

The Amen Corner

A Skirmish in the War Against Evil

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Demonic possession of human beings may explain phenomena such as speaking in strange languages, disclosing unknown events, or using superhuman physical strength. These indicators may accompany hatred of God, of the name of Jesus, of Mary, the saints, the Church, the Word of God, worship and sacred images. So remarks the Catholic Church's *De Exorcismis et supplicationibus quibusdam* (Introduction 16).

Formerly available only in Latin as Titulus XII of the 1614 *Rituale Romanum*, where it carried the title *De exorcizandis obsessis a dæmonio*, exorcism is the last of the Catholic Church's ceremonies to be revised after the Second Vatican Council. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy never mentioned it, and Pope Paul VI's Consilium for implementing that constitution never formed a study group to work on it. However, during the pontificate of John Paul II, who personally performed more than one exorcism in St. Peter's Square, a revision was published in 1999. It categorizes the ceremony under the liturgy constitution's treatment of sacramentals (SC 60, 79). The first official English translation of the rite of exorcism is now underway.

When it is published, it will make news. Catholics better be ready.

The preamble of *De Exorcismis* considers demonic power self-evident, relying on testimony as early as the New Testament and as late as Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*, which says "a monumental struggle against the powers of darkness" pervades all human history (37). The Church relies on the strength of Christ, whose power triumphs over Satan. "The mystery of lawlessness is already at work. But the one who restrains is to do so only for the present, until he is removed from the scene" (2 Thes 2:7).

An exorcism concerns a specific skirmish in the world's war against evil. It presupposes that the devil is tormenting or possessing an individual Christian. Such cases are difficult to discern, and they are considered rare. The rite of exorcism distinguishes between demonic possession and more explainable difficulties such as psychological trauma and vivid imagination. Some people may think that their affliction is due to bad luck or a relative's curse. They warrant prayer - but not necessarily an exorcism (*De Exorcismis* 15). One should not judge cases rashly (14).

Even with these caveats, many post-enlightenment Christians struggle to defend exorcisms. Some Christian churches practice them; others do not. Strong and diverse opinions arise among Catholics, Protestants, evangelicals and nonbelievers. On the one hand, people use science and psychology to explain symptoms. On the other hand, the tenacity of exorcisms throughout Christian history demonstrates that - at least in some cases - a person's symptoms cannot be so easily explained, and prayers for deliverance have worked.

The premise holds that devils may overpower a Christian's speech and action. If you accept that premise, what cure would you offer? Pray in silence? Practice love of neighbor? Donate to charity? Take two aspirin? The Catholic Church enters this perilous demonic combat with its own unique tool: liturgy.

Because this is liturgy, a priest "celebrates" an exorcism (16). Not just any priest - a bishop appoints an exorcist for his diocese. Only that exorcist may perform this ritual. The number of bishops who make this appointment is not known, but it is probably more than most people realize. The identity of an exorcist is generally kept quiet. This protects him from unwanted attention and streamlined access from those with false needs. An exorcist usually does not have business cards or include this ministry in his resume.

The postconciliar ceremony updates its predecessor with a more logical flow. It is to be celebrated in sacred space in the presence of images of the cross and of Mary, whose combat with Satan governs a common interpretation of the struggle between a woman and a dragon in the enigmatic chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation.

The ceremony begins after the exorcist has offered a private prayer. He then leads those present in the sign of the cross and a greeting. He sprinkles all present and the room with holy water, blessing it first if necessary. All kneel if they are able for the litany of the saints. They rise for a prayer, which may be followed by the recitation of some psalms. The exorcist proclaims a passage from the Gospels, through which Christ speaks to the gathered Church. Then he imposes hands on the head of the one who is afflicted, in order to invoke the Holy Spirit. All recite either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. Or they may renew their baptismal promises, which include the renunciation of Satan. All pray the Lord's Prayer with its closing petition, "deliver us from evil." The exorcist shows an image of the cross of Christ and makes the sign of the cross over the afflicted person. He may blow toward the face of the one who is tormented, while asking for the Lord's Spirit to displace evil spirits.

The priest then speaks formulas of exorcism, which fall into two categories. A deprecation humbly addresses God for help. An imperative harshly commands the devil to flee. Imperatives are optional. If one is used, the exorcist must address God before speaking to Satan. These may be repeated; other formulas may be added. The ceremony concludes with a canticle of thanksgiving, a prayer, and a blessing.

