive' thoughts and considerations of a more philosophical nature (good accounts on this can be found too in Ferber 2006 and Kondo 1986). Thus, I acknowledge that, while my positionality allowed for certain doors to open, and avenues of enquiry materialise, it also precluded me from perhaps investigating others.

In an important way, I (re)entered the field by the guiding hand of my mother. Although I shared cultural and social commonalities with my interlocutors, it was through her that I gained access to many of them and their church-based social networks. As I point out in the introduction, the beginning of my fieldwork was marked by the challenge of both caring for my mother and doing ethnographic research. This meant that she and I received a wealth of visitors, some of whom became my interlocutors in time. My mother is well known in the

community. She is an assiduous church goer and is involved in *confraries* and prayer groups. She is also known for her good humour, her ability to bring people together and to get things done. Being the daughter of a talented seamstress who worked until well into her 70s, my mother and I grew up in a household where women came to try their outfits for weddings and other festivities, often exchanging gossip or pouring out their worries. My mother's door was, still is, constantly being knocked on for help, advice, and gossip.

Abu-Lughod (1988, 143), who was similarly introduced to her Bedouin interlocutors by her father, narrates how when entering the field her "Muslim credentials were shaky": raised in the US in a mixture of Western and Arab values, she did not pray and, although she was versed in the comportment and customs of Arab societies, she dressed, talked and thought differently. Reflecting on potential differences between my interlocutors and myself before going to the field, I also realised that having lived abroad for so long, living a non hetero-normative life and being a (cis) man may have added to the fact that I had estranged myself from the Catholic Church for most of my adult life. Yes, my Catholic credentials were also shaky. However, as the days and weeks passed after my arrival in Benaigua, I started to realise that those same factors were contributing, on many occasions, to the narrowing of differentials.

The fact that I was unmarried and had no children of my own meant that both my mother and the community saw me as available at all times. As a gay (cis) man, mostly 'out' in the community and the son of one of the active congregants, women warmed up to me and welcomed me in many of the activities and meetings which I had not foreseen joining. For nine months, my participants did not hesitate to send me messages, call me, or knock on my mother's door when looking for assistance: sometimes an image needed to be taken down from the altar in order to be dressed and they required *un home* (meaning someone strong rather than a man per se); other times help was sought for cutting out and delivering pamphlets, others still a catechist had fallen ill and needed a replacement to teach catechism to children. These affordances were supplemented by the fact that I had been 'away' from the Church for long. My interlocutors welcomed me (back) with added enthusiasm, some keen to include me in their stories of conversion and faith. Similar to Abu-Lughod's case in

which her father's perceived piety and earnestness were taken as guarantee of his daughter's behaviour in the field, my mother's were also transferred onto me.

My mother and I with the image of the Mother of God of the Carmel (Our Lady of Mount Carmel). Photo courtesy of Julia Martínez.

At the same time, however, my gender and sexuality affected the research scope in other, perhaps more limiting ways. For example, I write about gay and trans *men* and not women because, even though there were religious gay women in the congregation, my gentle enquiries into their lives met with little or no response. Also, an explicit expression of my sexuality would not have been welcome in certain religious spaces such as archives or the vestries of churches in which I interviewed priests. I explore how I negotiated the space of the closet in more detail in Chapter Four, but I want to point out in this section that men-only or men-majority spaces such as certain bars, the football pitch or men-only *confraries* were spaces where I felt, and still feel, uncomfortable due to past experiences of homophobia. When it came to the research project, this part of my past was therefore significant. Thus, I have drawn from my personal memories and experiences in writing this thesis, in particular making sense of how faith and religion bridge the intimate and the public in Benaigua, often

in contestation with normative (patriarchal) doctrine. Here I join a fertile and generous genealogy of researchers who have made sense of embodiment, misogyny and homophobia, religion and community, particularly in the Spanish-speaking worlds (Anzaldúa 1987; Anzaldúa and Keating 2002; Delgadillo 2011; Facio and Lara 2014). Aided by this engagement, I realised that the Catholic rituals which I learnt in my childhood from my mother, my grandmothers, and my catechists, are inscribed in my body in ways that are difficult to forget and, sometimes, to make sense of.

To conclude this section, I feel obliged to write briefly about my own spiritual positioning within the field, a positioning that shifted over the nine months and continues to shift restlessly as I write this. In the field, I came to experience and question myself in ways that I could not have anticipated. I had left the UK an atheist, firmly rooted in a secular interpretation of the world. Although raised Catholic, the sexually repressive core of normative Catholic doctrine came to undo my faith during my late teenagehood. Religious leaders at the time explicitly told me that I could not exist as both gay and Catholic. In my 'new' life in the UK, friends and partners seldom spoke of God, or faith; and in academia, secularism felt (problematically) like the default framework from which to write and think about religion. Nevertheless, by the time I returned to the UK after nine months of fieldwork at home, the epithet 'atheist' felt uneasy, itchy, like that woollen jumper that we find ourselves still wearing on the first warm day of spring. I had seen how gay men like me in Benaigua (and elsewhere) had made sense of Christianity through their interpretation and embodiment of faith, contesting potentially claustrophobic spaces such as the closet. This inspired me. Although I still hesitate to call it an awakening, a spiritual curiosity had definitely been stirred, something had been pulled inside me.

And when something pulls, I write. I have written poetry since I was a child, and poetry became a source of questioning and caring for myself in the field. For me, poetry can be conducive to reflection, expression and ultimately self-care (Almudéver Chanzà, *forthcoming*). Poetry emerged, while I was in the field, as a form of contemplation in which, as well as saying things to and about the divine (whatever that may be), I talked reassuringly to myself, to the landscapes that my body is, at a time of doubt and need (Ó Tuama 2019). What these fieldwork circumstances reveal perhaps is that, as a corollary to what I have

written above, researching ‘home’ may be viewed as “*tierra entre medio”* or *nepantla*, that Anzalduan concept that signifies an in-between space characterised as “an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (Anzaldúa 2002, 1). Fieldwork ‘at home’ has the potential to activate myriad liminal spaces in order to cope, confront and survive with others in the many scenarios we inhabit (Facio 2014).

CHAPTER ONE: Co-existing through opposition: iconoclasm and internal cohesion in a Spanish village

1.1. New Iconoclasts

One late-winter evening I headed to Benaigua's main square after dinner. The streets were cold and empty. There was a drizzle that put the tarmacked road and the few streetlamps in oneiric conversations of orange light. I could hear my own wet steps. I had left mum at home, comfortable but with some painkillers next to the armchair where she sat, telly on. A week before I moved back to my family home to conduct my PhD fieldwork, she had had a fall and had damaged her back. She was now to have complete rest for a month, and I was to be her carer. My brother had secured a job around that time, one that would predictably finish in a few months at best; precarity for manual labourers was astounding. He also had a family to think of. So, I tried to leave the house for short periods only, to make sure mum was with company. The evenings were an opportunity for me to get out and about. Benaigua was at that time quiet and shivery under the cold weather.

I walked past a small, tired-looking building, 1960s straight lines, shutterless square windows overlooking two of the central narrow streets of the village. That evening the lights of the entrance and the second floor were on. A man more or less my age was hunched by the main door, smoking a cigarette under the inefficient protection of a narrow balcony. The door was wide open: on Tuesday and Thursday evenings volunteers from *Caritas*[8] set up a local food bank. Volunteers also collected papers for grants and food vouchers for people in need. '*Bona nit*', the man said. '*Bona nit*', I replied. A former centre for the local Agricultural Co-operative, the building had been in the hands of the Church for nearly two decades; the priest had purchased it from the sale of the old cinema to the local government. The old cinema had now been done up as a Cultural Centre and the old Co-op was a multi-purpose building where different groups connected to the Church worked, held meetings and had their base, including *Caritas* and the *torró*-making confrares (see Chapter Two).

[8] *Caritas* is a Catholic aid organisation with local and global presence. More on its importance for the village, including its congregation, in the next chapter.

I walked on and soon arrived at Benaigua's main square, empty, silvery. The Music Society bar had no customers. The waitress swept the floor, dragging the heavy chairs this way and the other. The church bell tower looked as if it was indifferent to the rain or the silence, secure in the knowledge that none of those would last for long. The next building with its lights on and an open door was the *Centre Parroquial*[9]. There was nobody looking after the door. I wiped my feet on the mat and climbed the stairs, to the first of many Neo-Catechumenal lessons which I attended from January till the Spring. The Neo-Catechumenal Way, or The Way, is a new expression of the Catholic Church led by lay people. In the last two decades it has irrupted in the religious panorama of the village with increasing force. The Way's agenda of conversion and spiritual interiorization through demanding regimes of reading and testing, together with a vehement detachment from material practices, conform to a process of 'purification' (Keane 2007; Latour 1993) that enters in direct conflict with the embodied rituals and cultural traditions that the rest of the village congregation are in the process of updating and renovating. Thus, this chapter introduces the theological dynamics of Benaigua, tracing the competitive yet silent trajectories that result from the confrontation between members of The Way and the established local congregation.

The struggles that ensue between these two factions of the Catholic community not only aim to secure worldly resources such as priestly and liturgical time or church-owned spaces, but they also point at other-worldly competition between differing theologies and understandings of the divine. Because of the crucial positioning of the priest, who is himself both the only priest attending to the whole congregation, *and* a member of the Neo-Catechumenal local community, the themes of iconoclasm and anticlericalism are central to the chapter, in particular a critique of Robert Redfield's (1960) dichotomous "little tradition" and "big tradition" (see also Behar 1990; Brandes 1976). Although I pay attention to classical definitions of 'sects' (Troeltsch 1931; Weber 1922), tensions are ultimately conducive to a finely balanced co-existence, characteristic of the "elasticity" of the Catholic Church at large (Mayblin 2017b, 2019b). Heterodox beliefs and practices emerge from socially situated

[9] A building adjacent to the priest's house, belonging to the provincial Bishopric and which is also used by the various local religious associations for catechesis in preparation for the first communion, confirmation and so on. It is also the main meeting point for members of The Neo-Catechumenal Way.

interrogations of the pairings absence/presence and silence/voice (M. Meyer 2012; Minca 2009) influencing the villagers' experiences of faith and public piety. The chapter thus expands and questions current spatial notions of intra-religious co-existence, anticipating the thesis' concerns with religious leadership and agency.

From early January to late March, I took part in a Neo-Catechumenal introductory catechesis. The Neo-Catechumenal Way, The Way, or *El Camí* as the local members called it, is "an itinerary for the rediscovery of Baptism [sic] and an ongoing education in the faith" (Laicis 2002), an expression of the Catholic Church based on "conversion and catechesis" (Ibid) that originated in Madrid in the 1960s (see Argüello 2012 for a first hand account of its genesis). The Way thus fits into the sociological category of new conversion-led religious movements in which members actively opt into religion, rather than "inherit" it through familial or societal ties (Lehmann 2013), a distinction that will become crucial later in the chapter. Members of the Way are offered a Christian lifestyle based on what is termed 'the tripod': the Word of God, Eucharist and communal living (Laicis 2008, 5). This experiential tripod was, not accidentally, highlighted as fundamental to Christian life by the Second Vatican Council, an event which many members of the local communities of The Way acknowledged as crucial to the organisation's ethos.

Through a sustained programme of readings and group discussions of the bible, communities of 10 to 20 people are established. They 'walk' together for a number of years in a formative itinerary that is meant to emulate the long instruction that people underwent before being christened in the early days of the Church. Members of The Way are also scrutinised periodically by trained instructors in order to ascertain the strength of their faith and theological knowledge. Neo-Catechumenals not only learn about the history, doctrine and central tenets of the Christian (Catholic) faith, but also, as I heard on more than one occasion, they strive to be an example of a community of love and support. In this way, some members were involved in local charities and other religious movements such as youth organisations or *confraries*. Consistent with other conversion-led movements, members of The Way spent a considerable amount of time (and money) as visible representatives of the movement, but at the same time gave the impression of inwardness due to the secrecy of their rites (more later). However, contrary to Protestant variations of these movements (Lehmann 2013, 656),

The Way is deeply invested in adherence to doctrine, to Catholic theology and to the transcendental (Ibid). And the movement is a populous one. From Argentina to China, Italy to Australia, there are an estimated one million members of the Way in all continents of the world. The Way also has its own seminaries and monasteries, where priests and nuns are trained and live, as well as hundreds of lay families that are said to be *en misión* (Laicis 2008, 25), that is, living and evangelising in countries that are not their own[10]. The Way has become, in its short life, a force to be reckoned with in Catholicism.

Failed selfie with fellow neophytes during bible study time at a Neo-Catechumenal retreat.

Neo-Catechumenals are also informally known in Spain as *Kikos*, particularly by those who are not members of The Way, in reference to Kiko Argüello, one of the two founders of the movement and still the head of the organisation, whose charismatic speeches in front of crammed football stadia can be watched on YouTube. The epithet *Kiko*, however, has become in common parlance a synonym of ultra-conservative Catholicism, of large families, and of secretive rituals, according to many of my interlocutors both religious and not. Indeed, although the Vatican granted The Way legal and official status in 2015, there are voices within the ecclesiastical hierarchy that fear a schismatic threat to various aspects of Catholic liturgy and doctrine (Fülep and Schneider O.R.C. 2016; Luna Tobar 1993), as well as social aspects of the faith (Mickens 2014; Thornhill 2007). Hence, the Neo-Catechumenal Way occupies an ambiguous place in the contemporary imaginary of Catholics: it is often seen either as too conservative or too modern both by the laity and the priestly hierarchy alike.

[10] One of those very families is from Benaigua, and at the time of my fieldwork they had just moved to Estonia.

In Benaigua, the relationship between the congregation and members of the Way is an on-going struggle. The Neo-Catechumenals' regular meetings in private homes or alternative settings to the church, their near-absence from displays of traditional religiosity, as well as their perceived privileged access to resources have been a source of anxiety for many, exacerbated by the fact that the village priest himself is a member of one of the two Neo-Catechumenal local communities. In conversations and events that I participated in, gossip often alluded to the latest refusal of the priest to attend this or that event, or anxieties about the probability of a procession due to the priest's perceived disinterest in traditional forms of Catholicism and his preference for the new movement. In the next section, I explore the particular theologies at play, paying attention to the priest's own agenda in comparison to that of his flock at large, and of previous priests to Benaigua.

1.1.1. *'Out with them!'* Enter the priest.

In an early afternoon much later in August I walked to the *casa abadia*, the priest's residence in Benaigua. The sun beat down and there were not many people in the streets. The village became a desert most of the summer: those who could afford it, rented a flat by the seaside, or owned one and moved there for as long as they could. As I waited for the priest to open the door, I heard a voice nearby, '*qui és? hola?!*' It was him, calling from behind a window shutter. I suddenly found myself talking to a closed window in the middle of the street. I reminded him he had given me an appointment to come to see him that day. He asked me to come back in the evening. 'Before or after Mass?' I asked. 'What time is Mass today?' he asked in reply. I stared at the shutter. Was he not supposed to know what time he was saying Mass? 'At eight', I replied. 'Come at seven', he replied. I said thank you and waited for a moment in case he had not gone.

At seven, I was there again. After much knocking and ringing the bell the priest opened the door, sweating, nodding repeatedly as a way of greeting me. We sat at his desk table in the hallway as was customary during our meetings. He turned the fan on, directing it this way and the other as we both battled with documents, pamphlets and bits of paper that wanted to take off in all directions. He tried different configurations so it would not interfere with the

papers, particularly with those inside a bulging blue folder. The folder contained the statistics that I had inquired about, numbers of villagers being christened, married, having their first communion and funerals. Although I suspected I could get this information from the provincial diocese archives in town, I wanted to go through these figures with the priest, find his views on how these numbers had changed in recent decades, if at all. Slowly, with parsimony, he started taking each piece of paper, examining it, considering it. The fan made the task even slower.

The numbers of people having one sacrament or another in Benaigua had definitely gone down, in the priest's view. Soon, he was talking about what he often referred to as 'the plague of laicism', that is, the progressive loss of faith in favour of secular beliefs based on scientific progress and on economic wealth. That was the reason the priest gave for the decrease in the number of christenings and weddings since 1999 and up to the present, the period contained in the blue folder. He pointed also at the lack of social interest in the church. 'In olden times', he said, 'people would come and pray to this saint or the other, seeking protection over a crop, or an ill child. So much ignorance', he said. I said that I could still see traditions in Benaigua that had to do with protection. I was referring then to the anointing of children's throats with blessed oil. Some of the more veteran women involved in teaching religion to children preparing for the first communion still performed it around February, invoking Saint Blaise in order to protect their young pupils from colds in the coming spring and summer. 'Oil?!' the priest said in the hot hallway, 'I'd throw it all out if I could! But I don't because it would be a scandal. Never mind oil, if you have a sore throat go to the doctor for the love of God.' He got up. I did as well.

We headed to the door as he continued: '*Confraries* are on their way out anyway. Processions? What for? People don't need entertaining any more, they have TVs, theatres, cinemas.' As he said this, numbers of people came to mind, those who I had helped in the past nine months to get images ready for public rituals and pilgrimages, their joy, their struggles, the passing of devotional and material knowledge and its contestation, the different sorts of capital that these peoples invested in and which circled around church traditions (more on this on consecutive chapters). 'If it was up to me', the priest continued,

'I'd keep one Christ, one Mary[11], perhaps the patron saint in the local church, that's it. The rest, out!' he went on. Bearing in mind that the village church held just under 20 statues of saints, and of different venerations of Christ and Mary, as well as many painted ones on walls and ceilings, this was a radical proposal. In the darkness of the hallway behind him I suddenly saw a fluttering of whiteness, like a small flock of uncertain doves jumping off the priest's desk; many of the papers had started being blown away by the fan from toppling piles, irremediably, with a life of their own.

This section begins with a visual metaphor of flight: the flight of religious traditions from the hands of Benaigua's priest. Although a flight always assumes a departure from one place in order to land onto another, in Benaigua the landing was always taking place and never quite done with. Tradition seemed to be shaped by different people at different times, from the dissent of new movements to conservative modes of religious tradition from older parishioners, from a new generation of young women that wanted to 'modernise' it to gay and trans men who appropriated it through gentle *queer* nudges. The chapters in this thesis thus offer a number of understandings and versions of this flight from the point of view of Benaigua's villagers and their priest. I chose to open this first chapter with an ethnographic picture that is representative of the whole thesis, but also of a pressing preoccupation of the villagers, that is, their relationship with a priest that had particularly iconoclastic attitudes towards religious traditions.

The priest as agent of religious authority has been one of the central characters in the collective imagination of nations in which Catholicism has an important historical presence, in and beyond Europe. As agent of conversion, centralised orthodoxy and the violence associated with these technologies of control, fact and fiction mix in accounts of, for example, Tomás de Torquemada (1420-1498), head of the Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834), or of the armies of priests that travelled to the 'New World' in order to forcibly convert indigenous populations. The figure of the priest continues to be present in Spanish-speaking cultures, not only in history but also in classical literature and in popular culture. The TV series *El Pájaro Espino* (US 1983) or a dramatization of the *fin-de-siècle* Spanish novel *La Regenta* (Spain 1995)

[11] The priest referred to images/statues.

with their central characters of priests battling with love and desire, held the breath of large Spanish audiences in the 1980s and 90s. Critically acclaimed films have denounced the power that priests hold over their flock in *El crimen del padre Amaro* (Mexico 2002) or the sexual abuse scandal in *La mala educación* (Spain 2004). More recent films such as *Mi querida cofradía* (Spain 2018) or the popular Valencian comedy soap *Senyor Retor* (2019-present) not only continue to include the figure of the priest as a central character of their jocose narrative, but also consider the tensions and accommodations between the priest and his congregation as still relevant in order to make sense of contemporary Spanish society.

The role of the priest in Iberian communities is well documented. In some of the earliest ethnographies of rural communities in Spain, all written during the Francoist dictatorship, the priest was one of the key members of the "ruling group" (Pitt-Rivers 1971, 32), the cadre of "influential, professional and wealthy people" who linked the village to the state "through political and social contacts" (Ibid). This group included externally appointed officials such as town clerks or the local doctor, and also wealthy landowners (Ibid, 67). The priest was an intercessor in ways other than spiritual intervening, for example, in neighbourly disputes (Ibid, 130). In these ethnographies, the priest was largely in charge of local devotions, managing festivities, keeping a close eye on the brotherhoods that were linked to popular devotions (Brettell 1990; Christian 1972; Pina-Cabral 1986). In Benaigua, there was a similar consensus when villagers reminisced about former priests. Not only had they been crucially instrumental in the development of certain devotions from the spiritual and material point of view, they had also been closely involved with the running of *confraries*, new youth organisations, and even setting up new devotions.

In the mid 1950s, Don Pablo had been responsible almost single-handedly for the canonisation of the Mother of God of the Carmel[12] as patroness of the village, beseeching the Vatican directly for a proclamation decree. This action solidified a rich culture around the devotion of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel during Benaigua's summer festivities, inaugurating

[12] Although the usual nomenclature for this title of the Virgin Mary in English is "Our Lady of Mount Carmel", throughout the thesis I use "Mother of God of the Carmel" [*la Mare de Déu del Carme*] to reflect the unique Valencian inflection of using "mother" rather than "virgin" when referring to Mary. I will do the same in Chapter Three to refer to the commonly known veneration of the "Assumption of Mary" as "Mother of God in August" [*la Mare de Déu d'Agost*] as it's known in the region.

what some in the village saw as the golden era of public religiosity (García Martínez 2021). Don Pablo was succeeded by Don Víctor, who established a new religious festivity in 1949 to be celebrated every February in commemoration of Saint Blaise. This new addition to the religious calendar aimed to involve children in the church, organising a full day of activities for them, including games, fireworks and a pilgrimage to a nearby shrine. In fact, the peak of youth involvement in the local church also seemed to have happened under the supervision of Don Víctor, as he encouraged the development of *Juniors*, a pan-Valencian Catholic youth organisation. In this way, Benaigua's local devotions and their material cultures (including images in the Church) seemed to be the result of a historical process led by consecutive priests who were instrumental in the rootedness and popularity of these devotions (Christian 1972, 97–98). The devotional palimpsest of the village, however, did not bear the exclusive hand of the priest. Don Pablo and Don Víctor may have established devotions as a result of their own spiritual interests or/and the interests of missions which they may have been close to, but devotional practices in Benaigua were importantly linked to its social and economic circumstances, and in particular to the salience of the seasons in the agricultural cycle of the village, something that both former priests must have been sensitive to.

When don Pablo secured the canonisation of the Mother of God of the Carmel, he must have been aware of the agricultural calendar, in which July, when the feast of the Carmel is celebrated, signalled a lull in the productivity of the village. Similarly, Don Víctor linked a devotional feast dedicated to children to the seasonal onset of colds and flus, Saint Blaise being the protector of illnesses of the throat and nose, and the importance of the good health of younger generations so as to be able to take over the work of the land from older generations when the time came. Benaigua's seasonal calendar mapped onto its religious calendar (see Chapter Three for more on the significance of festive calendars for village identity). Although the appeal to gods and divinities to protect one's crop or one's health is not limited to Catholicism, Catholic theologians have argued that land-based economies (as opposed to Protestant industrial or urban ones) have tended to have more of a connection to Catholicism (Schmitt 1996, 10), through its myriad interceding prayers and rituals. Benaigua's devotion to Saints Abdon and Sennen, protectors against hail and unseasonal weather, was most popular at a time when agriculture was of overriding importance to

villagers' livelihood, both as an immediate source of food and as an opportunity to participate in commerce. They remain patron saints of the village.

It seems that previous priests not only tolerated but also encouraged a type of faith that made full use of the range of intercessors in the Catholic pantheon. According to Christian (1972, 185), this model of spiritual leadership is concurrent with a pre-Vatican II model of priesthood described in terms of intercession or intermission: "Communication with other worlds was to be mediated by the Church and its ministers" (Christian 1972, 185). Even though Benaigua's priests were trained formally in the theological foundations of the faith, and used sermons and addresses in pamphlets[13] as an opportunity to expound and clarify these, they also seemed to have acknowledged the need for the villagers to engage in what Robert Redfield (1960) called the "little tradition". For Redfield (1960), the "little tradition" refers to the heterodox set of traditions and religious customs that are localised and unofficial from the point of view of the Church. In opposition, he identifies the "big tradition" as that which encompasses the orthodox, written-down set of beliefs and practices followed by the elite. Brandes (1976), takes this nomenclature in his study of a Spanish rural community to observe that those who followed the "little tradition" did not differentiate between their customary understandings and performances of religious tradition and the more orthodox, doctrinal even, elements of that tradition. For them, all of it was religion, and faith sustained it. Priests, on the other hand, could and did differentiate, being able to discern, catechise and censor public expressions of piety if necessary.

This much is clear from the opening ethnographic vignette of this chapter. Benaigua's current priest was quick to critique the interceding nature of the villagers' faith in the past, although he never mentioned any of his predecessors' attitudes towards it. His arrival in the 1980s in order to take over the duties of Don Víctor as he approached retirement, signalled a progressive change in priestly attitudes to local religious customs, a change that, again according to Christian (1972, 186), is telling of a post-Vatican II generation of priests who advocate for a rational appraisal of the relationship of the people with God through

[13] Pamphlets were printed and sold (or given for free) by the organisers of each public religious festivity. The contents included the running order of the celebrations, an address by the village mayor and another by the priest, as well as a thank you note by the organisers and adverts for local businesses.

eliminating intercessors such as saints, the souls in purgatory or even Mary[14]. These priests see in the relationship between members of the Christian faith the true model for faith. Christ becomes inspiration, rather than a source of divinity or assistance (Ibid). With the elimination of public rituals of intercession, religion becomes a disenchanted affair (Weber 1922) and secularisation, a process hence born from within Christianity (Brandes 1976; Christian 1972). I come back to these themes in the next section, linking them to some of the principal tenets of the Neo-Catechumenal Way.

1.1.2. The Neo-Catechumenal community

A banner advertised *Catequesis de Adultos* from the balcony of the *casa parroquial*. When I inquired about it, I realised that the teaching was headed by Ernesto, someone I knew through friends from Edinburgh. Ernesto was in his 50s and a teacher in the local, publicly-funded secondary school, tall, friendly and always interested in knowing what life was like when living abroad. As it turned out, Ernesto's wife Pura (also a member of The Way and also a teacher) and I had attended music classes together many years ago, in the music society school. I must have been a teenager; I then sang in a folk band for a year or two. While I hadn't continued with the lessons, remaining a frustrated musician, Pura learnt enough to play the guitar and sing, essential skills for members of The Way to celebrate eucharists and other rituals.

That first night in January, it was Ernesto's turn to deliver the lesson. When I entered one of the rooms on the first floor, probably the largest in the building and laid out exclusively for use by the Neo-Catechumenals, people were engaged in small talk. Ernesto saw me and came to greet me, effusively. Pura also came and gave me the customary two kisses, 'I haven't seen you for such a long time!' she said beaming. We chatted for a while. Later, I raised a hand to the priest, and he greeted me back from his chair, in one corner of the room. I mouthed 'How are you?', using the polite 'you' in Valencian. He responded in the same mime-like gestures

[14] Benaigua's current priest, in our conversations and during sermons, often made a point of critiquing those who over-relied on Mary: 'People are confused' he said once. 'They think Mary is a goddess, and she's not. She's a reflection of Christ. The mother doesn't save! Only Christ is the saviour.'

saying '*Anem anant'*, a typical Valencian expression somewhere between 'not too bad' and 'it could be worse'. I sat down and greeted those near me, some I knew, some I didn't.

Meanwhile Ernesto had walked back to a tall wooden lectern and arranged some papers on it. Behind him, the rest of the catechists sat in contemplation, some tuning their guitar, the priest in his usual grey trousers and jumper, chatted to one of them. We all had our coats on, as the room relied on a sole gas heater which had just been turned on. Opposite the catechists there sat about ten of us, chitchatting, complaining about the damp cold. That night there were three women of different ages, a young couple attending the sessions in preparation for their marriage, and three senior members of *Juniors*, the local Catholic youth organisation. Ernesto cleared his voice generously; we quieted down. Then, grabbing the towering silver cross which always stood next to the speaker, he began. Ernesto's voice was thunderous, and we the neophytes bathed in it, sat in a semi-circle facing him.

Waiting for the catechist at a Neo-Catechumenal retreat.
On the left, the tall crucifix that accompanies the
meditations. Photo by author.

On that first session, Ernesto laid out the aim of the catechesis: 'to form groups characterised by the love to one another and our unity. That way, being an example for others, 'everybody will want to be part of our community.' Although we had been using Valencian when greeting each other, the catechists, including Ernesto, switched to Spanish when catechising (more on this later). Ernesto proceeded to outline a recent social history of humankind. According to Ernesto, humans had become nihilistic, deceived by two great world wars, and as a consequence had pursued a Marxist agenda, in order to change social structures in search for justice and equality. To my surprise, there was no mention of the Spanish Civil War. He

continued: advancements in science and technology, together with an improvement in living conditions through economic prosperity had further eliminated the need for transcendence. Humans, according to Ernesto, had replaced God and put themselves in God's place. The session finished with an explanation of a table Ernesto had drawn on the board earlier, and that looked like this:

Religion	**Faith**
Fear	Love
Rites	Go to Christ
Sacrifice	Salvation

Christianity was, according to Ernesto, not a religion. Religion demands rites, public expressions of faith, and sacrifices to God in order to obtain its benevolence, its favours. The overriding sentiment then was fear. Faith, however, did not demand anything according to him, only love from our side, our love of God: 'God is always open' Ernesto said, 'and so when you go and encounter Christ, you can be saved. Do you understand?' The priest asked to speak. 'Christianity is not a religion, it's not a moralism that requires effort', he continued, 'what effort? God loves you all the same!' he emphasised, raising his shoulders and arms. 'That's the most important thing' interjected Ernesto, 'God loves you all the same.' These, according to the catechists, were *the good news.*

Over the course of the following sessions, as the winter gave way to spring, Ernesto and other members of the Way continued to talk to us about the love of God, the possibility of salvation, the importance of studying the word of God in the bible and the gospels. In all of the sessions, sections from the old and new testament were read and commented, psalms were always sung, accompanied by Pura's guitar, and a volunteer who took the tambourine. Sometimes worksheets were given out and we did small group work, but most of the times these were not the focus of the session, rather the speeches that the catechists had prepared were. These were rousing, vociferous exercises that often flowed into the sea of impassioned improvisation. Having experienced previous catechesis as a child and later as a young adult in preparation for first communion and then confirmation, the messages and the way they were delivered was at odds with the general teachings I had received then, in which God was

indeed a fearful figure who was meant to pass judgment on all things we did. The Christianity that The Way offered was not only different in content, but also in form to that which I had previously known and, presumably, to that which was known and practised by other villagers.

These differences in form and content find clear echoes in academic literature. As a point of departure, I use Eric Hoenes del Pinal's (2017) work with a Guatemalan *Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement* (CCRM) congregation. The CCRM expression of the Catholic Church also has its origin in the 1960s and the momentous resolutions on participation of the laity in the life of the Church passed during Vatican II. The CCRM and the Neo-Catechumenal movement have a number of traits in common, not least the fact that the some of the hierarchy was reluctant (initially at least) to welcome the movements into the Church (Ciciliot 2019). An effort to justify the movements on theological grounds was needed for their formal acceptance, an acceptance that was seen by some as a precautionary measure to avoid splintering from the Church (Ciciliot 2019; Hoenes del Pinal 2017; McDermott 2002). Formally, both movements share in common the long and loud speeches made by their members, the importance of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the speaker, and the emphatical use of repetition. In addition, a similar switch between languages exist: in Benaigua and in San Felipe in Guatemala Spanish is used as standard language in the movements' proceedings, considered more appropriate for the expression of one's spiritual experience or the exposition of finer doctrinal points, away from Q'eqchi' (Hoenes del Pinal 2017, 174) or Valencian. As well as attending to the politics of language in the region (which I describe in the Introduction), using an international language such as Spanish pays testament to the global drive behind growing movements such as The Way or CCRM. Similarly, Ernesto's succinct history of humankind seemed to be told in a way that could appeal to anyone anywhere: more is known, globally, about World War II than about the Spanish Civil War.

Returning to Hoenes del Pinal (2017, 176), through the use of "*hermano"* and "*hermana"* [brother and sister] to refer to each other, the use of common Spanish vocabulary and similar expressions, CCRM practitioners and sermon-preachers in San Felipe aligned their discourses to certain "models of moral personhood" and religious identity "through talk", defining thus what it meant for a person to be a member of the discrete religious community. The verbal repetition of some of the central tenets of The Way gave its members in Benaigua, not only

their individual moral personhood, but also a sense of *collective* personhood, one in which the language of renewal was central. All members of The Way I spoke to were convinced that The Neo-Catechumenal Way was a revitalising force in Catholicism. How this renewal was being implemented differed from person to person. Some thought The Way was the future of Catholicism. In this future, attendance to Mass would not be appraised through the numbers of people occupying the pews, but through their spiritual quality. Others saw in the Way an explicit drive to put in practice the advancements in the role of the laity put forward by the Vatican II and so a chance to make the church a more participatory place; others still saw in the Way a solution to human and social evils such as alienation or greed through small communities of family-oriented individuals that loved and supported each other. This collective sense of revitalisation of the Church from within was often defined in terms of theological accuracy and spiritual authenticity against the mirror of traditional forms of religiosity deemed inappropriate, inauthentic, or antiquated.

One sunny morning in early Spring I had coffee with Artur, a recent law graduate and a local catechist who prepared teenagers for their confirmation. Encouraged by his parents, he had joined The Way when he was a young teenager, just like his three other siblings had done. At the time of my fieldwork, he was the only one of the four who was still committed to The Way, although in consequent conversations he would intimate that he was having doubts about it. That morning, however, while talking about the religious community at large in the village, I pointed out the number of *confraries* and religious associations that worked in the continuation of tradition. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘that’s natural religiosity’. I had heard this concept used a number of times during the catechesis. When I asked him to explain, he told me that all humans experience a need to believe in a higher being. One way of appeasing this need, he continued, was through tradition, that is, relying on images, processions and customs such as saying novenas, or making promises to saints. ‘But natural religiosity, tradition, does not have a deep spiritual content’, Artur said.

I pressed Artur further. I told him about how I had helped recently a number of male villagers to arrange the image of Christ on the cross onto its float, in preparation for the yearly Easter procession. I had seen some of them kissing the image, calling it beautiful things, looking at it in contemplation in a way that I thought expressed their spiritual connection to the

transcendental. Artur replied quickly, 'I would tell you that what they were doing there was furthering tradition, a tradition that is based on the image itself.' In his view, locals were taken by the image alone, which triggered certain emotions in them. He said that *that* was different to what *he* felt when he saw the image, that is, appreciating Christ's ultimate sacrifice in dying for the sins of humanity. 'We're different, spiritually, that's all', he concluded. I could not but think that Artur's last comment went some way to disguise a sense of theological authority over the rest of the congregation; he knew better.

