

The following is Part One of an excerpt entitled "A Brief Handbook of Exorcism".

It is taken from Malachi Martin's 1976 classic work on

the subject of possession and exorcism called, "Hostage To The Devil".

Among other things, the 477 p. book also contains an

in depth analysis on the recent possessions of 5 "ordinary" Americans.

For further information on the subject, the reader is

invited to consult the book. It is published by Perrenial

Library of New York.

Note: Italicized words are represented through use of 'single' quotation marks.

"A Brief Handbook of Exorcism" - (1)

The recent vast publicity about Exorcism has highlighted the plight of the possessed as a fresh genre of horror film. The essence of evil is lost in the cinematographic effects. And the exorcist, who risks more than anyone else in an exorcism, flits across the screen as necessary but, in the end, not so interesting as the sound effects.

The truth is that all three - the possessed, the possessing spirit, and the exorcist - bear a close relation to the reality of life and to its meaning as all of us experience it each and every day. Possession is not a process of magic. Spirit is real; in fact, spirit is the basis of all reality. "Reality" would not only be boring without spirit; it would have no meaning whatsoever. No horror film can begin to capture the horror of such a vision: a world without spirit.

Evil Spirit is personal, and it is intelligent. It is preternatural, in the sense that it is not 'of' this material world, but it is 'in' this material world. And Evil Spirit as well as good advances along the lines of our daily lives. In very normal ways spirit uses and

influences our daily thoughts, actions, and customs and, indeed, all the strands that make up the fabric of life in whatever time or place. Contemporary life is no exception.

To compare spirit with the elements of our lives and material world, which it can and sometimes does manipulate for its own ends, is a fatal mistake, but one that is very often made. Eerie sounds can be produced by spirit

-but spirit is not the eerie sound. Objects can be made to fly across the room, but telekinesis is no more spirit than the material object that was made to move. One man whose story is told in this book made the mistake of thinking otherwise, and he nearly paid with his life when he had to confront the error he had made.

The exorcist is the centerpiece of every exorcism.

On him depends everything. He has nothing personal to gain. But in each exorcism he risks literally everything that he values. Every exorcist must engage in a one-to-one confrontation, personal and bitter, with pure evil. Once engaged, the exorcism cannot be called off. There will and must always be a victor and a vanquished. And no matter what the outcome, the contact is in part fatal for the exorcist. He must consent to a dreadful and irreparable pillage of his deepest self. Something dies in him. Some part of his humanness will wither from such close contact with the opposite of all humanness - the essence of evil; and it is rarely if ever revitalized. No return will be made to him for his loss.

This is the minimum price an exorcist pays. If he loses in the fight with Evil Spirit, he has an added penalty. He may or may not ever again perform the rite of Exorcism, but he must finally confront and vanquish the evil spirit that repulsed him.

The investigation that may lead to Exorcism usually begins because a man or woman -occasionally a child -is brought to the notice of Church authorities by family or friends. Only rarely does a possessed person come forward spontaneously.

The stories that are told on these occasions are dramatic and painful: strange physical ailments in the possessed; marked mental derangement; obvious repugnance to all signs, symbols, mention, and sight of religious objects, places, people, ceremonies.

Often, the family or friends report, the presence of the person in question is marked by so-called psychical phenomena: objects fly around the room; wallpaper peels off the walls; furniture cracks; crockery breaks; there are strange rumblings, hissess, and other noises with no apparent source. Often the temperature in the room where the possessed happens to be will drop dramatically. Even

more often an acrid and distinctive stench accompanies the person.

Violent physical transformations seem sometimes to make the lives of the possessed a kind of hell on earth. Their normal processes of secretion and elimination are saturated with inexplicable wrackings and exaggeration. Their consciousness seems completely colored by the violent sepia of revulsion. Reflexes sometimes become

sporadic or abnormal, sometimes disappear for a time. Breathing can cease for extended periods. Heartbeats are hard to detect. The face is strangely distorted, sometimes also abnormally tight and smooth without the slightest line or furrow.

When such a case is brought to their attention, the first and central problem that must always be addressed by the Church authorities is: Is the person really possessed?

Henri Geslaud, a French priest and exorcist who works today in Paris, stated in 1974 that, out of 3,000 consultations since 1968, "there have been only four cases of what I believe to be demonic possession." T.K. Osterreich, on the other hand, states that "possession has been an extremely common phenomena, cases of which abound in the history of religion." The truth is that official or scholarly census of possession cases has never been made.

