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Exorcism and Harry Potter

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 1, 2006 All Things Catholic

A story hit the wires this week that Pauline Fr. Gabriele Amorth, described as "the Vatican's exorcist," has declared that Hitler and Stalin were possessed, and that the Harry Potter books bear "the signature of the king of the darkness, the devil."

For the record, Amorth is not "the Vatican's exorcist."

He is instead one of nine approved exorcists in the Rome diocese, a ministry he has carried out since 1986. He works out of a small office in the headquarters of the Pauline order in Rome, receiving people who seek his help 365 days a year.

He draws many of the same faithful who flocked to exorcism services of Zambian Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo. (Amorth, by the way, recently suggested that Milingo too is under the influence of the devil, given his decision to renew his links with the followers of Rev. Sun Myung Moon).

On the subject of Hitler and the devil, Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli reported in a 2003 book that Pius XII had prayed that Satan might "leave" Hitler, reflecting the wartime pope's conviction that there was something diabolical in Hitler's personality. Whether this amounts to a "long-distance exorcism," as Amorth and others have suggested, is another matter.

On the subject of Harry Potter, it has become a favorite indoor sport of Roman journalists to bait anybody even remotely connected to the Holy See into making comments, which can then be played up into headlines like "Vatican condemns Harry Potter" or, conversely, "Vatican praises Harry Potter."

Once again for the record, the Vatican has never officially taken a position on J.K. Rowling's work.

For a different view from Amorth's, however, Msgr. Peter Fleetwood, a former Vatican official who now works in Geneva, offered this interpretation in a 2003 press conference:

"As far as I can tell, the chief concern of the author is to help children to understand the conflict between good and evil," Fleetwood said. "I don't see the least problem in the 'Harry Potter' films."

I wrote a package of stories on the resurgence of the ministry of exorcism for the Sept. 1, 2000 issue of NCR, in which Amorth is quoted. The stories are available on the NCR web site. Visit the Archives page [1] and type "Cover Story Exorcism" into the search engine.

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