Artur echoed something that many members of The Way talked about often, including the priest. 'To appeal to an image of a saint or the mother of God is not a bad thing,' the priest said to me once in reference to the village congregation, 'but it means that the person is a spiritual pauper.' The priest had not as many qualms as Artur to qualify the differences between The Way and the rest of the congregation. As we saw above, these attitudes are compatible with post-Vatican II priestly politics which place "traditional" Catholics in a primitive stage of spiritual evolution. The priest continued: 'We need to make people move from a natural religion to Christianity proper.' I thought of Ernesto's catechism, of his illustrative table explaining the differences between religion and faith. It was clear that the Neo-Catechumenals saw themselves as legitimate Christians, those with a more authentic faith, one that had a direct line to God the Father and tried to demarcate itself from public forms of religiosity involving intermediaries, both material and immaterial. The Way, its spiritual itinerary of training and education, was seen by its members as a spiritual affordance that placed them on a higher plain when it came to their faith.

In the scant academic literature on The Neo-Catechumenal Way, knowledge is presented as the gateway to this higher plane. One consequence of knowledge acquisition and re-deployment, for example, is the revivification of ritual: the Eucharist is lived in a way in which the members of The Way feel they are *actively* in the ritual (as opposed to *passively* attending the ritual) (Contiero 2012, 12). Other ritualised celebrations mark similarly the passing of tests (*"escrutinios"*) and proceeding to the next "step". "Rites" and "exorcisms" solemnise one's progression too (Blázquez 1988, 66). Interestingly, the importance of spiritual progress and advancement was disconnected from traditional notions of Christian eschatology: the aim was not salvation, according to the Neo-Catechumenals, for you could be saved in your

everyday relationship to God. Implicit in Ernesto's catechesis above, and explicit in many of the addresses from the catechists to us neophytes, was the message that the Kingdom of God had arrived, that we did not have to wait for our death in order to be granted citizenship in the realm of salvation. That difference meant that, although Neo-Catechumenals participated in a strongly teleological training, salvation was presupposed in the growth of one's faith through learning, at every step, rather than an end in itself. In constant training, the members of The Way became "transitional beings" (Castilla Vázquez 1999, 4), constantly between this world and the next. While matters such as salvation, intercession or communication with God in the past may have been a mystery (may continue to be a mystery for many Catholics), the Neo-Catechumenals had dispelled unknowability as much as possible, placing one's responsibility for one's salvation in one's capacity for learning.

Here freedom, frequently deployed during Neo-Catechumenal catechesis, came into play together with agency and independence. Salvation became one's responsibility in a continuous one-to-one transaction with God which required the occasional presence of the priest for rituals and sacraments. Neo-Catechumenals strived for independence from intermediaries such as images or the priest; in that way, they were deemed free to pursue salvation independently. As I indicate above, language became central to the formation of one's spiritual interiority and, ultimately, to the development of an autonomous subject (Keane 2006). I follow here Webb Keane's (2007) application of Latour's concept of "purification" to the study of Protestant conversion. For the latter, purification entails the historical separation of two spheres, the human from the non-human, culture from nature; purification entails the reverse of mediation. Keane picks up this development and writes about the Reformation as concomitant to the dematerialisation of religion, a push back to the self and away from rituals, images, and intermediaries such as saints of even the priest.

My interlocutors seemed to want to separate materiality and spirituality discursively too, the latter being the place where agency emanated. Learning and language signalled a process of interiorisation, a characteristic of purification, in which intermediaries, again, were in excess. In addition, there is something else that purification entails: as Artur and the priest both suggested, Neo-Catechumenals had progressed from a rudimentary understanding of Christianity, to an increasingly illuminated state, in which freedom was achieved by leaving

behind superstition and fetishism (Ibid, 5). On the whole, the Neo-Catechumenals perceived themselves as modern, some would say Protestant, while the rest of the congregation remained in the past.

Although I could see these epistemic power dynamics taking place in Benaigua, it was not all as it appeared. On a few occasions, I witnessed debates between members of The Way and non-members in which knowledge was used as a marker of difference. As I will show, the issue of materiality was central to these debates too. Once, I spent some time with Lola, one of the veteran members of the congregation who was very active in the organisation of religious festivals, as well as imparting catechism to children aged five to eight in preparation for their first communion (see Chapter Five). We were sitting in her living room, talking about the coming Easter preparations, when the bell rang. It was Mercè, a member of the Neo-Catechumenal Way. She was coming to sell Lola some lottery in aid of *Caritas.* Both Lola and I bought some tickets, Lola asked Mercè to sit down and we continued our conversation.

At some point, Mercè said that on Maundy Thursday they, the members of The Way, had a special celebration with the priest in the *casa parroquial*. 'I don't think that's right' Lola offered automatically. 'A lot of what *you* do happens completely separate from what *we* do and, well, we don't like it, we would like to see what you do too.' Mercè smiled nervously and said that everybody was invited to their Eucharists, of course. Lola replied, again almost impulsively: 'Don't you think it's sad' she said 'that all Thursday night *we* will be in church praying and meditating to keep company to our Lord before he offers himself for sacrifice, and that *you* will be in the *casa parroquial*, next door, doing something different, or the same perhaps, who knows!'

Mercè nodded as she listened to Lola and replied in a way that indicated that this was not the first time she was offering this explanation: she talked of how the rites and the Eucharist as practised by The Way required sitting around a big table, displaying certain icons, dancing even, and the church could not accommodate these requirements. Mercè told us that an increasing number of churches were being refurbished or re-made in order to accommodate the rites of The Way. If this happened in Benaigua, Mercè continued, then we could all celebrate Mass together. Lola replied with a raised eyebrow, saying that they met much more

often than just for Mass on Saturdays. ‘Of course, but if you came to any other of our sessions’ Mercè replied, ‘you wouldn’t understand, you would even be alarmed by the things we say, the words we use!’ She chuckled to herself, ‘you haven’t gone through the learning we have.’ Lola pulled a face. She was not convinced by the argument.

As well as being a member of The Way, Mercè was involved in a *confraria*, and in that way, in the material and spiritual reproduction of local traditions. At the same time, her recourse to a discourse of knowledge vs ignorance when talking about the differences between members of The Way and the rest of the congregation made me think back to Brandes’ (1976) purportedly exclusive ability of priests to differentiate and arbiter between the “little” and “big” traditions. There were, in Benaigua, a minoritarian but sizeable community of Neo-Catechumenal lay men and women, which Mercè was part of, who were theologically dexterous. They shared a theological universe with the priest characterised by exclusive scriptural and theological access to meanings that were once thought to belong only to the latter. This movement could be seen as it was seen by some of the local members of The Way, as the democratisation of the Church. However, it is my contention that this adoption of the “big tradition” by the lay movement of The Way worked, in Benaigua, towards the further differentiation between the non-Neo-Catechumenal laity and the priest and his Neo-Catechumenal peers, questioning Brandes’ argument.

Yet, this did not mean an abandonment of the material aspects of the Catholic tradition at large. Mercè shows how physical resources and settings were of great importance to The Way: to celebrate the Eucharist the usual arrangement of furnishings and objects found in Benaigua’s church was not appropriate, their requirements were other, physically other, materially other. Purification is a working aim, but one that is hard to achieve fully in practice (Keane 2007, 23–24).

1.2. Contestations.

To fully appreciate the consequences of (dis)playing religious knowledge and (im)materiality in the tensions between the Neo-Catechumenals and the rest of the congregation, we need

to pay attention to one of the essential sources of knowledge, material culture and memories in the village: land. I wish now to look at the importance of land metaphors in Benaigua tracing Schmitt's (1996) theo-geographical observation above about the relation between Catholic societies and land. For Schmitt (1996), while (urban) Protestant societies see nature as the antithesis of intellect, enterprise or labour, Catholic societies appraise nature as a co-existence of all elements mentioned (9–10). Although Benaigua's economy has moved away from being mainly agricultural (see Introduction) during sermons and in some of the Neo-Catechumenal catechesis, the priest seemed exceptionally keen to criticise the villagers' pride in the soil that they worked on and its associated wealth. During one catechesis, he switched from Spanish to Valencian in a mock characterisation of local farmers. Contorting his face into a Greek mask of pride he emulated what he thought local farmers sounded like: "My land, that's all there is for me, land and my work!" His point was to awaken us to false priorities such as money, work, and their associated pride. We were urged to concentrate instead on God. Land and its cultivation were seen by the priest as anathema to the spiritual rationality (and religious contemplation) expounded by The Way, similarly to how Schmitt characterised Protestant societies.

Not everyone found these pedagogical warnings illuminating or appropriate. Some of the villagers I spoke to, considered these frequent attacks on farmers as going too far. "It's our livelihood! What does he want?" one of my neighbours asked me rhetorically during an informal conversation. She and her husband had ceased attending the priest's masses on account of these reportedly repeated attacks. For a number of years, they had gone instead to churches in neighbouring villages or the city. Indeed, non-attendance has been used historically as a form of protest against the priest (Brettell 1990, 68; see also Chapter Five). This form of protest as absence practised by my neighbours and other villagers, had its counterpart in precisely the opposite behaviour: protest in the form of presence. In 2018, the young members of a new confraria wished to diversify the Easter celebrations with a new procession. The priest mounted a stern opposition. In the end he caved in after a protracted negotiation that involved many tears and late-night WhatsApp messages. The villagers, supportive of the young cohort, attended the procession massively. It was a success. Yet the following year it did not take place. In these tensions, the members of The Way were absent, continuing with their separate celebrations and rituals officiated by the priest unreservedly.

1.2.1. Absences and inheritances

In the run-up to Holy Week the church was aflame with activity: near the main altar a group of men of different ages arranged the *cenaculum*, the altar where the Holy Host would be kept from Holy Thursday through Resurrection Sunday. One of the men was on top of a ladder, trying to hang a pair of heavy red curtains, while the rest on the ground looked and pointed up with differing instructions. The whole scene looked like a painting by Caravaggio: the heavy drapery, the darkness and light of the church playing on the men's faces. By the side chapel, there was another group of men and women giving the last touches to the image of the sorrowful Mary, clad in golden thread and black velvet, ready for the *besa-mans*[15]. I could see my friends Martí, fussing with the rim of the skirt, and Diego looking at him, arms akimbo, unsure of Martí's work (see Chapter Four). By the entrance of the church, another group of men, some in their late teens, others past retirement age, were trying to mount the heavy image of Christ on the cross onto its float, in readiness for a procession later in the week. They encouraged each other, patted each other's backs and, again, shouted instructions that did not necessarily add up together. Many kissed the image, caressed it and called it loving epithets.

Pere, a regular helper in these events, offered an overall elucidation: 'These are like allotments, you see? The church today is like a field, each group has its own plot and they work on it; nobody else has the right to do anything on your plot. That one', he said pointing, 'belongs to the Eucharistic Adoration, that to the Holy Sepulchre *confraria*, and that other to the *confraria* of the Christ.' Cheekily, I asked him if he knew who regulated the inheritance of this land. He searched through the crowd on the spot. I thought he was looking for the priest, but eventually he pointed at the church warden, 'there she is.' I could see her leaning on her Zimmer frame, curved spine, glasses, inspecting the work that Mercè, a member of The Way, was doing on yet another image. The priest, someone told me later, was not in the premises.

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[15] A ceremony in which members of the congregation are invited to come close to the image of Mary and kiss her hands, in respect and solidarity for her suffering in losing her son. In Spain, much of the Passion is lived through Marian optics.

Easter preparations: the image of Christ on the cross is brought down from its *niche.*

An Easter procession with the image of Our Lady of Sorrows at the back. Both photos by author.

Using Pere's nomenclature, members of the neo-Catechumenal Way did not have a plot in the church to work on. During Easter in particular, they neither identified with any particular spot in the physical edifice of the church nor, more importantly, made a claim to any particular image. Despite members of The Way being actively involved in the Easter masses officiated for the whole village, they were seen as mostly inconspicuous by the wider congregation the rest of the year. By habitually assembling in purpose-built rooms in the *casa parroquial*, meeting in their private homes when studying the bible, or attending regular retreats in hotels and hostels outside Benaigua, the villagers saw The Way as actively encouraging secrecy and divergence from the rest of the faithful. This contrasted unambiguously with the dynamics of the rest of the congregation who, as we will see in the following chapters, placed great importance in public performances of faith, and for whom orality was central to experiencing religion, including understanding and continuing religious traditions.

The absences of The Way were very much felt by the congregation at large; they were lived absences. By the end of my fieldwork stay in Benaigua, rumour had it that the building owned by the church to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter was going to have a major

revamp. The aim was to make it fit for the Neo-Catechumenal communities' activities, making it their permanent centre of worship, away from what were seen as official sites of religion such as the church or the *casa parroquial*. The *confrares* and possibly *Caritas* too would have to move. By the following year (2019), the rumours had been confirmed. The decisions regarding the revamp and the move of The Way had been made by the priest univocally, and the *confrares* of the Carmel had had to rent a private space for their activities, much to the anger and frustration of the organisation and the congregation at large.

But as well as space, Benaigua's congregation saw time as a valuable resource of which they were being deprived, that is, time which the priest did not dedicate to his flock but which he allegedly spent with members of The Way. As well as a general sense of abandonment, congregants talked of the loss of traditions that had been discontinued because of his lack of interest. Others still, bemoaned their situation as one of invisibility in the wider provincial and national religious panorama: members of The Way had made a few trips to Rome in recent years, where they were said to have had audience with the Pope. They were also perceived to be the centre of frequent ceremonies and meetings with the Valencian archbishop (himself a Cardinal, and therefore, closer to Rome than other provincial archbishops). 'Of course they are better known [by the Church hierarchy] and more together, having met so many of them!' objected one of my interlocutors on one occasion, '[the priest] never gets *us* together, or takes *us* to meet anybody!'

This sense of entitlement to the priest's time and the Church's resources played into perceptions of favouritism and expressions of anticlericalism. 'We are all Church, aren't we?!' some villagers exclaimed in the course of heated conversations about The Way. For the congregation at large, the concentration of resources in the hands of this movement was unjust. Ecclesial spaces and priestly time were resources perceived as 'common': if one had been baptised Catholic, then one had a right to the same resources as any other Catholic. One of my interlocutors pointed out that some members of The Way participated in processions and were members of established *confraries* without the explicit consent of the priest or the people. Why could not the congregation attend The Way's own rituals in the same way? she asked.

During the celebration of public forms of piety in Benaigua, all villagers were indeed automatically assumed to be part of the community of practitioners that came together and either held a candle in a procession, helped sell lottery to fund a religious festivity, or simply stood in the street with their family watching the proceedings. This default inclusion conforms to the sociological model of the "parish civilization" (Hervieu-Léger 2002, 100–101), which historically allowed for the expansion and securement of Christianity over geographical territories, and thus over numbers of believers. By being included into Catholicism by default, villagers in Benaigua shared in a particular collective past that encompassed religion necessarily (see Chapter Three for a development of the themes of religion, collective memory and local identity). Through the chain of memories passed down from generation to generation, villagers composed a collective imaginary of themselves, one that anchored the Church and its members to space (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 2002). This chain, of course, had discontinuations and missing links. Immigration into the village, for example, meant that there were villagers who found difficult to interpret traditions, either because they came from other provinces or countries with different Christian customs, or because they were practitioners of other religions all together. Even in these cases, processions, pilgrimages and other public expressions of festive piety entailed social occasions open to all villagers. They could participate, watch or ignore, in keeping with sociological trends that see religions in late modernity increasingly as a matter of personal choice (Davie 2007, 31).

These dynamics of choice and inclusion allowed for a religious performative flexibility: one could choose to avoid communing with their fellow villagers in religious rituals and acts for some time and then return without much fuss. One's faith was not necessarily judged by a constant and progressive commitment to the Church, but by a politics of presence and absence that encompassed assiduous churchgoers, *creyentes no practicantes* and even atheists. In this way, villagers who rarely attended Mass, men in particular, were seen and welcomed during masses said on the anniversary of a relative's death, when they attended the service in the company of their families. I too was an obvious case: having been absent from Church life for decades, I was happily greeted and welcomed once I expressed an interest in it. As Maya Mayblin (2017) has pointed out in her work, the construction of religious subjecthood in Catholicism is characterised as much by those members who "lapse" into non-practice or non-belief, as it is by disciplinary technologies and proclamations of faith.

At the same time, "lapsed" villagers, *no practicantes*, and those who had not been baptised as Christians but were involved in one way or another in the life of the village, relied on the Church (the priest, its local members) to uphold what a majority saw as (traditional) social values of compassion, consistency, and continuity. In what Grace Davie (2007, 22) has called "vicarious religion" in reference to Western societies at large, religion was performed "by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing." In Benaigua, this was most salient during funerals, particularly of young villagers. Whether you were Christian or not, believed in God or not, funeral goers turned to the Church expecting a good service including an appropriate sermon that extolled the virtues of the deceased and soothed those present in their sadness and anxiety.

Things were quite different with local members of The Way, though. The model of parish civilization, with its default membership, was the antipode of a system with strict rules of belonging. The Way's teleological itinerary, catechists insisted, was free to enter. We were often told that we could leave at any point if we were not interested. But that meant that you were not going to progress onto the next level with your cohort. If you left, you were always cordially welcomed to their Eucharists once a week, as Mercè pointed out to Lola above. But you could not take part in their readings, their group commentaries on the bible, the mutual teaching and learning. In this way, you were either in, or out. The fact that members of a community talked about personal experiences and troubles in front of their brothers and sisters meant that secrecy was required within the group. When a member of a community was going through a rough patch economically, their brothers and sisters would make a collection. Artur, during one of our many conversations confided that he had been thinking about leaving The Way because of its insular characteristics. "I want to experience the world as it is, and the people in The Way close in in themselves", he told me. Villagers often used the word *secta* [sect] to refer to The Way.

From what we have seen so far, The Way presents certain traits that are consistent with the classical sociological church-sect typology (Troeltsch 1931; Weber 1922). Membership is restricted, in this case to those who follow the pedagogical itinerary, forming small

communities that function fairly independent from the main Church. In addition, rituals have important organisational differences to the Catholic Church at large. Thus, from the spatial point of view, activities and rituals are celebrated apart from the congregation and in spaces where non-members are not welcome. Also, members of The Way come together freely and voluntarily; their (new) conversion entails a form of Christian faith that is neither 'inherited' through familial bonds or imposed through social hegemony, like a (state) religion may be (Hervieu-Léger 2002, 102). Also, although the last word in doctrine and theology is in the hands of the Vatican, The Way certainly makes claims that denote an "epistemological authoritarianism" (Wallis 1984, 123) based on reform and renewal. Thus, The Way establish communities that aim to "articulate a new religious memory" (Hervieu-Léger and Casabella 1993, 95–96), away from the village's own. Finally, the movement charismatic founder and still current leader, Kiko Argüello, is largely perceived as an ideolog and, as some of my interlocutors said, "a gift from God" to be followed and listened to.

Although the members of The Way did not see themselves as isolated from the village culture and society, in fact participating in *confraries* and public events, they ultimately referred back to their Neo-Catechumenal community in moments of need, be it financial, spiritual or moral. To some extent, in their self-reliance they functioned as an "ultra-localized extraterritoriality" (Hervieu-Léger 2002, 102) in the village and, I would claim, within Catholicism.

1.2.2. A complex of opposites

As I wrote the final remarks for this chapter, trying to make sense of the villagers' dynamics between default and opt-in membership, between presence and absence, Spain was dealing with one of its most trying times in recent history, the COVID19 pandemic. At the time of writing these lines, Spain had one of the highest rates of deaths due to the virus in the world. As the government, like many Western others, scrambled for a coherent line of action, discourses of solidarity and nationhood were re-deployed in forms that reflected the myriad ideological fields existent in the country, from left-wing redistributive ideas about wealth, to Catalan-independentist emancipatory agendas of wealth management in times of crisis, to calls for national unity among accusations of genocide from the right and the far-right parties hurled at the socialist government. But Spaniards also paid attention to what happened

elsewhere in the world. Lock-down memes and videos were translated into Spanish and shared on social media. News programmes talked about curves of infection in Germany, China and Yemen. Donald Trump's critiques of the WHO were echoed by the far-right Spanish party VOX, who aligned themselves with the US president. In this way, Spanish society tried to make sense of the current situation using of a number of global *ideoscapes* (Appadurai 1996) that relied on concepts such as democracy, rights, or representation. These ideas and images, common to many genealogies of the Enlightenment, become, at the same time, imbued with local and national nuances consistent with the plurality of late modernity (Ibid).

The place of the Catholic Church in the pandemic was contested too in this plurality. Through Facebook posts, on TV news or via WhatsApp messages, Spaniards inhabited a number of positions vis-à-vis its role in the current crisis: some accused it of not doing enough for those in need ('they should sell the gold they have in the churches and give it to the poor', some said on Facebook); others showed the work of members of religious orders through pictures of nuns busy on their sewing machines making surgical masks; others still commented on the Pope's sensitive words during the Easter celebrations on compassion and familial love. In Benaigua, villagers drew from these local, national and global imaginaries too. Women said a prayer once a week on their balconies holding a candle, an event organised through one of many local church-based WhatsApp groups; Martí hung the image of the locally venerated Christ of the Faith from his balcony and encouraged others to do the same to 'invoke His protection', posting pictures on his Facebook and Instagram profiles. Meanwhile, the streets in Benaigua remained empty, the church kept its doors firmly closed, the faithful had to cope with the absence of each other.

These "geographies of absence" (Minca 2009) emerged in the context of Easter, one of the pivotal points in the Catholic calendar. Absence here had "value in itself" (Ibid, 269) for the faithful in the village: unrealised public professions of faith such as nocturnal praying sessions and masses weighed heavy in their (un)lived experience of Easter; instead of populous processions and *Via Crucis*, the streets and balconies remained empty. Easter holidays at large were suspended too: the popular second homes on the beach or the mountain, as well as bars and restaurants stayed closed. These absences quickly highlighted, in turn, certain essences for my interlocutors: how was Easter to be celebrated if not in the company of each

other, organising festivals, dressing the image of the Mother of God in black in preparation for Christ's death, or adorning the balconies with flower garlands to receive the image of Christ resurrected? The villagers' "geographical imagination" (Ibid) of Easter made me think back to the ways in which the wider congregation appraised the noted absences of Neo-Catechumenals from a relational and "present" concept of faith.

An empty street in Benaigua during the pandemic. The festive flags had just been put up in preparation for Saint Joseph's *festa* when the first confinement was announced.

The congregation at large registered the members of The Way as absent from the village's manifestations of faith. But this absence was compounded with a perceived threat to their customarily publicly lived Catholicism. Absence was doubly spatial: in the conspicuous non-attendance of Neo-Catechumenals, and in the traces of religious expressions that existed no more and whose disappearances were partly blamed on the influence of The Way on priestly presence. At the same time, the perceived absences from public religion by members of The Way were characterised by an inconspicuous but active battle for spiritual resources. Specially formatted church spaces and priestly time were considered essential: the Neo-Catechumenals too had an interest in territorial and material space. And much as they were

perceived as ‘absent’, the Neo-Catechumenals were simultaneously ‘present’ in the preoccupations, gossip and confrontational politics of the rest of the congregation. In this way, absence and presence were not only relational but also *mattered*, that is, (they were) materially expressed and noted (M. Meyer 2012).

Religious experience in Benaigua entailed thus a plurality of absences, silences and presences, perhaps exemplary of the (competing) plurality of discourses or *ideoscapes* that define Spanish society, a plurality that both homogenises and differentiates its members. As I will show in the proceeding chapters, a plurality of faith and the rhizomatic entanglements thereof, including secularism, are a central characteristic of lived Catholicism in the 21st century. Away from hierarchical understandings of knowledge, of faith, of salvation, Benaigua’s villagers participated in an expansive formation and deformation of Catholicism. Anti-clericalism emerged as constitutive of the villagers’ experiences of religion. Although these processes of re-interpretation and contestation are not new to Catholicism, what is new is that they are done in the context of a population for which the points of reference in the past and those in the future are in constant flux, a point that Appadurai (1996, 44) makes in reference to diasporic communities and culture. But if diasporas rely on imagined ‘elsewheres’ that are treated as points of cultural and experiential reference, then the villagers also relied on different and differing imaginations of lived Catholicism that set their origins not in space, but in time.

The Neo-Catechumenals harked back to a proto-Christian time in which faith was a journey of affirmation against the violent odds of a repressive Roman Empire. The rest of the congregation located their religious point of reference in the more recent splendorous past of public expressions of religiosity. Both trajectories need to be seen against the background of the fast-changing Spanish society of the end of the dictatorship and the first decades of the democracy, a time in which Catholicism as a social reality began crumbling, a process not exclusive to Spain or Catholicism (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 105). Changes in the social and moral values of Spaniards in late modernity have been seen to transform Catholicism into what Luhmann would call “a code of symbolic generalization” (in Pace 2007, 45). That is, belief is no longer the direct precursor to social actions, although it still plays an important role in the construction and deployment of a collective memory (Ibid). Concomitant to this process

of dilution and loss, both The Way and the rest of the congregation enacted skirmishes of re-territorialisation locally. The Way confronted and challenged Luhmann's "generalization" of religion, creating new cognitive communities that purportedly look back to belief in order to act socially. Importantly, the withdrawal of The Way into small communities of faith was accompanied in Benaigua by a silent battle for resources. As the communities became established and through the partisanship of the priest, himself a dedicated member of The Way, spaces that had been shared by the wider religious community were seized and re-purposed. Faith was also seized and re-purposed, bringing it closer to doctrine, to a teleological understanding of knowledge, and taking it (back?) to a hierarchical imagination of the Church. But the rest of the congregation did not witness this entrenchment passively: as will become apparent in the following chapters, and perhaps as a reaction, they started re-inventing and updating Catholic traditions, relying on popular, oral, and collective notions of religion and faith in the public sphere.

Some would say that this pugnacious co-existence is inherent to Catholicism, in what Schmitt (1996) called *complexio oppositorum*. Tracing the political forms of Catholicism in history, Schmitt saw similarities between parliamentary forms of government and the Church, both in its "principle of representation" (8), and in "the unity and plurality of interests and parties" (26). In its alleged capacity to allow antinomies within itself, Catholicism does not need to resolve these tensions, being able to exist both with "limitless ambiguity" and "precise dogmatism" (Mosse 2017, 105). This inner "elasticity" of Catholicism (Mayblin 2019b, 145) allows for a return to forms of rigid governance through the triumph of global movements such as The Way, but also for traditional and indigenous forms of faith to be repurposed. While Schmitt (1996, 29) saw in Catholicism a "curious mixture of traditional conservatism and revolutionary resistance", Benaigua's tensions between the "traditional" congregation and the members of The Way could present rather "traditional resistance" and "revolutionary conservatism" competing for spiritual space. Beyond a critique of Schmitt's nomenclature, I conclude this first chapter highlighting how, through discourses of absence and presence, anticlericalism and religious elasticity, the very terms "tradition" and "revolution" are relational and co-productive of each other, a dynamic that extends, not only the existence of Catholicism, but of Spanish society at large, as a complex of opposites.

CHAPTER TWO: Gossip and Godly Work: Benaigua's Devotional Cartographies of Care

2.1. A faith-based epistemology of care

This chapter begins with an ethnographic vignette: a day in the life of a group of fifteen women with whom I worked closely with and who, while I conducted fieldwork, were responsible for the organisation of the devotional *festa* dedicated to the *Mare de Déu del Carme*, Benaigua's patron and honorary mayoress in perpetuity. These women belonged to a *confraria*, a Catholic devotional organisation, and therefore were referred to by others and themselves as *confrares.* To take the *festa* to fruition, the women worked all year round in order to earn enough money for the devotional celebration. Work centred around the manual labour that was required to make *torró*, a local delicacy made of peanuts, honey, cinnamon and lemon. Torró was made and sold door to door throughout the year. To the visitor, it would have seemed that this was a straightforward affair: a product was made, then sold, then the money was spent in the week-long summer *festa*, which included fireworks, flower tributes, masses, a pilgrimage and processions. However, in this chapter my aim is to show that there was much more to these practices than met the eye.

Through the process of making and selling *torró* the confrares formed thick social networks of information, gossip and rumour that worked as the base for an extended and dynamic web of devotion and care. This chapter shows how these gendered networks were maintained, and how the information was exchanged, gathered, contested and corroborated. These processes of information exchange resulted in the production of cartographies that plotted out care and devotional needs in the community. In this sense, the *confrares*' cartographies acted as tools for change: on the one hand they became care interventions, from visits to the elderly, to referrals to local food banks, or spiritual assistance in villagers' homes, thus revealing the porosity of the private and public spheres in the village. On the other hand, physical maps were produced once a year that traced the route that the image of the *Mare de Déu del Carme* took around the streets of the village in order to visit her devotees, therefore physically charting devotion in the community.

The chapter puts forward the claim that lay women are at the forefront of religious renewal and continuation, over and above the authority of the male priestly hierarchy. At the intersection of the geographies of religion, labour and gender, I explore the concepts of devotional labour and cartographies of care, and in doing so, advocate for a women-centred epistemology that in its dynamism provides for a community. Theoretically, I draw from feminist conceptual frameworks of gossip and rumour (Adkins 2017; Birchall 2006; Guendouzi 2001; D. Jones 1980; Meyers 2012; Norris 2001), as well as from philosophical work that acknowledges suffering and happiness as a source for relationality (Cavell 2002). The work of Latour (1987) is also explored, complicating established notions of knowledge production and, in particular, of the power dynamics traditionally associated with mapping as a form of representation (see Harley 2001a, 2001b; Harley and Woodward 1987, 1993, 1994). Finally, I argue that the grounded and embodied character of women's devotional knowledge allow for a form of "spiritual activism" (Anzaldúa 2015) that functions as counter-hegemonic to the institutional character of the Catholic Church, the state and the market at large (de Sousa Santos 2015).

2.1.1. Devotional Labour

On a chilly winter morning, Remei picked me up at 8:30. A big straw bag dug into her forearm, making her whole body lean over. The bag was full to the brim with lemons, a coffee machine, and a couple of notebooks. She smiled, 'are you ready?' I offered to carry her bag. On our way to the main square a mist still hung from the balconies of Benaigua, filtering the sound of matinal activity. We stopped at Chelo's house. She opened the door, 'Oh great Josep is here, could you carry that bag of sugar for me please? My shoulder has been playing up.' I picked this bag with my free hand. Our destination was, thankfully, not too far. When we arrived at the building, owned by the local church, there were already three other women waiting, also with bags hanging from their arms. 'We've got a helper today!' they said happily when they saw me. Remei produced the keys and we went in. Quickly we started washing a couple of huge steel pans. A machine that looked like a hybrid between a car's engine and a meat grinder was positioned on one end of the big room. As an over-sized gas stove was being

assembled, other women arrived. One of them pushed a pram with a baby sleeping in it, oblivious to the mounting din. She was my aunt, my father's cousin's wife, and the baby's grandmother. She looked after him most weekdays while her daughter worked in a supermarket during the mornings. By now we were all wearing aprons, chit-chat reigned. Cecilia, the *presidenta* of the *confraria* called everyone to be quiet, a short prayer was said, our murmurs joining the familiar noises of the morning seeping through the thin window panes: kids going to school, people talking outside the bank round the corner, and the bells of the nearby church tolling for nine o'clock. The stove was then lit, and the cooking started.

This was the first of three occasions in which I helped the *confrares* of the Carmel make *torró*, a traditional sweet they sold to raise money. The *confrares* of the Carmel were (are) a permanent group of 15 women ranging in age from 50 to over 70. The *confraria* came about in 2003 when, due to the repeated absence of young volunteers to do the yearly *festa* to the Mother of God of the Carmel, a group of women were nominated by the priest and the church warden in order to continue the devotion permanently. Among the *confrares* there were cousins, sisters and other forms of kinship, including neighbours and life-long friends. Year in, year out, *confrares* made *torró* following a process that had been handed down from generation to generation.

A *confrare* ready to spoon cinnamon in the hot *torró* mixture. Photo by author.

Each slab of *torró* was made by hand through a process that started with two women grinding roasted peanuts with the hybrid machine[16]. Two other women looked after a big pot where water was boiled adding honey and sugar first, then lemon zest and finally cinnamon. Timing was crucial and a *confrare* was in charge of keeping an eye on the clock. The pot was then taken off the heat, the ground peanuts carefully poured in and the mix stirred energetically with a massive wooden spoon until it became a thick paste or, in my case, until my arms burnt with the effort of stirring. When the paste achieved the desired thickness, all hands were called in to fill wooden moulds lined with greased paper, out of which soon slabs of *torró* came out, tidy and glistening. This process, which produced 40 slabs, was repeated seven times during the course of the morning and early afternoon. And the whole enterprise was repeated once a month from October to May, sometimes twice or even three times during Christmas and the annual village fair in September, when the demand for the product surged.

Torró had both a symbolic and a functional value. On the one hand, it stood symbolically for the continuation of local traditions, both culinary and religious. Purchasing and consuming the local delicacy did not only mean supporting a tradition financially, but also being part of a long lineage of women who had maintained and passed on religious practices. Although not all buyers shared in the devotion to Our Lady of the Carmel, the majority verbalised a variable trust in the role of the Virgin Mary as intercessor between the pleas of mortals and God's ability to make things happen. I saw many customers during the *festa* in July, either accompanying the image during a pilgrimage, attending Mass or simply watching the procedures. *Torró* acted in the community as a substance gravid with significance: it provided both physical and spiritual nourishment. *Torró* is highly calorific. I have childhood memories involving my grandmother stuffing short baguettes with it for my father to take with him to the fields; the sugar and honey worked as an energy boost in the middle of a morning of labour. Metaphorically, the consumption of food with religious connotations reminded some of my interlocutors of the Eucharist, the moment in which the bread-turned-body of Christ is eaten during Mass.

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[16] Money for the ingredients came from some of the benefits from the previous year that was set aside. Each batch of torró, when sold, paid for the ingredients for the next and so on. The machine had been made by a confrare's husband in a genius work of upcycling discarded materials.

