

Exorcist shortage has U.S. bishops trying to recruit more



A crucifix and holy water are among the religious items used in the rite of exorcism. Nancy Wiechec, Catholic News Service

U.S. bishops are looking for a few good men to become exorcists.

In response to growing interest in the rite of exorcism and a shortage of trained exorcists nationwide, the bishops are sponsoring a two-day conference prior to their 2010 fall general assembly Nov. 15-18 in Baltimore.

Interest in the Nov. 12-13 Conference on the Liturgical and Pastoral Practice of Exorcism proved great. When registration closed Nov. 1, 56 bishops and 66 priests had signed up.

Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance, told Catholic News Service he knows of perhaps five or six exorcists in the United States.

They are overwhelmed with requests to perform the rite, he said.

"Actually, each diocese should have its own resource (person)," Paprocki said.

Only those priests who get permission from their bishops can perform an exorcism after proper training.

At Baptism, the rite of exorcism is performed in a simple form. A solemn or

major exorcism, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted in his Church."

Scripture contains several examples of Jesus casting out evil spirits from people.

"We don't think that's poetic metaphor," Paprocki said.

Despite the many requests for an exorcism, the actual number of people possessed by a demon is far fewer than people fear, Paprocki said. The rite rarely is as dramatic as portrayed in movies and popular media.

Other actions, especially reception of the sacraments, can drive out the devil as well, he added.

"The sacrament of Penance is much more powerful than an exorcism," the bishop explained. "The work of the devil is much more regular and our response to that should be rather regular."

THOROUGH INVESTIGATION

Church practice requires a thorough investigation of circumstances surrounding the individual thought to be possessed. Physical and psychological exams are conducted. A priest will examine the person. Family, friends and co-workers may be interviewed.

"We use the principal that we exclude the natural before going to the supernatural level," Paprocki said.

Signs of demonic possession might include:

Speaking in a language the individual does not know.

Scratching, cutting, biting of the skin.

Profound display of strength.

Sleeplessness.

Lack of appetite.

Aversion to anything holy, such as mentioning the name of Jesus or Mary, or the act of praying.

Strong or violent reaction to holy water.

Once the need for a formal exorcism is determined, the rite is conducted in a private setting such as a church or a person's home, where family members can be present.

DEEP-SEATED POSSESSION

In a case where the possession is deep-seated, it may take more than one performance of the rite over a period of months or even years to dispel the devil, Paprocki said.

"We, because of Hollywood, have this kind of exaggerated sense of not only a very dramatic kind of possession, but also a very dramatic kind of exorcism," he said. "It ties in with our culture of quick fixes: You do it once and a person is going to be liberated."

Holy water, a crucifix, relics of saints and blessed salt are part of the exorcism rite.

"The reality is that a full exorcism is a rare thing," Paprocki said, "but we still have to have people who know how to do that because the reality is that it's not unheard of."

Exorcisms are more common in Europe. Dozens of priests are authorized to perform the rite, especially in Italy, France and Poland.

"It's not only performed more commonly (in Europe), but a lot less people get excited about it," Paprocki said.