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The Exorcist: Priesthood at the Door of Darkness

"When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the evil one and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism. Jesus performed exorcisms and from him the Church has received the power and office of exorcising. In a simple form exorcism is performed at the celebration of Baptism. In solemn exorcism, called a 'major' exorcism, can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop. The priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church. Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demoniac possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted to his 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"

(from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. 1673.)

We are fascinated with it, and there are some who would even wish to be witness to it --- but the grim reality is that exorcism deals with dark and deadly things, things inimical to life and implacably hostile toward everything good --- especially toward the Exorcist and any present with him. In short, it is a grim affair fraught with peril to all involved.

The *Roman Rite*, or the *Rite of Exorcism* as it is formally called, is an extremely dangerous ministry that has been carefully entrusted to *specifically appointed priests* within the Church. It is not, Holy Mother Church insists, something that laymen should tamper with, nor even priests without specific training, special credentials, and deeply personal sanctity. Indeed, any *attempt* at exorcism is expressly forbidden --- and for good reason, as we shall see. It is well to soberly reflect upon the perils which these special priests confront and the frightening realities to which they are exposed. The confrontation with evil is very real, and anyone dismissing it as outdated and "pre-enlightened" is not just sadly but very dangerously mistaken. As we see in the citation above, the Church is extremely careful to distinguish between psychological abnormalities amenable to medical science, and the phenomena of demonic *possession* and demonic *obsession* (yes, there is more than just one menacing face of the persona of evil). Evil --- that is to say, evil of a demonic and personal nature --- exists and constantly strives not simply to perpetuate itself, but to metastasize to anything and everything to which it remotely tangent either through its own native efforts or through the folly or effrontery of men. It seeks, above all else, the ultimate trespass: upon the domain of the human soul.

The Exorcist is entrusted with this sole commission: to challenge the evil, and to liberate the afflicted person from its crippling, and often devastating effects. The danger he confronts lies in what is effectively a dual effort to *expropriate* and *reappropriate* --- that is to say, to expropriate from the devil, and to reappropriate for God. Satan does not readily relinquish what he has taken to be his possession --- except under holy duress. The Exorcist, duly empowered by the Church, and prompted by his deep love of Jesus Christ and zealous for the salvation of souls, determines to do both: to deprive the devil and to return what was violated to God.

By his very involvement, his absolute and unremitting contention with powers and principalities, the priest himself is placed in a vulnerable, volatile, and extremely dangerous situation. His very presence (because he is an *alter Christus*, "another" Christ, and acts in *Persona Christ*, in the Person of Christ) will antagonize the evil, and his actions and prayers will often elicit a violent response.

For this reason the tremendous conflict must be approached with maturity, fasting and prayer, and a supportive group of those who hold him up to God in prayer. He stands at the door of Darkness itself ... an image of the Light.

A priest in this sacred ministry once confided the the fact that he needed to keep especially close to Jesus Christ when preparing for an exorcism, to keep his heart pure from sin – because *after* performing an exorcism, there was always reprisal, always something or someone subsequently set in his path to cause him to stumble; it takes little imagination to understand this: "Flesh for flesh", the "father lies" said in the Book of Job.

Keenly aware, and deeply acquainted with the frailty of man, the methods satan chooses to do this are manifold and subtle: he may try to tempt the priest to believe that he himself, the priest, had the power of his own – perhaps through a mistaken or overstated belief in his own sanctity or even his own personal power over evil – in other words, attempting to seduce the priest himself to believe that he himself had liberated the person from evil, when in fact it was his instrumentality through the hand of God that had rendered deliverance; that *he had performed the rite, not of himself, but in the Name of Jesus Christ and through Christ's power invested in him*. I is precisely because of the puissance of evil and the weakness of man that exorcism is not entered into lightly, and Holy Mother Church does so with much preparation.

We must remember the seven sons of Sceva:

"Now some also of the Jewish exorcists who went about, attempted to invoke over them that had evil spirits, the name of the Lord Jesus, saying: I conjure you by Jesus, whom Paul preacheth. And there were certain men, seven sons of Sceva, a Jew, a chief priest, that did this. But the wicked spirit, answering, said to them: Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you? And the man in whom the wicked spirit was, leaping upon them, and mastering them both, prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

(Acts 19:13-17)

With the ever increasing attraction to Wicca, or witchcraft, it is not difficult to understand why so many priests – these emissaries of Christ and arch-enemies of evil – are sometimes afflicted by unfounded fears and great temptations. There *are* those who worship evil --- and very clearly many who cooperate with it --- and vigorously promote it. Wittingly or not, there are many in complicity, and in an unholy communion with, the evil one.