About 10:30 there was a break. The stove was turned off and we sat around a long table, our aprons still on. One of the women had gone to get some baguettes and milk. Soon the bread was partitioned, and sandwiches made with the *torró*. Coffee and milk were heated up. By then the baby had woken up and my aunt was giving him a bottle. From then on, we all took turns to play with him, holding him in our arms for the rest of the morning. As we ate and drank during the half-hour break, conversations that had drifted around during the morning continued: one of the women's daughter-in-law was pregnant again to the general joy of the group. Many women asked for the protection of the Mother of God of the Carmel during her pregnancy. Again, a short prayer was said. On an aside, my aunt asked me if my boyfriend and I were thinking of having kids. I said that we would very much like to, but that we felt then was not the time.

Another woman announced that she was going to move temporarily to a different region, in order to help her divorced daughter raise her kids. She excused herself from future meetings and everybody nodded, understanding that she had *compromís*, a concept that is used in Valencian to denote caring and working responsibilities, particularly among women. She continued talking about the divorce proceedings at some length and became visibly upset when referring to her grandchildren's custody, which was being decided by the courts at that time. Women stood up and put an arm around her shoulders, others produced a handkerchief. I was left with the baby in my arms as my aunt moved to comfort her. 'Pray for me girls', she said as she dabbed her eyes with a paper tissue. One of the *confrares* worked at the family courts in València and offered some advice as well as reassurance. Soon the break was over, and everyone resumed their previous positions.

Checking time and sizes: making *torró.*
Photo by author.

This chapter began with a central characteristic of the continuation of Catholic traditions in Benaigua: devotional labour. Devotional labour encompasses the sets of practices that sustain the private and public devotion of a divine figure. It "draws attention to […] the embodied, often ephemeral, gestures of sanctification working in tandem with well-rehearsed rites and traditions" (Peña 2020, 243) which materialise religion. Devotional labour in Benaigua was not regulated legally or by the state in the way that formal labour was, that is, there was an absence of legally binding contracts between the *confraria* and the *confrares* or a set of written rights and responsibilities for sellers and clients. The *confrares* prided themselves on having developed a manual of statutes that standardised their activities and set clear aims to their work, however. These statutes had been ratified by the provincial bishopric following a set of strict check-list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' that were meant to guide *confrares* both practically and spiritually. However, in Benaigua there were other tried and tested systems of regulation in place: the community acted as a regulator in more effective ways than the statutes did. Let me explore this more in depth.

Devotional labour in Benaigua was never isolated or individual, although many times private prayer and contemplation were part of it (Kaell 2016; Orsi 1989). Often, a devotional labourer spent a considerable chunk of her days autonomously sorting her produce or selling it door

to door. Members of other *confraries* also spent considerable time away from their remunerated jobs or from un-remunerated care work, individually selling lottery tickets to fund their *festa*. Even during this self-directed time, they were part of a network of producers, organisers, sellers and buyers to whom they remained accountable. And accountability worked circularly, or rather rhizomically: villagers agreed to purchase *torró* from the *confrares* so they could continue enjoying a traditional product that was not available in other ways, and the confrares pledged to use that money in order to further local religious traditions. This pledge led *confrares* to make unwritten agreements with other *confrares*, both from their own organisation and from others, agreements that were of a spiritual and social nature (they thought public expressions of piety were necessary and important), but also contractual and financial (honesty and trustworthiness were necessary for the transparent running of any devotional 'business'). These contractual relationships were particularly important in the background of the perceived threat to traditions caused by the presence of The Way, as I outlined in the previous chapter. In July, during the festa of the Mother of God of the Carmel, villagers checked how and where the money they spent on *torró* was being used by the *confrares*: on fireworks, concerts, and processions that gave Benaigua people a sense of locality and continuation (more on this aspect in Chapter Three).

At the same time, there were myriad actors on the peripheries of these informal contracts that both benefited from and contributed to the rhizomic labour network: the hairdresser who coiffed a *confrare* during the celebrations bought torró or attended the procession, adding to the success of the festa; the bar owner that benefited from villagers populating her business during the *festa*, contributed with a special donation. The production and reproduction of labour was thus done through this web of labourers and consumers in which tradition, kin and collective memories played not only constitutive, but also regulatory roles. Devotional labour produced and reproduced not only economic capital, but also social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The existence of carefully plotted networks of devotional labourers and clients, in my view, contributes to a critical appraisal of the purported boundaries between formal and informal labour. Devotional labour could perhaps be examined through the lens of exploitation then, a Marxian characteristic of formal labour (Mollona 2005). Women in Benaigua seemed engaged in devotional labour freely and gladly, however. When I asked them why they dedicated so much of their time to this sort of work,

many answered that the *confraria* was quite the opposite of labour for them. For many it was a space of respite, 'we do what we like here', Remei exclaimed once jovially, 'away from our husbands and children!' These comments do not summon thoughts of exploitation. Yet the *confrares* committed to attending regular torró-making shifts, to selling it and to adhering to other schedules of devotional activities that were often strenuous and taxing, even if part of their everyday lives.

As it has perhaps become clear already, devotional labour networks were gendered. Jill DeTemple (2020) has highlighted how women have a particular proclivity to form networks, which reflects their community-based thinking, in relation to devotional cooperatives in Ecuador. Hillary Kaell's (2016) interlocutors in Quebec, men retired from their jobs in the construction and wood industries, drew from their professional and personal male networks in order to look after religious monuments. In Benaigua *confrares*' devotional labour was enmeshed in a web of women's networks that encompassed their remunerated jobs as well as the informal economies they were part of. Thus, some *confrares* in Benaigua had remunerated jobs: they were teachers, secretaries, or manual labourers in the local orange-growing businesses. *Torró* was sold and consumed in these circles. Many *confrares* did not have waged jobs. But all were involved in the local informal economy that looked after the elderly and the very young, that is, the women's own parents and grandchildren, while their immediate offspring populated the world of formal work. In this way, the making and selling of devotional labour was part and parcel of the unregulated, unwaged work that women performed in their everyday lives and that could be seen under the remit of *caring*. The ideological dichotomy between formal and informal labour, between the public and the private at large (Horwitz 1982; Habermas 1989), has historically highlighted the complex position of women in modern societies, where patriarchal power relations have pushed women's labour to be seen as part of the purported realm of the domestic, the familial and the dependent through discourses that appealed to both nature and custom.

Feminist scholars have launched a long and sustained critique of the ambiguities of the public and the private (Pateman 1987; Okin 1991 among others), and in particular of the ways in which this dichotomy entrenches the informalisation of women's caring labour (McDowell 2009). In the Spanish context, informal work is well embedded in culture and society in the

form of undeclared wages and care-giving activities (Flaquer and Escobedo 2009; Durán 2018), particularly in the context of multi-generational households. Concomitant to this informal economy, *torró* in Benaigua became a substance that signalled religion in the public sphere: it circulated through it, allowing for the expression of religiosity in its everyday presence and in the final summer *festa*. In this way, *torró* as a religious symbol, defied secularist notions of religion which see it as contained to the private sphere (Casanova 1994; Luckman 1970). Further unpacking the concept of devotional labour and its consequences in Benaigua, in the next section I explore how the *confrares'* work existed as part of an economy of information and gossip that functioned as the epistemic substratum of an extended network of care.

2.1.2. Gossip and small talk as epistemic tools

The *torró* making session continued. While the second half of the morning session went on, Remei mentioned someone who she had been chatting to recently and to whom she had taken some spare *torró*. 'She's in dire need', she commented, pointing to the client's familial precarity at the time. According to Remei, the woman's husband had recently lost his job, adding to the pressure of raising two kids. Some *confrares* added to the story, confirming it. Others had comments to make about the kinds of occupations that the husband engaged in: some were cash in hand and so they did not reflect on the official income of the family, an important issue when claiming benefits. I noticed different levels of scepticism among *confrares* when referring to news like this, some expressed verbally, some others through body language, a nod, a shake of the finger, or the raising of an eyebrow. Chelo asked Remei if she had told the woman about food banks. 'I hadn't thought about that' Remei said, 'but I don't want to offend her.' The women talked about other people they knew in the village who had been too proud to ask for help initially. Needs must, they all agreed however, particularly in the long aftermath of the global financial crisis that hit the Spanish economy in 2008. For more than a decade, austerity cuts to public expenditure had been compounded with an alarming unemployment rate that reached 26.1% at the peak of the crisis in 2013 (ECB 2020). The effects of this were still very much felt by many in Benaigua, particularly by women who normally were at the helm of multi-generational households around which Spanish families tend to cluster (see Holleran 2019).

There were two food banks in Benaigua organised by the local branch of The Red Cross and Caritas. Earlier in the month I had had a long conversation with Sara, the head of the local Caritas branch. She had told me that financial instability was rife among the local community: the work on the land was not as profitable as it had once been, and the factories that provided employment to a considerable amount of men in Benaigua, offered precarious contracts. She told me that her organisation, as well as The Red Cross, gave out small grants to pay for electricity or gas bills too. 'When they come with an unpaid gas bill in winter, you can't say no, you have to cover it, she said. Back that morning, one of the *confrares* addressed Remei, 'Would you like me to talk to Sara?' She continued, 'You know we're good friends. I could mention the case to her and see what she can do about it.' Remei considered this and then replied, concerned, 'But she'll be discreet, right?' 'Of course, they know how to go about these things', her fellow *confrare* assured her. Other women also reassured Remei, recounting some other cases they had been informally involved in. The conversation suddenly changed when the little boy started crying; some tried to console him, others continued the conversation tangentially, talking about the labour precarity of their own children.

Information about the situation of local families, including the *confrares'*, was continually exchanged and contested during the process of making *torró*. Most of the times this information had been gathered first-hand through conversation and gossip in the process of selling the product. Each *confrare* had a number of clients who signed up to one or more slabs of the sweet on a monthly basis from September to June, thus funding the *festa*. The produce was taken individually to the customers' house during gaps in the *confrares'* caring and waged duties, many times in a process that took them days. The presence of the sweet in kitchens, travelling in baskets or in the boot of a car in the homes and around the streets of Benaigua, its exchange from hand to hand and its final consumption filled the everyday lives of the *confrares*.

I accompanied the women on many occasions on these *torró* rounds. My mother, a member of the *confraria*, did her sales in between taking her grandchildren, my niece and nephew, to school in the morning and picking them up in the early afternoon. The rest of the day she looked after them, making sure they did their homework and had an afternoon snack, while

my brother and sister-in-law worked. During fieldwork, I was also part of this informal network of care, sitting with my niece and her homework, or taking my nephew to tennis practice. If I was not around, my mother took my nephew to tennis, and twice a week she took my niece to English lessons. On a couple of occasions, when the kids were not feeling well, we also took them to the local primary care centre. All of these trips were on foot. Sometimes on our way to one of these destinations, my mother would take her basket, put some slabs of the sweet product in it and make one or two deliveries. Sometimes going out to sell the sweets felt like pleasant walks, interrupted by chats in the street. Many other times they involved wrestling with the seasons: taking refuge under balconies for a considerable time during a real deluge or stopping at an air-conned bar and having a cold drink, sweat dripping down our backs. Some other times still there would be nobody at home and we would have to come back repeatedly, or the owner of the house would have a dog that would come running to us, barking and showing us their teeth. Other confrares such as Remei did their rounds by car after their waged job or on the weekends. Remei worked as a secretary to a notary in the city. She did not sell as many slabs of the sweet as others, but she still participated in the same rituals of sorting, selling and making sense of money once a month. Again, the Valencian concept of *compromís* was deployed often to evoke her busy schedule.

Most customers were women: they would come to the door with their apron on, drying their hands, ‘Come in, come in’, welcoming us into their homes, ‘I was just making lunch.’ Others were at home only in the evenings after they came back from their jobs, or during weekends. Often a child opened the door, looking puzzled as to our presence there. ‘Mamaaaa!’ he shouted running back into the flat, ‘the *torró* woman!’ Different levels of trust were evident among women. The closer in age the buyer and the seller were, the more varied were the forms of capital being exchanged beyond the strictly monetary. These exchanges depended on the network of villagers that each woman was part of, their circle of acquaintances, friends and relatives. Thus, although these circles included different generations through kin and neighbourly relations, women of a similar age group were able to exchange news and gossip more efficiently.

Just like the smell of ripe rice from the nearby paddies during the summer, I encountered gossip and gossiping wherever I went in Benaigua. The *confrares* whose lives and tribulations

are at the centre of this chapter were by no means the only ones participating in this activity. Villagers of all ages and backgrounds gossiped. The form was common in most instances: gossip mostly occurred in private settings, implying a certain intimacy between the those exchanging information. Sitting rooms, the back pews of the church or a side chapel, and quiet corners in bars were the spaces most often used for the exchange of the kind of gossip I was privy to during my time in Benaigua. When a quiet space was required for the exchange of gossip, but the interlocutors found themselves in a public space such as the marketplace or the waiting room of the primacy care centre, they would lower their voices, sometimes taking a few steps back from the main crowd. This movement, which I witnessed often, was all but inconspicuous. Passers-by would know what was going on and would say '*hola'* or '*bon dia'* quite loud announcing their presence, sometimes with a smirk on their faces. The gossipers would stop talking, raise their voices to respond to the greeting, and then use some verbal fillers until the passer-by had moved away an appropriate distance. Gossip was an oral activity. Even when information was exchanged via WhatsApp, a social media platform heavily used by the *confrares* and many villagers, on many occasions it was through voice messages, rather than written ones.

Some of the formal characteristics which I have covered so far appear regularly in scholarly work on gossip. Karen Adkins (2017, 3–5) highlights the selective and synthesizing nature of gossip. Gossipers discriminate the information that is important or most useful to them from the chaff of the everyday experiences and are able to summarise it in order to pass it on. Adkins also reminds us that gossip has historically not only been gendered (thus seen as the remit of women), but also "othered" (Ibid: 39), that is, associated with gay men and the working classes (servants and maids in particular). Deborah Jones (1980, 194), in talking of women's use of gossip, refers to it as corresponding to a "speech community, with language skills and attitudes of [their] own, as well as those shared by the wider speech community." Jones points to an interesting capacity of gossip and small talk, its ability to form communities within communities through shared understandings and meanings. In this way, each *confrare* was part of a network of gossip communities, interconnected circles that worked at different registers: some involved close kin, other neighbours, others still work colleagues, local members of the government and other political parties. Included in all these circles, there were the villagers that bought *torró*, with the *confrare* both harvesting and sharing gossip,

revealing the social porosity and polyphonic character of gossip (Adkins 2017, 73–74). Its rhizomatic potential (Mellencamp in Birchall 2006, 122), without a centre, with its potential for expansion in myriad directions, maps well onto the networks of *torró* production and consumption. Through this continual exchange of information the *confrares* were privy to a communal set of local imaginaries.

But gossip can have a pernicious effect. In smaller communities such as Benaigua, families and neighbours have known each other for generations. Everyone understood that they could be the target of gossip regardless of their perceived authority. If potentially claustrophobic to urban minds, this *habitus* perhaps reveals also a certain democratic aspect to gossip's content. Although Benaigua's population size did guarantee some level of privacy, as a member of the closely-knit community you needed to be prepared to be talked about sooner or later. And yes, sometimes loose talk caused upset (Norris 2001); I witnessed tears and quarrels that had its origin in gossipy misunderstandings. Gossip could also be a means of policing certain ideologies, particularly of gender (Guendouzi 2001; Meyers 2012): claims about a woman's *compromís* were framed in terms of what counted as appropriate and inappropriate usage of time, forms of motherhood and so on. Masculinities too could be seen as being policed in this way, particularly non-heternormative masculinities among church members (see Chapter Four). Indeed, gossip "can be seen as a form of 'backstage' talk that involves reproducing frontstage norms in relation to acceptable social roles" (Guendouzi 2001, 47).

But gossip, I came to realise, was a skill too, involving an ability to listen and respond. *Confrares* were highly skilled in this art. In a way, their ability to understand their customers' circumstances through speech and non-verbal cues, made them able to discern important details in the mundane intricacies of their lives, i.e.: acknowledging why someone had lost a job meant knowing about the political and financial context in which that job loss occurred, and the power relations entailed by it; acknowledging the loneliness of an elderly person meant knowing about the changing nature of families in Spanish society. Gossip could thus be seen as conducive to social cohesion (Dunbar 1997). Further, everyday experiences were connected to the macropolitics of Spain and the world at large. Listening and acknowledging were part and parcel of *confrares'* devotional labour. Cecilia, the *presidenta* of the *confraria*,

pointed out to me once that listening was already an act of mercy, which in her view was part of the role of the *confraria* in emulating Mary, the mother of God. 'Many times, you go into an older person's home and they're so happy to see you. They may have not spoken to anybody in days!' Cecilia told me once. 'And what do they talk about? What they had for dinner, that they woke up with a headache… Not much, but by listening you're helping them with that loneliness.'

Cecilia and other *confrares* visited the local nursing home regularly. I accompanied them on three occasions. One of the *confrares'* daughters-in-law also came, with her guitar. The visit proceeded in similar terms each time. First, we said hello to the residents spending some time chatting. The *confrares* recognised many of the residents, some of them former neighbours, or distant relatives. After a while, we went to a big room and said the rosary. It was moving to see how some of the residents, wheelchair-bound, silent for most of the greeting session, would join in prayer, encouraged by the repetitive nature of the rosary. In between decades we sang a song, accompanied by the guitar. Cecilia had talked to me about the reciprocal nature of this devotional assistance: 'We go and pray with them and they like it, they light up when we sing or say the rosary. Maybe it reminds them of their childhood. But it also helps me.' She confided that when she saw the elderly, in their frailty, greet her with happiness, with a joke sometimes, it helped her cope with her own everyday worries. 'Seeing that others may be in a more difficult situation than me, but that they are still happy', she clarified.

Although the word gossip took on negative overtones towards the 17th century in English-speaking societies, it initially meant 'god-sent' or 'god-related' (god-sib), in reference to an acquaintance that would assist you in time of need (Birchall 2006; Hoad 1996). At an inter-personal level then, gossip could act as a form of reflection, as a private moment between two people in which they trade concerns for themselves or for others, perhaps a respite from the everyday troubles to cheer each other up. For me, these moments amounted to existential acknowledgements of each other. In a way, and as Kathleen Norris (2001, 76) points out in her work on spirituality in a rural community in Dakota, when people gossip we ask after someone's health, or after someone who has lost a spouse, so "when we gossip we are also praying, not only for them but for ourselves". Gossip and small talk were the medium by which Cecilia acknowledged the suffering and need of others, and in her eyes, this was part

of a theology of care that linked the *confrares* to the divine figures of Mary and Christ, to their suffering during their lives and to their divine assistance in time of need. Gossip, as Norris contends, "is theology translated into experience." (Ibid)

Cecilia's devotional 'acknowledgement' of others is of particular interest here. Writing about the pain of others, philosopher Stanley Cavell (2002, 257) says that "acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge." That is, acknowledging someone's pain, although it does not guarantee its *knowing* it (in the sense of properly understanding it), requires doing something about it or revealing something about it on the basis of that knowledge. Cavell links the body's inner states such as pain to behavioural expressions of that pain. And for that expression to be part of the wider repertoire of human expressions, it must be acknowledged: "knowing that someone is in pain…involves acknowledging that pain in one's behaviour towards that person" (Mulhall 1994, 169). I contend that when the *confrares* acknowledged the suffering (loneliness in old age), or the happiness (of a new life to be) of themselves and others through gossip and small talk, they were presupposing, sharing, contesting and constructing knowledge claims about the community in which they lived. In summary, I see that the manufacture and sale of *torró*, beyond being a mundane practice, facilitated useful forms of communal knowledge. Thus, I argue that gossip is more than a means to an end, but the form in which knowledge and information were stored in the collectivity and then drawn from continuously (Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs 2004). In the following section I explore the ways in which this particular kind of knowledge becomes effective in the community, both through ephemeral care maps and a material devotional cartography.

2.2. Women's mappings

2.2.1. Devotional cartographies

Towards the end of that day's session, the *confrares* sat down around the table again. Hundreds of slabs of *torró* rested nearby, cooling down, filling the room with the smell of sugar and cinnamon. Cecilia, the *presidenta* of the *confraria* put her hand up. The rest of the confrares started quieting down. 'We need to decide the route that the Mother of God will

take the day we take her out', she announced. She was referring to one of the most important events in the summer festival in honour of the Mother of God of the Carmel. One of the evenings was dedicated to parading the village's image of Mary through the village streets, stopping at a number of devotees' houses. *En route*, the villagers threw flowers at her, recited poems, and prayed under her gold-thread coat. The *presidenta* took the map from the previous year out. This map was included in the leaflet that the *confrares* distributed throughout the village with the *festa* programme. Cecilia had drawn a fresh route in red. 'I designed this route thinking of last year's and of some of your comments. I want to know what you think'. The ensuing consultation went on for a long while, with the map being passed around, and the names of villagers, streets and squares being exchanged and contested.

Route for a parade at the back of a *festes* pamphlet.
Photo by author.

Through the delivery of *torró*, the women had become experts in urban geography, repetitively engaged in answering questions such as who lived where, who had moved and why, and who had decided to stop buying *torró*, including the circumstances for it. This knowledge, together with anecdotes that remained in the collective consciousness of the *confraria*, were used then to inform the maps for a procession or pilgrimage. One such

anecdote, was told often by my mother for the delight of the *confrares* who, even though had heard it before, gradually stopped talking and listened. She recounted that at some point during the parade in a previous year, a man asked the confrares to stop the image and turn it to face his house. 'You know who it was? Lluís, he and his wife have always been *del puny en alt*!', she recounted. To be *del puny en alt* (literally, "with a lifted fist") means to be a left/socialist sympathiser, sometimes a communist. The expression comes from the Spanish Civil War, when the fighters on the Republican side (an amalgamation of communists and socialists of many denominations) would salute lifting their fist. As my mother said this, many women nodded, some opened their mouths briefly to show surprise. The story continued: the image stopped and the confrares turned it towards Lluís' house. He went in and opened a big window that faced the street. Then, everyone realised what Lluís was trying to do: through the window, the public saw Lluís' wife, bedridden, and gazing at the image of Mary through her window.

> 'Lluís came out again and asked the priest to go in for a moment. He said, "my wife would like to speak to you[17]". Look girls, we all cried; it was so moving to see Lluís and the priest helping the poor woman sit up so she could see the Mother of God, people who'd never been to church, with such devotion in their eyes!'

These were always my mother's concluding remarks. The anecdote often kick-started a fresh round of gossip exchange where some women picked up the theme of conversion and talked about other cases in the village, people who had turned to the church after a long absence from it; some other women spoke of Lluís and his wife, about the kind of life they had led and the fate of their children; others still spoke about the recently elected socialist government and their own fears about the kind of decisions they could make at a local level that may run contrary to religious custom. Back in the *torró*-making session, Cecilia called for everyone's attention. She showed the map again, with some modifications suggested during the meeting, and then she asked for a show of hands to vote as to the conformity with that year's route. They all agreed.

[17] Here, Tere used the polite *you*, used in Catalan and other Romance languages. This form of the second person is used to show deference and respect.

Confrare reads a poem to the Mother of God of the Carmel. Photo by author.

This map-making exercise effectively plotted devotion on and in the community drawing from the pool of collective knowledge gathered through gossip. This same pool was also drawn from for other important means, namely, to distribute care in the community. The *confrares'* extensive communication network included members, friends and relatives who worked for local food banks or charities. Information was shared discreetly in order for aid to be materialised with an aim to remedy if not the whole at least part of the perceived need. I have mentioned above that care interventions were done through local branches of Caritas and The Red Cross in the form of food and clothes banks, and financial assistance to cover bills. On occasion the network reached the local social worker. Although I did not witness any instance of the latter, I was told of a couple of cases in which a single, older person had qualified for state benefits as the ultimate consequence of the *confrares'* involvement in the case (through the intervention of social services). The *confrares* took action too, visiting the elderly, going to the local nursing home to pray and offering spiritual support during the moments in which *torró* was sold.

Gossip has been seen to mobilise local knowledge in order to aid community members through committees or organisations (Elias and Scotson 1965), traversing the alleged walls between public institutions and the private lives and circumstances of villagers. Something I heard repeatedly in Benaigua was how social services, either deployed locally or through national legislation, often failed to reach those in need. Many members of the congregation referred to the important welfare role that the church still played when the official (state) channels failed. My neighbour often told a story which exemplified state failure in this respect. While she looked after her mother in her last years, a law was passed by the government at the time making possible for carers to add their work hours as contribution to their eventual pension. She narrated how she had applied for it but only got a response two years later; by that time her mother had passed away. Indeed, the role of religious organisations in the provision of social services in the aftermath of repeated financial crises has increasingly become a focus for academic attention (Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Cloke, Beaumont, and Williams 2013), although the ethnographic intricacies of the networks that allow such provision have not been explored.

In Benaigua, *confrares* monopolised some of these networks. Over time, and as circumstances changed or remained the same, the *confrares* plotted people and places over their collective and richly contextual knowledge of the village, producing a palimpsest of intersecting traces. Although ephemeral and immaterial, these maps of care and devotion existed in the collective mind of the *confraria*, emerging through conversations and gossip during meetings in a *confrare's* house patio or a church room. These spaces became then true *centres of calculation*, to use Latour's (1987) nomenclature. Latour develops the concept of centres of calculation to explain the circular movement (from a centre to other places) that allows for the building up and accumulation of knowledge. Latour's aim is to explore the expansion of European scientific knowledge as a consequence of capitalist and imperialist projects abroad. Places such as the Royal Geographical Society in London allowed for the mobilization, stabilisation and combination of non-human resources by scientists, processes that allowed for the production of knowledge (Latour 1987, 223). When Latour refers to non-human resources, he refers to samples of soil and other materials, specimens of animals and plants; also, notebooks recording field expeditions, and traces on paper outlining the physical terrain of explored lands (Ibid, 224-226). But inherent to this movement of resources was the power

differential between coloniser and colonised: the information gathered from 'other places' was used to further an extractive project that continues in the present.

I want to argue that the centres of calculation that *confrares* embodied in Benaigua complicated that very notion in a way that affected the power differentials implicit in Latour's work. Ultimately, the *confrares'* devotional labour allowed for a devotional epistemology of care that defies traditional understandings of knowledge construction. In the first place, the non-human resources which the confrares mobilised were difficult to stabilise; very little if any of the gossip and small talk that was collected and exchanged was written or recorded physically. The way in which information was made stable was through its repetition. For Latour, the stabilisation of samples and specimens allowed for its study in so far as they did not decay or become altered (Ibid:223). In Benaigua, small talk and gossip were unstable and alterable by nature. However, this characteristic was precisely what made it valuable in the construction of knowledge, furthered by the contestation and corroboration of gossip through repetition in the devotional centres of calculation. In fact, the *confrares'* cartographies of care run counter to how Latour thinks of maps as "immutable mobiles" (Latour 1987, 227) that is, material scientific objects which allow information to travel physically over space. In Benaigua the *confrares'* maps which allowed them to locate people and needs (as well as other types of information) existed in the dialectical flows of speech, in omnipresent yet evanescent exchanges of questions and answers.

Maps have been invariably investigated and critiqued as tools generated by the powerful in order to maintain order and create territorial/discursive dominion. J.B. Harley (2001b, 79) points out that, unlike the social history of literature or art, maps "[appear] to have few genuinely popular, alternative, or subversive modes of expression. Maps" he continues "are pre-eminently a language of power, not of protest." The allure of the map works along the allure of power, of advantage over others through its use, to paraphrase Harley (Ibid). Jorge Luis Borges' (1998) *On Exactitude in Science* or Lewis Carroll's (1893) *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* are staples of the cartographic literature, academic or otherwise. Both literary pieces allude to the might of empires and nations whose drive for the creation of a map that maximises representation and usefulness take them to produce a 1:1 map that is deemed in the end useless. I also found references to these stately cartographies in articles in *The New*

Yorker (Cep 2014), in political philosophy treatises (de Sousa Santos 1995) and in poetry (Szymborska and Cavanagh (transl.) 2014). Even when Latour approaches maps and map-making, he calibrates cartographies as emerging from imperial centres of power.

But beyond their use as material tools for domination and control, mapping has been seen as a universal cognitive and cultural practice deployed by societies and groups in order to make sense of the macro-environment in which they exist (Blaut et al. 2003, 181; Harley and Woodward 1987, 1993, 1994), both in terms of orientating oneself and/or representing these environments. What I found interesting in Benaigua is that these sense-making exercises were done through the language and habitus of religion. Gossip instantiated maps that existed in the collective and in the heterogeneously performative act of devotion (see Crampton 2009). Devotional labour, in its myriad instances, seemed to allow villagers picture their own community in their own terms, indeed to "imagine" it in their own terms (Anderson 1991). In my view, gossip and maps were used as devotional technologies that uncovered certain relationships between power and knowledge. On the one hand, even though the cartographies of care described above resulted in different forms of assistance and aid, they depended on certain readings of the community shaped by factors such as class. The confrares' cartographies worked as cultural texts, and so they shaped, discursively the community according to the confrares' values. In this way, maps created certain sorts of power relations, a certain "spatial panopticon" (Harley 2001a) in which the confrares decided who was or was not worthy of assistance. On the other hand, however, the care maps that resided in the collective existence of the *confraria* worked apart from the official channels of aid, be it the state or the local charities, but at the same time informed the interventions of both. In the following section I look at how the women's alternative contributions to the power/knowledge (im)balances in the community thrived apart from the official channels of care by the institution of the Catholic Church.

2.2.2. Retrieving maps

During the map-making meeting I describe above, I heard one of the confrares ask a question that I had heard before with varying degrees of sarcasm: 'And the priest, what is he going to do this year? Will he attend or not?' The village priest's lack of interest in public expressions

of religiosity was an important part of the gossip that villagers exchanged, particularly those involved in *confraries* and assiduous church goers. As I explored in the previous chapter, the priest's absence in the running of local religious traditions had ceased to be conspicuous by the time I conducted fieldwork. In the eyes of many of my interlocutors, he and his particular theology were behind the reasons why villagers had stopped attending Mass, participating in church-related activities and generally losing interest in Catholicism.

In a conversation with the priest, the topic of devotional labour came up, this time in reference to a Catholic youth organisation in the village. 'What is the point of working so hard?' he said, 'What is the point of this delirious activism [*activismo febril]*?' The priest thought that the organising of festivals should be financially the remit of the local government. 'Nowadays everybody has a television, so what do you want entertainment for?', he emphasised. Even the charitable aspect of *confraries* was not worth working for, he added, pointing to the work already being done by the local branches of The Red Cross and Caritas. 'They are enough', he said. For him, faith was about the individual's relationship with God, and so any intermediaries, such as popular devotions and the labour involved in them, were inauthentic, unnecessary. This topic came up in his sermons as well. On the occasion of the celebration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with a plethora of women in attendance[18], the priest made a veiled reference to women's work in the church. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus talks to Martha and reminds her of her duty to God: 'Jesus said to Martha' the priest told the congregation, 'you have many preoccupations [*preocupaciones*] but there's only one thing that is necessary, and that is God.'

Unsurprisingly, this attitude was the basis for certain anti-clericalism in the village, particularly from the congregation itself. However, the same members of the congregation that criticised the priest on certain occasions, would be sympathetic on others on the ground of his age or his poor health. When members of the congregation organised lunches or dinners and the priest was invited, he was eagerly awaited, and his attendance celebrated. His presence at a

[18] In Benaigua the *festa* of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is done by women and for women, although men participate in masses and, increasingly, in the procession that marks the day of the festivity. It involves a heavy schedule of funeral attendance and lottery selling in order to raise money for a procession, a sung Mass and flower tributes.

celebration or gathering organised by a *confraria* was commented by the members as a matter of pride. And although there was frequent talk of dissidence, all planned events were put past him. Yet many members of the congregation shared an interesting position vis-à-vis the priest: his absence benefited them as *confrares* because it meant that they had more freedom in organising the *festa* (see de Sousa Santos 2015 later in this chapter). This freedom was interesting: it seemed to exist reflexively, encountered in the priest's disinterest in public piety. A final ethnographic scene will help illuminate these intricately productive tensions.

One late evening I was in the company of a number of *confrares*. There had been a meeting at Cecilia's place, it was cold outside, and the women (and I) were reluctant to venture out onto the street. We got talking about a time when the priest had tried to organise a network of visitors in order to assist villagers spiritually. He gathered a few volunteers and gave them a number of streets each, to visit. The idea was, the *confrares* told me, that once a year they would get together and gather information as to who was in need of other than spiritual aid. The project was part of a '*pastoral de la salut'* [health ministry], a historical expression of the Catholic Church with official organs and centrally funded campaigns that centre around care-giving activities. In Benaigua, this project did not last long. My aunt, whose parents were visited by one of the priest's volunteers and a *confrare* herself, offered an explanation: 'It didn't work because each time I knew they were coming I felt obliged to clean the house, to have a little snack prepared.' Other *confrares* nodded. 'My parents had Alzheimer's then', she continued, 'sometimes the visit did not sit well with them, they got anxious.' In the end, the *confrares* told me, these visits were perceived more as an inconvenience than support.

At the time of writing, the priest-led *pastoral de la salut* exists only in memory. Not only did the *confrares* deemed it inappropriate in its deployment, but the priest also considered that caring for those in need should be left to official institutions (the government or local charities). Perhaps the ministry's hierarchical rigidity, with projects being subject to funding and approval from the bishopric down to regional and local priestly authority, was its demise. Contrarily, Benaigua's women-led fluid cartographies continue to be strong. While labour precarity and cuts to social services mark the lives of villagers in Benaigua, the *confrares* continue to exercise what Gloria Anzaldúa (2015, 39) termed "spiritual activism" whereby practitioners concern themselves with "the grounded realities of people's lives and

struggles", exploring thus "spirituality's social implications." This is spiritual/social activism in the community by the community, away from the direct intervention of the state and the economy, yet working alongside both. In this respect, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015, 139) makes a pertinent point in reference to the privatisaion of religion. "Expelled from the state and the market", de Sousa Santos says in reference to the process of (Western) modernity, "religion took refuge in the community, a domain of social regulation less standardized and more open to diversity." It is in the realm of the community that progressive theologies may develop counter-hegemonic emancipatory projects and agendas (172). The Church's "health ministry" fails to account for what is already constituted by and in the community, that is, that people like the *confrares* organise themselves, materialising productive theologies of care and devotion.

