NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Why is Hollywood obsessed with exorcisms?

Daniel Burke
Religion News Service
| Jan. 25, 2011

For nearly 40 years, Hollywood has been obsessed with the possessed.

Since the 1973 blockbuster ?The Exorcist? unleashed a head-spinning, pea-soup spewing, foul-mouthed and demon-possessed girl on the American imagination, a host of films featuring exorcisms have hit the silver screen.

And why not? To date, ?The Exorcist? franchise?two sequels and two prequels?has grossed nearly $500 million worldwide, according to TheNumbers.com, which tracks box office receipts.

?Exorcism is Hollywood?s wet dream,? said Diane Winston an expert on religion and the media at the University of Southern California. ?It?s taking on the most fundamental questions of good versus evil and doing it in a way that?s titillating and vaguely scandalous. How could that go wrong at the box office??

The latest film to test that premise is ?The Rite,? which opens in theaters on Friday. The film is loosely based on a nonfiction book by American journalist Matthew Baglio and stars Anthony Hopkins as an aging exorcist who may be possessed by demons himself.

Baglio?s book follows the Rev. Gary Thomas, a Silicon Valley priest who was sent to Rome in 2005 by his bishop to train as an exorcist. Thomas and Baglio consulted on the film, visiting the set in Budapest to ensure accuracy.

?They were really anal about wanting the exorcisms to appear accurate,? Thomas said in a recent interview. ?And it is. Nothing in the movie is far-fetched, impossible, or something that hasn?t already happened.?

Exorcist movies have become their own mini-genre in Hollywood, said Robert Thompson, an expert on pop culture at Syracuse University, gaining a place in the horror canon. But unlike most horror movies, exorcist films possess a hair-raising dose of realism?after all, the Roman Catholic Church still performs exorcisms.

?What?s so incredibly scary about exorcism is that it has the church?s theological underpinning,? Thompson said. ?It gives the movies a sense of legitimacy, which makes the whole thing seem real.?

Besides launching a genre, ?The Exorcist? fixed in the public mind the Roman Catholic Rite of Exorcism as the paragon of demonic expulsion, media experts say.

?There?s something iconic about the priest standing there,? wearing his clerical collar and reciting ancient prayers, Baglio said. ?It?s not as dramatic if you just have a guy wearing a sweater and slacks in a conference room.?

Baglio says film producers bought the movie rights to his book before he?d even started writing it. All he had

was an outline and a few sample chapters. ?How quickly it happened caught me by surprise,? he said.

?The Rite,? isn?t the only media project on exorcism in the works.

Last month, the Discovery Channel announced ?The Exorcist Files,? a show that plans to pull the curtain from exorcism by presenting ?real-life? cases of possession. Media reports said the Vatican was cooperating and would even open its case files. Katherine Nelson, a spokeswoman for Discovery Channel, said: ?The implication about the Vatican is not accurate, though we do have cooperation from people in the church.? The show?s premiere has not been scheduled yet, Nelson said.

Demonic possession and expulsion turned heads long before ?The Exorcist.? In fact, exorcisms were one of Jesus? most common miracles, scholars say. When Jesus commanded the Apostles to cast out demons in his name, their exorcisms gained much-needed publicity for his fledgling church.

?In the early church, exorcisms were big crowd-pleasers that attracted a lot of converts,? said Nancy Caciola, expert on the history of demonic possession and a scholar at the University of California, San Diego.

Some Catholic officials hope ?The Rite? will do the same.

Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., convened a conference on exorcism last year in Baltimore that drew more than 50 bishops and 60 priests from around the country. The aim was to reduce the caseload of the two dozen official Catholic exorcists by encouraging each diocese to appoint their own experts.

The bishop said exorcists are needed now more than ever.

?People are falling away from organized religion, dabbling in their own spiritual path, or practicing no religion at all,? he said in an interview. ?That opens a door for the devil to come in and get involved in their lives.?

Paprocki is eager to see ?The Rite.? ?It can be a positive thing toward giving people a more balanced understanding of what exorcism is all about,? he said.

Thomas said the image of a Catholic priest heroically battling Satan in multiplexes nationwide could deliver a much-needed ego boost for American priests demoralized by the sexual abuse scandal.

?This is an evangelizing movie,? said Thomas, who will walk the red carpet at the premiere of ?The Rite? this Friday in Los Angeles. ?The church actually comes out looking pretty good.?

Source URL (retrieved on *10/30/2014 - 07:40*): http://ncronline.org/news/why-hollywood-obsessed-exorcisms