RITE ON
MORE THAN JUST A MOVIE OBSESSION

THE RITE OF EXORCISM HAS BEEN AROUND SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH, AND INTEREST IN IT IS ON THE INCREASE

BY TRIONA DOHERTY

Say the word ‘exorcism’, and thoughts will invariably turn to one of the many films dealing with the subject, from the iconic 1973 movie The Exorcist to the recently released The Devil Inside. We imagine terrifying demonic voices, spinning heads, levitation, and priests clapping crucifixes as they command the devil to leave the body of the possessed person. It’s a chilling picture, but surely it’s the kind of thing that only happens in films?

The success of films featuring stories of demonic possession and exorcisms demonstrates people’s fascination with the subject. But exorcisms do occur today, including in Ireland, and are something the church takes seriously.

While Ireland does not appear to have the kind of official system in place that exists in some other countries - Irish dioceses, for example, do not have specially appointed exorcists - a number of exorcists operate across the country and have spoken in recent years of an increase in demand for their services.

WHAT IS AN EXORCISM?
Exorcisms have been around since the beginning of the church. They were a regular feature of Jesus’ ministry. In tandem with his ministry of preaching and healing, we are told that Jesus regularly cast out spirits. He had power over evil or unclean spirits, and his command “Be silent and come out of him” was enough to free the possessed person.

The Gospels also tell us that Jesus passed on this work of casting out demons to his followers. At the end of Mark’s Gospel, when Jesus addresses his disciples before ascending into heaven, the first ministry he entrusts to them is driving out evil spirits.

But what exactly does this entail? The official definition of an exorcism is the driving out, or warding off, of demons or evil spirits, from either a person or a place which is believed to be possessed by them.

The church tends to distinguish between ‘minor exorcisms’ and the more rare ‘major exorcisms.’ The simplest form, a minor exorcism, is included in the celebration of baptism, when the church asks that the person being baptised be protected against the power of evil. Major exorcisms, on the other hand, are conducted according to a set ritual, with the aim of driving out evil spirits.

The Catholic Church has a set of regulations regarding ‘major’ exorcisms.

For example, Canon Law states that such an exorcism can only be performed with the permission of the bishop. According to canon 1172, “no one can perform exorcisms legitimately upon the possessed unless he has obtained special and express permission...”
from the local ordinary (bishop or superior). The local ordinary is to give this permission only to a presbyter who has piety, knowledge, prudence, and integrity of life.”

Priests were reminded of this in a document prepared in 1984 by the Congregation for

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the Doctrine of the Faith, which was headed then by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). However, it added that this “should not stop the faithful of Christ from praying, as Jesus taught us, that they may be freed from evil.”

“The church is also careful to warn against confusing demonic possession with various forms of illness, and cautions that the exorcism rite should not be used unless there is a “moral certainty” that there is demonic possession.

“Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted to his church,” teaches the Catechism of the Catholic Church. “Illness, especially psychological illness, is a very different matter; treating this is the concern of medical science. Therefore, before an exorcism is performed, it is important to ascertain that one is dealing with the presence of the evil one, and not an illness.”

In 1990, six priests, including chief Vatican exorcist Fr Gabriele Amorth, and exorcist for London’s Westminster Archdiocese Fr Jeremy Davies, came together to form the International Association of Exorcists, which has over 200 members worldwide. Priests can join with the permission of their bishop, and the association meets every year in Rome.

THE EXORCISM RITE
The guidelines for exorcisms were updated in 1999 when the Vatican released a

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EXORCISMS IN FILM AND POPULAR CULTURE

There have been countless depictions of exorcisms in literature and film, and modern cinema has had a powerful influence on popular ideas of the devil and exorcism.

The Exorcist (1973) remains the most iconic of its genre, dealing with the possession of a young girl and various attempts at exorcism. It is based partly on a real exorcism case from 1949 and features many of the signs we would associate with possession, such as the unexplained movement of objects, violent behaviour, and speaking in a strange language and voice.