All in all, I have argued for a women-based epistemology of care and devotion, the foundation of which are certain instances of gossip and small talk exchange. I argue that gossip can be seen as a form of spiritual attention, a "saintly virtue" (de Sousa 1994) which encompasses an urge to tell, to utter, rather rather than to keep silent. The ethnography above has shown how trust and the contexts of intimacy entailed by gossip and small talk can form the basis for an accountability, a responsibility towards each other that grounds communal knowledge. Given this mutuality-based responsibility, this chapter puts forward the idea of a gossip-enabled ethics of care in the community. In the context of extant critical "counter-cartographic" work (see for example Bryan and Wood 2015; Orangotango+ Kollektiv 2018), the ethnography in this chapter foregrounds devotional maps as emergent epistemic practices beyond their mere appraisal as cultural texts (Cosgrove 2008). The openness of maps and map-making to reconfiguration by an individual, groups or societies, their performative potential and a defiance to hierarchisation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) are qualities that work alongside gossip's rhizomatic character. By paying attention to ritual cartographic practices, this chapter contributes to and expands on scholarly work situated at the productive crossroads of spatiality and spirituality. In doing so, it places religion firmly in the centre of public life.

Finally, this chapter intervenes in the literature on labour: existing away from a hierarchical understanding of the state, the exploitative character of the market, and the rigid hierarchies

of the Catholic Church as institution, the *confrares'* devotional labour and the resulting care cartographies can be seen as counter-discursive and identity-forming (Cupples and Glynn 2020). In this respect, women's *laboured* cartographies offer alternative routes to devotion and care, routes that are made by the community for the community in the pursuit of social welfare. Crucially, these faith interventions, the successful continuation of religious traditions, and the diffusion of pious politics of care into the (secular) community are proof that the future of religion and religious expression is firmly commanded by women.

CHAPTER THREE: (Making) Memories of *la festa:* cohesion and contestation, tradition and innovation.

3.1. *Fer la festa*: past and present

While I was growing up in the 1980s and 90s, a multitude of *festes* peppered Benaigua's civic calendar. This was the time of *clavaris* (men *festa* organisers) and *clavariesses* (women *festa* organisers). This Valencian term comes from the Latin for 'key' and refers to 'those who hold the key' referring to the exclusive access to the cabinet where the saint or the image of the divinity in question was kept. Not only did the *clavaris* or *clavariesses* have access to this cabinet, but they were also the keepers of the tradition, in charge of the repetition of rituals and festivities in honour of their saint or divine figure. *Fer la festa*, then, entailed being in charge of the activities that raised the necessary funds to put on a festivity, organise said festivity and nominate a fresh batch of *clavaris* or *clavariesses* for the following year to continue the tradition. I have fond memories of my mother being a *clavariessa* of the Mother of God in August in 1991 when I was a teenager. There are photographs in the house, encased in fine leather albums showing images of my mother in a traditional colourful dress during a flower tribute to Mary the Mother of God. In one photograph, hanging from one of her arms, a wicker basket contains an explosion of red and pink carnations. Her other arm is linked with mine, as she wished me to accompany her to some of the events. We stand in front of the church and against an intense blue sky. I wear dark trousers, a white shirt and a red sash around my waist, reminiscent of Valencian farmers' attire. My cheeks, a bloom of acne, frame a shy smile as dozens of villagers look at us in the near distance.

Other photographs from the same festivity show my mother in an orange cocktail dress at night, with my father next to her. He is tanned from the work in the fields and holds her hand gently. Both stand in front of the orchestra that entertained the villagers during the festivities. But the climax of the *festa* photographs comprises those that show my mother in her finest dress, which my grandmother, a talented seamstress, made for her. Tradition indicated that the dress for the *clavariesses* of the Mother of God in August had to be black and long, and that it had to be worn with a high comb, all in deference to Mary in her transit to heaven. In

one of my favourite photographs, my grandmother holds my mother's hand and looks at her creation. My mother wears an elegant black affair, embroidered by hand in black little stones. The dress is punctuated by a high comb atop her head, from which a waterfall of black lace, a *mantilla*, falls onto her back. She beams from the photograph, the lightest of sweat drops crowning her eyebrows.

Mother and daughter: my mum, my grandma and the dress she made.

What I remember most of that year is the amount of time that my mother (and my father) spent with her fellow *clavariesses* (and their husbands): just as the *confrares* in the previous chapter met at least once a week to talk about the sale of lottery, to account for the sale and manufacture of *torró,* attended Mass often and organised processions, pilgrimages, and visits to the local nursing home, my mother's team of *clavariesses* in 1991-92 also made local delicacies, they sold lottery, became cooks-cum-bartenders during many of the local culinary fairs, preparing *tapas*, pouring beer and wine, enticing friends and neighbours to spend some money in their food kiosk, money that they later carefully allocated to music, fire-works, religious rituals, parades and food in a week-long summer *festa* that pulled the community

together. Mum often reminisces about this time. 'What was the best thing about that *festa*?' I asked her once. '*L'harmonia*', she answered unhesitant. 'We worked hard, but we got along very well. You know what it is to get together with people you don't know much, and by the end of the year you have become a tight team [*una pinya*]? Friends for life.' Mum continued, 'And your dad was alive, and you grandma was well.' She did not say more than this on this occasion, but I knew she was thinking back, going over experiences and memories of that time. Whenever *festes* were talked about, at some point there was talk of absences, of those who were not there but that had participated in *festes* or had been crucial to them.

In this chapter, I proceed from my mother's brief reflections on the phenomenon of the *festa* in Benaigua, its socialising aspect and its capacity for memorialisation. Festive time is explored as both conducive to social cohesion in the community, and capable of contesting established ideologies, be it circumnavigating the priest's liturgical and institutional power, or through re-inventing tradition. A conceptual engagement with photographs and photography (Barthes 1981; Roberts 2012; Rose 2010) will allow for an exploration of the role of memory and memory-making in the production and reproduction of *festes.* In particular, this chapter deploys Halbwach's (1992 [1941,1952]) classical notion of "collective memory" and more recent work on memory, kinship and identity (Antze and Lambek 1996; Pine 2007; Carsten 2007) in order to put forward the idea that the return and re-invention of religious festivities conform to a contemporary notion of *festive time* (Gil Calvo 1991; Lefebvre 1991)*.* Inspired by Walter Benjamin's (1998, 177–78) concept of 'the ruin' in his dictum "In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting", I explore how the economy, spirituality, material memory, and identity become entangled in everyday performances of place-making.

3.1.1. Photographs, memories, and memory-making.

Often taken on the big day of a *festa*, family photographs welcomed the visitor in the hallway of many of Benaigua's houses, co-existing with others of different generations and in different settings, and readily indexing the private and the domestic. Family photographs are, according to Gillian Rose (2010, 126), "a technology for performing familiality", with its concomitant practices of displaying, archiving and sharing. Interestingly, however, in Benaigua the domestic was signalled through the display of photographs of people in public,

mostly religious, festivals. Photographs of the family during communal festivities welcomed the visitor to private spaces such as the home, and thus a certain village-wide familiality pervaded Benaigua's homes. Family photography, as Rose (2010, 1) suggests, may well be considered a social practice that, in this case, has a capacity to homogenise and to signal local identity. Certainly, these family photographs taken during festivals and displayed in the home evoke and occupy a place "between the objective material and the social, psychic and sensory" (Roberts 2012, 105), anchoring villagers' memories to the village itself.

Family portrait: from left to right, my mum, my brother, I and my dad during mum's *festa* in 1992.

In many of Benaigua's houses, there were cupboards and drawers that contained similar photographic albums and other memorabilia plotting important moments in the life stories of villagers of certain generations (see Horton and Kraftl 2012 for more on cupboards and memory). Of recent, however, these photographic domestic archives have found their public counterpart online. In 2012 a group of young men and women interested in local history and crafts strived to put together an exhibition of Benaigua's past material culture. The exhibition, which showcased some of my grandmother's designs, was a resounding success in the number of visitors it attracted and the number of stories about local material practices it unearthed. On the back of this, the same group started in 2014 the task of collecting, scanning and uploading 'old' photographs of village people and places onto an online repository. Since

then, more than 2500 photographs have been uploaded, shared and commented upon on a dedicated Facebook page. In fact, conversations in Benaigua were often interrupted by someone bringing out a phone and sharing the latest post, passing the phone around. A heated exchange invariably followed, where my interlocutors tried to identify the people and places in the photograph. Engaged thus in the art of remembering, the villagers shared and contested not only local stories that veered in and out of the personal and the familial, but also accounts of the larger social milieu of the time in which the photograph had been taken, revealing contrasting ideologies. The shared cultural and social participation implied in looking at and 'reading' photographs is what Roland Barthes (1981, 25–26) called the *studium*, instructive of a common body of shared memories, knowledge and information.

Although the *studium* aspect of photography is what initially commanded the attention of my interlocutors, it was something else that compelled them to talk about photographs at length: a dress worn by a woman, a house with its front doors wide open, the slant of a hat worn by a young man. Material gestures. This attention to details that exist no more (95) yet signal a "subtle beyond" (59) in the lives of those in the photograph, these "blind fields" (57) of the past are what Barthes calls the *punctum.* Often, it was the absence of people and objects depicted in photographs that started conversations. I went through many photographic albums with *confrares* and women that had been *clavariesses*. 'Look, how handsome we look!' Fina said showing me a photograph of herself, dressed elegantly in black, like my mother, standing next to her husband in front of the church. I interviewed Fina and her granddaughter Pepi at the former's house one very hot summer day. I was a bit early. Pepi had not arrived yet and Fina took the opportunity to show me the family photographs lined up on her dresser, one by one. She looked particularly beautiful in the picture she was holding then. Fina, in her late 80s at the time of my fieldwork, remembered well when she had done the *festa* of the Mother of God in August in 1992. She told me stories of hard work and initiative similar to those I heard from my mother or the *confrares* in the previous chapter. As well as selling lottery to raise funds for the *festa*, back then Fina and her fellow *clavariesses* sold eggs from a nearby farm to raise money. Fina recounted going around her neighbourhood once a week with a trolley full to the brim with eggs, fulfilling the orders that neighbours, friends and relatives placed. 'I did the *festa* because I had never done one' Fina

told me, 'and I wanted to know what it was like to have a good time, not just work, work, work.'

Fina had been born and brought up in a village some one hundred miles away to the south of Benaigua. She met her Benaiguan husband when the latter travelled to her village seeking work. When they married, the husband's job meant that they settled back in Benaigua. 'Oh, I've had so many jobs: I've picked cotton, I've cleaned houses, looked after sick people…' I said to her that her weekly sale of eggs sounded like a lot of work to me, on top of her many jobs. 'But we had such a blast!' she replied. 'Working together, organising together. I made good friendships [*amistats*]. We still meet and talk about it.' Just then, her granddaughter Pepi arrived. 'I wanted my granddaughter to have the same experiences', Fina said as Pepi embraced her. 'Are you talking about the *festa*?' Pepi asked, greeting me with the customary two kisses. 'I just couldn't say no', Pepi smiled, putting her hand on her grandmother's arm, and looked at the photograph. 'You two look so handsome there. Do you remember the huge banquet laid out by grandad for the whole family? Some relatives even came from abroad!' Fina nodded, visibly emotional. The photograph's *punctum* (Barthes 1981), that is, the poignantly personal memories elicited by the photograph, "pricked and bruised" (27) in the revelation that some people, Fina's husband, Pepi's grandad, had ceased to exist. But death did not have dominion over everything.

Joining a reclamation of Benaigua's visual and material history, two different teams of *clavariesses* were intent on resuscitating religious traditions that had ceased to be. Pepi and her team of *clavariesses,* nominated in 2017, were one of these two teams. That year it was Fina's 25th anniversary of the *festa*. When there was a marked anniversary like this in Benaigua, the veteran *clavariesses* became special guests of that year's organisers. However, there had been no volunteers to take over the *festa* of the Mother of God in August for the fifth year running. In the absence of the latter, Fina and her fellow former *clavariesses* decided to volunteer some money for a basic floral tribute to the Virgin and the feast day's Mass. There would be no procession, no music parade on the day and no evening concerts, as there had been before the *festa* disappeared. In one of Fina's gatherings with her former fellow *clavariesses* that year, however, one of them proposed nominating a new batch of women volunteers. There was some reticence to start with, Fina recalled. 'Some said young women

were not interested in these things anymore. There was much debating.' But a list was eventually compiled that included some of the women's daughters and, in Fina's case, her granddaughter. Out of 20 women nominated, nine put themselves forward to re-start the religious festivity. 'We did not want the tradition to be lost', Pepi said.

Pepi was a product control manager in a textile firm. She had lived and studied abroad for a number of years. Like many young, middle class Spanish students at the time, she had decided to do a masters abroad in order to increase her chances of employability. Pepi told me that she had missed her own people then, the activities entailed by Valencian culture, *el folclore*, she called it tongue in cheek. 'When I came back from living abroad, I realised that I needed to be here, I needed to feel that *I am* from here, you know, a kind of identity that I missed' she explained. 'And so, when my grandmother nominated me and we considered re-starting the *festa* we said, are we or are we not village [*som o no som poble*]?' Pepi smiled broadly. 'We're working very hard and doing things none of us had never done before, like setting up a bar and serving drinks! But I'm having such a good time.' Words like '*harmonia*' [harmony, unity] and '*amistat*' [friendship] came up in the conversation, just as they did when I talked to Fina, or my mother. These observations confirm a capacity of the *festa* that has been well documented, that is, "the creation of communitarian linkages, which result in articulations of the social fabric" (Gil Calvo 1991, 144).

The symbiotic relation between popular religiosity and *festa* has been studied at length (see seminal publications of the Spanish context in Prat et al. 1991 and Velasco 1982b), and owes importantly to a Durkheimian understanding of public rituals, geared towards the integration of the individual in society, as well as the regulation of the community. *Festes* have been seen as reaffirming the boundaries of the community yet encouraging cooperation among its different (sometimes differing) sections (Brandes 1988; Domene Verdú 2017; Moreno 1999; Pitt-Rivers 1971). In this way, *festes* reinforce communal and national identity through group membership (Brettell 1990, 57), be it through pilgrimages and processions in Andalusia (Crain 1992, 1996; Driessen 1984), saints festivities in rural Portugal (Brettell 1990; Dias 1981), the celebrations around the *Día de los Muertos* in Mexico (Brandes 1998), or competitive firework displays in Malta (Boissevain 1965). *Festes* become thus "communicative acts" in which signs, (semantic) references and behaviours are transmitted and contested (Gil Calvo 1991, 61).

Importantly, for Fina and Pepi, the *festa* becomes a mark of identity in the context of migration: although born elsewhere, by participating in one of its key religious festivals, Fina had perpetuated her ties to the village; while Pepi lived abroad, memories of festivals and festive time reminded her of her identity, encouraging her to participate in the organisation of the *festa* (for the importance of migrants and migration in the continuation and renovation of religious festivals see Brandes 1975; Christian 1972; Driessen 1984; and Orsi 2002).

Some weeks after the interview, Pepi and her fellow clavariesses put on a number of events that galvanised the community around the festivity of the Mother of God in August in a way that it had not for some time. The night-time concert, which had gone over the decades from traditional folkloric dances in the Franco era to a progressively popular format which included pop singers and *risqué burlesques* in the early years of the democracy, was substituted that year with a performance by 5 cellists and a dancer who played from classical tunes to arrangements of pop songs, to the delight of people of all ages in the village. Benaigua had recuperated its festive mood. Importantly, earlier on in the month of July, a similar set of events also brought back some of the splendour that villagers associated with religious festivities and which had been lost for some time too. In 2017, a month before Fina and her fellow veteran *clavariesses* read the list of women which included her granddaughter Pepi, a different list was read from the same altar. This time the nominees included 12 young women in their early 20s who had volunteered to pick up the tradition of the *clavariesses* of the Mother of God of the Carmel from where it was left 14 years before.

The first time I attended one of their meetings, the young women reminded me of the *confrares*' gatherings: loud and productive. It took place in a *baix*, the space on the ground floor of big houses in Benaigua that was sometimes left fairly unbuilt, historically to keep farm animals or tools, but presently to be used as parking space for the family car(s). There was a long table in the middle of the *baix*, and I helped the young women place white plastic chairs around it. That evening, one of the first warm ones in May, we spent some time talking about my PhD project; they showed a keen interest in traditions being documented. 'Sometimes we don't realise the wealth of culture that we have in Benaigua', one of them said. Then the women went through the agenda for the evening and started talking about up-coming

fundraising events as well as the ongoing sale of lottery. When they settled all matters for the evening, one of them turned around to me and said, 'Ask us anything you want!'

They were keen to tell me how it all had begun, how they had decided one night in 2016, as they cheered with a drink in their hands in a local dancing club, that they would become *clavariesses* and do the *festa*. But I wanted to know why. I was curious as to their reasons to recuperate a *festa* that had not seen the light of day for nearly two decades. From what I gathered that evening, they had busy lives: many of them were in the last years of their university degrees, one was already employed full-time and another was in the process of sitting exams to become a civil servant. The answer came in a cacophony of voices. Many of them talked of their aunts, mothers and grandmothers. The latter had done one *festa* or another when they were young and had passed them onto these women through anecdotes and stories. Cristina, one of the women around the table nearest to me offered an explanation. She had both her elbows resting on the arms of the plastic chair, her fingers and thumbs gripped firmly a mobile phone: 'It's something that our mothers and our grandmothers have done and that we have not known.' Here Cristina referred to the fact that they had no memories of a *clavariesses*-led *festa* in their lifetime. 'We've heard the stories and seen the pictures. We've been told what a good time other women had' she continued 'and we wanted to be part of that history too.' Another *clavariessa* intervened: 'We like organising parties, everybody knows us. We're such busybodies [*romanceres*]!' They all chuckled, 'That's what life is about right? To do things for the village so that later in life we can think: look what we did, we had such a good time.' They all agreed with a cheer.

In both accounts above, Pepi and Fina's interview, and my exchanges with Cristina and her fellow *clavariesses*, the importance of sociality and memories is central, not only as events from the past that were reflected upon through photographs, stories and anecdotes, but also as narratives in the making (Kaell 2016). These narratives were conducive of a women-centred sociality that persisted over time, a sociality that young women in Benaigua were intent on not losing. Thus, I want to consider memory as practice (Antze and Lambek 1996, xii) emerging in the context of relatedness and, in particular, of kinship. Memory and kinship are intricately entangled (Carsten 2007) and at the same time entail processes and artefacts that reveal the importance of a sense of place. In Benaigua, when a graduate student was in her final exams,

her mother, grandmother, aunt, sometimes even a neighbour burned a candle in front of a stack of prayer cards, often placing the Mother of God of the Carmel, the village's patron, at the front. Family photographs welcomed visitors to the village homes. When my cousin's son turned three, my uncle (the child's grandfather), a farmer like my father, bought him a toy tractor, shiny and green, with pedals so he could drive it. As we say in Valencian, his pride was fit to burst his shirt. These practices invoked respectively the importance of familial advocations of the Virgin Mary, village traditions and forms of labour, memorialising the everyday through kinship.

And so stories from the past came about, memories that carried personal and social perceptions of the dictatorship, the *transició* and the first years of the democracy. These memories often featured struggle, poverty, precarity, kin feuds, but also happiness, family stories of prosperity, sometimes a sense of a past "simpler life". Mirroring Frances Pine's (2007) exploration of memory, kinship and land in rural Poland, I observed two kinds of remembering or memories in Benaigua. On the one hand, there was a collective or social memory that took the shape of general narratives of the past accessible to all, including memories in the form of village stories which many had access to and recounted. As we saw in the first chapter, memories and metaphors of the land were important for villagers. Others had to do with forms of leisure in the past, in particular, with the local cinema owned by the church and run by two charismatic spinsters. 'If you wanted to get into the cinema for free, you had to go to Sunday Mass', I was told. Anecdotes about films, about what people ate as they watched them, or stories involving the cinema keepers were exchanged often in gatherings of any sort.

On the other hand, there were the personal, individual memories that narrated the death of a relative, say, or a festive event. For Pine, these two levels, the personal and the collective, are in constant interaction, giving each other context for re-telling and re-interpretation (Ibid, p. 122-123). Maurice Halbwachs (1992, 38), writing in the 1940s and 50s, suggested that the acquisition and repetition of memories are societal. Halbwachs talked of "social frameworks" (40) of memory which are instrumental in the continuous and collective (re)construction of a society's past through the narratives of the present. These frameworks are constituted by repeated stories and rituals, by physical objects, and by the naming of places and people that

accumulate in time and space: physical objects and symbols conjoin in collective remembrances (204). Collective memories thus become vehicular to the creation not only of communities but of nations at large, drawn upon when the nation needs to rally its members, such as in times of war. In this vein, Benedict Anderson (1991, 6) proposed that nations are imagined, as even when their members cannot know each other, there is a sense of collective "communion". Memory and memories become heralds of continuity and association and thus of identity (Antze and Lambek 1996).

In addition, this identity was territorial. In the context of religious traditions, the patron saint of the village was often involved in anecdotes from Benaigua's past that exalted the village's traditions (even the image of the patron saint herself), and disparaged others from the village next door. Village feuds were often talked about. My interlocutors would then embody a kind of playful pride during and after the telling of these anecdotes, agreeing with each other, smiling, laughing. Yet at the same time on occasion the same village next door, its festivities and patron saints would be invoked as more successful in pulling the community together. Thus the two villages became not only imagined communities, but also their festive territories were bounded, marked different, demarcating traditions and indexing local identity (Homobono Martínez 1990, 49–56; see also Christian 1972).

3.1.2. Questioning homogeneity: the politics of remembering.

Before moving on to exploring the return of traditions to Benaigua in more detail, I want to question the seeming homogeneity of the villagers' collective memories: which memories were not talked about or contested? did collective memories leave anybody out? Spain as a modern nation has been dealing with its own contested memories of the recent past for some time. Legacies of the dictatorship and the lack of closure that the *transició* entailed for many, resulted in collective memories of the nation that are unstable and ceaselessly disputed. The passing of the *Ley de Memoria Histórica* [Law of Historical Memory] in 2006 brought about a number of cultural artefacts that were meant to give voice to those who had suffered during the conflict and under the dictatorship, those whose voices had been silenced. A wealth of novels, non-fiction monographs and documentaries appeared in a short period of time (Labanyi 2008). Adding to this production, a local historian compiled a monograph which

documented in detail the decade comprising the Civil War in Benaigua, including extra-judicial killings. The book, published by one of the two universities in València in 2010, caused an uproar in the village. Some villagers were not happy having the names of relatives (now dead) mingled in a narrative of conflict and repression. Others thought that the work had been long due and that it showed how some people suffered more than others. The historian received death threats and had to leave Benaigua and live in exile for some time.

At the same time, Benaigua's local government, a coalition of socialist and centre-left parties during the time I was conducting fieldwork, organised a number of events in which, for example, fighters of the International Brigades (soldiers from outside Spain who fought in the Republican side against fascists during the Civil War) were celebrated and memorialised by giving them street names. This happened around a time when the national media followed the case of a number of people who had chained themselves to a monument in order to stop its demolition. The monument in question was a cross just on the side of church in a town south of València. Crosses erected during the dictatorship memorialised those fallen during the Civil War, tellingly on the side of the Nationalists. The town's local government decided in January of 2018 to pull it down, operating according to a clause from the Law of Historical Memory. Its defenders, however, alleged that the cross was a sign of identity, a "religious symbol lacking political connotations" (Sánchez 2018).

My aim in referring to these events is two-fold. First, I wanted to signal the importance of what is not said, or not talked about. Just as memories of *festes* past circulated freely in the religious circles I moved in, other memories, those of the role of the Catholic Church in the dictatorship, rarely emerged. When they did, they were bathed in nostalgic tones, just as the memories above about the Church-owned cinema in the village. Forgetting and loss are, in this way, concomitant to the construction of identities and, beyond this, of what is considered "real" or "true" of the village's past (Antze and Lambek 1996, xxv). Selecting certain memories when remembering the past involved an active forgetting of aspects of Benaigua's everyday past, in particular those that referred to conflict, struggle or instability. A good example of this 'selective memory' that is closely linked to the *festa* of the Mother of God of the Carmel is the fact that during the 1960s and for a number of years the *clavariesses* put on a *Día del Caudillo* [Day of the Leader], where the dictator, Franco, was paid homage. I found

this information in *llibrets* (the printed programmes of summer *festes*), and when I enquired about it, people told me mostly that they could not remember.

Further, I wanted to show how memory is intrinsically dialectical: experiences are narrated, and narrations are experienced, then they are passed on, personal layers are added, which in turn complicate and contextualise the social. And these dialectics of the past in the present, as I point above, are concomitant to the narrative construction of identity in the community. When the *clavariesses* referred to the *festa* which they were in the process of organising, they said they were doing it '*per al poble',* for the village, that is, to recreate memories that later in their lives they could elaborate on and that would tie them closer to Benaigua. My contention would be that the *clavariesses'* deployment of memories is central to identity discourses, and thus of "conceptualizations of memory and of the 'self,' or 'subject'" (Antze and Lambek 1996, xxi) in which memory, experience and the present coalesce. But memory-making entailed more than a recreation of the past. In the second half of the chapter, I explore how innovation was central to the making of memories, exploring in detail the *festes'* return. Just as Benaigua's past remained contested in the memories of its inhabitants, the future of the *festa* relied on a number of interpretations of tradition and, importantly, a number of innovations and volitional slippages.

3.2. '*Una festa low-cost i democràtica'*

During the same gathering with the *clavariesses* of the Mother of God of the Carmel, I posed the question of faith and devotion. They had been talking about how some of their university friends from other villages had been *clavariesses* to their own patron saint. 'And we thought, does not our patron saint deserve a celebration too?!' one of the young women posed. Some nodded affirmatively. So, you are doing it for devotion? I asked. Some heads said yes once more but some others vacillated. Cristina spoke again, 'Look, some in the group are not religious but many of us are. We went to a religious school; we believe in God. And yes, part of what we want to do is to show that you can be religious and modern at the same time, you know?' What does modern mean, I asked. 'What we mean is that you can go clubbing and do a religious *festa* at the same time, that you don't have to choose' said another young woman.

Cristina piped up again: ‘We are totally neo-Medieval [*Som neo-medievo total*]’ They all laughed. What? I asked, amused. ‘Yes, neo-Medieval. It’s a new concept you know. For example, you go into a church and they have air-con and screen projectors, the old with the new. We’re totally that.’

Clavariesses of the Mother of God of the Carmel in 1965. Photo courtesy of local history repository.

Clavariesses of the Mother of God of the Carmel in 2018. Photo courtesy of the *clavariesses.*

3.2.1. Innovation in the time of austerity

I wondered whether Cristina and her fellow *clavariesses’* use of the emic concept ‘neo-Medieval’ was merely a stylistic affectation or it carried more meaning than it appeared. I had

been in conversations in bars or during informal gatherings at people's homes where some villagers struggled to make sense of the return of public expressions of religiosity. They saw it as a return to the past, a past where the Church was involved in (if not outright regulated) most expressions of the villagers' social life. For them, this 'recuperation' was a form of 'going back(wards) in time'. But the revivification of public expressions of religiosity was not only concerned with the past of the nation. In the many conversations I had with the men and women involved in bringing traditions back to Benaigua's religious and festive calendar, there was an undeniable preoccupation for innovation. Innovation was always seen in the context of continuation, both from the past and into the future, but it also entailed the cessation or abandonment of certain practices. When the *festes* re-emerged after a period of abandonment, they were not exactly the same as those that had ceased to be. The *festa* of the Mother of God in August and the Mother of God of the Carmel kept their name, their liturgical rituals and similar festive proceedings, including flower offerings and a final procession. The villagers engaged with the past of these traditions through collective memories and common vocabulary, thus recognising their continuation in the present. But to be able to actualise tradition in a way that engaged with the villagers at present, some things needed to change.

Pepi had told me that her team of *clavariesses* did not want *el poble* (the village) to lose its traditions, that is why they had volunteered to run the *festa.* Yet, she continued, 'we are not going to go to the extent that previous *clavariesses* did.' She pointed that working full time and raising a five-year-old daughter was not compatible with the amount of work that previous cohorts had done in the past. Their festival was going to have fewer events. She also pointed out that they had made a decision regarding their attire: it was going to be simpler, shorter dresses and neither high comb nor *mantilla*. Fina, her grandmother, strongly agreed: 'It's not necessary to be dressed to the nines, is it? With a long dress, in the heat of summer, the stiff high comb…' she said with a sneer. In this way, there were material elements of tradition that *clavariesses* wanted to keep and others that they wanted to discard or change. During the meeting with the *clavariesses* of the Mother of God of the Carmel, it became clear that they were going to continue wearing white dresses. 'The *clavariesses* have always worn white', one of the young women said. But at the same time, they had also decided to abandon the custom of wearing a high comb with its additional *mantilla* too. 'If you start making things

complicated and expensive people will not want to continue the *festa*.’ Cristina quipped. ‘We are all students you know, and we knew that we could not do what *clavariesses* used to do, all that work and commitment, so we kept things to a minimum’, another woman in the team clarified. ‘We wanted a *festa* that would be low-cost and democratic’ [*low-cost* (sic) *i democràtica*], Cristina concluded. Many of the young women around the table nodded. ‘Shall I write that on our Instagram live?!’ one of them asked eagerly. They all laughed.

I could not but think of austerity and the global financial crises of the recent past. The young women I was talking to had grown up in a society in which inequalities between rich and poor had progressively increased over their lifetimes. Conversations in the village often referred to media reports on the consequences of austerity policies and the financial crisis at large: home evictions due to mortgage default, the lengthening of hospital waiting lists, or work precarity. The Spanish government had imposed austerity measures on public expenditure following the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Spanish second recession of 2011-2013, measures that peaked in 2012 with the passing of the controversial Labour Reform, which facilitated dismissing employees and increased the villagers’ perception of labour precarity. Reaching an alarming 26.1% unemployment rate in 2013 (ECB 2020) Spanish families, typically clustering around the same multi-generational household, struggled. In a conversation with Bàrbara, one of Pepi’s fellow *clavariesses*, she referred to the disappearance of *festes* in unequivocal economic terms: ‘There was a moment, when, when…’ she shrugged her shoulders, lifting her hands up, ‘a moment when people were very low because of the [financial] crisis, as if we were in some kind of emotional and economic hole.’ A decrease in public devotional practices has indeed been linked to economic crises before: William Christian (1972), for example, documented the shrinkage of shrine devotion in the north of Spain following the economic downturn of the 1920s and 30s. In the context of an economic crisis which dragged on for the best part of a decade (2008-2018)[19], Bàrbara told me that the mere thought of doing a *festa* during this time was judged as shallow, as a waste of resources. In fact, some women told me that, before it disappeared, the *festa* had become a bit of a wealth display, a challenge ‘to see

[19] News of the end of the financial crisis, announced by Rajoy’s government in 2018, were nevertheless contested by different sectors of Spanish society in the media who thought otherwise, particularly those who had been most affected by it: the working class and those without established networks of support.

who could wear the most expensive dress.' The financial crisis put a stop to the appropriateness of these displays.

In fact, Bàrbara, Pepi and their team of *clavariesses* had decided that, once all the *festa* costs had been settled, they would donate to charity most of the money raised through their work and the sale of lottery. This discontinued a long tradition of giving this remainder to the local church in the form of a gift to the image of the Virgin Mary: a coat, a crown or jewellery. 'We looked at Save the Children, Caritas and The Red Cross, thus helping a number of organisations, rather than just one.' Bàrbara confided. 'I see that gesture as something more spiritual, you know, something closer to the word of the Lord, right?' I wonder if this gesture was too an example of the neo-Medieval practices the younger team referred to: Christian charity in the guise of secular social aid, after all Bàrbara did use the Valencian '*obres socials'* [literally, social work] rather than '*caritat'* [charity] when referring to the destination of their devotional money.

Back in the *baix,* I pressed the young *clavariesses* to clarify the concept of having a 'democratic' *festa*. The clavariesses referred to two aspects. In the first place, they alluded to the fact that all decisions in the group were made by a show of hands after an honest exchange of opinions and without the presence of the priest. I had witnessed this practice in most of the *confraries* I worked with, where decisions were opened to the group, contested verbally, and then submitted to a vote. This conferred church organisations certain independence, both of will and of means, as each organisation worked autonomously for the accumulation of funds for the *festa* in whatever guise. In the second place, and connected to this, was the fact that there had been a clear majority in both cohorts that had wished to abandon what they perceived as antiquated and ostentatious forms of celebration in a push to attract a younger generation with 'younger' tastes. As well as driven by what was seen as a kind of 'generational taste' of their own, they considered that the changes would update the *festa*, making it more affordable and hence more attractive for future generations to continue it. Let me explore these two drives behind the innovation of the *festa* in more detail, as they will reveal some of the contributing factors that the literature highlights as conducive to the return of festivals, particularly in Southern Europe.

The young *clavariesses* negotiated the attendance to church events. Some saw them as excessive in number and in tone. Not all young women turned up to Mass once a month as they were required by tradition in order to preside over the service. On many occasions, they did not account for half of the total cohort, much to the disappointment of some older congregants. In addition, many protested over the need to participate in the prescribed *penitencial*[20] that preceded the big festivity in July. Many, once more, did not turn up on that occasion. 'I believe in God; all my family do. But I want to go to Mass or confess when I feel like it, when I'm ready, not when the priest tells me', one of the young women confided, to the agreement of those around her. As Boissevain (1999, 2013) and others point out in relation to a revitalisation of religious festivals in the last quarter of the 20th century, the de-denominationalisation of certain Western societies after a period of Church domination[21] entails a greater autonomy of the individual, who is free to choose and craft their spiritual beliefs and practices. A second reason for the *clavariesses'* independence of will was economic. Although they listened to (or heard through the gossip vine) what other members of the congregation, the village at large, the local government, or the priest thought, the young women said that *they* worked for the festival, and so *they* had a right to decide what to do with the money accumulated, at least to a certain extent (see below and previous chapter regarding gossip as a form of social regulation). Negotiating church and village customs, the women's wish to democratise tradition was reflected in an openness to alternative interpretations, loosening it from customary standards and ties (Boissevain 1999). In this way, church attendance was negotiated, and material practices were revised.

But the young women were not alone; as the previous chapter shows, I encountered similar attitudes in other groups of *clavariesses* and *confrares*. And although the range of celebrations were put to the priest and to the local government, it was the laity that led on matters of time and space, that is, on what was going to happen and when. Thus, a parallel aspect of the *festa* which accompanies social cohesion is its opposite: contestation of

[20] A *penitencial* is a celebration in which members of the public are invited to confess with the priest in front of each other. Although the confessions are done individually and in secret, the rest of the congregation is present, waiting their turn, witnessing, singing and chatting. Chapter Five covers the politics of confession in Benaigua.

