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'Deliver Us From Evil' is dark, violent, and an adventure in grace

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jul. 2, 2014 NCR Today

Horror-meister Scott Derrickson's newest film, "Deliver Us From Evil," begins with three U.S. Marines in Iraq who come across some strange writing on a wall in an underground cave. What they don't realize is that the writing is from the devil and that when they return home, they bring darkness and evil with them.

New York police sergeant Ralph Sarchie (Eric Bana) is one tough cop with his own inner darkness. He is married to Jen (Olivia Munn) with one child, Christina (Lulu Wilson). He works the night shift with his partner, Butler (Joel McHale), in the Bronx, where they are starting to respond to calls about strange happenings featuring a hooded man, odd noises, cold temperatures, and objects that move on their own.

Ralph Sarchie knows he has a sixth sense about most things and is aware that something supernatural is going on. He doesn't figure it out until he meets a rather freelance Jesuit priest, Fr. Mendoza (Édgar Ramírez), when Mendoza shows up at the precinct and offers to help the police.

Mendoza is an exorcist, but a pastor of souls first of all. He knows the devil takes possession of people who then present as criminal offenders or as people who are mentally ill. He also knows that cops are reluctant to use demonic activity to explain domestic abuse, murder and other crimes. Cops want to put people behind bars, but Mendoza wants to relieve them of their suffering. Mendoza offers his services to help discover what's going on, and Sarchie eventually agrees.

Mendoza is frank with Ralph and explains his "work." The priest tells him: "There are two types of evil in this life, Officer Sarchie. Secondary evil, the evil that men do. And primary evil, which is something else entirely." If Sarchie is going to get anywhere near an exorcism, he is going to have to clear his soul and go to confession. Mendoza leads the way by telling his own story of a sinful past, even as a priest, then Sarchie confesses. As odd things start to happen around his home and threaten his family, the strong-willed Sarchie has to assure his wife that everything will be all right. He has to mend some fences in their relationship, too, since he spends more time at work than with his family.

"Deliver Us From Evil" is drawn from the life and experiences of former New York police officer Ralph Sarchie, as told in episodic form in his 2001 book, co-authored by Lisa Collier Cool, *Beware the Night*. The storyline about the U.S. Marines in Iraq bringing the devil back with them is a fictional device to tie the episodes together into a single narrative.

I asked director Scott Derrickson if "Deliver Us From Evil" is an anti-war film, and he agreed that it is, though it is also a nod to the story of "The Exorcist" that started in Iraq as well.

He continued:

> Genre films about exorcism and horror such as 'Night of the Living Dead,' and 'Rosemary's Baby,'

> have more ideas going on, have metaphors at work. I liked the idea of demonic possession as a very subtle way to think of PTSD. This condition is so prevalent in returning soldiers that have been recycled through these wars over the last twelve years. I think that war is evil. I am not saying it is never necessary to go to war, maybe it is the lesser of two evils at times, but war is evil no matter what. ... I was interested in the idea of these soldiers who are off fighting these battles pick up this darkness they can't get rid of and bring it home through no fault of their own. This film is an empathetic look at their situation and an anti-Iraq war statement. It was a very deliberate decision to make the film this way -- which is why the chapel scene when Ralph reckons with his personal demons. Fr. Mendoza tells him that vengeance destroys everything, referring to Ralph's way of dealing with police work ... The invasion of Iraq was sold as an act of vengeance and this was an unbelievable destructive force in our world and American culture with massive civilian casualties in the country we invaded. But in terms of compassion for our troops, the suicide rate, crime rate and PTSD is an epidemic caused by a war of vengeance that I wanted to shed some light on.

Mendoza's character is a fusion of Malachi Martin, a former Jesuit priest and controversial author who claims to have performed several exorcisms, and traditionalist Archbishop Robert McKenna. Sarchie's book is filled with references to these men, and he was present for or took part in exorcisms they carried out. Sarchie also took classes from Ed and Lorraine Warren, lay Catholic demonologists who were the subject of last summer's hit horror thriller, "The Conjuring." According to Derrickson, it was easier to blend the two clerics into one and given their ecclesial pedigrees, or lack thereof, I agree.

Derrickson says about the priest: "I built the character of Mendoza very carefully and deliberately with the actor Édgar Ramírez; creating his backstory, his addictions, and the mistakes. But the secret of the movie that is never spoken but is one that you see on his face and the face of the possessed man at that moment of freedom. It's my wife's favorite scene and it made her cry. Mendoza is not your typical exorcist who is a demon hunter. He's not interested in the demonic like Sarchie is; instead he is invested in rescuing the person and relieving that person from suffering in the name of Christ. In this film you are witnessing profound human suffering with people who are possessed and Mendoza is all about helping the real person not battling demons."

In addition to the unconventional but committed Mendoza, there are strong Catholic elements and sacramental themes in the film that function well to reveal demonic activity, yes, but also the grace of Christ's death on the cross to redeem mankind. The ending of the film is deeply moving rather than frightening.

The film has a Catholic "look," as the crucifix, rosaries, holy water are very present, as well as a St. Benedict medal, which traditionally comes with the words of exorcism engraved on the back, in case you didn't know.

For informed Catholics watching the film, the odd details about Mendoza's life, his freelance status and the seeming lack of some precision about the rite of exorcism may be an irritant. But the average filmgoer won't be bothered. The priest is not a demon chaser; he wants to relieve the suffering soul, as the rite of exorcism is intended to do.

The character of Ralph Sarchie almost obsessively takes on the devil as a cop would take on the worst criminal. As he regains his Catholic life and improves his relationship with his wife, the audience gets to experience the spiritual strength of the words of the baptismal promises.

Derrickson is an Episcopalian, and given that his filmography consistently deals with evil and the human and spiritual in such Catholic ways, I asked how close he is to Catholicism. He replied: "I have more personal, creative and theological affinity with the Catholic Church than any other and I would probably become a Catholic at this time in my life but while I know how to raise Protestant children I don't know how to raise Catholic children. Two creative writers have influenced me greatly. I have read G. K. Chesterton 'Orthodoxy' a

dozen times and in the last decade I've been reading all the books by and about Flannery O'Connor, especially 'Mystery and Manners.' I have spent much time looking at the profound place from which she was writing as a Catholic and this has had an extraordinary influence on me."

To me, "Deliver Us From Evil" is not a horror film, though some will get scared watching it. You might call it a psychological thriller, but I think an adventure in grace is a more apt description, however dark and violent the story. "The Conjuring" was a screamfest, but "Deliver Us From Evil" is a layered, engrossing film about the power of God and good in the world, even amid great suffering and evil.

Watch Sr. Rose review "Deliver Us From Evil":

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