Certainly, many who claim to be possessed or whom others so describe are merely the victims of some mental or physical disease. In reading records from times when medical and psychological science did not exist or were quite undeveloped, it is clear that grave mistakes were made. A victim of disseminated sclerosis, for example, was taken to be possessed because of his spastic jerkings and slidings and the shocking agony in spinal column and joints. Until quite recently, the victim of Tourette's syndrome was the perfect target for the accusation of "Possessed!" : torrents of profanities and obscenities, grunts, barks, curses, yelps, snorts, sniffs, tics, foot stomping, facial contortions all appear suddenly and just as suddenly cease in the subject. Nowadays, Tourette's syndrome responds to drug treatment, and it seems to be a neurological disease involving a chemical abnormality in the brain. Many people suffering from illnesses and diseases well known to us today such as paranoia, Huntington's chorea, dyslexia, Parkinson's disease, or even mere skin diseases (psoriasis, herpes I, for instance), were treated as people "possessed" or at least as "touched" by the Devil.

Nowadays, competent Church authorities always insist on thorough examinations of the person brought to them

for Exorcism, an examination conducted by qualified medical doctors and psychiatrists. When a case of possession is reported by a priest to the diocesan authorities, the exorcist of the diocese is brought in. If there is no diocesan exorcist, a man is appointed or brought from outside the diocese. Sometimes the priest reporting the exorcism will have had some preliminary medical and psychiatric tests run beforehand in order to allay the cautious skepticism he

is likely to meet at the chancery when he introduces his problem. When the official exorcist enters the case, he will usually have his own very thorough examinations run by experts he knows and whose judgment he is sure he can trust.

In earlier times, one priest was usually assigned the function of exorcist in each diocese of the Church. In modern times, this practice has fallen into abeyance in some dioceses, mainly because the incidence of reported possession has decreased over the last hundred years. But in most major dioceses, there is still one priest entrusted with this function -even though he may rarely or never use it. In some dioceses, there is a private arrangement between the bishop and one of his priests whom he knows and trusts.

There is no official public appointment of exorcists. In some dioceses, "the bishop knows little about it and wants to know less" -as in one of the cases recorded in this book. But however he comes to his position, the exorcist must have official Church sanction, for he is acting in an official capacity, and any power he has over Evil Spirit can only come from those officials who belong to the substance of Jesus' Church, whether they be in the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, or the Protestant Communion. Sometimes a diocesan priest will take on an exorcism himself without asking his bishop, but all such cases known to me have failed.

It is recognized both in the pre-exorcism examinations and during the actual exorcism that there is usually no one physical or psychical aberration or abnormality in the possessed person that we cannot explain by a known or possible physical cause. And, apart from normal medical and psychological tests, there are other possible sources for diagnosis. However rickety and tentative the findings of parapsychology, for example, one can possibly seek in its theories of telepathy and telekinesis an explanation of some of the signs of possession. Suggestion and suggestibility, as modern psychotherapists speak of them, can account for many more.

Still, with the diagnoses and opinions of doctors and psychologists in hand, it is often discovered there are wide margins of fluctuation. Competent psychiatrists will

differ violently among themselves; and in psychology and medicine, ignorance of causes is often obscured by technical names and jargon that are nothing more than descriptive terms.

Nevertheless, the combined medical and psychological reports are carefully evaluated and usually weigh heavily in the final judgment to proceed or not with an exorcism. If according to those reports there is a definite disease or illness which adequately accounts for the behaviour and symptoms of the subject, Exorcism is usually ruled

out, or at least delayed to allow a course of medical or psychiatric treatment.

But finally, reports in hand, all evidence in, Church authorities judge the situation from another, special point of view, formed by their own professional outlook. They believe that there is an invisible power, a spirit of evil; that this spirit can for obscure reasons take possession of a human being; that the evil spirit can and must be expelled - exorcised - from the person possessed; and that this exorcism can be done only in the name and by the authority and power of Jesus of Nazareth. The testing from the Church's viewpoint is as rigorous in its search as any medical or psychological examination. In the records of Christian Exorcism from as far back as the lifetime of Jesus himself, a peculiar revulsion to symbols and truths of religion is always and without exception a mark of the possessed person. In the verification of a case of possession by Church authorities, this "symptom" of revulsion is triangulated with other physical phenomena frequently associated with possession -the inexplicable stench; freezing temperature ; telepathic power about purely religious and moral matters; a peculiarly unlined or completely smooth or stretched skin, or unusual distortion of the face, or other physical and behavioural transformations; "possessed gravity" (the possessed person becomes physically immovable, or those around the possessed are weighted down with a suffocating pressure); levitation (the possessed rises and floats off the ground, chair, or bed; there is no physically traceable support); violent smashing of furniture, constant opening and slamming of doors, tearing of fabric in the vicinity of the possessed, without a hand laid on them; and so on. When this triangulation is made of the varied symptoms that may occur in any given case, and medical and psychiatric diagnoses are inadequate to cover the full situation, the decision will usually be to proceed and try Exorcism.