[21] Coetaneous to the death of Franco and thus the end of the Spanish dictatorship in 1975, a number of authoritarian regimes with close links with the Church in several southern European countries also fell: Portugal and Greece in 1974, and Malta in 1971.

hegemony, disorder. A procession, a pilgrimage or a parade disrupts the usual layout of the village, the neighbourhood or the city. The music, dancing, eating and drinking in excess which accompanies festivities signal "a display of energy and enthusiasm not appropriate or possible in the work place" (Orsi 2002, 200). The *carnivalesque*, with its attendant humour and chaos, allows for the emergence of disruptions and alter(c)ations (see Bakhtin 1984a, 1984b). But in Benaigua contestation needed not be manifest in effervescent behaviour. In the next section, I show how *clavariesses* and other congregants circumnavigated the authority of the priest and the influence of past customs, presenting their own challenges to both through the renewal of the *festa*. As well as cohesion, festivals encourage contestation and re-interpretation.

3.2.2. Navigating democratic urges.

Festival-organisation is often a source of conflict especially with the priest, who seeks to extend his dominion over people's souls into the terrain of public expressions of religiosity (see, for example, Behar 1990; Brandes 1976; Brettell 1990; and Pina-Cabral 1986). As we have seen in previous chapters, Benaigua's priest's particular theology advocated for a 'purification' of tradition. This 'purge' of public religiosity from the calendar of festivities in Benaigua is incidentally consistent with an overall reduction in the days of obligation of a post-Vatican II Church, a reduction in numbers which some scholars see as concomitant to the enlargement of fewer festivities centred around a particular saint, patron of a village or town (see Velasco 1982a), as is the case with the Mother of God of the Carmel in Benaigua. Mirroring much of the literature on priest-village tensions, decisions involving festive liturgy and festival organisation in Benaigua were put to the priest too: 'on this day we are planning a procession, on this day a flower tribute, and on this day high Mass.' Although I heard and witnessed often enough the priest's vehement reticence to be part of a procession or to organise a new religious event that had not been put on before, he very often conceded to the pleas of the *clavariesses* or the *confrares*.

On one occasion I heard him state forcefully 'That which is fallen, let it be fallen', in reference to a devotional practice some young *confrares* wanted to bring back. But villagers would reason with the priest skilfully, many times with theatrical humility: the money had already

been paid to external parties (music bands, drummers, security officers), these were people's livelihoods, they said, the event just *had* to go ahead. At times *festa*-organisers (particularly younger ones) strategically sought and garnered permission and logistical assistance from the local government *before* going to the priest, and the latter would have to concede to the former's festive agenda. The organisation of certain *festes* was not possible without the help (financial and logistical) of the local government, who had a chunk of the yearly municipal budget dedicated to *festes,* including religious ones, under the "Culture and Sport" remit.

Other times, tactics were more subtle. The priest was invited to dine with a prominent member of the congregation, who had been briefed about the *clavariesses'* requests, and who tried to change the priest's mind. Negotiations like these between priest and laity are not particular to Benaigua and have been well documented in academic literature (see above). What is noteworthy in this ethnography is that contrary to this literature, which presents village priests as the dominant organising authority of *festes* in the past, in Benaigua this power seems to have resided historically and commonly in the hands of the organisers, that is, the villagers themselves. Oral histories paid testament to this. In one such account described to me, a small group of widows who lived in Saint James [*Sant Jaume*] street in the 1950s put on a festivity in honour of the street patron. Raffles and the sale of home-made sweets allowed for a modest parade of the saint, a communal *berenar* (a mid-afternoon snack) of hot chocolate and cake, and a vespertine reverie with music and dance. Although the neighbours attended Mass that day, the celebrations were done without the explicit sanction of the priest at the time. And this was during a period in Spanish history when most would agree on the Catholic Church's firm grip on Spanish society and sociality. Victor Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* encompasses a capacity for public (festive) ritual to flatten hierarchical relationships, that is, for a productive defiance to perceived or established hierarchies, which in Benaigua seems to have existed for some time. Equally, Henri Lefebvre (1991, 204) sees in festivals an opportunity for those in less advantageous social positions to remind those in power of their existence and needs, sometimes through mockery.

A second aspect of the renewal of the *festa* which challenged established tradition in Benaigua was the new material practices that *clavariesses* introduced regarding their attire. In looking at this, I want to highlight how the return of traditions in Benaigua both contributes

and moves away from a re-sacralisation of village spaces. That is, if on the one hand the reappearance of traditions in Benaigua signifies quite overtly a public affair, a return of religious expression back to public spaces such as the street, the market place or (as we will see later) the industrial estate through processions, pilgrimages and flower offerings, on the other hand, the decisions that the two teams of women made regarding their head-dresses could be understood as stripping the (women's) religious body from religious symbols, rendering it perhaps more profane, more secular. Let me elaborate this point.

The consensus amongst the *clavariesses* was that they had wanted to recuperate a tradition in order to be continued by the coming generations, so in their view, by discontinuing the traditional high comb and *mantilla*, they were 'making things easier for themselves and for generations to come', the young women said. As I point out above, both teams of women had also decided to shorten the traditional ankle-length *festa* dress. The decision not to wear a high comb and a *mantilla* was cloaked in the language of economic and practical convenience: not only future *clavariesses* would economise by not purchasing new paraphernalia, but they would also avoid unnecessary hairdressing expenditure to have it placed on, and the uncomfortable experience of wearing it. Fina, above, advises her granddaughter Pepi and her cohort of *clavariesses* not to wear one: it's stiff, unpleasant. Comfort and austerity were invoked in order to justify both the discontinuation of a tradition that went back for hundreds of years, and the continuation of the *festa* itself. The concept that was used again and again to rationalise this change was that of 'modernising tradition' [*modernitzar la tradició*]. While certain objects or tropes continued its life within the tradition (such as the colour of the dress), others were decided against. Yet the significance of the objects themselves is worth exploring briefly. Spanish historian Mary Vincent (2009) explains that the high comb and the *mantilla* were re-introduced by the Francoist regime soon after the end of the Civil War. Women were made to cover their heads during Mass not only as a form of reverence to and expiation from God, but also to/from the Church and the Church hierarchy, part of the regime itself. The re-introduction of the high comb and veil during religious occasions then functioned as a signal to a return to traditional gender roles (men did not cover their heads), and to a re-sacralisation of time and space (post-war derelict churches and streets during Easter processions, for example).

The return of religious traditions to public spaces in Benaigua hence worked both for and against a re-sacralisation of time and space. Through subtle changes and negotiations, 'modernised' traditions signalled a past and a future in which the role of religion in the public sphere remains contested. Yet there were innovations or guises of 'modernity' that were more acceptable than others. Just as the memories that guaranteed the identification of a tradition as the same through time were collective, the acceptability or otherwise of new elements were similarly collectively negotiated. In the same way that the community checked on the *clavariesses* or the *confrares* for what was being done with the money that the community contributed towards the *festa* (see previous chapter), women who had been *confrares* or *clavariesses* in the past kept a close eye on what the new cohort proposed. This was done through creative verbal conjugations of the verb *fer* [to do]. As the new batch of women took over the organisation of the long-gone festivals, I could hear many of my interlocutors asking each other *'i que van a fer?*' [so, what are they going to do?], *'es fa així'* [that's how you do it] or *'això no s'ha fet mai'* [that's never been done before]. And so although 'doing' had different connotations in the preceding examples, what characterised Benaigua's commitment to tradition was a constant preoccupation with what the new 'others' were doing. In this way, the values and attitudes of previous generations co-existed with and contested those of the new ones in a continuous democratisation of the tradition.

In the next and final section in this chapter I turn to an extended ethnographic vignette in which I describe a new religious tradition that has established itself firmly in the festive calendar of the village, spearheaded by *confrares* and ex-*clavariesses*. My intention is to make sense of some of the themes we have already studied: the democratisation of the *festa* and material changes to it in order to ensure its continuation. Against Benaigua's post-industrial, post-rural backdrop, the village's *festive time* percolates into its inhabitants' sense of locality.

3.2.3. Festive temporalities and village allegories.

One of the prominent events that peppered the summer festivities for the Mother of God of the Carmel was a local pilgrimage. The pilgrimage had had a life of about a decade by the time I conducted fieldwork in Benaigua. Having participated in a similar event invited by fellow *confrares* in a nearby village, the local *confraria* decided to give it a try in order to attract more

people to the Carmelite devotion. According to the *confrares*, it had been a resounding success. By 2018 the pilgrimage was a firmly established tradition. The short pilgrimage[22] was well attended by women of different generations who accompanied an image of Mary from the church to a tiny chapel on the outskirts of the village. The chapel used to occupy one of the corners of an extensive orchard with palm trees, fruit trees and gardens which belonged to a wealthy local family. This orchard and its progressive stages of abandonment were very much part of the locals' collective memories: it was a place where children went to play and explore, teenagers organised picnics during Easter and, in the summer, families took their children to spend the long hot afternoons under the shade of its palm trees.

The chapel was dedicated to another popular Valencian Marian invocation, the *Mare de Déu dels Desemparats* [Our Lady of the Forsaken]. Women I met and interviewed walked often to the site to light a candle for their children or say a prayer. Men looked after the chapel voluntarily, tending the trees and flower beds around it, asking favours to the *Mare de Déu,* sometimes asking for guidance. The chapel was also a popular place to simply and leisurely walk to and from in the hot summer evenings. Theologically, *confrares* explained that part of their aim in taking an image of the Mother of God of the Carmel to a chapel dedicated to a different invocation was to show how 'there are many advocations, but only one Mother of God.' This was perhaps of particular salience in the context of naming practices in the village and the Valencian province at large: Maria, Carme and Empar[23]are among the four most common first names for women.

In the 1990s the whole of the orchard was bought by the local government who had plans for a new industrial state which would bring prosperity to the village. According to many villagers I spoke to, including the local mayor who oversaw the initial development, success never quite materialised. Some blamed the bigger and better-connected industrial state in a nearby

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[22] The distance covered by the pilgrimage was short: from the main square to the chapel on the outskirts of Benaigua and back. I thought often that this was more akin to a procession rather than a pilgrimage, but my informants always called this event *peregrinació* [pilgrimage] on account of its non-formal nature: no candles were carried, participants did not keep to a line, there was no hierarchical order (participants-image-priest-government officials-music band), all of which are characteristics of processions.

[23] In this order: Maria, Carmen, Josefa, Amparo (all in Spanish). Carme (with formal and familiar variations such as Maria del Carme, Maricarmen, Carmeta, Carmensin, or Mensín) has its origin in the Carmelite invocation. Empar (again, with variations such as Desampa, Desam, Amparo, and Emparín), in the invocation of Our Lady of the Forsaken.

town as an overpowering competitor. Others explained how any and all kind of industry had experienced an overall decline since the Spanish late industrial boom of the 1960s. The fact is that by 2018 the industrial state had already undergone two government-funded renovations in order to attract industry. This work involved also the doing up of the chapel, which, after the modern development found itself enveloped by tarmacked roads, with a truck depot on one side, and food-processing factories on the other.

The chapel among the industrial units. Photo by author.

Over one hundred people, mostly women and children, turned up for the nocturnal pilgrimage in July 2018, accompanying both the *confrares* and the *clavariesses*. The priest had attended once or twice in the long life of the event, but not that year. Some women in their 70s and 80s hung from the arm of their daughters and grandchildren. There were babies carried in prams, as well as a gaggle of young boys and girls that ran in and out of their mothers and aunts' legs. The *confrares* at the front of the pilgrimage were accompanied by the incumbent *clavariesses*. They sang songs intermittently as they said the rosary. One of them carried a standard with the image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Another used a hand-held megaphone to make herself heard. The rest of the pilgrims, all locals, walked behind,

talking, praying, singing, looking out for people on corners, balconies, saying hello with their hands as they recognised friends and neighbours in the street. Even pilgrims said hello to each other excitedly, kissing on both cheeks. The sound of the songs and the hum of the prayer travelled up the narrow stumpy streets, bringing villagers to their windows and balconies.

Soon the pilgrims arrived at the immaterial boundary between the village and the industrial state, and what had been a snake-like mass of people became a dispersed crowd. The road was full of cracks caused by the thirsty tarmac and the frequent presence of heavy lorries. Grandmothers tightened their grip on their children's arms. Toddlers shook in their prams. Some children squealed at a cockroach coming out of the cracks, others avoided a line of giant ants crossing the road. The familiar unfamiliarity of the nocturnal terrain heightened everybody's senses. And very soon we all arrived at the small chapel, which shone under towering orange roadlamps. More songs were sung, a few prayers were said, and a small mob of people started taking pictures of each other. While veteran pilgrims were accommodated in chairs, the young *clavariesses* served cold *orxata*[24] and snacks, the older *confrares* arranged the banner and the flower tribute, children ran around and exchanged sweets. The voices of generations permeated the heat, it mingled with the hum of the factories and the song of not-so-distant crickets.

As the pilgrims, and I with them, reposed momentarily in this dream-like setting, I looked around and wondered how many of the older generations were remembering their own involvement with one summer *festa* or another, the communal joy and busy-ness, but also those who were not there. The setting allowed for past and present to coalesce. Academic-cum-runner Hayden Lorimer (2012), jogging in a familiar terrain made unrecognisable by the snow, his senses heightened by the altered landscape, catches his own shadow as he runs: the shadow immediately reminds him of his father, his gait and shape, the man who taught him how to run. Reversely, did the older women sitting by the chapel and watching the proceedings remember themselves through the younger folk? Would the young, looking at photographs of that night in the distant future, see their own mothers and aunts in their younger selves? Were they not having those memories imprinted there and then with the

[24] Tigernut-based drink. Very popular in València and parts of Latin America.

laughter, the tastes and images of the night? After all, the *clavariesses* approached the *festa* as a 'memorialise-able' event, as something to do to remember later, to go over with others in conversations, to compare future *festes* to the one they put on. I wondered if they would eventually see themselves in a younger team of *clavariesses,* their energy and confidence, having taken over the *festa* in an uninterrupted line of cohorts over the years, as they intended.

The head of the short pilgrimage. A *confrare* carries a flag with an image of the Mother of God of the Carmel. Photo courtesy of *confrare*.

Faced with the threat of a total disappearance of religious traditions, the villagers turned to the importance of memories and memory-making, including those of the rural. The dizzying mixture of urban, industrial and rural noises, smells and visual perceptions made up an "allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history" (Benjamin 1998, 177) of Benaigua. And the chapel, a ruin of the village's past, continued to function as a stage for the village's present, a "physical space… dependent on the enduring memories of the group that occupie[d] it" (Pensky 2011, 65). In Baroque dramas and paintings, the ruin is often used as a setting (Benjamin 1998). In Benaigua, the little chapel in the industrial state became central to a performance of the villagers' past collective memories in the present. But, as Divya Tolia-Kelly (2004, 315) reminds us, "material cultures are not simply situated as mementoes of a bounded past, but are precipitates of syncretized textures of remembered ecologies and

landscapes." These "precipitates" are constituted by "narrated histories, and artefacts of heritage and tradition" (317). The possibility of not having their own narrations of tradition and heritage was too much to bear for the teams of *clavariesses*: they were resolved to have their own stories to relate to future generations, again and again, to be like their older peers, evaluators of *la festa*. Ultimately, to add their own to "a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (Massey 2005, 107).

Inspired by Benjamin's (1998) work, I propose that the villagers' innovative re-elaborations of tradition function as allegories of Catholic public religiosity in which the demised materials of the past are treated as the heritage ruins from which to create anew. Photographs, processions and dresses are Janus-like objects: prompting the past, looking out into the future. This is when allegory, for Benjamin, becomes strongest, as "an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity" (223). In re-occupying the streets and squares of Benaigua, foregrounding spaces such as the chapel and embodied practices such as ritual attires, the *clavariesses* spatially performed an allegory of its past. From material and abstracted notions of public religiosity, the *clavariesses* proceeded to its (re)invention as "something palpable to represent it almost at will" (Arendt in Benjamin 1968, 13) giving tradition new and incomplete meanings. Is this what the young women called the "neo-Medieval"?

These festive representations and performances, crucially, were part of the way villagers saw time pass: processions, concerts, parades, dances, masses, rosaries, floral tributes and other activities inscribed public religiosity on the temporal existence of the village. *Festes* were exceptional events yet their organisation pervaded the villagers' lives through embodied practices such as going through family photographs, selling lottery (or eggs!), participating in local food fairs or holding dancing nights in order to raise *festa* moneys. Between "triviality and splendour – seriousness and play – reality and dreams" (Lefebvre 1991, 251) festive time allowed for the continuous reconfiguration of collective memories and local identities. Time becomes ordered (and disordered) through cycles in which *la festa* wanes and waxes without fully disappearing from Benaigua's landscape. The festive riot or pomp may contrast with the everyday, yet "[be] not separate from it." (Lefebvre 1991, 207). Enrique Gil Calvo (1991) proposes that, essentially, human beings are *festive animals*, '*homo festus*'. This marks us

apart from other species: our capacity to apply labour to the *communal* organisation and deployment of joyful celebrations[25]. In the end, amidst (secular) discourses of economic austerity, of local identity and of memorialising practices, *homo festus* makes possible myriad "articulations of the social fabric" (Gil Calvo 1991, 144) in which public religion and festive time continue to ostensibly sacralise public spaces through religious innovation.

[25] Although Gil Calvo is inspired by Johan Huizinga's (1949) concept of *homo ludens* (human beings as playful animals, as capable of creating games), he moves away from dichotomies such as work/play, order/disorder, rational/creative.

CHAPTER FOUR: The church as an open closet: gay and trans men's embodied geographies of Catholicism

4.1. Not in the news

I had woken up at 9am already covered in sweat. So, when my mum asked me if I could help her collect the membership fee from her fellow *confrares*, I took some time before I gave her an answer. This annual exercise involved walking in the sun for at least a couple of hours, knocking on neighbours' doors, going in and out of their houses checking that they still wished to be part of the *confraria*. I eventually obliged, but we sat and had breakfast first. Mum had the TV on already; it was the first thing she did when she woke up, to keep her company, she said. The Catalan independence issue dominated the news. A recent spat between the Catalan Prime Minister and the Spanish ambassador to the US was the centre of all heated debates on all the numerous TV morning programmes. Mum double checked her printed register, full of names and addresses while I had a glass of milk and a madeleine, checking my Facebook account on my phone.

A number of friends from the UK had posted news about International Pride Day, which was being celebrated that day, 28th of June, in commemoration of the 1969 Stonewall Riots[26] and the historical ripples it caused. Thus galvanised by the American revolt and by the relentless disciplining and violence over the LGBTQ+ community under the Francoist regime, Barcelona had its first protest march in 1977, Madrid in 1978 and València in 1979, the latter organised by the *Moviment d'Alliberament Sexual del País Valencià* (Lopez Clavel 2018). Since then, the annual parade has rallied the whole LGBTQ+ spectrum and their allies in a celebration and a vindication of LGBTQ+ history, its present visibility and its future struggles. I saw on Facebook that the rally was to take place the following Saturday, with an emphasis on the visibility of trans people, those who have historically been at the forefront of LGBTQ+ activism and, therefore, of its first manifestations, both ideologically and physically on the streets. The

[26] The history of LGBTQ+ activism was arguably kick-started by an impromptu demonstration against police brutality that galvanised the trans and gay community of Greenwich Village, New York that year, 1969.

motto for the demonstration would read "*Conquerim la Igualtat – TRANSformem la Societat"* [Let's conquer equality – Let's TRANSform society].

When we left the house, the sun poured its morning might onto the street, blinding us; yet people went about their everyday chores, immersed in their everyday tribulations. As we moved from house to house the sun approached its zenith and the streets became deserted. Mum and I soon felt exhausted and decided to take refuge in the Music Society Bar. They had air con. While the waitress was taking our order of two coffee granitas Martí entered the bar. He had just come from the church, where he had been tidying up some cupboards. He sat with us and ordered fizzy water. The conversation soon veered towards the preparations for the coming Saturday trip to a nearby village, where they were to celebrate the 125th anniversary of their *Nocturnal Adoration* group, a Eucharistic practice in which the Sacrament is adored from the evening to well into the early hours of the following day. Benaigua's own *Nocturnal Adoration* team included both Martí and my mother.

Mum left us for a moment, and I took the chance to show Martí the call for the Saturday Pride Demonstration on my phone. Impossible, he said, 'I must accompany my Adoration group, I am the secretary after all', he told me with some pride of his own. And, anyway, those type of celebrations were not his thing, he added. 'Have you ever been?' I asked. No, he answered with a grimace. Martí was 22 at the time, single, and gay. He had not come out to his family or the wider community, just to a number of his friends. Mum and I were two of them. Although he had told me before that he did not mind people knowing about his sexuality, he was very discreet about it in front of others, so I only brought the topic up when we were by ourselves. It was my mother in fact who had put us in touch initially. Despite the age difference, they were good friends. For a while Martí had struggled coming to terms with his sexuality. At the time, mum asked him if he would find it helpful to talk to another gay man and Martí said he would, so she asked me, gave him my number and we chatted a few times on the phone. This was before I started my PhD. Martí and I had been in touch on and off since then and became more acquainted with each other during the time I lived in Benaigua, even going on a pilgrimage together earlier in the year. Martí felt that his sexuality was very much part of him, of the intimate self that he chose not to show others. He told me that it was of no concern to others who he may choose to sleep with. Otherwise Martí was a visible

member of the congregation, all the more by being one of the very few young people in it. He attended Mass regularly, he went to most if not all of the processions in the Catholic calendar and had recently become the president of a *confraria* that had renewed its full board with younger folk (having been run for decades by women in their 70s and 80s).

Although Catholic doctrine condemns homosexual "acts" and partnerships as sinful (more on this later), in the course of our many conversations Martí told me that this was something that the church hierarchy would have to change in order to reflect the diverse nature of those who make it up and participate actively in it. 'I can't think how those two things can be at odds with each other', he said, referring to being both gay and Christian. Just before we left the bar, I told Martí about International Pride Day. He didn't know anything about it, but that would explain, he went on to say, why a rainbow flag had been recently unfurled from the balcony of the village townhall. Later, while Mum and I were having lunch, I noticed that the 3 o'clock news programme on a major Spanish TV channel (*Antena 3*) did not mention International Pride Day at all. At night, I made a point of watching the 10 o'clock news in the publicly owned TVE1. Of 27 news items (not counting the sports section at the end of the programme), a piece about International LGTBI (sic) Pride Day sat at number 23, just after the murder chronicles and before the culture news[27].

[27] In fact, the piece mentioned that that year "*la fiesta se centra en la visibilización de la transexualidad y el 40 aniversario de la manifestación de Madrid*" [the party will centre around the visibility of transsexuality and the 40th anniversary of the demonstration in Madrid]. The piece was followed by a short report on a photography exhibition tracing "cuarenta años de travestismo" [forty years of transvestism].

Benaigua's Town Hall entrance during Pride Month, showcasing the rainbow, symbol of LGBTQ+ visibility. The statue at the top, a permanent fixture, is of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Screenshot courtesy of Almudena Puchol. The caption reads "I love those who love (Proverbs 8:17)"

The coexistence of media near-silences on LGBTQ+ issues together with visual shout-outs such as the rainbow flag in the local townhall, of personal silences about one's own sexuality such as Martí's together with local Pride demonstrations, is distinctive of the lived experiences of lay LGBTQ+ members of the religious community in Benaigua. This chapter has two main aims. First, to study how the sexual lives of lay gay men connect to a multiplicity of sexual politics within the Catholic Church, both as institution and as a body of faithful. This multiplicity exists within a system of official and un-official positionings, occlusions and silences, in which doctrine remains unchanged yet always challenged. Thus, I pay attention to written doctrine and Vatican-published documents and letters and compare them to what priests and the current Pope have to say about the lives of LGBTQ+ people.

But the main aim of this chapter is to explore the lived experiences of local gay and transgender men who participate actively in the life of the church. A conceptual engagement

with issues of interpellation (Althusser 1971) and performativity (J. Butler 1993, 1999) will allow me to explore emic concerns with "normalcy" and "discretion" in the arena of politically and theologically contested gender ideologies. Using 'the closet' as a methodological and conceptual tool, will allow for a critique of both hetero- (Michael Warner 1991, 1999) and homonormativity (Duggan 2002) in which the presence of lay LGBTQ+ Catholics in the everyday existence of local congregations serves to de-stabilise normative notions of masculinity via stylistic deployments *the Baroque* (van de Port 2012) and *Camp* (Garlinger and Song 2004; Sontag 2018). Finally, this chapter further confirms something that has become apparent so far in the thesis, Catholicism's inner *elasticity* of belief and practices (Mayblin 2019b).

Yet the chapter points to a number of limitations or perils to this elasticity. On the one hand, elastic interpretations of doctrine and practice from within the priestly hierarchy arguably end up perpetuating a system in which priests are pushed to live duplicitous (sexual) lives, both preaching and breaching doctrine throughout their careers, arguably to the detriment of the Catholic Church's moral standing as "expert in humanity" (Paul VI 1965). On the other hand, by comparing the lived experiences of faith of local gay men to those of a transgender man in a nearby town, I will argue that the same technologies of the closet that allow the former to benefit from a certain spiritual and social malleability are not necessarily afforded to the latter.

4.1.1 *Politico-sexual* conjuncture

A considerable historical shift in Spanish attitudes towards gay and trans men has been necessary for a symbol of LGBTQ+ acceptance and solidarity such as the rainbow flag to hang from Benaigua's balcony together with the Valencian autonomous community, the national and European flags. It becomes necessary here to talk about the more recent *politico-sexual* conjuncture in order to help contextualise the lived experiences of Martí, Pepe, Axel, Diego and Florenci, local gay and trans men, and lay actors in the ecclesiastical arena. It will also be necessary in order to place myself as a gay man researching the Catholic Church and negotiating the shared spaces of the closet with my interlocutors and the congregation at large.

According to media outlets such as The Guardian (A. Wilson 2019) or NBC News (Sopelsa and Gutierrrez-Morfin 2016), and international organisations such as Stonewall (Stonewall UK 2018) or OECD (Valfort 2020), Spain is currently one of the countries in the world with the most progressive LGBTQ+ legislation. In 1979, four years after the dictator's death, same-sex intercourse was legalised, after having been penalised with imprisonment and conversion therapies. Only in 2001, however, and urged by those who had been convicted for being gay, bisexual or transgender, the government destroyed their criminal records (Vallejo 2018). Later in 2005, same-sex marriage was legalised, and soon after a gay member of the Civil Guard (a military force with police duties) married his long-term partner, an event that urged the military to allow them and other same-sex married couples to live together in barracks. Bisexual and transgender people can serve openly in the army too. In the same year, adoption by same-sex couples was legalised. The Valencian Community (where Benaigua is located) passed, as recent as November 2018, what has been called "the most advanced LGBTI bill in Spain" (Enguix 2018). Building on a 2017 act penalising discrimination in health and education services and LGBTQ+ hate crimes, the bill now forbids any form of conversion therapy with fines that go up to hundreds of thousands of euros. It also makes explicit mention of intersex people and their right to decide over their own bodies. In addition, the bill proposes the initiation of *L'Espai de la Memòria LGTBI*, a publicly funded space that will encourage research into the history of the collective as well as the production of LGBTQ+ knowledges (Ibid).

A list of passed bills and lifted prohibitions may give the impression to some that agency comes principally from the arm of the law. However, it is activists, scholars, authors and a long list of LGBTQ+ people who have been at the forefront of legal battles and their eventual successes. This is the case of Fernando, who I meet during a visit to the *Col·lectiu Lambda*, the seat of the Valencian LGBTQ+ collective. We met in the tiny room that functioned as the library of the *Col·lectiu*, huddled around old photography albums. The volunteer librarian was there too, together with a young scholar who intended to shoot a documentary about the first days of the LGBTQ+ movement in València. Fernando took us through photos that went back to the early 1980s, when he had become a founding member of the *Col·lectiu Lambda*. The photos showed men and women in tight white t-shirts and jeans, young kids bedecked with pink and blue feather boas, the familiar places of the city invaded and transformed with

banners, balloons and flags. A picture showed a muscled guy, his tanned body shiny with oil. He was dressed in a white loin cloth, sandals, a crown of thorns, and pulled a cross along. From his chest a banner read *Él nos quiere a todos por igual* [He loves us all equally]. '*She* used to come to all Pride Marches', Fernando said humorously. As the pages of the albums were turned, his eyes became trembling little pools: he remembered people who were not with us anymore, particularly gay men who had died of AIDS during those 'terrible years', as he called them. 'We have achieved so much', he said.

Yet the approaching provincial and national elections in the Spring of 2019 were already casting a shadow over these achievements. In January 2018 the far-right Spanish political party VOX had secured its place in a tripartite conservative government in the Andalusian Autonomous Community. This success was amplified after the national elections of April and November 2019, when VOX gained 52 seats in the Spanish Congress following months of political instability. Some of the very central tenets in VOX's electoral manifesto were the proposed "expulsion[28]" of more than 50,000 immigrants from the country and the repeal of domestic violence and gender recognition laws. This was the first time that a far-right party had won seats in any regional or national government since the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975. Although Spanish media and society at large were still trying to get to grips with this breakthrough, most commentators pointed at a number of tropes that are common to the rise of other far right and neo-fascist forces in Europe in recent years: immigration, neo-liberalisation of the labour market, and nationalism. Seemingly unconnected to the anti-immigration and nationalist rhetoric, however, one of the party's chief preoccupations is to "dismantle the spectacle built around supremacist feminism" [*desmontar el chiringuito creado en torno al feminismo supremacista*] (@AndaluciaVOX 2019).

VOX had made the pejorative neologism *feminazi* one of their weapons, hurled at anyone they deem to be a feminist in order to discredit their views. Usage of the word has become a common occurrence on Twitter and Facebook. For VOX, feminism is an ideology that generates inequality based on the premise that it puts women's interests ahead of men.

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[28] This word carries strong historical connotations in Spanish: *expulsión* [banishment, expulsion] is used to refer to the banishment of Jews from the Peninsula in 1492, and to the long and protracted history of banishments (and conversions) of Muslims starting in the process of *la (Re)Conquista* (see Introduction).

Gender reassignment, in particular, has been the source of a number of party interventions in the media: their second plea on the section on "Health" in their regional party electoral manifesto in 2018, advocated for striking gender reassignment (and abortion) off the National Health System list of free surgical procedures (VOX 2018). This was a view that emerged during a couple of interviews with different male members of the village church congregation. The context of the conversation with one particular interlocutor (and member of The Way) was his disapproval of his daughter's school teaching her that 'a woman may have a penis or a vagina' (sic), that is, teaching conceptions of gender beyond the man/woman binary. He continued to expose vehemently his view that survivors of breast cancer were obliged to pay for their plastic surgery reconstructions while people could have a sex exchange for free. 'And now there's a bloke that says, look, I fancy being a woman now. I want an operation. And he gets it for free! While the poor cancer patients are women and will always be women, and they have to pay', he concluded.

Just as my interlocutor seemed to be conflating different aspects of sex and gender through his essentialist, biologicist views, the Catholic Church's lack of doctrinal engagement with a LGBTQ+ conceptual vocabulary is symptomatic too. In the next section I lay out the Catholic Church's official institutional stand on issues of gender and sexuality. My aim is to show how this seemingly rigid doctrinal stand is contested by the villagers and rendered unstable by unspoken alliances between priests and the laity. Further, I contend that the interplay between official and un-official gender and sexuality positionings within the Catholic hierarchy allows for a dynamic understanding of the institution itself, which may account for its longevity.

4.1.2 Doctrinal negotiations

Although my interlocutors verbalised that in their view both the Spanish Church and society had advanced, they still felt that the labelling of same sex relationships as sinful by the Church acted as a barrier for their full acceptance. Catholic doctrine accepts sexuality as an integral part of the human condition, linking it to "affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate", even to form "bonds of communion with others" (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC],

3.2.2.6.2332). When it comes to homosexuality, however, the vocabulary that is used in order to describe same-sex sexuality ("homosexual acts") is that of "depravity" and "disorder" (CCC, 3.2.2.6.2357). Homosexuality is further coached as a trial for homosexual people, a condition that requires self-mastery and chastity (CCC, 3.2.2.6.2359), and as such homosexuals deserve "respect, compassion and sensitivity" (CCC, 3.2.2.6.2358). It is perhaps telling that these considerations come under a section on "the vocation of chastity" and, immediately after the last item on homosexuality, the next section begins on "the love of husband and wife" (CCC, 3.2.2.6.2360-79), clearly placing the unnamed (and unnameable) homosexual love outside desired "ordered" (Ibid) loving relationships. As recent as March 2021, the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, the doctrinal centre of the Catholic Church, issued a *responsum* denying same sex couples the possibility to have their union blessed by a priest[29]. In the 1050-word long dictum (in the English version), the word homosexual appears ten times, the word love appears twice. There is no mention of bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual or queer people. The word gay or lesbian does not appear even once.

Regarding transgender people, a 2015 case in the Spanish media acted as a catalyst for the Vatican to make their official position clear. Albeit, to date, the Vatican has issued a number of letters and declarations related to what the hierarchy calls "the pastoral care and provision of homosexual persons", these fail to make explicit reference to transgender people (see for example Congreation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986). However, in 2015, Alex Salinas, a Spanish trans man made it to international media outlets by being behind the Vatican's first explicit pronouncement on trans people. Alex had asked his local priest for permission to be his nephew's godfather. The priest went to the bishopric for guidance. The bishop initially said no, then acquiesced but finally took matters to the Vatican pressed, he said, by "the media relevance of this matter" (RTVE 2015). In a letter to Alex from September 2015, his bishop communicated the Vatican's decision to the young trans man: he could not be a godfather as he was not leading a life according to the faith that he professed (Ibid). Canonical Law was cited to back the argument up: section 874 §3 states that for a person to be considered a godparent, they need to be leading "a life consistent with the faith and the role

[29] In the 1050-word long dictum (in the English version), the word homosexual appears ten times, the word love appears twice. There is no mention of bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual or queer people. The word gay or lesbian does not appear even once (Congreation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2021)

of god-father." The letter continued to assert that Alex's "transsexual behaviour shows publicly an attitude opposed to the moral requirement to solve one's own problem of sexual identity according to the truth of one's own sex" (Ibid). In other words, the Vatican considered Alex's sex at the time of birth a sign of God's design and, therefore God's perfectibility. To deny the latter is to be at odds, according to this pronouncement, with God's design.

The media storm that Alex's case caused is symptomatic of the wider Catholic priestly hierarchy's public attitude towards gender and sexuality questions, as is the lack of vocabulary that engages directly with them. But as gender and sexuality recognition laws continue to be passed in Spain and other countries, the emphasis on traditionally gendered modes of family is reinforced from the altar during homilies by priests and other members of the priestly hierarchy. They complain that gender has been 'made' an issue at all and reel against its legislation or contestation. In their view, the line separating man and woman had been divinely drawn and could not be tempered with. In these discourses there was an essentialist conflation of the concepts of sex and gender that resulted in an endorsement of the biological explanation of the former and a de-problematising of the latter.

