

Vatican denies pope performed public exorcism

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Pope Francis

Vatican City

When Pope Francis solemnly laid both hands on the head of a young man in a wheelchair Sunday and prayed intently over him for several minutes, he was not performing an exorcism, the Vatican spokesman has said.

The young man, who was among dozens of people in wheelchairs greeted by the pope at the end of Mass May 19, appeared somewhat agitated when the pope approached. A priest with him said something to the pope, who then prayed over the man.

"The Holy Father had no intention of performing an exorcism, but -- as he often does with the sick and suffering people presented to him -- he simply intended to pray for the suffering person before him," said Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi.

Lombardi issued his statement late May 20 after Italian papers began reporting the story, citing TV2000, the satellite television station owned by the Italian bishops' conference. Promoting an upcoming program on Pope Francis' teaching about the existence of the devil and his influence on people, the station said it had asked several exorcists to watch the video clip from May 20 and they agreed, "It was a prayer of liberation from evil or a real exorcism."

Other theologians and exorcists contacted by Italian media said a priest -- even the pope -- would never perform an exorcism on the spur of the moment and without first ascertaining that the suffering person was not afflicted by a physical or mental illness. In addition, exorcism is a rite that includes set prayers, blessings and invocations.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "The 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 demonic 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."

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