Stigmata (1999) tells the story of a girl who is attacked by unseen forces and sustains stigmata wounds, before an exorcism is attempted.

Exorcist: The Beginning (2004) and Dominion (2005) are prequels to the 1973 film, telling the story of the crisis of faith experienced by Fr Lanester Merrin, many years before the events of The Exorcist. They each include an account of an exorcism carried out in Africa, through which Fr Merrin regains his faith in God.

The Exorcism of Emily Rose (2005) develops the theme that it is the most innocent who are most at risk from demonic possession; it is a courtroom drama in which a priest is accused of homicide after he performs an exorcism.

The Rite (2011) is based on the book The Making of a Modern Exorcist by Matt Baglio, and on the story of Californian priest Fr Gary Thomas who becomes an apprentice to a Rome-based exorcist.

The Devil Inside (2012) tells the story of a woman who murdered three people while an exorcism was being performed on her, and of new attempts to exorcise her demons.
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Fr Gabriele Amorth, Vatican exorcist

document setting out a new exorcism rite. The new rite was called for by the Second Vatican Council and incredibly was the first revision of the text since 1614.

The rite includes prayers asking for God's help, as well as prayers addressed directly to the devil commanding him to depart, using words like “I charge you, Satan, depart from this servant of God”; or “I cast you out, you unclean spirit.”

These prayers are part of a ritual that also includes a number of actions and specific prayers. The rite begins with the sprinkling of holy water, a reminder of the purification received in baptism. It is followed by the litany of the saints, and readings of a psalm and a Gospel passage. The priest then lays his hands on the person, invoking the power of the Holy Spirit so that the evil spirit will depart. The rite also includes the proclamation of faith, the Lord's Prayer, and the sign of the cross. It concludes with a song or prayer of thanksgiving and blessing.

Vatican exorcist Fr Gabriele Amorth says he has dealt with over 70,000 cases of demonic possession over the past 25 years. He recently published *Memoirs of an Exorcist*, a book of interviews about his life in this ministry.

In late 2007, Fr Amorth announced plans to train hundreds of priests as exorcists, with each diocese to be assigned a number of priests trained in exorcism.

“Thanks be to God that we have a pope who has decided to fight the devil head on. Now bishops are obliged to have a number of established exorcists for their diocese. Too many bishops are not taking this seriously and are not delegating their priests in the fight against the devil. You have to hunt high and low for a proper, trained exorcist. Thankfully, Pope Benedict XVI believes in the existence and danger of evil,” he said in an interview.

In recent years some commentators have spoken of a rise in paranormal activity - and of the resulting need for exorcisms. The late Fr James LeBar, who was exorcist for the Archdiocese of New York, spoke in the year 2000 of “a large explosion” in cases over the previous 10 years. While the majority of cases didn’t require an exorcist, they involved “unusual things happening – things moving around the house or people claiming to have seen or heard the evil one.”

Fr Jeremy Davies, exorcist for London’s Westminster Archdiocese, has also commented on the rise in the need for exorcisms.

“There have been more exorcisms, undoubtedly. There are more people in need and the church is dealing with the problem more effectively,” he said.

**DO EXORCISMS HAPPEN IN IRELAND?**

In spite of these calls, the situation in Ireland with regard to official exorcists appears uncertain. In contrast to many other countries, there are no official exorcists appointed by Irish dioceses. Several priests and other figures have spoken of the need for exorcists to be available in each diocese, and for protocols to be put in place to protect the people involved.

In 2005, Vincentian priest Fr Pat Collins called for each Irish diocese to have a specialist
to deal with supernatural occurrences such as hauntings, poltergeists, and “demonic infestations.”

“Not all priests would be expected to know about such things, any more than all doctors would be expected to know all about rare diseases... Surely priests should be able to refer difficult cases, to do with such things as poltergeists, hauntings, and demonic infestation, to diocesan specialists. Otherwise those who are afflicted may have recourse to New Age practitioners, spiritualists, psychics, and other non-Christian helpers,” he wrote in an article in *The Furrow*.