For example, early one Spring morning one of the main squares of the city was packed in attendance to an open-air Mass officiated by the bishop-cardinal of València. I was there with Martí and other friends. The occasion was the celebration of the festivity of the *Mare de Déu dels Desamparats* [Our Lady of the Forsaken], patron saint of the city and source of rich devotional practices. The swallows screamed as they plunged from the top of the Cathedral façade, past the loudspeakers, and away into the crisp matinal horizon. In a monotone voice that stitched a blanket of silence over the congregation, the bishop-cardinal talked about the family as central to a 'new evangelisation'. The family, according to him, was formed of a man and a woman who in their union became 'sanctuary of life' and 'future of the world'. In contradistinction, he talked of 'those who are against the family' as being against 'mankind and the common good'. Although the cardinal-bishop had not named the 'enemies of the family', Martí and I looked at each other, knowing who the reference was for.

In this speech and others representing the Catholic Church in Spain, the term "gender ideology" was used frequently to refer to progressive social attitudes to gender and gender-

recognition, and in particular LGBTQ+ legislation. On different Catholic media platforms, liberal political forces were accused of "excluding and impeding other visions of the human being… [thus] limiting fundamental freedoms such as religious ideological freedom, freedom of expression, of press, of cathedra". "Gender ideology" was thought to be "a fundamentalist proposal" that established "a true censorship" (Diócesis de Cádiz y Ceuta 2017). However, I would argue that these public performances of conservatism cannot always be taken at face value. Without having to dig too deep into the Spanish collective imaginary of priests and the priestly hierarchy of the church, one comes across nuggets of Valencian popular wisdom such as '*Com els retors: fes lo que jo diga, però no lo que jo faça'* (Like priests: do as I say, but not as I do). Although the popular saying needs to be understood in the wider historical context of Spanish anti-clericalism, it nevertheless reveals the deeper entanglement of the Catholic priestly hierarchy with forms of silence and double-speak (Mayblin 2019a).

During a conversation with Daniel, the priest of a nearby village, this became apparent. As we chatted in his large vestry, we came upon the topic of gay Catholics. Daniel's attitude was fully consistent with doctrine: he advocated for respect, understanding, but also guidance as to how to live a life of sanctity. 'We need to support [gay people] in their suffering and [have] due consideration' he told me. 'Loving is normal and natural, and people with those inclinations have to know how to give that love in other ways that are different to how a man and a woman love each other.' All in all, Daniel ratified in prosaic terms what doctrine has to say about homosexuality: that it is a 'life-long cross to bear', that it is not 'God's will' and that homosexuals merit respect because all people are 'called to sanctity.' His pronouncements surprised me slightly, as Daniel was known in the region for being a dynamic priest, 'modern' in his understanding of the church, and loved by people of all ages. The fact that nobody used the deferential 'don' preceding his first name was an indication of his progressive outlook. As well as being involved in popular devotions with older generations, he regularly organised talks and conferences on topics that were of interest to his younger parishioners such as drugs, abortion, or sex. Because of his commitment to his flock, he was well known in the area. So, when one of my interlocutors in Benaigua showed me a photograph of a merry gathering of friends enjoying a copious lunch under an olive tree, I was not surprised to see Daniel in it. 'How do you know him?' I asked. 'Well, Daniel and I met in the seminary. We have

been very good friends ever since.’ This was Pepe, a friendly Catholic villager I met during my fieldwork and who invited me to his house a couple of times for ice cream and a chat.

Trained in the same seminary as Daniel when they were young, Pepe eventually decided against following the route to priesthood. He continued to live in Benaigua, first by himself and later with his mother, who then in her 80s he looked after. Pepe remained a committed Catholic but with a view of Christian life very much his own. He was a vehement defender of one’s own conscience and intelligence when it came to doctrine. In the course of a conversation about confession, I volunteered that I would not be comfortable telling the priest about being in a same-sex relationship. Pepe became animated: ‘Do you think that being in a relationship with someone you love takes you away from God? Of course it doesn’t!’ he replied himself before I had time to. ‘You wouldn’t confess about doing a good deed, would you? Like giving 20 euros to a pauper?’ I replied: ‘Or living with the person you love.’ ‘Exactly’, he concluded. In his view one’s personal conscience was in direct communication with God who, in turn, had given us intelligence to discern good from evil. ‘Look’, he said, ‘there’s God and there’s you. And that’s that.’ On another occasion Pepe told me more about his friendship with Daniel: weekend trips they had done together to important cathedrals, and regular lunches like the one in the photograph, leisure occasions which sometimes included their elderly mothers. Like Daniel and Pepe, other men in the photograph had not married. The seminary had brought them all together; their close friendships continued. I started to wonder, how could Daniel have close friends who advocated for a conception of love unbounded by doctrinal definitions of sin, and at the same time condemn homosexuality thus following doctrine to the letter when talking to me?

Mayblin (2019a) has written about this seeming duplicity at the core of the Catholic Church’s sexual politics in relation to priests’ sexual lives. For Mayblin, the fact that priests are required to be celibate yet enjoy sexual partners reveals the humanity of priests: although they are meant to act *in persona Christi*, priests are “not entirely isomorphic with the Church in its mystical superorganic form” (18). The church becomes a complex ‘person’ in its own right, “imperfect, mired in bureaucracy…yet still infinitely greater (more beautiful or sacred) than any secular organisations and greater than any individual priest.” (20). Secrecy and doubleness are thus tools that guarantee its survival, prolonging its life, according to Mayblin.

Yet this duplicity has been central to condemnations of the Church as a hypocritical and corrupt institution (see Martel's 2019 lengthy volume on homosexuality and/in the Vatican), an institution, further, whose tragic handling of the sexual lives of priests is seen by some as the origin of a culture of sexual abuse (Cornwell 2014). Yet Mayblin is on to something when she observes that the Church "neither entirely human, nor entirely supernatural… stands in a category apart" (18): the priests, the faithful, the institution and its wealth, its mysteries and its written tradition, are all part of a *body of Christ* that exceeds our individual power and judgement. Perhaps it is in this vein that, on a plane returning from Brazil in 2013 and in front of a group of journalists, Pope Francis famously refused to condemn people for being gay: "If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?" (BBC 2013). Five years later, his acceptance of homosexuality went further, telling a gay man "God made you like this, and loves you like this" (Baynes 2018).

Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken against the marginalisation of gay men and women, and of trans people (DeBernardo 2018; Hernández 2015; Ring 2020), openly condemning homophobia (Johnson 2019), and veering away from the hard doctrinal line taken by his predecessors. More recently (*Aljazeera* 2020; Horowitz 2020; Verdú 2020), he has supported same-sex unions, calling for countries to legislate their acceptance, arguably normalising homosexual partnerships. This positioning ostensibly contradicts previous official Vatican communications drafted by cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (future Pope Benedict XVI) and published during John Paul II's papacy (see Congreation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003). Nevertheless, doctrine remains largely unchanged, and Pope Francis in some of his pronouncements reminds the faithful of it: in the same conversation with journalists which I allude to above, he stresses that although homosexual orientation is not sinful, 'homosexual acts' remain so.

In addition, another influential institution within the Church issued in 2019 a polemic document on gender identity which further entrenched the Church's biologicist-cum-theologically conservative line: gender, according to the document, is read through genitalia which are, in turn, determined by God (an argument reminiscent of the letter sent from the Catholic hierarchy to Alex Salinas). Fluid, non-binary interpretations of gender, thus, are deemed originating "in a confused concept of freedom in the realm of feelings and wants"

(Congregation for Catholic Education 2019, 11). Here we return to the issue of duality or even multiplicity of positionings vis-à-vis gender and sexuality: an army of ordained men, including the Pope, both question and support doctrine, the core in the body of the Church, but the core does not change or alter, or if it does, the shifts are imperceptible, non-official. Yet LGBTQ+ Catholics worldwide see in Pope Francis a flicker of hope and acceptance. In the next section I take this thread, charting how local gay men and their congregation negotiate this doctrinal legacy of sin and marginalisation through the deployment of the closet, valorising 'acceptance' and 'normalcy' (along Pope Francis' pronouncements) in order to foster their own belonging to the Church.

4.2. Congregational closets

Following this idea of duplicity, in this section I deploy the concept of *the closet* in order to understand better the lived experiences of faith and sexuality in Benaigua. The closet has had a dynamic trajectory in Western culture and society at large. Eve Kosofsky Sedwick (1990, 72) shows us how the most productive contestations of social meaning in 20th century Western culture have come from the pairings secrecy/disclosure and private/public. These contestations are the fertile grounds on which the figure of the homosexual (and the concept of the homosocial) grow, definitions that are part and parcel of the production of knowledge in the west. According to Foucault (1998), knowledge was pervasively *about* sex in a society in which public institutions and the state became increasingly interested in knowing about, and thus controlling, the lives of individuals. Medicine, in particular, scrutinised the lives of those it deemed 'deviant' and who could endanger public moral decency: the mad woman, the queer man. As we will see in the following chapter, confession (with its long Christian genealogy) became a technology used in these new realms of institutional order for the 'outing' of certain divergent behaviours and personality traits. The interplay between revelation and concealment, between the outward and the inward is then afforded and presupposed by the closet. But the closet is not just metaphorical. The lived experiences of gay and trans men are very much anchored in spatial material relations that can be found in a variety of scales, from the body to the globe (M. P. Brown 2000). In the following

ethnography, I unpack the intricacies of the closet in Benaigua, to later look at the contestations they entail.

4.2.1. The doors of the closet

Diego and Florenci are two of my interlocutors and long-standing friends of mine. At the time of my fieldwork, Diego was 47 years of age and Florenci 38. They both identified as gay cis men and as practising Catholics and had been in a relationship for seven years. Florenci and I grew up in Benaigua and come from well-known families in the village. We went to a nearby high school together where we became very good friends. Later, we both went to the university closest to our place of residence, a practice that is common in Spain. During that time Florenci and I came out to some of our friends. Florenci is the first person I came out to, and I am the first person he came out to, and it is fair to say that this first exit of the closet in the company of each other marked our close friendship. Although we continued to live with our families, we spent as much as time as we could away from Benaigua, making friends from other villages and towns. I left for the UK when I was 20, as soon as I graduated. Florenci stayed. He got a job as an engineer in town and bought himself a flat in Benaigua so he could live near his parents. So, Florenci worked in València, shopped in nearby Riu and the location of his flat in the village meant that he interacted minimally with neighbours and relatives. When I asked him if this was intentional on his part, he told me that when he became a university student, he had made an effort to get away from people who knew him. 'You know that I had a tough time coming to terms with my sexuality, as a believer', he told me, 'and I wished to talk to as little people as possible about it. You know what people here are like, "what, you don't have a girlfriend yet?" ' However, Florenci also told me that his local life had of late experienced some sort of resurgence, and all because of Diego's involvement in the church.

Diego was originally from outside the Valencian province. Less than two years ago, they made the decision to stop commuting to and from each other's place of residence, something that permitted them to see each other only on weekends and during long holidays. Because Florenci had the more stable job of the two, Diego left the big city he lived in and moved with him. For Diego, village life was a bit of a shock to start with: 'There were barely any shops!'

he told me, recounting humorously his first few weeks in Benaigua. It wasn't only the lack of leisure outlets. Leaving his family and his job behind proved very challenging initially. And then there were the villagers themselves. Diego complained that people in Benaigua had no shame in asking who you were, where you came from, and why you had moved to the village. They wanted to know, Diego told me, 'who it is that you are married to, basically'. Diego began exploring Benaigua by surveying the area, taking long walks around the village countryside, following cycle paths that connected to other rural roads, lined by rows of orange trees, pomegranate orchards and abandoned irrigation sheds. He started attending Mass too, on Saturday evenings, with Florenci.

At the end of every Mass, there was a moment when people gathered just outside the main door, greeting each other, catching up on gossip and illnesses, before moving on to nearby bars for a drink and a snack, or heading home. Both Florenci and Diego told me of anecdotes that had taken place in those liminal moments, when conversations could be left half-finished, to be completed some other time in the market, the bar or Mass the following week. The anecdotes involved parishioners, in many cases prying older women, who wanted to either know or hear how it was that they, Diego and Florenci, knew each other. In those conversations there was, it transpired, an assumed air of ignorance on both parts: the one who asked feigned not knowing who Diego was in order to get answers, and the one who answered feigned not understanding the question in order to avoid providing them. At other times, however, members of the local congregation carried out effective *outings* without Diego or Florenci being able to have a say in it. Florenci told me of an anecdote involving two women, one of them his neighbour, who approached him and Diego after a concert in church near the Christmas holidays. The neighbour had said to her companion, 'Look, this is Florenci, Pere's son.' 'Oh, I hadn't seen you for such a long time' the companion replied. Two kisses were exchanged. 'And this young man?', she had asked referring to Diego. Florenci's neighbour replied before Florenci had a chance, 'This is Diego, Florenci's partner.' As Florenci finished telling me this anecdote Diego interceded, 'So you see, discretion is such that you don't have to say anything [about your sexuality].' To which Florenci replied, 'Is that discretion or indiscretion?' We laughed.

These initial vignettes begin to illustrate the social mediations entailed by the closet in Benaigua. Gay men who are part of the active life of the church negotiate with the rest of the congregation this space of silences, volitional misunderstandings and discreet *outings*, strategies and technologies of the closet I too was included in. As a local and a researcher (trying to navigate both the *emic* and the *etic* in ethnographic terms), sometimes I was 'fully out' taking part in an LGBTQ+ Eucharist in a nearby town. Some other times I 'went back into the closet', as when I met a male member of the congregation who offered freely that he was a VOX voter on our first encounter. But mostly, I existed in an inconclusive space that was mediated between my interlocutors and I: they held the handle of one of the doors of the closet, and I held the other. Following Louis Althusser (1971), we could say that my interlocutors and I were part of a dialectical loop in which our sexuality was called into existence through questions and outings. We were *interpellated* through a call into heterosexuality; failing to answer we were socially constituted as *queer*. In Diego's view, the outside subject (as a foreigner to the village) was asked to recognise himself as local *and* heterosexual (as in *who are you married to?*). But Althusser's interpellation-identification dyad becomes limiting in understanding the more complicated dynamics at play: Diego resisted the identifications through strategic silences and misunderstandings, other times he obliged in his own terms (see below). Judith Butler (1993, 122) confirms that a refusal to answer the interpellating call may be "in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command". She has in mind the power of the performative, of the potential questioning of normativity through stylised repetitions of stereotypes, in this case, gender stereotypes. In the next section, I pursue Butler's proposal by looking at how my interlocutors' presence in the congregation rendered "'being a man' and … 'being a woman' [as] internally unstable affairs." (126).

4.2.2. Hetero-normalcy and its contestations

In conversations with Diego and Florenci about their involvement in the local church, they repeatedly used one word to describe how they thought they were perceived by others, and how they perceived themselves: normal. 'I don't see any difference between us and any other young couple' Florenci said on one occasion. Here Florenci was making a comparison of visibility: between his relationship with Diego and the presence of heterosexual couples in

church. Diego, in the same conversation, told me about his admission to a *confraria* in the village earlier in the year. Before his first meeting with the group, he wondered if members would know about 'the reason why [he] lived in the village', referring to his relationship with Florenci. 'But when I told them, they said that there was no problem. So it was all very normal', he said. I pressed him a bit on this: did he say that he was Florenci's boyfriend? No, he used a circumlocution, something like 'we live together'. 'But anyway, I don't need to' he continued, 'everybody knows, so there's no need to go around waving the flag' he concluded, making a gesture with his hand. He meant the rainbow flag. 'There are people that have more of an activist [*reinvidicativa*] attitude,' Florencio intervened, 'our attitude is, mmmm, well, normal' he concluded.

I tried to see 'normal' from the point of view of Diego and Florenci. According to Florenci, he did not see himself being treated differently from heterosexual couples in church. Indeed, Florenci and Diego participated together in as many, if not more, of the multitude of social occasions that religious festivals afforded: from processions to masses, concerts to food fairs, firework displays to coffee gatherings. Diego had found his membership to a *confraria* conducive to feeling more 'at home'. They were recognised by the community as a couple, esteemed and valuable as assets to the congregation due to their young(er) age. As Diego intimated above, everybody seemingly knew about their relationship and accepted it. Perhaps Florenci and Diego were pointing at something a bit more profound: their perceived equality in terms of sexual ethics. Even when doctrine may say otherwise, the community in Benaigua had moved on with the times, and many people probably in agreement with the legislation that allowed them to live together and marry if they wanted to; they could make their own sexual, intimate choices, just as every other straight couple did. Valentine and Waite (2012), for example, show us how acceptance of sexual others within Christian, Muslim and Jewish congregations is bargained through a civic co-existence that is often harmonised by the existence of equality laws. Their (hetero- and homosexual) interlocutors negotiate personal belief and experiences "predicated on complex intersectional identities" (490), prioritising their individual and situated lived experience of faith "over theological or institutional perspectives of 'what ought to be'" (474).

But were these ethical choices not influenced by normative morality? Even though there was a perceived equality, I could see that their public behaviour as a couple differed from that of heterosexual couples. I never saw Diego and Florenci holding hands or embracing in public, like other (straight) couples did. They never talked openly about their intimate lives either, or seldom about each other's families, unless we were in the exclusive company of each other. The same applied to other gay men involved in church. They also rarely referred to themselves as gay and, although they did talk of other local gay men, it was never in the sense of a gay community. They never referred to LGBTQ+ issues, rights, or let alone activism, not even when these issues were on the news. Quite the contrary. On one occasion I hosted Diego, Martí and other members of their *confraria* for an informal dinner. As usual, the TV was on as we chatted and ate. One of the items on the evening news caught the attention of the small gathering: a legal complaint had been launched by a Spanish association of Christian lawyers against *Sethlas*, a drag queen who had recently staged a drag version of the Last Supper during the carnival in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The show, which included a dragged-up Jesus singing from the cross as a colophon, was meant to vindicate freedom of expression. 'You see? I don't agree with that' Martí said referring to the drag act, 'that's a lack of respect to our faith.' The association of Christian lawyers alleged that the show had offended their religious beliefs. Those around the table, including Diego and Martí agreed: the drag queens had gone too far.

The above vignette is not meant to draw the premature conclusion that my interlocutors agreed with the Church, its structure and doctrine without reservation. All of the gay men that I spoke to expressed a concern for the Church's teachings on (homo)sexuality; some referred to the Church's structural misogyny too. All saw a need for affirmative change on both these accounts. However, none of them either advocated to take action to realise this change or expressed a wish to cease participating in the life of the Church as a system, to cease being Catholic. Although the local priest was condemned often for what were seen as a number of personal and ecclesiastical shortcomings, the Church as such was rarely openly criticised (see Mayblin 2019b). There seemed to be little outward contestation of the hegemonic character of the Church. For Florenci, normal meant being seen as part of the majority: the majority of the congregation and beyond this, the majority of Spanish society. Once perceived as being in the majority, and not in the minority because of their sexual

choices, Florenci, Diego and other local gay men felt that activism was not needed any more, at least not from their part. “Normal as in [our] sexual orientation not being a motive of open difference in human relations”, Florenci clarified once. In this vein, sometimes value judgements were passed by some gay men in the local congregation regarding other gay men’s activism: the case of the drag show mentioned above is an example.

Thus, and perhaps unsurprisingly, ‘discreet’ was another word that kept coming up in conversation with local gay men who participated in church life. As they grew up, men like Diego and Florenci had learnt to express their sexuality in public in a way that conformed to socially acceptable standards. Diego told me often about his uncle, a socialite and a gay man himself, from whom he had learnt a great deal: how to behave ‘appropriately’ in front of the family and society, how to be discreet about relations, and how to surround himself with people akin to his social class (see Astudillo Lizama 2015 for the importance of class in gay homosociality). Some of Florenci’s relatives had exercised a different sort of influence, he told me, policing certain bodily gestures and verbal inflections that they did not consider proper for ‘a man’. Although Spanish society has become increasingly more accepting of sexual dissidences, one of the ways in which homosexualities changed during the first few decades of the democratic period (the 1980s and 90s) was to return to the figure of the virile, macho man who ‘passes’ for straight as almost *de rigueur* (Guasch 2011). Memories of my own childhood include many of these nudges away from a masculinity that was not hegemonically heterosexual: dad picking a football ball instead of the teddy bear I wanted as prize for winning a raffle, or school mates pulling faces when I told them I’d spent the weekend with my cousin, playing with her dolls in her new toy kitchen. After the latter incident, a friend pulled me to one side and told me not to say that again in front of the other boys.Discretion would, it seemed, go hand in hand with an ability to ‘blend’ into a heteronormative society, a society that finds its standard expression in the heteronormative body. By heteronormative I mean the socially constructed idea that heterosexuality (and its foundational gender binary) is the norm, the standard, not only when it comes to one’s sexuality (Michael Warner 1991), but also socially, as any individual not conforming to this norm is seen as deviant, abhorrent or invisible (Rich 1980). Heteronormativity is therefore both socially descriptive and prescriptive (Ibid). And so perhaps it is not surprising that once gay men are able to live together, marry and adopt, able to enter the military as an openly gay person, some Spanish

gay men, including my interlocutors, may think that “sexual unfreedoms” (Warner 1999, p17) such as “moralism, law, stigma, shame and isolation” are matters of the past. In this social scenario, active dissidence is deemed not needed. Lisa Duggan (2002, 179) has written about this lack of open contestation of “dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions” as consistent with homonormativity. Homonormativity is further described by Duggan as the upholding of heteronormative values, particularly by and of white, middle-class American gay men “while promising the possibility of a demobilised gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”[30] (Ibid)

A young Benaiguan dresses the image of Our Lady of Sorrows, in preparation for a procession. Photo by author.

Warner (1999) also wrote about a number of white gay male commentators that in the same American context tried at the end of the 1990s to move away from the idea of the gay ghetto, and who then advocated for a post-gay times in which gay men wanted to be defined by more

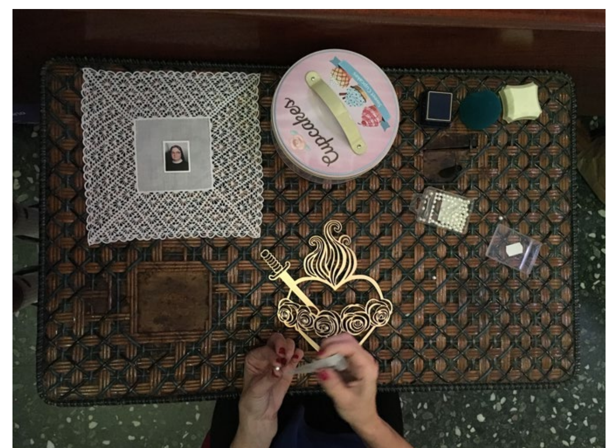
[30] It is interesting to note that Duggan’s defining piece on homonormativity is largely comprised by a critique of the work of a conservative, Catholic gay man. Andrew Sullivan’s *Virtually Normal* (1995) advocates for a ‘normalisation’ of the gay experience, that is, for mainstreaming gay men and women in US society through access to marriage and the military.

than their sexuality. This attitude is reflected in Florenci's words. Not only his words but also his life with Diego. For most of the time I lived in Benaigua, Diego remained unemployed and so he took more of an active role in the upkeep of the flat, while Florenci went out to the city to work. Domesticity characterised the life of the couple and it played considerably into stablished heteronormative patterns of love and care. Diego would also allude to Florenci using the domestic language that other people, women mostly, deployed when, for example, excusing themselves from social gatherings: "Oh, I should get going. Florenci will get back soon from work and I really should go and make dinner." However, I contend that Diego and Florenci's domesticity and discretions coexisted with bodily gestures and speech acts that revealed and stated.

The simple fact of being younger than the average parishioner was the first and most conspicuous act of visibility; younger gay Catholics were always quick to point this out themselves. In addition, during the part of the Mass when people shook each other's hands as a symbol of peace, Diego and Florenci gave each other two kisses, one on each cheek (I saw this intimate way of kissing in church performed mostly between parents and children, occasionally between straight married couples). Further, many of my gay male interlocutors' interests and involvement in church aligned with those that came under the remit of women: the tending and caring of image paraphernalia, from jewels to dresses; ordering masses in honour of deceased members of the congregation; being involved in gossip networks that continuously reworked the power structures of organisations within the church; and participating with women in traditionally segregated rituals such as wiping the effigy of Christ clean before processions. These affinities for decorative paraphernalia, for clothes, jewellery and wigs that dress religious images, for stylised retellings of gossip and rumour point towards a clear *Camp* sensibility.

In her foundational *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag (2018 [1961]) perorates about this elusive concept. For Sontag, "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration." (1) Contemporary Spanish Catholic imagery still owes its defining characteristics to a period that is characterised precisely for exaggeration, for *tromp l'oeil*, and "ecstatic bodily languages" (van de Port 2012, 874): the Baroque. Emerging as a response to a number of historical conjunctures such as the Reformation and the 'discovery' of the

Americas (with inhabitants that worshipped other Gods), the Baroque offers a new artistic language for the faithful, needing reassurance in a world that is not as previously thought and a God that is less and less assured. Thus, the Baroque's ability to both comfort and obscure. Sontag considers another characteristic of Camp that may apply to our case: not a desire for the old, or a nostalgia for it, but a sympathy towards the objects and practices that have fallen out of favour (20). Catholic material cultures have undergone a process of forgetting and abandonment too, partly because they started being considered démodé by Spanish society at large as the country became more secular. I am thinking here about the sumptuous capes worn by images, some embroidered in silver thread, some in gold, or the wigs of some of the images of Mary, made of real hair. The contorted face of a dying Jesus on the cross, repeated across Spanish churches, his body naked but for a loincloth that folds, hides and suggests. Beyond the images, there are the dresses, suits and accoutrements that Catholics wear during processions or on feast days. Martí and Diego could spend days planning and rehearsing what to wear. But there is temporality: the enactment of Catholic traditions on streets and on the body is still reminiscent of Francoist iconographies that are considered out of fashion, *cursi* [corny] (Garlinger and Song 2004).



Further work on Our Lady of Sorrows (above and left), with the author atop the float (left). Photo courtesy of anonymous *confrare* (left) and by author (above)

Van de Port (2012) is skilful in tracing the connections between Camp, the Baroque and queer folk. He points out, as Sontag does above, that one of the capacities of Camp is to de-naturalize discourses of normalcy and naturalness[31]. For this to happen, it is important to understand the suggestive power of Camp in coming out narratives: Camp, the Baroque (and in my mind, *Kitsch* too) point to a lack in the real world, a falseness. In the same way, coming out stands for the gradual process in which gay men realise that what we took for reality does not cover our inner experience, in particular our sexual orientation (877). In other words, to come out is to contest our heteronormative habitus through bodily technologies that share with Camp and the Baroque: revelation and concealment, trickery and misunderstanding. These, for me, are the very technologies of the closet that gay men use to their advantage in Benaigua, technologies that make me think back to Butler's suggestive work on performativity and subjectification. To conclude this section, I want to make two arguments. First, that the technologies of the closet which I explored above and that have a specific expression in Benaigua, are the bases for *queer* contestations of faith and of Catholic tradition. Second, that this queering is concomitant to another contestation: that of the concept of homonormativity. Let me unpack each one of these points.

In the first place, I have tried to move away from a concept of the closet as an "institution of repression, persecution, control, invisibility and a mandate to be silent" as the Spanish scholars Llamas and Vidarte (1999, 78) call it. As I observed Diego and Martí undressing the image of the Virgin of the Sorrows in front of a group of parishioners, bickering about the need for more padding under the image's skirt, I thought that Camp was alive and well in Benaigua. But just as the conspicuous padding under the image's robes are meant to give an illusion of lightness from the outside, the closet affords the possibility of a system in which one can be both discreet and obvious, importantly, in relational terms. This is what Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, p22) calls an "open secret" structure: "In dealing with an open-secret structure, it's only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative." While Catholic doctrine prescribes gay men and women to

[31] In the ethnographic example that van de Port invokes, the Amsterdam Zoo organised an exhibition in which the aim was to show that homosexuality exists in nature and therefore, it entails a 'natural' characteristic of the animal kingdom (of which we humans are part). However, by showing cockatoos with colourful queer plumage and virile bulls reminiscent of 'muscle Marys', the exhibition contests (perhaps unknowingly) the linkage between nature and homosexuality.

sacrifice their sexuality, to deny desire, gay men in Benaigua brandish both through everyday gestures and acts. By giving it a bath of Camp, traditions are queered, Catholicism and its hegemonic morality are challenged. Catholic traditions (which already share in the Baroque) and their stylised repetitions seem like an appropriate home for the contestation of hegemonic gender and sexuality. Gay men's domesticity and taste dispute established heteronormative patterns of love, care, and in this case, faith. Their (dis)ordered performativity of masculinity and traditional Catholic practices have the potential to blur and de-stabilise gender roles. Butler's (1999) concept of performativity reveals that heterosexuality and its binarisms are based on "imitation" (125), suggesting an "emptiness" of signification which allows for a multiplicity of performativities of gender (and sexuality). In a similar vein, I argue that Camp and its possibilities allow also for a dynamic performativity of the Catholic tradition, one that gay men are able to access and implement.

And this queering of the Catholic tradition, in my mind, opens up the possibility of questioning homonormativity as a theory. Some scholars have already warned of a tendency to apply homonormativity indiscriminately to gay and lesbian experiences (particularly metropolitan ones, see G. Brown 2012). As well as homogenising, there is a further tendency to present those experiences defined as homonormative as universal (G. Brown 2009, 1497). But by paying attention to the specific social, cultural and political conjuncture in Benaigua, we can see the potential of informal, non-mainstream forms of socialisation such as faith-based communities, which escape to some extent the neoliberal bases of homonormativity (Brown 2009, 1503). By engaging in acts of queering the Catholic tradition, gay men in Benaigua question the very idea of norms, of doctrine even. If "Camp is the solvent of morality" (Sontag 2018, 12), through the utilisation of tropes that both conform to and question both traditional Spanish masculinities *and* homosexualities, local members of the congregation perhaps advocate for an ethics of the closet: a relational understanding of equality through a negotiated visibility.

4.2.3. A closet with no doors: affordances and conclusions

It was unusually cold for May. Axel and I walked down the acacia-lined avenue that traversed the centre of Riu, a bigger town to the west of the village. It was about six in the afternoon,

and people had started populating the side pavements, sitting in bars and entering shops. Axel kept his arms very close to his body, his hands in his pockets. Like other young men his age, he was not wearing a coat, just a lumberjack shirt, black skinny jeans and white trainers. As we walked, he stopped three or four times to say hello to people, introducing me as a friend. Near the bottom of the long avenue, police officers were redirecting traffic. I heard the distant sound of a music band. 'It's the procession for Saint Joseph, the patron saint of the church I used to go to', he told me. We stopped and became spectators. The pageant opened with a group of children walking on the sides, older women going from one to another like sparrows, asking them to be quiet, to keep in line. Then young men and women, this time carrying lit candles, dressed in their Sunday clothes, gelled hair, shiny shoes. Almost all of them greeted Axel: some raised their hand, some others smiled in his direction, nodding their heads nervously. After them, a beautiful image of Saint Joseph in reds and golds: the bearded putative father held the hand of a child crowned with blond ringlets. 'It's your saint', he told me as he looked up at the passing image. I smiled. Older folk followed the image, also holding candles, then the priest, then some representatives of the local council, all looking ahead, exchanging the occasional essayed smile. The music band closed the procession and Axel and I resumed our walk. I asked him if he would have liked to be part of it. 'Of course. But I don't want people to get upset, I don't want to upset things up.'

Axel had been at the centre of arguments and debates about transgender identity and visibility. He had been a member of *Juniors Moviment Diocesà*, a youth movement within the Valencian Catholic church. With a presence of over 25,000 affiliates (*Paraula: Església En València* 2017), each local organisation of Juniors meets every Saturday for a mixture of educative games and rituals that are meant to train the youth in their spiritual life as Christians. Led by senior (lay) members of the organisation, priests play the role of general overseers, letting the former run the groups fairly independently. The highlights of yearly activities are the Easter and Summer camps, very popular with kids aged eight to 15. As young adults, Juniors are then encouraged to take places of responsibility in their local groups: first to become instructors (*monitors/monitores)* and then youth workers (*educadors/educadores*). For this, they undergo official training and are given a certification that allows them to be in charge of large groups of children, both in the church and during outings. Axel, who had been a Junior for ten years, had been recently promoted to the

position of instructor and was on his way to become a youth worker when he started transitioning.

Axel told me about the run-up to Summer camps, when those in charge of groups planned activities, contacted Youth Hostels, secured volunteers to cook and clean and applied for small grants. This was a time of bonding for the organisers themselves, who strengthened relationships of co-dependence and trust. It was also an opportunity for instructors from across the region to know each other, expanding the networks of friendship and religious community amongst the youth. Axel told me that the Juniors community had been understanding of his decision to transition. 'I had started my hormone treatment and it wasn't easy, but my friends in Juniors were very supportive' he told me. When I spoke to other young members of the organisation about Axel, they all shared similar memories about this time: that initially it had been challenging to use his new name, and to refer to Axel as *him* instead of *her*. One young interlocutor in Benaigua recalled becoming friends with pre-transitioning Axel: 'We were camp friends, and I knew he liked girls when he was a girl herself. I thought it was a bit premature, though. He had never said anything to us about wanting to be a boy, and suddenly he was already shooting testosterone. But I understand it now, and it's not as easy as it seems [for Axel].'

Not everyone was equally supportive of Axel's decision. He told me that his local priest had called him aside one day and had told him that he was not happy with him going to summer camp, and that he was thinking about his progression to become a youth worker, that it may not happen. 'That's when we had that big meeting', he recalled. The issue at stake was how much the priesthood was prepared to allow Axel to participate in the running of the local Juniors group, particularly in the upcoming summer camp. The local priest responsible for Axel's group asked to have a word with him, and when Axel told his peers about the meeting, they insisted in attending it with him. They had said that if Axel wasn't allowed to participate in the camp, then they'd leave the organisation. During the meeting, Axel narrated, the priest had said he couldn't allow him to continue in the organisation because, by transitioning, Axel was refusing the body that God had given him. According to the priest, it meant that he was setting a bad example for younger kids. There was the added issue of which toilets and shower rooms he was going to use. But Axel told me that he had already thought about it, and that

he was going to make sure he got up before anybody to have a shower, to avoid using them at the same time as the children in the camp. The priest, he told me, had made no comment about this decision. Axel also told me that, throughout this and other meetings, the priest had used his pre-transition name and referred to Axel as *she/her* when using the third person, which had upset him and angered some of his friends, who threatened the priest with discontinuing the Juniors group in his parish if Axel wasn't allowed to stay.