The priest is the most visible adversary and the most prominent sign of contradiction --- and therefore the most clearly distinguishable object of animosity and malevolence. He must not, indeed, he cannot, stand alone. For our part, it is incumbent on us, Religious and laity alike, in the Communion of Saints which we understand to be the Holy Catholic Church, to visibly and consistently support them, indeed, to support all priests, with fasting and prayer.

As we *all* journey toward our goal in Christ --- which *is* Christ --- we grow to understand that our life on earth, especially in this culture of decadence and death, indeed is warfare, incessant battle, a spiritual conflict with the world, the flesh ... and yes, even the devil. All of us, through our Baptism, through our Confirmation by which we became Soldiers of Christ ... *all of us* are involved in this battle in one form or another: at the front, in the rear, on the flanks, the conflict rages with what is seen and with what is unseen. We do battle, and with whom we do battle is of no small account. Do not be seduced by the bromides and clichés of those whose perception of the battle is reduced to little more than whisperings of legends and myths. No less than St. Paul himself tells us in the clearest terms possible that:

"Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood; but against principalities and power, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore take unto you the armour of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect."

(Ephesians 6.12-13)

Are we too *sophisticated* for this? Too "progressive"? Too "enlightened"? Are such things mere rumors and vestiges from dark, sacerdotal days of "unenlightened" eras long past?

The days, I tell you, have not been darker and the time has never been more present! Look around you – *who* is living the myth ...?

Pray for our priests, pray for those studying and training for the priesthood, pray for those who are discouraged and weak. Have they not given their lives for us, for the redemption and the sanctification of our souls? Shall we not be prepared, are we not compelled, to make sacrifices, in turn, for *them* in the form of prayer and fasting? Do you think that your prayers, your fasts, your vigils are of no avail, have no effect? You are the Body of Christ: what you do affects the entire Body ... for well or ill.

Through you ... in this Communion of Saints we call the Holy Catholic Church – strength is given to those who would otherwise falter. As Aaron and Hur held up the weary arms of Moses in Joshua's battle against Amelec in Raphidim – for as soon as Moses' arms tired and lowered in weakness, the battle went ill (Exodus 17.9-13) – so *we* through our prayers, fasts, and vigils, sustain our priests, our exorcists, our Saints – in *our* times!

We are one. If one fights, all fight. If one conquers, all share in the fruit of that conquest. In one fails, all suffer the scourge of that defeat.

How often the battle is fought one on one ... yes, but we must not be unaware of our place in the scheme of things, our part in the victory through our participation in Christ the Victor, through *our* prayers and fastings, our mortifications!

Priests are ever at enmity with evil. It is the nature of the priesthood, for the priesthood is Christ's. They are, therefore, those for whom the enemy lays his snares most carefully.

One eminent example of the potential danger of the priestly ministry in executing the ministry of exorcism in recent years, is the case of Zambian Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo, who fell from grace in a most extraordinary way, subsequently contracting a 'marriage' with a member of a pagan sect. Our readers are probably well informed about the story.

But how many paused to peer beneath the surface to what was actually occurring? How many saw beyond the obvious sin and the manifest folly to the blandishments of the evil one manipulating a priest of God? What is particularly notable in this context is that this Archbishop was himself an appointed Exorcist! Is further evidence needed of the gravity, the danger, of the situation, and the tremendous peril inherent within Rites of Exorcism? In a moment of human weakness he himself, appointed to cast out evil ... was invaded by it. Who will not shudder before this?

But the story becomes more frightening still. Milingo repented. How the Holy Father must have rejoiced at the return of the lost sheep when the Archbishop performed public penance, expressed his true sorrow and asked public forgiveness?

Yet even here we see the malevolent and dogged tenacity of evil, that unquenchable malice that thirsts for sin and can only sate itself on death, for Archbishop Milingo fell yet again, once more defying the Holy See and subsequently incurring the deadliest of penalties --- excommunication *latae sententiae* (that is to say, automatically, through the act itself) --- through defecting from his episcopal office in *attempting* to consecrate as "bishops" four married men in 2006 ... who also and equally suffered the grave penalty of excommunication (total separation from the Church, the Body of Christ ... the death of the soul to God).

Here a modern parable has unfolded before us of the *manifold* and resolute attack upon the priesthood by the evil one.

What was a victory of sanctity over sin was again vanquished through the insinuation of sin into sanctity! Is it any wonder, then, that Saint Paul himself told us that we work out our salvation --- not through arrogance and presumption --- but in fear and trembling?

The victory over evil is always Christ's, and it is always *in* Christ ... and so are we ... in prayer, sacrifice, fasting and penance, in the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and in Holy Communion. We have no cause for despair. No one goes alone into this battle, and no one goes without some vestment in grace through the prayers of many.

Are *you* part of that victory, of *any* victory, through *your part* in Christ?

Pray for all our priests.

Remember that they, too, are men ... an ancient and broken race.

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