He also recommended that theologians, psychologists, and experienced exorcists come together to explore this area of ministry.

Fr Collins has made several TV appearances to talk about exorcisms, often alongside Canon Billy Lendrum, a retired Church of Ireland clergyman who has written a book entitled *Confronting the Paranormal. A Christian Perspective*. Both have spoken of the need for more people to be trained to tackle these supernatural phenomena.

“The church is failing to help its own members by not really being expert in the one thing that they should be expert on, which is the supernatural,” says Fr Collins. Indeed, there seems to be a growing awareness of the need for this type of ministry. In January this year a meeting took place of 15 Irish priests who are involved or interested in the area. At the invitation of the Irish School of Evangelisation, several speakers have addressed the issue in Ireland this year alone, including Neal Lozano from the US, who has run a deliverance ministry for the past 35 years, and Fr Rufus Pereira, (who has since died), former vice-president of the International Association of Exorcists. Fr Jeremy Davies of Westminster is also to address a seminar for priests in October this year.

One Irish priest I spoke to believes the need for this ministry is growing due to the increasing interest in the occult. The priest is reluctant to describe himself as an exorcist, talking instead about a ‘ministry of deliverance.’ This can take the form of anything from blessing a house to dealing with a more serious case of possession.

“There are very few cases of possession, but thousands of cases where people are oppressed or affected by paranormal activity,” he says.

“The need for this ministry is increasing due to the rise in New Age practices – people getting involved in ouija boards, tarot cards, fortune telling, and so on. I have seen the Lord do powerful things; it is the Lord who is the deliverer. If you look at chapter 16 of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples they will cast out demons in his name. This is all I am doing, the same thing 2,000 years later,” he says.

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Fr Pat Collins SCM

These things open people up to a spiritual realm that is sinister and unhealthy.

“Once or twice I have prayed over people who have been oppressed by an evil spirit, who have been tortured and tormented in their minds. What I am doing is a pastoral response to people’s needs and their suffering. In some cases a family member might come to me when they have done everything they can, when they have exhausted all the medical and psychiatric options. I would also be there to support the person and the family afterwards,” he explains.

“Basically, it is a ministry of prayer. We are tapping into the power which is given to us through the grace of the Holy Spirit. It’s not me doing it; I see myself as an instrument of God’s work.”

A MINISTRY OF DELIVERANCE

In addition to the priests involved in this ministry, several lay people, often with the support of local priests and bishops, carry out what they call a ‘ministry of deliverance.’

Over the past 33 years, thousands of people have visited the home of healer Seamus Byrne from Gowran, Co. Kilkenny seeking healing from ailments of all kinds. Exorcisms, or ‘deliverance’, also form a small part of Seamus’ work, which involves helping people who are tormented or possessed by demons.

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practices such as an ouija board or fortune telling. The person must renounce, or if possible make a confession, to break the curse of these things. Being troubled by demons is not an indication of how good or bad a person is; he or she can be a very good or prayerful person,” he explains.

Seamus doesn’t refer to himself as an exorcist, and says he is rarely called on to carry out a ‘solemn exorcism.’ “Exorcism is an official church function. If I came across a really serious situation I might approach the bishop and he could sanction a priest to carry out an exorcism, and I would work with them,” he says.

However, he believes there should be more church-appointed exorcists.

“There are lots of priests and lay people working in this ministry of healing and deliverance all over the country. People need to know that this exists, and that there is help available. If what we are saying is the truth, it should be available to all. ‘I feel we need three or four exorcists appointed to every diocese. Our local bishop is aware of my work and very supportive, and I work in obedience to him. He is careful to ensure that proper protocols are in place.

“This is our mandate, that believers would do these things, and the Lord has allowed me the privilege of serving people in this way. The reality is that we have God in heaven and the devil downstairs, and our lives and our minds are the battleground where it all plays out.”

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