All of this may surprise a postconciliar church whose experience of exorcisms in English is thus far contained in the Rite of Baptism for Children and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. In the former, a prayer "to cast out the power of Satan, spirit of evil" is called an exorcism (49), as is its alternative form (221), which simply acknowledges that those being baptized will have to "fight the devil in all his cunning." Both options pray that the children be freed from original sin. Original sin is a human precondition. It is not the same as demonic possession, so the context of this exorcism is different.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults includes exorcisms in the periods of the catechumenate (94) and of purification and enlightenment (154, 168, 175). In the former, they may take place during liturgies of the word, and in the latter they form part of the scrutinies. These exorcisms presume that an unbaptized adult's proclivity to sin is partly due to the free range given the devil and forces of evil to those outside the Body of Christ. The scrutinies do not presume demonic possession. They treat a weakness in one's ability to avoid sin. Flip Wilson's character Geraldine Jones provided the best explanation for the spiritual desolation that scrutinies target: "The devil made me do it."

In none of these examples is the word "exorcism" pronounced out loud in the liturgy. If you weren't following along in the book, keeping an eye out for headings, you might never know that one is happening. None of these examples include imperatives. Prebaptismal exorcistic formulas are all deprecations - every one of them addresses God.

Not so with preconciliar baptismal rites. Their exorcisms were glaring and manifold, including both deprecations and imperatives. Paul VI's Consilium had appointed one of its study groups to revise the baptismal rites for children and adults. Its members entered much discussion, trial and error on exorcisms. Knowing that these would be pronounced in the vernacular, and that the distinction between sin and possession might be misunderstood, the group decided to reduce these many formulas.

Thus, prebaptismal exorcisms changed after Vatican II. They still aim to free those outside the Christian family from evil forces, but they no longer address Satan, preferring to ignore him and address only the omnipotent God. These exorcisms build toward the baptismal promises, which always include a direct repudiation of Satan.

De Exorcismis concerns a different situation: those who fall into the snare of demonic possession after baptism. Members of the People of God, they have thus already been enlightened by Christ (10).

William Peter Blatty sensationalized exorcisms in his 1971 novel and subsequent screenplay, *The Exorcist*. The drama galvanized people's perceptions of the murky Catholic subculture dealing with sin, ritual, and visual effects. Lifting a small part of Catholic ministry into the spotlight, Blatty raised fears that demonic possession was more common than people had thought.

He also increased the workload of parish priests. Not every priest is an exorcist, but in the popular culture, if you think you have a demon, you call a priest - even if you're not a Catholic. Once, a distressed couple from a nearby evangelical church searched me out to report strange happenings in their home - locked doors suddenly open, a shadowy figure appearing in the hallway's half light, pattering sounds above the ceiling. They feared not that ghosts were haunting the house, but that some capricious demon was disrupting normalcy. They were hoping I would come, vest, and drive the devil away. I tried to convince them that other explanations were more likely - forgetfulness, drowsiness, squirrels. They left disappointed that I chose to stay home. Later my plucky

brother proposed a different solution. “You should have told them that they were in luck. House exorcisms usually go for \$600. But this week there is a special. They’re only half price.”

The devil can be entertaining. As we laugh at sexual jokes to conceal embarrassment, so we smile at evil in order to extend the frisson of temptation. In Blatty’s novel, the reader remains on the side of goodness, hoping that young Regan MacNeil will be set free. Now, however, many narratives increasingly want clients who switch sides, who hope that evil will triumph over good. Antiheroes have accumulated their own following not just in novels and movies, but in television shows and video games as well. Customers want excitement more than goodness. If violence is the means to that end, many people welcome it. The holiday for which most Americans decorate their homes is Christmas; second place belongs to Halloween. Its ghoulish costumes, haunted houses and unfettered ribaldry glorify the demonic.

Images of devils and hell populate cartoons. (One of my favorites: a devil seated behind a desk in hell invites a new arrival to pull up a chair, explaining, “The first 1000 years are all paperwork.”) Still, cartoons can foster the perception that the distance between evil and reality is vast.

The visual arts were not always this way. Dante’s *Inferno* has colored many a mortal’s view of eternal damnation. Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* argues that hell awaits the sinner. Some church portals confront visitors with images of the Last Judgment - the just rising to eternal life, the condemned spiraling to the pit. (The hell side is always more interesting than its counterpart.) Viewers of these depictions may resolve to avoid temptation and practice charity.

The problem most believers face is not demonic possession but the lure of sin. Seeking refuge from sinister entertainments that make virtues of sins, they call out for deliverance. They don’t need an exorcism. They need other spiritual helps, which exist in abundance.

Chief among them is the presence of Christ. The popular prayer *Anima Christi* says to Christ, “From the evil Enemy defend me.” At Christmas one reason for tidings of comfort and joy is the birth of Jesus, who came “to save us all from Satan’s pow’r when we had gone astray.”