There has never been, to my knowledge, an official listing of exorcist together with their biographies and characteristics, so we cannot satisfy our modern craving for a profile of, say, "the typical exorcist."

We can, however, give a fairly clear definition of the type of man who is entrusted with the exorcism of a possessed person. Usually he is engaged in the active ministry of parishes. Rarely is he a scholarly type engaged in teaching or research. Rarely is he a recently ordained priest. If there is any median age for exorcists, it is probably between the ages of fifty and sixty-five . Sound and robust physical health is not a characteristic of exorcists, nor is proven intellectual

brilliance, postgraduate degrees, even in psychology or philosophy, or a very sophisticated personal culture. In this writer's experience, the 15 exorcists he has known have been singularly lacking in anything like a vivid imagination or a rich humanistic training. All have been sensitive men of solid rather than dazzling minds. Though, of course, there are many exceptions, the usual reasons for a priest's being chosen are his qualities of moral judgment, personal behaviour, and religious beliefs - qualities that are not sophisticated or laboriously acquired, but that somehow seem always to have been an easy and natural part of such a man. Speaking religiously, these are qualities associated with special grace.

There is no official training for an exorcist. Before a priest undertakes Exorcism, it has been found advisable - but not always possible or practical - for him to assist at exorcisms conducted by an older and already experienced priest.

Once possession has been verified to the satisfaction of the exorcist, he makes the rest of the decisions and takes care of all the necessary preparations. In some dioceses, it is he who chooses the assistant priest. The choice of the lay assistants and of the time and place of the exorcism is left to him.

The place of the exorcism is usually the home of the possessed person, for generally it is only relatives or closest friends who will give care and love in the dreadful circumstances associated with possession. The actual room chosen is most often one that has had some special significance for the possessed person, not infrequently his or her own bedroom or den. In this connection, one aspect of possession and of spirit makes itself apparent: the close connection between 'spirit' and 'physical location'. The puzzle of spirit and place makes itself felt in many ways and runs throughout virtually every exorcism. There is a theological explanation for it. But that there is some connection between spirit and place must be dealt with as a fact.

Once chosen, the room where the exorcism will be

done is cleared as far as possible of anything that can be moved. During the exorcism, one form of violence may and most often does cause any object, light or heavy, to move about, rock back and forth, skitter or fly across the room, make much noise, strike the priest or the possessed or the assistants. It is not rare for people to emerge from an exorcism with serious physical wounds. Carpets, rugs, pictures, curtains, tables, chairs, boxes, trunks, bedclothes, bureaus, chandeliers, all are removed.

Doors very often will bang open and shut uncontrollably; but because exorcisms can go on for days, doors cannot be nailed or locked with unusual security. On the other hand, the doorway must be covered; otherwise, as experience shows, the physical force let loose within the exorcism room will affect the immediate vicinity outside the door. Windows are closed securely; sometimes they may be boarded over in order to keep flying objects from crashing through them and to prevent more extreme accidents (possessed people sometimes attempt defenestration; physical forces sometimes propel the assistants or the exorcist toward the windows). A bed or couch is usually left in the room (or placed there if necessary), and that is where the possessed person is placed. A small table is needed. On it are placed a crucifix, with one candle on either side of it, holy water, and a prayer book. Sometimes there will also be a relic of a saint or a picture that is considered to be especially holy or significant for the possessed. In recent years in the United States, and increasingly abroad as well, a tape recorder is used. It is placed on the floor or in a drawer or sometimes, if it is not too cumbersome, around the neck of an assistant.