The situation was not resolved in that meeting. The priest consulted other priests in the area, including Benaigua's and, as I learnt later through other sources, he also had talks with prelates higher up in the provincial hierarchy. In the end, Axel was told that because he had chosen to refuse the body God had given him at birth, he did not have the right to '*anunciar la paraula de Déu'* [proclaim the word of God]. This prohibition to teach meant that Axel could not progress within the organisation. Axel was told he could instead take other positions in the parish, like joining the choir. 'That's when the Juniors instructors and youth workers where most supportive: they went on strike and cancelled the summer camp' he said. 'And that's when I left.' I could not believe how insensitive the priest had been in Axel's narration. Not only the hierarchy had shown no sympathy or interest for his transition, but they also had shown a (malicious?) lack of awareness about the process he was undergoing. Just as Alex Salinas had been referred to by a priest as "a transsexual woman who considers herself a man" (see above), Axel had his male identity negated by being constantly referred to by his pre-transition name. By inviting him to join the choir at a time when his voice would have been changing due to hormonal treatment, the priestly hierarchy had further refused to acknowledge Axel's new gendered self. In parallel, Axel's peers had come to terms with his transitioning, sharing experiences during previous summer camps, planning activities, attending Mass… His Juniors religious community had understood the change as it happened, adapting to Axel's changing persona (Rubin 2006).

Inversely, the priests deployed theological and corporeal arguments in order to stop Axel from joining the summer camp as a person in charge, and therefore from being accepted as a full member of the religious community. On the one hand, Axel was not in a moral position to teach the word of God because of his refusal to accept his sex at birth. On the other hand, the presence of Axel's transitioning body in an environment where it was necessary to

supervise younger folk when they used toilets and showers, made the priest nervous. Public toilets and showers have been historically one site of gender (and sexuality) surveillance and control (Cavanagh 2013). Axel's self-policing through early morning routines that guaranteed the privacy of his ablutions reached out to calm the priest's panic to no avail. When I asked Axel if he did not want to take things further, make a complaint to the Bishopric for example, he told me how his mother had wanted to write a letter to the Pope himself. 'She was so angry', Axel said with a chuckle. But he had not wanted to make a fuss any more than he had. He left. He also stopped responding to his Juniors mates' phone messages. Axel regretted having done so then. He felt that he had become a source of disappointment precisely for the people who most cared for him and who may have ended up thinking he didn't care about Juniors anymore. But he also told me that he had recently come to realise that he had been overwhelmed by the circumstances. In short, he had been trying to fight too many battles at the time: with the church, with high school (where he was very behind in his studies), with his family (his father was not readily coming to terms with having a trans son) but, as he told me, most importantly with his own body.

Axel's lived experiences of being part of a church congregation compares starkly to that of the gay men I write about above. In the latter's case, the hidden, that is, their sexuality, can be negotiated, revealed and concealed by both themselves and the congregation, in a game of opening and closing the doors of the closet that also suits both. In the case of Axel, he was out through and through, transitioning occurred under the gaze of Axel's religious community, which left him with fewer affordances than his gay male counterparts. His experience speaks to that of other transgender people for whom being out is less about revealing their trans identity at any given time than making their past explicit, that is, disclosing the fact that they were born in and were once known by their opposite sex (J. Green 2006). In a permanent state of exiting the closet, Axel decided to take himself away from the organisation he so much loved. Rather than being an outspoken dissenter he preferred to exist as a Catholic trans man *with dissent*, in disagreement with the hierarchy and established doctrine in his own terms (Mayblin 2019b). Interestingly, he did so discreetly, reluctant to be the source of further trouble in the church or disappointment for his peers. I wondered if this discretion, also deployed by gay men in Benaigua, would have worked for Axel in similar ways had he arrived in a different congregation post-transition, or for Alex Salinas: had he turned

up on the day of his nephew’s christening, would the priest have cancelled the ritual or pretend he had not noticed? It is precisely in a game of occlusion, of (badly muffled) silences yet visible religious performances that the Church at large and gay men in Benaigua seem to continue to exert their presence, to exist, changing the face of the Church at large.

CHAPTER FIVE: Out of the box: changes in confessional practices

5.1. Forgiveness and other early lessons

Twice a week during the months of January and February I helped a cohort of catechists prepare children aged six to eight for their first communion. I worked with Lola, a vivacious octogenarian and soul of the congregation, and Remei, one of the members of the *confraria* of the Mother of God of the Carmel. For decades, both women had been teaching the basics of the Christian faith to children in preparation for the sacrament on a voluntary basis. They were part of an all-women seasoned cohort, knowledgeable teachers with a range of pedagogical skills learnt over the years and heaps of love and patience. The classes were always lively and would take place right after the kids' school day. The narrow street between the church and the *casa parroquial* became a feast of voices, of children running around their parents or chatting to each other. In early spring, the swallows joined their screams, augmenting the sense of chaos and mirth. Each catechist waited for their pupils at different points of the entrance to the *casa*; children flocked to each one of them, exchanged greetings, and waved goodbye to their parents as they were taken to the classrooms upstairs.

'We walk away from Jesus when we sin. We sin when _______. We sin when ______. We sin when ______.'

One afternoon in late February, Remei and Lola were busy encouraging the kids in our group to fill in the gaps of the above exercise. Their group was made up exclusively of boys in the third year of catechism, which meant that their first communion was imminent, to be celebrated in May. The title on the exercise sheet that day was *Cuando decimos no al amor* [When we say no to love, in Spanish]. 'We sin when… when do we sin?' asked Remei. 'We sin when we fight' Manel, one of the boys, said as he grinned and play-punched the boy sitting next to him, eliciting a loud 'Ouch!' 'Okay, you don't need to do that,' Remei replied. 'He hurt me!' the other boy exclaimed, arching his mouth and eyebrows in a phoney attempt to show upset. The boys laughed. In a mixture of excitement, trepidation, tiredness and boredom, the boys spent the hour trying to finish the written exercises, teasing each other, constantly

dropping their pencils and rubbers, and responding to the catechists' questions. Sometimes we sang songs, and very often we went over prayers, particularly those that were going to feature in their first communion Mass. Salva, one of the livelier boys suddenly stood up, dragging his chair behind him with a din. 'I've sinned because I stole a sweet, look, I did it like this,' he said acting out the mechanics of taking an imaginary sweet and eating it, like an actor in a silent film. Remei rolled her eyes. 'Well I'm glad you're telling me Salva,' Lola said, gently trying to sit him back down, 'because although I cannot forgive you for your sins, I can advise you what you need to do, which is to confess, and of course, you can't take back the sweet because you've eaten it, but you can give what it cost to a beggar, or you can pray…'

The particulars of confession, including forgiveness and penance, featured often during the many afternoons I spent with Remei, Lola and their students. The following week, the class started with a dictation, a rare occasion in which the boys worked calmly. As Lola and I helped the boys with their spelling, Remei recited with a clear voice:

> 'The steps to a good confession are five: 1) Examine your conscience; 2) Remorse for your sins; 3) Firm desire not to sin again; 4) Say the sins to the confessor; and 5) Do the penance given by the priest.'

Remei and Lola spent some time explaining each one of the steps, interrupted by questions and remarks from the kids. One of them declared a couple of times that he did not want to tell his sins to anybody, why should he? Lola explained that the priest represented Jesus on earth, that he was the only one who could forgive him, in His name. Salva interjected, 'What if I kill someone?' Remei quickly retorted: 'You can't lie during confession Salva.' But Salva insisted, what if he killed someone, would the priest forgive him? 'The Lord's mercy is infinite Salva,' Lola replied punctuating her speech with her raised hands and a smile, 'that means that He forgives all if you're truly sorry.' 'What if I kill an ant?' Salva asked after Lola's explanation, a finger next to his mouth, eyes a squint. While Remei was trying to formulate a reply to this provocation, Manel came in, late. He was not a happy bunny. As Remei talked to Salva and the rest of the kids, Lola moved to welcome Manel, settle him, she opened his bag and his notebook for him. It soon transpired that Manel had had a fight earlier in the day, in school, with Salva. As Manel was telling the story to Lola, his eyes welled up. The rest of the

boys looked at him and listened in silence. ‘How can the most handsome boy here be upset?’ Lola had her arm round Manel, comforting him. We all went back to reading a passage from the textbook. After a while Salva started talking to Manel in amicable terms. The latter read a chunk of the passage and Lola gave him a kiss on the cheek, ‘Well done.’ Manel received it with a smile, his earlier troubles seemly gone. After the passage was read, the boys started colouring in a drawing of a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. Soon it was time to go; they lined up ready for their treat; a bag of sweets was produced by Remei from her handbag. Lola then asked Manel, ‘Do you think you can forgive each other now, Salva and Manel?’ Approaching his friend and emulating adult speech, Manel embraced Salva effusively: ‘Of course, damn it.’ The two boys smiled and got in line to pick their sweet.

Catechists sorting a group of first communion girls for a procession.
The latter wear their first communion outfits. Photo by author.

The opening ethnography already proposes the conceptual elements central to this final empirical chapter of the thesis: forgiveness, sin, public acts of private testimony, and a reluctance to auricular confession. Here, I try to make sense of the fate of the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation, also known as the sacrament of penance or, as was commonly called in Benaigua, confession. Using Michel Foucault’s (1978) theoretical framework in which confession is both a tool for dominance and for the construction of the self, I appraise the villagers’ lived experience of confession in order to elucidate larger points regarding what he termed “the confessing society” (Foucault 1978, 59), and explore how this is intricately linked

to the *longue durée* of the sacrament of reconciliation. Through ethnography I ask: what are the reasons for the perceived demise of auricular confession? If priestly confession and absolution are at the centre of Catholic doctrine and Catholic eschatology, what does it mean when the faithful devise their own modes of forgiveness away from doctrinal demands?

The ethnographic analysis will not only answer these questions, but also propose that Foucault's own understanding of 'the confessional', and much of the scholarly work that engages with it, disavows the lived experience of Catholics for whom confession is still spiritually relevant. Far from being a religious practice in decline, this chapter shows how confession infiltrates the secular, bringing with it Christian notions of forgiveness and righteousness. Importantly, and in line with themes already explored in the thesis, the ethnographic cases corroborate a certain democratisation of spiritual practices, which become untethered from the priest and continue a life of their own at the hands of the laity. The sacrament's historical oscillations between the public and the private which I outline at the start of the chapter, I contend, map onto contemporary instances of private confessions made in the public arena of Spanish society, in particular in the media. This chapter, therefore, intervenes in the scant literature on confession in the social sciences from the point of view of people's lived experiences, be it about faith and forgiveness (Megoran 2010) or in a tangential manner (Cannell 2006; Mosse 2006). In doing so, this chapter takes confession into the geopolitical arena of global theological questions such as reconciliation, conflict, and sin.

5.1.1. The making of the 'confessing animal'.

Confession's long and complex trajectory in the West has encompassed ideas fundamental to the development of European societies: retribution, reconciliation, punishment, forgiveness and guilt. I choose to start the chapter with children's experiences of confession because education has played a crucial role in the history of confession, both in the development of the religious sacrament and as technique of (self-)control and surveillance (Foucault 1978; Tambling 1990; Taylor 2009). Although the gradual development of confession had been uneven throughout Christendom, it crystallised as a sacramental and institutional practice at the Council of Lateran IV in 1215. Prior to 1215 and in the early centuries of the Church, the sacrament involved the public confession of one's sins and the also public act(s) of penance.

Whether almsgiving or physical mortification, the latter could extend for years and often included prohibition on participating in the Eucharist (Lea 1896). The priest or bishop was consulted but he had no jurisdiction over the actions of the individual, other than the performance of penance rituals (Ibid). For this reason, public repentance and its consequent atonement were a once in a lifetime communal affair: the individual, after being put through a course of spiritual and physical exercises, was re-accepted into the community of believers, into the Church. The Church thus "extend[ed] its forgiveness, restore[d] to charity, and in charity pray[ed] to God that He also may forgive" (Bossy 1975, 22). Sins did otherwise not require mediated contrition in order to achieve salvation, as Christ had died on the cross for that purpose: baptism was *the* sacrament that wiped original sin, hence giving the individual a chance for salvation.

But in 1215 Pope Innocent III decreed that confession to a priest was to be practised compulsorily by all Christians 'of age' (mid-teens) at least once a year prior to Holy Communion, at the risk of being denied Christian burial for non-compliance. This legislation may well have been brought about by a concern to control and extinguish 13th century heresies such as the Cathars (Cornwell 2014), but it quickly became one of the pivotal points not only of Church doctrine, but also of pedagogical texts and educational practices (Woods and Copeland 1999). Both in Latin and the vernacular, the educational and the confessional started to overlap, with an emphasis on the regulations of the priest's sacramental dominance as guide and interrogator (Ibid). By the Reformation, confession had become common place in the life of Christians: they were extolled to confess and have communion as often as needed, particularly if their life was in danger. Many of Luther's '95 theses' referred to confession and penance. He vehemently argued against the institutional practices in which forgiveness required the intercession of a priest *and* a consequent penance; in his view faith was enough to seek God's forgiveness of one's sins (Bossy 1975; Cornwell 2014). This approach ran counter to a Church tradition that had produced volumes of manuals in which the confessor had to track down every individual's inclination, every intention from the confessed in order to 'clean' as much as possible the latter's soul through absolution. This much was reinforced by the scholastic literature through the idea that sins were primarily psychological (Bossy 1975).

Hence, the resolutions promulgated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and which expressed the ideals of the Counter-Reformation, highlighted the sacrament of penance as decisive in refuting the Protestant theses. Although adherence to the sacrament was by no means homogenous, scholars mark the Tridentine resolutions as furthering the progressive individualisation of sin in Catholicism, accompanied by an accentuation of the power of the priest as confessor and judge (Haliczer 1996; O'Collins and Farrugia 2014). The shift "from a consequentialist morality to interiorised, 'casuistic' soul-searching" (Cornwell 2014, 45) was underway. Perhaps one of the most significant developments of this move towards interiority was the popularisation of the confessional box, with its earliest mention, curiously, at the Council of Valencia (1565) (Lea 1896, 395). In addition, these reforms were accompanied by a re-organisation and vitalisation of the teaching of catechism to children (Livingstone 2013a). Foucault (1978, 63) extends this history by referring to concomitant developments in 18th century pedagogy and 19th century medicine. Foucault's own genealogy of confession is motivated by his interest in exploring initially the production and reproduction of power in relation to sex and sexuality discourses, and ultimately the discursive nature of truth. The masturbating schoolboy of the 19th century becomes one of the central figures of his exploration (105): a burgeoning medical science of population aimed to control non-reproductive sexuality (25) through the tried and tested method of confession.

Confession thus gradually becomes a secular technology which not only priests but also parents, doctors, psychotherapists, and the police use. Although the dynamics of power involved in confessing confer the authority of naming, charging or absolving to the listener (a role played by the priest in Christianity), confession becomes over time a self-disciplining tool: what begins as an imposition (at the Council of Lateran IV) becomes by the 19th century a compulsion of the individual, a desire (21). Foucault defines confession as "a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement… in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it…" (61-62). As the Western individual becomes a "confessing animal" in order to integrate in a "confessing society" (59), telling all liberates. Foucault points out that, in a reversal of power dynamics, submitting to the centuries-old command to say "what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking" becomes an act of

freedom (60). That is, confession "exonerates, redeems, and purifies" the confessing individual; "it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation [sic]" (62). Echoing this therapeutic vision of confession still in the 1980s, Pope John Paul II referred to it as a "medicine" by which "the experience of sin does not degenerate into despair" (John Paul II 1984). And because children were deemed to already have a moral compass that enabled them to distinguish good from evil, rectitude from sin, Pope Pius X lowered the "age of discretion" (McNicholas 1911) from mid-teens to seven in 1910, counter to established canon law, tradition, and the opinion of theologians at the time (Cornwell 2014; Pujol Balcells 1983). This meant that children were to be taught catechism in a question-and-answer form, leaving little room for pedagogical clarity, interpretation or perceived unorthodoxy.

Thus, the social and institutional history of the confessional until the mid 20th century follows the path of increasing individualisation: it moves definitely away from public forms of penance or forgiveness and entrenches the power differentials between the priest and the confessed. Firstly, absolution can only be performed by the priest in front of the penitent, being the sure way in which the faithful can be totally forgiven of their sins by God according to doctrine. Secondly, the faithful are encouraged to learn the basics of their faith by rote; the only elucidations of sin, forgiveness and condemnation come from the hand of priests and other religious people who hold the pedagogical key (Cornwell 2014). Finally, confession is firmly established as a practice that occurs in the intimacy of the black box, in which the confessed search their soul away from the eyes and ears of the congregation, led by the confessor's questions[32].

In the next section I chart the villagers' memories of and attitudes towards auricular confession and explore the reasons why, despite catechists' efforts to educate children in its importance, it has long been in decline. The ethnography points to two main reasons for this: a loss of the divine authority of the priest and the individualisation of the villagers' understanding of sin. Although these elucidations are largely consistent with the

[32] This private setting together with the lowering of compulsory first confession was to have catastrophic consequences in the case of sexual abuses committed by priests (Cornwell 2014). In a cruelly paradoxical turn, the confessional apparatus that had been 'invented' in order to separate the priest from women during confession to thus avoid the priest's solicitation of sexual favours, allowed for the solicitation of minors.

secularisation and privatisation theories of religion, in the second half of the chapter I show how far from disappearing or becoming increasingly private, confession is ever present in the lives of Benaigua's congregation.

5.1.2. Not with the priest

Memories from my childhood and teenagehood cloak confession in secrecy and shame. The confessionary, the 'dark box' was still in use. As a child, my bafflement in kneeling in front of a box to tell the man on the other side of the panel my secrets, was accompanied often by shame, particularly later in my teens, when I was trying to grapple with my homosexuality. Although it seems that Foucault realised in his later life that sex was not as central as he thought to the production of knowledge through confession (Elden 2005), in the context of the villagers' own perceptions of forgiveness and faith, sex and sexuality remained important. In the chapter on local gay and trans men in this thesis, I alluded to the contrary feelings aroused by confession in relation to homosexuality. Martí, one of my interlocutors, saw no need to elaborate on what he referred to as his intimate life. When he confessed, he used the phrase 'impure acts and thoughts' strategically, as those words 'covered quite a lot of ground.' Pepe expressed with passion his view that love between men was no sin, how could it be when Jesus had asked all to love each other? One's sense of good and evil was above that of the priest, in his opinion, as the priest 'is a man just like you and I'. Florenci had not partaken in the Eucharist in decades for his fear of confessing, even though he attended Mass most weeks, while Diego, his partner, saw confession as something to be done directly with God, without the intercession of priests (more on Diego later).

Sex and sexuality were sources of anxiety for heterosexual members of the congregation too. Tica, a 79-year-old widow, candidly recounted her terror of confessing sins of a sexual nature while she was younger and married. 'I used to argue with my husband, because I knew that what we did was sinful,' Tica said. 'I was told again and again that avoiding having a child was a sin, that if God was sending a baby then I had to have it.' Tica was referring here to the use of contraception. She wrung her hands as she continued, 'We got to a bad place, my husband and I, because I didn't want to sin. And when I asked a priest in the city, you know what he said? He said, why are you confessing this if you're going to sin again?' Tica raised her

eyebrows. 'What was I meant to do?! Divorce my husband?!' Tica's frustration is indicative of the process through which an individual is subjected to dominant discourses, trying at the same time to make sense of them vis-à-vis her life experiences. In this case, this tension compelled Tica to confess and seek absolution again and again. She also recounted that she had eventually told the local priest about the city priest's words, and that he had not confirmed or denied them, 'he did not say anything', Tica said with a shrug of her shoulders. Tica concluded her anecdote telling me that she had ended up not confessing as often, perhaps, I thought, a way to contest the moral objections raised by the priests. As well as pointing to a professional complicity among priests, her account highlights one of the most important moments in the history of the decline of confession in the 20th century: the entrenchment of the Catholic Church in the ban of contraceptives, particularly the pill, through Paul VI's infamous encyclica *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. Faced with such dilemmas, many Catholic women stopped confessing and some stopped going to Mass altogether (see Harris 2018; Ignaciuk 2018).

The lack of confidence in the confessor was rationalised sometimes through appeal to, interestingly, religious authority. One of my neighbours followed the advice of her late uncle who had been a friar: 'My uncle was not partial to confessing to a priest either,' she told me. 'He taught me what to do, which is to confess directly to God, and that's what *I* do.' Similarly, Diego often recounted how he had been taught religion in school by a loving Catholic nun who had advised him to 'confess less and pray more', the latter in direct and personal communication with God. In conversations with Diego, it became clear that he did not trust the priesthood; the topic of the historical sexual abuses by Catholic priests was one he felt particularly strongly about. Many of my interlocutors logically objected to feeling interrogated or under scrutiny by the priest. During a small gathering in a neighbour's sitting room, a mutual friend complained that a priest had asked her repeatedly about her sexual behaviour during confession. 'Just because I dress in a certain way and use make up, it does not mean that I go around sleeping with men!' she said. 'He made me feel very uncomfortable.' Others complained about being patronised or told off like children during confession: 'My years of first communion catechism are well in the past,' another interlocutor said. Finally, a considerable number of members of the congregation refused to confess with a priest because of his proximity to their everyday lives. 'I know him well, I see him in the bar

and the street all the time,' one villager told me, 'I don't want him to think of my things each time he sees me.' Implicit in these considerations by my interlocutors, a de-sacralisation of the priest becomes apparent, concomitant to a decrease in the trust placed in his opinion and his deeds.

Was confession in crisis then? I asked Benaigua's priest. 'Confession is not in crisis. It's Christian life that is in crisis.' The priest lamented that people did not understand sin. 'In olden times,' he said, 'everything was sinful: holding your girlfriend's hand, giving her a kiss… Now nothing is sinful, everything is fine because modern man has reached adulthood, nobody can tell him what to do.' Yet, he explained, ambition, desire, and ire wreaked havoc in society. 'Sin is not only to remember the 6th and 9th commandments[33],' he said, 'the 1st one is not abided by anybody to start with!' By referring to the 'olden times' in which sin was ever-present, the priest reminded me of the exhaustive confession manuals that I refer to above and that saints and theologians had designed. In contrast to this confessor-centred period of the Church, the priest talked of the 'modern man', one who could make decisions independently and, according to the priest, often against God. He reiterated that society was failing to lead a Christian life by not engaging in penance as *metanoia*, he explained, as 'interior change that has external repercussions' (more on this later). 'The thing that is in crisis as you say' he finally pointed out, 'is individual confession as an individualistic thing taken as a *me and God*, *me and God*' he concluded with disapproving hand gestures. At the time, I did not know that I was going to write about confession in this thesis, otherwise I could have posed an obvious question to the priest: so if confession as an individualistic practice is in crisis, why does the Catholic Church still insist on one-to-one auricular confessions in order to absolve mortal sins?

However, the priest was right in pointing out a different sort of crisis, one in the meaning of sin. His comment amplified a set of attitudes towards sin which I encountered often in Benaigua. In the first place, many of the members of the local congregation considered their lives mostly free of mortal sin. Mortal sins are those that "attack the vital principle within us

[33] The 6th and 9th commandments refer to sins of sexual nature: 'You shall not commit adultery' and 'You shall not covet your neighbour's wife' respectively. The 1st commandment, 'I am the LORD your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me.' The priest is obviously referring to money, ambition and power as false Gods.

– that is, charity – [and] necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of the heart normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation" (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 3.1.1.8.1856). To clarify, mortal sins need priestly confession to be forgiven. Importantly, mortal sin "is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself" (CCC, 3.1.1.8.1861), that is, it is completely the result of the individual's will. Normally, mortal sins are associated with the ten commandments (CCC, 3.1.1.8.1858), thus the importance, according to the catechists, of children learning them by heart. Villagers often referred to the decalogue indirectly when talking about their personal stance on sin and sinning. 'I am an affable person who lives life with an open heart, I don't steal, and I don't harm anybody,' a friend of mine said to me, explaining why she did not usually confess. Chatting to one of the *confrares* on another occasion, she referred to her husband as someone who thought he did not sin. 'Do you know what he says? He says, well, I haven't killed anybody, I don't steal… what sins have I committed?' the woman said with a laugh. Contrary to the priest's perception about the 6th and 9th commandments, villagers mostly referred to the 5th and the 7th[34] when justifying why they had not committed such grave sins as to justify the need for confession. 'It's all about your own understanding of sin, and your own experience of faith,' the *confrare* concluded.

This individualisation of one's understanding of sin perhaps was a remnant of the situation I described earlier, a time when the catechism was learnt by heart. When I learnt them as a child, any doubts or questions about the ten commandments could only be answered by the priest during confession. But as people looked beyond the priest for moral authority in places such as science, education, or liberalism, they seem to have started to rely on their own interpretation of sin and forgiveness. The decline of the priest's authority, concomitant to the modernisation of the country, allowed for multiple understandings of sin away from doctrine. This would account for the range in the villagers' attitudes towards confession. But it was not only the villagers who differed in their interpretations of sin and penance. It seemed that priests did so too. Thus, choosing a confessor depended often on his personal qualities and attitudes. One of my older interlocutors had changed confessor often when he had not been

[34] The 5th commandment is 'You shall not kill'; the 7th, 'You shall not steal'.

happy with the priest's advice, while a woman in her late teens told me that her choice of confessors depended on how 'cool' they were.

Unlike Tica's experience with priests in the past, the young woman told me as a matter of fact that different priests had different opinions on the same sins, and so she preferred those who did not tell her off for her choices regarding, in particular, her sexual life: 'God is love, anyway!' she said with a laugh. One of my gay interlocutors told me that he never went back to the same priest if he was reprimanded for his homosexuality during confession: 'You could say that I'm choosing what I want to hear. And I'm fine with that,' he said. 'And anyway, I don't think God may love me less for my sexual choices,' he concluded. So, it seemed that regardless of what doctrine may say, both the priests and the laity were actively interpreting it in order to adapt it to their lives and circumstances, interpreting sin in their own terms. In addition, my research participants seemed to have an overriding sense that the love and charity of God was above any mortal sin that may have been committed 'on paper.'

Finally, this tension between doctrine and lived experiences of reconciliation with God became once more evident in conversation with one of Benaigua's Eucharist ministers. Eucharist ministers are lay people who undergo Church training in order to assist priests administering holy communion to people in church and the community. I had met them some years ago when they had come to my mother's house in order to give the Eucharist to my elderly grandmother. I remember being surprised at the time by the fact that my grandmother had been given communion without having had to confess first. 'Look,' the minister told me during one of our conversations, 'before giving the communion we always pray. And in prayer we ask for forgiveness.' The minister referred to the passage in the 'Our Father' when Christians ask God to "forgive our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12; CCC, 4.2.3.5). The minister also said that before giving the Eucharist there was a moment when they encouraged an interior moment of reflection, of personal confession of one's sins before God (something similar happens during Mass). But I insisted: what if the person had committed a mortal sin? The minister patiently explained that if in the last gasp of life before death one repented, all sins would be forgiven. 'Everything we do as Christians, we do it from a place of faith. You can't have rigid rules,' the minister concluded.

The preceding passages show how the de-sacralisation of the figure of the priest, together with a decrease in his authority, as well as an individualisation of discourses of sin have resulted in Catholics seeking alternatives away from auricular confession. One of these alternatives is to confess less or not at all. But many of my interlocutors opted for other forms of confession and reconciliation which will be explored in more depth in the second half of the chapter. What I have shown so far, however, is that far from acting out of compulsion or impulse as Foucault entailed in his idea of the "confessing animal" (Foucault 1978, 59), my interlocutors thought about confession at length. Taylor (2017, 29) observes that Foucault's original term, "*bête d'aveu"* translates literally as "beast of confession", a term that leaves even less room for autonomy than "animal", entailing a lack of agency that my interlocutors were far from. Dispensing with the confessor, however, did not mean that my interlocutors were free of the dominant moral discourses that compelled them to confess. But it does mean that the historical process of individualisation of the sacrament of confession is mirrored in the progressive individualisation of the villagers' lives in late modernity, in which they take responsibility for their own actions. Nevertheless, in the next section I show how the community becomes central to the villagers' ideas of confession and reconciliation, picking up Foucault's latter work on technologies of the self and showing that embodied confessional practices are social and cultural too, beyond the mere interpellation of the confessor.

5.2. Forms of confession

Auricular confession was still seen by some members of the congregation as necessary. Some found confessing cathartic, a true act of declaring one's beliefs and asking God for mercy and forgiveness as well as praising God for them. The same techniques that seemed clearly inquisitorial to me, some congregants found useful. In this way, the priest often read a list of questions from the altar that were meant to spur our memories of sins and sinning before confessing. Some of the questions included 'do I only talk to God when I need help?', 'do I go to Mass regularly?', or 'what do I do to grow spiritually?' Lola took a written list of sins and thoughts with her to her confession. 'Each time the priest sees the list he laughs,' Lola told me with a chuckle, 'but I do not want to forget anything.' Lola referred often to her regular

confessions using the vocabulary of food and nourishment, ‘I need it like water’, or ‘when the priest gives me the absolution, I’m full!’ she would say with an expansive motion of her hands and a big smile. Confession was also seen as an opportunity to give vent to one’s problems and seek advice: ‘I do not seek confession to redeem my sins. I seek to have an opinion on certain things that I cannot tell everybody,’ Martí told me once. ‘I do not seek the priest’s absolution; I seek to unburden.’ Martí explained that priests could give him an objective opinion because they did not know him like a relative or a friend. In this way, Martí’s need to communicate his worries met with the different Foucauldian roles of the confessor: spiritual guide, psychologist and therapist (Berggren 1975, 8–9). Confession was in these cases an act of self-care.

The heavy image of Christ on the cross is carried by Benaiguans. Some informants saw carrying the cross as part of a personal act of penance. Photo by author.

I have shown how the villagers had complex relationships with the priest as confessor. Amongst the myriad ways of seeking reconciliation with God, one of the more common among the congregation entailed a rejection of the priest’s auricular confession in favour of more personal modes of reconciliation. Bàrbara, one of the organisers of the festivity in honour of the Mother of God in August (Chapter Three), also advocated for an individual and honest relationship with the divine. ‘Why would you want to go there [the confessional] to say, *I’ve had an argument with my mother, or with my husband*… does that really help? Yes, we sin. But are we doing something to remedy it, to not commit it again?’ Bàrbara explained

that in her case, she preferred to work by herself on her own behaviour and on how it affected others around her. 'When I realise, for example, that today I have not argued with my mother, challenging as she's been, and that I have been patient and understanding, then I think I can absolve myself,' she said. 'Maybe it's strange, but that feels more honest to me,' she concluded. Bàrbara's individual reconciliatory relationship with the divine is one in which, although the confessor is totally absent, the internalised moral discourses of good and evil are still deployed in order to keep herself at peace. But further, through self-reflection, Bàrbara defines her own religious identity that contests and questions the place of doctrine in her spiritual experience. Perhaps this can be seen as the epitome of the (Catholic) secularisation of confession: Bàrbara, a Catholic, has become her own therapist as well as her own confessor. In this way, the different confessional forms that Lola, Martí and Bàrbara deploy become part of a process of subjectification in which confession works both as discipline *and* as self-care (McLaren 2002, 149). In this section I follow the thread of the secular-Catholic confession by exploring the social aspect of this care of the self, present in the villagers' attitudes to confession and reconciliation.

5.2.1. *Penitencials* and other communal celebrations

Artur was a member of The Way, a young law graduate preparing his entry exams for the civil service (see Chapter One). He was also a catechist for young teenagers preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation. 'Sometimes confession works for me, sometimes it does not. Is it necessary? Honestly, I don't think so.' He explained that for him it was more important to communicate directly with God through Scripture: 'It's about relying on a set of norms that can help you live an easier life,' he said. 'The problem is that people do not speak to each other. If you speak to your partner about the problems you may have, and you are able to ask for forgiveness, maybe you don't need confession as you are already being forgiven or forgiving. You are already mastering your pride,' he elucidated. I immediately thought of the tender embrace between Manel and Salva which I describe at the beginning of the chapter. For Artur, forgiveness was part of one's personal and long conversion, the 'metanoia' that the priest referred to earlier.

One of The Way's central aims was spiritual conversion resulting in worldly change, that is, the translation of interior faith into external demonstrations of love and care within small communities. One of the evening lectures I attended was dedicated exclusively to the celebration of a *penitencial* [penitential], in which we were invited to confess with the priest. The session started with some readings from the Old and New Testament; the passages from Genesis in which Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit were followed by a meditation on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross in order to wipe that original sin, 'so you can be free and act by your own will', the catechist concluded. Then the chairs were re-arranged to form a U-shape, the priest sitting at the top of the U with an empty chair facing him. 'This is free,' the leading catechist said with an easy smile, 'if you wish you can approach the priest, and if you don't that's fine, we won't judge you.' Some of the catechists started taking turns to sit in front of the priest, confessing, encouraging the rest of us with their example. Although we were all in the same room, we could not hear the loud whispers going on between the confessor and the confessed because two members of The Way played their guitars, and another used a large rattle liberally throughout. The songs were cheerful, and they bled into a final celebration that evening where a spread of cakes, savoury treats and drinks were brought for everybody to enjoy.

Penitencials also existed outside The Way. I attended some with the young *clavariesses* of the Mother of God of the Carmel, with the older *confrares* of the Sacred Heart, with the local Catholic youth organisation (*Juniors*) and with the kids preparing for their first communion. All of them were very similar in structure to the event just described, with confessions being made auricularly to the priest and in front of the congregation. Normally a *penitencial* happened in the days just before a religious feast, in order to spiritually prepare the congregation. The readings from Scripture above were sometimes supplemented by a sermon on the parable of the prodigal son, heightening the spiritual sense of reconciliation, of being accepted back into the fold. During the *penitencial* organised by *Juniors*, one of the youth workers took the microphone and stood by the altar, a large crowd of children and teenagers fidgeting in the audience: 'We are here today,' she said, her voice bright and slightly tremulous, 'to do something special, something that does not happen every day. We're here for God to forgive our sins. Here He is,' she said pointing to a massive crucifix behind the altar, 'nailed to the cross. What have we done to deserve His forgiveness, to deserve the sacrifice

that He made for us, his love?' Core theological concepts such as forgiveness, acceptance and mercy were woven through these events, with an emphasis on confession leading to a state of mind and soul that deserved a celebratory mood, signalled by the cheerful singing and playing of instruments and sometimes a concluding spread of treats and snacks.