Devotion to the saints has provided additional comfort. Some Catholics recite a prayer to Saint Michael the Archangel. Formerly offered at the close of every mass, it asks the angelic saint to cast Satan and all evil spirits into hell.

Others wear a medal carrying an image of St. Benedict on the obverse, its reverse stringing the cryptic letters VRSNSMV - SMQLIVB. The initialism abbreviates this command: *Vade retro Satana! Nunquam suade mihi vana! Sunt mala quae libas. Ipse venena bibas!* Starting with Jesus’ own words directed to both Satan (Matt 4:10) and Peter (16:23), the inscription addresses Satan to be gone, to quit tempting this believer, and to drink his own poison. Followers of this piety may purchase not only medals with this logo, but coffee mugs, sweatshirts, and mouse pads. The otherwise admirable accessibility of religious articles at times makes it hard to discern where devotion to Christ ends and the

commercialization of Satan begins. Do such practices ridicule Satan? Or overlook him?

Some popular piety does embrace belief in the real presence of Satan. Even Pope Francis frequently speaks of combat with the devil - not just with sin, not with some amorphous power of darkness, not with bad parents or victimhood, but combat with the devil as a person. Some evangelicals preach the same. Many of them consider Satan as real as the communicant next to you in church.

The temptation to sin can afflict entire groups. As Luke Timothy Johnson has written in "The Devil is No Joke" (*Commonweal*: October 7, 2011, p. 16), "Even an Enlightenment enthusiast, if he or she is alert, will notice that the language of social science fails to account for the puzzling persistence of behaviors that are malevolent, irrational, and systemic. Why does racial hostility triumph over civil-rights laws? Why do mobs gather and explode seemingly without cause or point? Why do highly educated people dedicate themselves to self-destruction through drugs or gambling? Why do nations destroy each other over oil and honor?"

The same society that rebuffs demonic possession has a tendency to deny personal sin and to withhold forgiveness from penitents. Jesus began his ministry with a call to repent, but many answer it with a preference for blame. Give the devil his due.

Or his downfall. Now that *De Exorcismis et supplicationibus quibusdam* is in the hands of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, the English-speaking Conferences of Catholic bishops, Vox Clara, and the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the revised English translation is being prepared by the same organizations that produced the Roman Missal of 2011. Cynics will wonder if Satan will understand it. Devotees will be happy for precise language when we need it most. In this case, there will be no former translation - with or without a *recognitio* - with which to compare. It will fall or stand on its own merits.

The heated controversy over the revised translation principles has been inevitable and necessary. Its continuation will strengthen ecclesiology, ecumenism, rhetoric, and spirituality. At the same time, *De Exorcismis* will require liturgists to reach into other areas of pastoral theology. We need cool heads making thoughtful distinctions between demonic possession and human afflictions, between pre- and postbaptismal sin, between original sin and concupiscence, between pre- and postconciliar baptismal rites and their attendant theologies of evil, between personal and societal sin, between deprecations and imperatives, and the relationship between physical and spiritual realities. We will need clarity about how a post-Enlightenment Church asks Christ to overcome Satan in the rare cases of individuals who are personally spiritually tormented, if not possessed.

Jesus performed more exorcisms than any other kind of miracle, according to the evangelists. From the outset of the gospel he engages the battle with evil,

first in his temptations in the desert, and then by expelling demons from individuals. He conquers the devil to foreshadow his ultimate triumph over death. In relating the Passion, Luke and John specifically say that Satan entered Judas just before the betrayal. The resurrection thus overturns the domain of Satan and replaces it with the Kingdom of God. In a resurrection appearance in Mark's longer ending, Jesus promises that his disciples will cast out demons. Examples proliferate throughout the Acts of the Apostles.

Even with strong biblical evidence that Jesus and his disciples performed exorcisms, some people must wonder if the same interpretation of the data could hold up today. Perhaps the afflicted ones who caught the attention of New Testament writers suffered something otherwise undiagnosable at the time - epilepsy, Tourette syndrome, or personality disorders. It's hard to know.

For sure, we meet such people in our ministry today, and not just at parish churches, many of which uncannily resemble Pope Francis's vision of field hospitals after battle. The people whom Jesus cured were people like your neighbors, difficult coworkers, the parents of children you teach, the parishioner you wish would find another place to pray. Many have treatable conditions. Some do not. Are they demonically possessed? Not likely.

But one thing I do notice about this group. I'm often not at my best when I deal with them. They demand time and attention, balanced words, and a strong hand. I cannot respond to them as easily as I can with others. Those who suffer physical and mental illnesses - I'm not worried about the devil in them. When I react to them, I'm worried about the devil in me.

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