The junior priest colleague of the exorcist is usually appointed by diocesan authorities. He is there for his own training as an exorcist. He will monitor the words and actions of the exorcist, warn him if he is making a mistake, help him if he weakens physically, and replace him if he dies, collapses, flees, is physically or emotionally battered beyond endurance - and all have happened during exorcisms. The other assistants are laymen. Very often a medical doctor will be among them because of the danger to all present of strain, shock, or injury. The number of lay assistants will depend on the exorcist's expectation of violence. Four is the usual number. Of course, in remote country areas or in very isolated Christian missions, and sometimes in big urban centers, there is no question of assistants. There simply is none available, or there is no time

to acquire any. The exorcist must go it alone. An exorcist comes to know from experience what he can expect by way of violent behaviour; and for their own sakes, possessed people must usually be physically restrained during parts of the exorcism. The assistants therefore must be physically strong. In addition, there may be a straightjacket on hand, though leather straps or rope are more commonly used. It is up to the exorcist to make sure that his

assistants are not consciously guilty of personal sins at the time of the exorcism, because they, too, can expect to be attacked by the evil spirit, even though not so directly or constantly as the exorcist himself. Any sin will be used as a weapon.

The exorcist must be as certain as possible beforehand that his assistants will not be weakened or overcome by obscene behaviour or by language foul beyond their imagining; they cannot blanch at blood, excrement, urine; they must be able to take awful personal insults and be prepared to have their darkest secrets screeched in public in front of their companions. These are routine happenings during exorcisms.

Assistants are given three cardinal rules: they are to obey the exorcist's commands immediately and without question, no matter how absurd or unsympathetic those commands may appear to them to be; they are not to take any initiative except on command; and they are never to speak to the possessed person, even by way of exclamation.

Even with all the care in the world, there is no way an exorcist can completely prepare his assistants for what lies in store for them. Even though they are not subject to the direct and unremitting attack the priest will undergo, it is not uncommon for assistants to quit - or be carried out - in the middle of an exorcism. A practiced exorcist will even go so far as to make a few trial runs of an exorcism beforehand, on the old theory that forewarned is forearmed - at least to some degree.

Timing in an exorcism is generally dictated by circumstances. There is usually a feeling of urgency to begin as soon as possible. Everyone involved should have an open schedule. Rarely is an exorcism shorter than some hours - more often than not ten or twelve hours. Sometimes it stretches for two or three days. On occasion it lasts even for weeks. Once begun, except on the rarest of occasions, there are no time outs, although one or other of the people present may leave the room for a few moments, to take some food, to rest very briefly, or go to the

bathroom. (One strange exorcism where there was a time out is described in this book. The priest involved would have preferred one hundred times going straight through the exorcism rather than suffer the mad violence that caused the delay.)

The only people in an exorcism who dress in a special way are the exorcist and his priest assistant. Each wears a long black cassock that covers him from neck to feet. Over it there is a

waist-length white surplice. A narrow purple stole is worn around the neck and hangs loosely the length of the torso.

Normally, the priest assistant and the lay assistants prepare the exorcism room according to the exorcist's instructions. They and the exorcee are ready in the room when the exorcist enters, last and alone.

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"A Brief Handbook of Exorcism" - (2)

There is no lexicon of Exorcism; and there is no guidebook or set of rules, no Baedeker of Evil Spirit to follow. The Church provides an official text for Exorcism, but this is merely a framework. It can be read out loud in 20 minutes. It merely provides a precise formula of words together with certain prayers and ritual actions, so that the exorcist has a preset structure in which to address the evil spirit. In fact, the conduct of an exorcism is left very much up to the exorcist.

Nevertheless, any practiced exorcist I have spoken with agrees that there is a general progress through recognizable stages in an exorcism, however long it may last.

One of the most experienced exorcists I have known and who was in fact the mentor of the exorcist in the first case related in this book, gave names to the various general stages of an exorcism. These names reflect the general meaning or effect or intent of what

is happening, but not the specific means used by the

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evil spirit or by the exorcist. Conor, as I call him, spoke of 'Presence', 'Pretense', 'Breakpoint', 'Voice', 'Clash', and 'Expulsion'. The events and stages these names signify occur in nine out of ten exorcisms. From the moment the exorcist enters the room, a peculiar feeling seems to hang in the very air. From that moment in any genuine exorcism and onward through its duration, everyone in the room is aware of some alien 'Presence'. This indubitable sign of possession is as unexplainable and unmistakable as it is inescapable. All the signs of possession, however blatant or grotesque, however subtle or debatable, seem both to pale before and to be marshaled in the face of this 'Presence'. There is no sure physical trace of the 'Presence', but everyone feels it. You have to experience it to know it; you cannot locate it spatially - beside or above or within the possessed, or over in the corner or under the bed or hovering in midair.