On another occasion, I was invited with other friends and acquaintances, to one of the public rites of passage of members of The Way. The rite was one of the concluding events in the long path of conversion that the members of one of their communities in Benaigua had undergone. It took place on Holy Saturday, when congregations around the world renew the vows that their godparents took for them during baptism, including renouncing Satan and embracing the Catholic faith. One by one each member of The Way stood by the altar in front of a shiny cauldron, facing the congregation, lifted their finger pointing at the entrance of the church and exclaimed 'I [name] renounce you, Satan, your works and your pomp'. They continued with an emotive speech in which each member declared how they had been cheated by the devil, how the devil had ruined their marriage, taking it to its limits, how the devil had made them think they were useless, 'human scum', and 'unworthy of love.' Many had tears in their eyes, their broken voices bounced on the church walls and reverberated inside the watchful congregation. Concluding the confessional speech, each member threw an envelope with money into the cauldron with vehemence, signalling a final and resolute act of renunciation to evil. At the end of the ceremony, the members of The Way were congratulated by all, hugged and kissed, admired for their bravery and strength.

I often witnessed similarly poignant public confessions of faith. On the occasion of a pilgrimage with the *confrares* of the Mother of God of the Carmel to Fatima (Portugal), one of the most popular Marian sites of devotion in the world, my mum asked to say a few words in front of a big image of Jesus, risen and victorious, at the end of a Via Crucis. She had recently finished the last round of her chemotherapy treatment and her hair was still short and curly. We were sweating and exhausted. With tears in her eyes, she pointed at the statue and told the crowd in front of her how He was the reason for her to be alive, that He was saviour and comfort. Many cried with her, nodded emotionally, eventually taking her hand, patting her on the back. The group came closer, affectively and physically, through the act of confession. But can these two examples of public testimonies of faith be counted as confessions?

Testifying and witnessing are normally considered Protestant practices that originated as challenges to the established (Catholic) Church authorities during the Reformation, and which encouraged a sense of communal solidarity (Dovey 2000; Haarman 2001; King 2008). During testimonials the speakers produce spoken demonstrations of faithfulness (spiritual and institutional), aiding the speaker to keep to her long path of conversion (Berggren 1975). However, the ethnographic observations above show the ease with which *Catholics* engage in this practice, with seemingly the same personal and collective results. At the same time and in the opposite direction, throughout the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries auricular confession became popular among Protestant denominations as forms of cathartic and effective individual forgiveness (see for example the case of the Oxford Movement, in Berggren 1975). This porosity of practices points to a certain ecumenism of religious ritual among Christian denominations, one that perhaps has not been paid enough attention as "Christianity has always been more interested in the history of its beliefs than in the history of real practices" (Foucault 1997, 224). In addition, this porous effect among denominations questions the exclusivity and centrality of confession in Catholic doctrine as defended since the Council of Trent by theologians.

Yet the question of confession would still stand: did my interlocutors confess or pay testimony? I contend that in both cases the speakers were actively (albeit perhaps unconsciously) invoking the first commandment, renouncing evil, giving thanks to God, thus performing an act of contrition and praise that results from a deep examination of oneself. Would this not be tantamount to confession? Admittedly, although priests were present on both occasions, a personal absolution was not granted. In addition, there seems to be a qualitatively temporal difference between the ethnographic cases and confession: during the former a sin, a weakness or a disease has passed and the individual testifies as to its passing, its being overcome, while confession is meant to invoke God's grace and forgiveness there and then. However, the two examples of public confession amounted to a communal acceptance of the mercy of God, and an emotive reconciliation of the members of the congregation with each other. These public demonstrations of faith, repentance and forgiveness, as well as pointing towards early practices of penance in the history of the Church, are examples of the myriad confessional modes and practices that according to

Foucault and others resulted from the original religious sacrament. From the autobiographical to the therapeutical, “confessional narratives take many forms” (McLaren 2002, 146). What Foucault’s work and others’ overlook, however, is that at the same time as secular confessional forms were being developed and deployed, Catholic confession also mutated and transformed.

During one of our interviews, Benaigua’s priest told me that in his opinion what he called the sacrament of penance had been revitalised through the Catholic Social Teaching [*la Doctrina Social de l’Església*] and particularly by the Second Vatican Council. Echoing the latter, the priest told me: ‘Sin has social repercussions; penance now includes a social, communal aspect.’ Penance, the priest knew, had been communal in the early Church too, and the Second Vatican Council aimed to rescue this dimension, bemoaning the radical individualisation of sin over the centuries, pointing to the public consequences of this individualisation, and emphasising the social nature of the Church membership in a way that sinning against God is tantamount to letting one’s fellow-woman or man down (Cooke 1968). So, does this mean that asking each other for forgiveness as Artur suggests above accounts as sacramental? Or that ‘improving’ ones’ behaviour is enough to receive divine forgiveness, as Bàrbara entails? In the 1970s and 80s and taking advantage of those resolutions that had revitalised the social aspect of penance, numerous bishops called for communal or group absolutions, in particular those from the global South where congregations were large and priests spread thin. John Paull II and his then “doctrinal enforcer” Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), however, insisted that absolution was to be performed individually, “a ruling that many priests saw as a bid to exert clerical control over individual souls and consciences” (Cornwell 2014, 211–12). In this line, more recent theological work on the sacrament of reconciliation (see D. M. Coffey 2001 or Fastiggi 2017), which includes contemporary ideas of sin and penance, still falls back on to the Tridentine precept of confessing grave sins (read mortal sins) at least once a year *and* always before communion (non-grave sins can be dealt with individually through personal contrition).

This push and pull between the centre and the periphery, the individual and the collective, are representative of the issues explored in this thesis, showing the different modalities of faith at play not only in Benaigua but in Christianity at large. Thus, in the last section, I look at

everyday examples of confessional forms present in the lives of my interlocutors, and how these forms further "democratise" the sacrament of reconciliation in practice, away from Church theological stands, bridging into the secular arena.

5.2.2. Mediated reconciliations

One evening I was invited to a *cine club* organised by Lola. Two or three times a year, Lola hosted a number of friends in her house. They watched a film and then they commented on it, from the vantage point of their spiritual experiences. One warm evening in June we got together to watch 'The Shack' (US 2017), a film about a family who lose their younger daughter to a serial killer while on holidays near a lake. The family experience a period of progressive alienation from each other following the murder. One day, the father receives a letter summoning him to the forest cabin where his daughter's dress had been found. It turns out that it is God who has called him. God, played by a woman, together with Jesus, played by a man, and the Holy Spirit, by another woman, live together in a nearby shack and have invited him to spend time with them. What follows is the father's spiritual conversion, from pain and rage to an enlightened reconciliation with God achieved through his forgiveness of the murderer.

In the darkness of the room, as we watched the film, some of us sobbed emotionally at different points, some nibbled on snacks and one nodded off for some time. The conversation after the film, however, was lively. The participants, who included Remei and other friends and neighbours of Lola, began going through some personal cases of hurt and forgiveness. Remei told the case of her sister-in-law, who she loved very much but did not attend Remei's mother's funeral, an absence she was upset by. 'We still visit each other and are on speaking terms,' Remei said, 'but I have not been able to bring myself to talk about it. I want her to explain why she didn't come, so I can forgive her.' The chorus of people around the table agreed with nods of assertion and short comments: they did not know Remei's sister-in-law's reasons, but the funeral of a family member was a must in the obligations of Catholics. The conversation quickly veered towards a familiar topic in Benaigua at that time. In recent weeks, the whole country had been gripped by the case of an eight-year-old boy from a village in the south who had disappeared on his short way home from his grandmother's house. For 12

days the search operation reminded Spanish audiences of similar past cases of disappearances. The visual vocabulary of shaky cameras in chase, of desperate pleas by parents and friends, of vox-pop interviews in the street, of bodies that disappear and reappear, attracted large audiences on Spanish television. In my interlocutors' sitting rooms in Benaigua, the television was constantly on. As well as news of social and political interest, the mornings were taken by programmes that detailed the latest disappearance of, mostly, young women. In the case of the little boy, his body was eventually found in the boot of the car belonging to the boy's father's girlfriend, who was finally charged with murder. 'It is very difficult to forgive things like that,' Remei commented. 'Would you, if you were his mother?' she asked the rest of the gathering in Lola's sitting room.

I finished the previous section wanting to explore alternative and current confessional forms. Foucault observes a progressive secularisation of confession by its ramifications into other domains through "interrogations, consultations, autobiographical narratives [and] letters" (Foucault 1978, 63). Chloë Taylor (2017, 30) extends Foucault's list of genres blossoming forth from the confessional: politicians personal and institutional declarations on television, reality TV shows, confessional talk shows, social media and networking, including posts on Facebook or tweets. From early morning to late at night, Spanish TV channels offer a number of programmes that combine a few of these confessional genres: morning programmes, talk shows, and celebrity gossip shows that top audience charts. My intention in paying attention to these genres in the Spanish context is founded in an interest in form that emanates from the feminist ideological debates of the 1990s in media and cultural studies. These debates broadly polarised talk shows as either transcendent of social structures in allowing the marginal voices of women, the working classes and sexual dissidents to be heard (Gamson 1999; Glynn 2000), or as failures to engage critically with those structures, a failure given by the inability of the therapeutic discourses deployed in these programmes to tackle the hetero-patriarchal matrix that presupposed them (Peck 1995; Tolson 2001). Although these political positionings are important, I want to move beyond them for now and look at talk shows as confessional melodrama, as the embodiment of disclosure and consequent condemnation or exoneration characteristic of popular media cultures (Shattuc 1997). In doing so, I am not seeking a causal link; rather, I want to suggest a porosity of confessional

practices between the secular and the sacred that is revealing of my interlocutors' experiences.

The popular confessional genres of Spanish television can be seen as arising from the long genealogy of talk shows popularised in the US and Latin America at the end of last century. However, they depart in many of their characteristics: Spanish programmes are not issue-oriented but adapt to current social and political developments or follow the vicissitudes of celebrities. The audience, unlike their American counterpart, does not play an active role; rather a group of guests comment on the issue at hand, be it a case of gender violence or the latest celebrity divorce. In the daily morning programmes, the guests can be politicians, doctors or social commentators. In the very popular afternoon gossip programmes, the commentators are minor celebrities themselves who, in some cases, have commanded audiences' attention on the same programme over years. These programmes are broadcasted live seven days a week and go on, in some cases, for five hours. The chorus of commentators and the guests are directed by a host who, although lacking in the therapeutic manner of an Oprah Winfrey (Shattuc 1997) or a padre Alberto Cutie (Acosta-Alzuru 2003), similarly encourages their guests to declare, clarify and disclose. The self-disclosure of a politician that finally admits engaging in corrupt practices, the emotional pleas of relatives and friends of a disappeared woman, or the confessional tones of a celebrity that has cheated on his partner, they all amplify social conflict through the experience of an individual. In this way, talk shows, in their myriad forms, "operate around the politicization of the private" (Peck 1995, 75).

Any given individual's self-disclosure of their intimate life on public television may be more or less reliable, but it is always up for social interpretations and contestations that revert back to the perception of that same individual. My aunt and her friend, who I had coffee often with, were avid watchers of the gossip afternoon programmes and representatives of those who most tune into them daily: women aged between 45 and 64 and from a middle or upper-working class (Gay 2007). As part of the audience at home, they constantly tried to make sense of celebrities' behaviour deploying concepts such as forgiveness, punishment or revenge, not only using the moral matrix that the programme offered but also drawing from their discrete attitudes and perceptions. In this way, the confessional could be seen as not

only the foundation of a certain Western ontology of the self, but also as complicit in the construction and reconstruction of individual and collective identities (Dovey 2000).

In this same way, the running of *confraries* and other religious organisations and groups required similar sense-making exercises centred around confessional speeches and gestures. The *confraria* of the Mother of God of the Carmel, whose members I spent a lot of time with, always made important decisions through a show of hands. However, during one meeting in the summer, one of the members felt very strongly about her proposal for an event. She threatened to leave the *confraria* if her proposal was rejected. This contravened their usual procedure, and a heated debate ensued. Faces went red, handkerchiefs were produced, and tears wiped during the long discussion in which issues of authority and decision-making were discussed. The woman finally retracted. She stood up and visibly shaken apologised for her manner. She said she had been feeling anxious for family reasons recently. She asked for forgiveness.

Over a number of days and weeks the members of the *confraria* commented upon and made sense of the meeting, drawing away from the woman. Both in person and through private WhatsApp voice messages, the *confrares* exchanged opinions and gossip about the incident, considering the woman's behaviour prior to it and revisiting her words. Some *confrares* tried to find out what her familial problems may have been about. Because it was the high time of the *festa*, they had to see and work with the woman in question, and this brought new opinions and considerations as to her behaviour: had she changed? did she show signs of contrition? of moving away from wanting to dominate the decision-making process? As I show in Chapter Two, the private lives of members of the gossip network of the *confraria* were commented upon, contested and corroborated in a continual process in which the intimate was made public, in a similar way to the televisual confessional. In the end, although her behaviour was not forgotten, her apology was accepted by all through an embodied reconciliation: the woman was accepted back into the everyday normality of the *confraria* which included pats, hugs and other corporeal intimacies such as allowing her to participate in gossip circles again.

Overall, the disagreement between the *confrares* was exemplary of the tensions between the laity and the priest in Benaigua which have been a constant in this thesis: the *confrares'* democratic-like decision-making processes rubbed against the top-down approach taken by the Catholic hierarchy of priests and which the woman in the previous vignette personified. In the same way, Bàrbara, Artur and others' decision to confess directly with God, contravened the doctrinal order of things. Just as talk shows "characteristically engender a mutability of truths and identities, a multiplicity of voices, [and] the transgression of norms" (Glynn 2000, 218), the myriad ways in which Catholics in Benaigua still confessed pointed to a multiplicity of spiritual experiences that required diverse personal and communal acts of self-disclosure and reconciliation. And it is in the vocabulary of media and cultural studies that I found the right conceptual framework to talk about it. Even then, when Foucault or media scholars refer to the confessional, they invariably use a narrow understanding of the latter which does not account for the ethnographic developments that I outline in this chapter. So, when Dovey (2000, 113) points out that "disclosing, coming out and witnessing appear to offer ways of speaking the self [in talk shows] that challenge the inevitable politics of the confessional", or when Glynn (2000, 218) in reference to tabloid talk characterises the Foucauldian confessional as "a site for the affirmation and enforcement of dominating truths and normalising judgements", they both miss the point that Catholics have been for some time contesting the very Foucauldian politics of the confessional that they refer to.

In this way, for my interlocutors the confessional is at least partly a way of constructing their own relationship with the divine and their community, thus, constructing their own self. This is of particular importance in a community where none (bar one) of the people I met and knew well in Benaigua attended counselling therapy or read self-help books[35]. The therapeutic role of the community, of Church-based socialities, continues to be of particular significance. Confession would then entail a combination of the Foucauldian "practices of

[35] Of the relatives, friends and acquaintances I knew in Benaigua, only those who were sent to psychotherapy by their GPs ever attended any form of counselling (at least this is what my interlocutors told me). These cases were all in relation to drug-abuse. Cases of anxiety, depression, panic attacks or paranoia in the community were invariably remedied by drug-based treatment. I have found very difficult to find data about the popularity of counselling or self-help literature that compares Spain to other countries. Spain is a heavily medicalised society, with a pharmaceutical spending superior to many of its European counterparts (including the UK, France or Germany) (OECD 2019), yet well below average in the number of professional psychoterapists (European Association for Psychotherapy 2010). It is also one of the top five European countries spending most on self-medication (Mikulic 2020), and least on newspapers and books (Jezard 2018).

domination that result in the objectification of individuals *and* the practices of subjectification that signal self-constitution" (McLaren 2002, 146) (my emphasis). In his later work, Foucault advocates that confession becomes something more than an interpellation, more than a subjectification process in which individuals are asked to "name and misname themselves" becoming responsible for their actions (Tambling 1990, 2). Self-reflection and its associated confessional discourses turn out to be both techniques of domination and of self-care (Taylor 2009). Beyond this, Catholic confession and confessional practices diffuse into the secular public arena in order to make sense of contemporary notions of good and evil, kindness and selfishness, domination and power, with popular notions of sin and reconciliation oscillating between the individual and the collective, negotiating the official and the popular.

CONCLUSION

C.1 Remembering the past, accounting for the present

A few nights before I took my flight back to Edinburgh in September 2018, some of my friends and relatives threw a small impromptu street party to see me off. Before my arrival in Benaigua to conduct fieldwork, I had hardly spoken to any of them for years and by the time I left they had become constant presences in my life, in and out of the congregation. The late summer night was hot and the streets full of people hanging around for the next event in the week-long bull festival. *Reguetón* and *pachanga* tunes pervaded the humid evening, travelling from the nearby makeshift bull ring. As we merrily ate and drank people passed by, 'What? You're going already?' many asked when they heard the reason for the celebration. I got up and kissed a number of people. 'So you'll be back for Christmas then?' all inquired. I began this thesis with my arrival into Benaigua and I wish to finish it with my departure. In the ten-month interval the village congregation, including its youth organisation *Juniors*, the many *confraries* and groups of *clavariesses*, the two communities of The Way, the priest, a wealth of catechists, friends, relatives and people I had never met before had opened their homes and arms with enthusiasm, welcoming my project. Beyond their welcoming, they had proved that public religiosity has a bright and secure future.

Yet, as I elaborate in this thesis, public expressions of faith are part of a number of entanglements in which the economic, cultural, social and political lives of the villagers exist. The (dis)continuation, return and reinvention of religious traditions and festivals are part and parcel of these entanglements, cause and consequence of how religion is lived and understood in late modernity by individuals and collectivities. Central to the history of modern nation states (Kaplan 2007), the everyday aspects of religious coexistence continues to attract the attention of scholars who grapple with pressing concerns for contemporary societies: violence, tolerance or morality to name a few (see, for example, Das 2010 or Olson 2013). But while it is most often relations between *different* religious communities that are focused upon, I began this thesis looking at intra-religious coexistence, tracing religious competitive tensions within and between The Way, iconoclastic and "purificatory", and the

rest of the local congregation, preoccupied with rescuing material traditions that had disappeared for some time.

I showed how forms of a ‘politics of absence’ and non-engagement affect the perception of differing theologies on the ground, ultimately revealing the *material* nature of religion, no matter how “pure” a version of Christianity is pursued. The chapter shows that the revival of lost traditions and festivals may well respond to these politics of absence, which, paradoxically reveal a concern with physical (as well as spiritual) resources: while members of The Way work towards the interiorisation of faith, the rest of the congregation engage in the re-exteriorisation, perhaps the re-sacralisation of public space. The Neo-Catechumenals meet behind closed doors and the rest of the congregation gather in the streets. As villagers witness the growth in numbers and influence of the Neo-Catechumenals, they take matters of representation in their own hands and bring back traditions that require for the village at large to stand and pay attention: public rituals of faith are part of who Benaiguans were and who they are, and they will probably exist in future in one form or another.

Ultimately, the tensions between The Way and the congregation are part of a tapestry of lived religion in the village, a tapestry that despite its different textures remains one, a Catholicism of *Catholicisms*. Yet anxieties and hostilities remain. Many have written about the divisive and divided political history of Spain, the oscillations between conservatism and liberalism at large. In the 1960s, while Kiko Argüello (founder of The Way) preached on the outskirts of Madrid recruiting the first acolytes that would shape the conservative Neo-Catechumenal movement, “red priests” preached liberation theology in similar shanty towns across the country. At present a battle over freedom of speech is being fought in the streets of major Spanish cities between a younger generation who demand to be able to condemn the police for its brutality and the monarchy for its corruption, and the older judiciary, who send people to prison for doing just so (Lloret and Purcell 2021). Yet these trajectories of tensions and struggles between “liberals” and “conservatives”, “democratic” and “authoritarian” are fairly central to many societies and communities around the world. In many of these, religion plays a role.

In Chapter Two I looked at the possibility of devotion-based epistemologies and knowledges. Material religion continues to pave the way for the continuation of festivals, and women lead not only in their organisation but also in the forms of knowledge and theologies that literally map faith in the community. I contrasted women's gossip-based rhizomatic forms of knowledge to the top-down dynamics of the Catholic male hierarchy when looking at (physical and spiritual) health interventions, highlighting the former's adaptability and the latter's rigidity. But while in this case the Church as institution may be sluggishly reticent to learn from the faithful, the thesis on the whole proves that the laity, in their creativity and resilience, adapt their faith to their current needs, without waiting for doctrine to 'catch up'. This, in spite of the seemingly few doctrinal and theological changes, particularly in opening up to women's contribution to faith-based knowledge. For example, out of 36 Doctors of the Church, only four are women. The epithet refers to "Christian theologians of outstanding merit and acknowledged saintliness" (Livingstone 2013b) and it encompasses saints, mystics, monks and poets, as well as the so called Fathers of the Church. Although the title has been given by the Church since the Middle Ages, it was only in 1970 that the first two women entered the list[36], a third in 1997 and a fourth in 2012.

In the chapter I illustrate how women *confrares* are experts in matters of faith and spiritual care, that their knowledges change the lives of those who come across their path and thus the community at large, showing "strong love and affection for family and friends" as well as "paving the way in a time of crisis" (Rengers 2014, 5), characteristics given to said Doctors of the Church. Hence, beyond Catholicism and in line with feminist scholarship, I argue that there continues to be a need for documenting and studying women's knowledge, including women's theologies, pushing in parallel for a critique of the concept of epistemology itself: whose knowledge matters and whose knowledge becomes authority? what does this power dynamic illustrate? what is the nature and use of rules and regulations, including doctrine, when these are continually interpreted and adapted by those who they are meant to interpellate? what are the lived experiences of religion on the ground and how do they affect orthodoxy? These are questions which the chapter addresses, hinting at a relational

[36] Interestingly, this first entry was speared by Pope Paul VI, the same pontiff who banned forms of contraception such as the pill, deeming its use gravely sinful, and thus effectively forbidding women from independently making decisions about their own body (see Harris 2018).

conception of orthodoxy, ceaselessly negotiated between the laity and the priest, allowing for the possibilities of (quiet) dissent *and* obedience at the same time (see Bandak and Boylston 2014). All of these ideas are still central to understanding contemporary societies and the institutions that govern them.

Chapter Three picked up on the themes of women's leadership and continued exploring the return of public demonstrations of religion in the community. It also carried on ideas about orthodoxy, in particular how normative imaginations of the past may affect the way the present is interpreted in order to fulfil future (devotional, cultural, identity) needs. The chapter aims to understand how societies that have undergone violence and armed struggle may be able to move on by remembering and reinterpreting the past. The Civil War and the subsequent 40-year dictatorship continue to loom large in the collective imaginaries of Spaniards, and the Catholic Church is entangled in these memories and ideologies in profound and lasting ways. Thus, memories and memorialisation are concomitant to local identities, particularly gendered ones. Allegorical performances of the past during religious festivals enact the present.

The interactions and relationships established among villagers during festive time emerge among contested memories of the past and the economic, cultural and identity requirements of the present, and far from priestly intervention. By invoking the democratic motto *per al poble* [for the village/for the people] women bring back religion to the public arena, justifying processions, pilgrimages, (pious) flower tributes and festive parades as part of an individual and collective search for local identity. These dynamics speak to the persistence of religion in the public arena of current communities and states, where ideas of local, provincial and national identity, and thus of belonging and exclusion, are made and remade. They also speak of a re-casting of 'public religion' in line with contemporary needs and identities. But festive time does not only contribute to social cohesion. The chapter redefines the *festa* beyond punctual outbursts of celebratory events and moods: festive temporalities result from the continuous engagement of the community in matters of organisation and continuation of public religiosity, in an unbroken reminder of who the villagers are, where they come from, and who they want to be.

Flowers thrown over the image of the Mother of God of the Carmel. Photo by author.

In Chapter Four I link previous concerns with visibility and invisibility to the sexual politics of Catholicism, and in particular to the lived experiences of religion of gay and trans men. Academic literature has paid ample attention to the intersection of spirituality and sexuality from diverse quarters (see, for example, Duncan 1996; Moultrie 2017; Nynäs and Yip 2016; Yip 1997), including religious homonormativity (Mikulak 2019; Sumerau 2012) and, on the other side of the spectrum, queer theology and spirituality (Bohache 2003; Browne, Munt, and Yip 2010; Loughlin 2008; Yip and Khalid 2010). This chapter used this literature as a springboard from which to explore the politico-sexual lives of gay and trans Catholics. These entail a number of negotiations: with doctrine, with the gendered pasts of religious traditions and with the hostile politics of a return to traditional gender roles by far-right ideologies. In this context, the concept of the closet emerges as a powerful tool to explore and explain these negotiations, taking it away from narrow understandings that deem it a place of obscurity and repression, and positing it as a space of creativity and of (quiet) disconformity with normative assumptions of gender.

The chapter explores less-studied Catholic material practices with which gay men engage, and which entail a point of entry for sexual minorities to express themselves piously, guaranteeing simultaneously the continuation of religious traditions. The lens of Baroque and *Camp* aesthetics are remarkably useful, lending themselves to the exploration of a multiciplity and simultaneity of ideas and practices. The chapter offers an initial analysis of the intersection between Baroque aesthetics, spirituality and sexuality, inviting further research on queer intersections on a broader European scale. Furthermore, in this chapter I relate these dynamics of occlusion and revelation to the contemporary politics of sex in the Catholic Church as institution, thus speaking to pressing issues of sexual and gender representation within religious institutions and denominations, especially those that have had a long history of, and continue to marginalise sexual minorities. In particular, the chapter adds to the scant literature on the lived experiences of religion of transgender people, questioning again normative notions of gender within religious traditions. Finally, the chapter may be of particular salience when considering the sexual abuse crisis that besets the Catholic Church at present, illuminating the ways in which homosexuality, secrecy, power and shame continue to shape the sexual politics of the priestly hierarchy.

In Chapter Five I explored how the laity is not only leading the way in matters of public religiosity, but also re-interpreting and developing sacramental practices which have historically and exclusively been the remit of priests and ordained people. Contrary to perceptions of a decline in confession, a decline that is defined quantitatively and taking doctrine as yardstick, I show how the Catholic sacrament of confession has not only continued thriving, but also been developed in the hands of the laity. Through reconciliatory and testimonial practices performed by lay people on the ground, confession spills out of its ecclesiastical remit to be present in the public arena. But perhaps this points to a deeper human trait that has been there all along: *homo confessus* uses confessional practices to make sense of feuds in the community, of gendered violence, of the lives of celebrities on television, and of the role of the priest in the secular present. While on Chapter Three I established how a younger generation of women are intent on reviving religious traditions through a democratisation of the organisation of the *festa*, in the last chapter I pick up this thread to confirm this drive: a lay revolution is taking place, reinterpreting sacraments without the intervention of the priest. Yet a generalisation of confessional practices does not entail an

either/or dichotomy: people may continue making use of doctrinal modes of confession (that is, auricular, in secret and to a priest), at the same time as participating in communal, lay and open performances of penance, testimony and reconciliation. Confessional practices thus multiply in form and content, and people chose among them according to their needs.

C.2 The democratisation of religion

The lives of my informants continue. I have not spoken or seen many of them for a very long while as I have not been able to travel home due to the COVID pandemic. Some have passed away since I last saw them. Their testimonies still exist in my notes, their recorded voices stored securely in the cloud. Some of their oral histories and memories have made it into the thesis, many have not, but the present work survives them. Yet when they spoke to me, they spoke often of a time before I existed. Sometimes of a time before my mother existed. I took notes in 2018, worked on their words for two years, writing and rewriting their lives. I hand in the thesis sometime in 2021, and by then some people may have changed their mind about the festivals, some others will have joined and left *confraries*; new villagers have been born, some bearing their ancestors' names. The thesis, however, remains a snapshot of the people I spoke to for nine months and as such the speculations that I make in it must remain open, liable to re-interpretation, just as the traditions I write about remain open, liable to re-interpretation.

All in all, through the lens of religious expression, the thesis is putting forward two overriding conclusions: one, that religious change and renewal are ubiquitous and two, that these come in quiet, non-confrontational ways. These two conclusions were foreshadowed in the introduction, where the conceptual themes of public religiosity, gender and tradition were foregrounded.

C.2.1 Public religiosity

In (post?) austerity societies, the work of faith-based organisations through devotional labour continues to be central to how communities organise their own modes of economic,

psychological and spiritual support in the absence (or ineffectuality) of the state. At the same time, the return of public religious traditions to festive calendars follows, amongst others, the relative economic recuperation of the middle classes after the long aftermath of the global financial crisis. Fluctuations in the international market affect the way religion is lived, not only publicly, but also in the privacy of the individual's familial home. And individuals take action. Organising, taking part, remembering, and passing on religious *festes* are activities that contribute to the construction of the individual's identity, her past, her sense of belonging to a collectivity that struggles to make sense of their present.

La festa is conducive to place-making, reaching over time into the everyday lives, intimate materialities and public personas of people. The tensions that result from differing theologies, which pull faith into secretive spaces and push it out into the streets, become exemplary of the ever-unresolved spatial negotiations between the public and the private. These, the public and private 'spheres', become a whole in which entry and exit doors are operated by the laity: confidential gossip turns into cooperative interventions; the closet, fertile with private discretions, becomes a social instrument for coexistence and continuation; and the confessional, heretofore the epitome of secrecy and individual shame, is activated in the community into collective forms of grace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

C.2.2 Gender

In its origins this thesis was animated by a double concern: why are religious traditions making a come-back, and why is this return chiefly led by women and gay men? The ethnographic analysis in each empirical chapter contribute to an understanding of the new and increasing religious and festive demands on priests and the community made by women of different generations. As I have determined, these demands are rooted in issues of identity, leadership, generation, belonging, gender representation and sexuality. What is particularly salient in this picture is the question of leadership: first, women are not only continuing and re-inventing faith in its public and communal varieties, but also in theological ways. Caring for the community, memorialising the past, honouring the elders, collective confessional performances… these are lay interventions that reveal profound theological stands: charity, hope, tolerance, and mercy become the cornerstones of action, particularly women-led

action, quietly but ceaselessly political. Other “marginals” add their grain of sand to this quiet storm: gay and trans men *queer* faith through *Camp* reinterpretations of religious material cultures, continuously contesting normative gender roles and expectations. By questioning traditional modes of masculinity at large, gay and trans men reveal the wounds of an institution in crisis for not facing the sexual tensions of an exclusively male, purportedly celibate priestly cast, showing that things can be otherwise. By their constant presence and increasing involvement as leaders, gay and trans men in local congregations push for doctrinal pronouncements and, ultimately, epochal change.

Second, these forms of leadership tell a story about the perdurance of institutions. Women-led organisations have an affinity for democratic methods: the passing on of traditions is negotiated communally, stories are heard and contested, decisions made by a show of hands, knowledge about festivities is rhizomatic and travels sideways in forms such as oral histories, printed pamphlets, photographs, memories. Unlike the male pyramidal structure of the Church-as-institution, the women’s people-as-Church works cooperatively. Unlike the authority of the institution of the Church, based on univocal written doctrine and tradition, the authority of public religiosity is negotiated verbally over time and space. In this thesis I have tried to avoid essentialist notions of womanhood that rely on stereotypical traits such as care, love or sacrifice. Yet, notwithstanding the work of some male mystics, overall “men theorize about love, but women are more often love’s practitioners” (hooks 2000, xx). I want to say that there is something about the religious/festive *habitus* that allows women to advance emancipatory agendas where a different future, more attentive to the community and more sensitive to its needs, is possible. Perhaps this *habitus* is possible precisely because of the encounter of oppositional theologies, or differing views of what is at stake in Christianity’s central tenets, or simply different views of the world in which the priestly hierarchy focus on doctrine and the laity mobilise practice. In its plurality, the Catholic Church remains one, and marches on.

C.2.3 Tradition

In a conversation between the philosophers Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo (2005) about the future of religion, the latter refers to this dialogical capacity: different and differing

approaches to faith (and to the world at large) coexist, entering in conversation with each other. As a result, and according to Vattimo, modernity, understood as the period from the French Revolution onwards, has entailed an increase in the "possibilities of the individual to participate in the definition of the rules" that move and govern this world (67). And the "metarule" that allows for the acceptance of difference is, Vattimo tells us, charity (59). Similarly, for Rorty, the social ideals of the Enlightenment have provoked a "gradual weakening of the worship of God as power and its gradual replacement with the worship of God as love" (56), from power to, again, charity. Yet, in my view, this replacement, like the metaphor of flight in Chapter One as the passing of traditions from priestly hands to the hands of the laity, is a movement that is dynamic and never quite done. In the dialogical in-betweenness of power and charity, religious traditions evolve towards a democratisation of their meaning and organisation. (Re)-foregrounding lived experiences of religion in contemporary societies accounts for a vitality of practice on the ground. Far from rejecting modernity, public/festive Catholicism enters in conversations with the various spheres that define it: the purportedly secular, forms of governmentality, historical (and theological) metanarratives.

C.3 Post-pandemic futures

Chapter One concluded with a description of Benaigua under the COVID pandemic. The Easter 2020 celebrations, including masses, processions, flower tributes, parades, *via crucis* and pilgrimages in the village were then cancelled. While I write these lines in March 2021, negotiations are afoot for the Paschal festivities: although processions and public expressions of religiosity are, for now, not going ahead, masses are possible with a limited capacity. In the interim period, my interlocutors have come up with a wealth of digital resources that are now part of their everyday lived experience of faith. WhatsApp groups have been created, the older generations have been taught by the younger how to operate their mobile phones in order to join Facebook groups, listen to podcasts and tune to their favourite religious radio station. Videos of village festivities from the 80s and 90s have emerged, digitised by villagers, and shared dozens of times on social media.

Forcibly, those members of the congregation I have been in touch with, have moved public religion from the streets to the virtual spaces afforded by digital media. This does not mean a reduction in their engagements with the divine or/and with each other, some have told me, but a change in the character of these engagements. Digital religion has opened up as a new, complementary way to access religion which, In my view, is not going to go away as a 'new normality' returns to the lives of Benaiguans. How does the digital change the panorama of the public return of religious performances to Benaigua? Further, how does it change religion at large? What is the role of digital faith leaders? How does an ageing population engage with new and ever-changing forms of religious engagement? These are questions that perhaps can be explored as the present thesis is expanded. For now, however, and as COVID vaccines begin to be rolled out, the villagers cannot wait to re-populate the streets with music, food, gossip, piety and love.

A final picture before I left Benaigua in September 2018. Mum, my aunt and my cousin outside the small chapel on the outskirts of the village.

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