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Conference on exorcism will make your head spin

Richard McBrien | Jul. 12, 2010 Essays in Theology

Many years ago, when the *National Catholic Reporter* was a young newspaper, it ran a feature in the left-hand column of Page 1 that highlighted embarrassingly dumb items that had recently appeared in parish bulletins and other ecclesiastical documents.

If that feature were still active, I would have an entry to submit.

In a letter dated May 18 of this year and addressed to "Eminences" and "Excellencies" of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Thomas Paprocki, self-described as "Bishop Designate of Springfield in Illinois," announced that the bishops' Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance, of which Paprocki is chairman, is sponsoring a special Conference on the Liturgical and Pastoral Practice of Exorcism, to be held in Baltimore in early November, just before the bishops' semiannual meeting.

Those with a deep interest in Catholic issues will recognize immediately how pertinent and even urgent this conference will be, given the present state of the church and the world, what with the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the tragic oil spill and loss of 11 lives in the Gulf of Mexico.

For those less engaged in religious matters, an exorcism is an act by which an evil spirit is expelled from a person who is demonically possessed. The act also has a less dramatic function in the baptism of adults: when candidates are enrolled in the order of catechumens, during the period of the catechumenate itself, and during the three "scrutinies" that take place on the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent, prior to the catechumens' baptism at the Easter Vigil.

The letter from Paprocki advises, "The conference is open to bishops and those priests or officials whom a bishop wishes to designate to attend," including those whom bishops have authorized to perform exorcisms, evidently apart from the sacrament of baptism.

However, there is one session open only to bishops. One can only speculate what sort of topics will be addressed in this closed session.

"The conference will address not only the theological and scriptural foundations of the rite of exorcism," the letter continues, "but it will also provide the necessary, practical insights into the many liturgical, canonical and pastoral issues associated with exorcisms and the church's battle against the demonic presence in the world and the lives of the Christian faithful."

The fact that the conference will be less concerned with the baptismal aspects of exorcism than its more "Hollywood" dimensions is made clear by the schedule of events.

The first afternoon session will focus on "the phenomenon of evil in contemporary culture; and responses and resources available to address the presence of evil, particularly through the use of exorcism." No mention of baptism here.

In the evening there will be a discussion of cases and responses "from a practical standpoint." As opposed to a theoretical standpoint?

On the second morning, there will be a "detailed presentation of the practice and use of the rites associated with exorcism [and these rites, again, will apparently have nothing to do with the sacrament of baptism], strategies for pastoral care [how to deal with those possessed by the Devil?], and an examination of other phenomena related to the presence of evil" (what these "other phenomena" might be is evidently left to the imaginations of the conference attendees).

The session designated for bishops only (in italics), on the second afternoon of the two-day conference, will present and discuss "matters of special interest to bishops related to the phenomenon of evil and the use of the rite of exorcism."

One wonders if this session will address the scandal of sexual abuse of children and other young people by priests and the subsequent cover-up of such crimes by bishops themselves, their intimidation of victims and their families, their hiding behind lawyers, and their irresponsible movement of predatory priests from assignment to assignment, without any warning to potential victims or even to pastors.

Bishops will undoubtedly be relieved to learn that there is no registration fee for those who wish to attend only this second afternoon session.

Paprocki hopes that many bishops and their designated officials will participate in this "important" conference. Those who need further assistance can contact a lay employee in the committee office or another staff person, a relatively young monsignor. He may be a fine person who will eventually be appointed a bishop himself.

The priest who sent me a copy of this letter wrote across the top, in capital letters, "CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS? IN 2010."

His question was rhetorical, of course.

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