The Marist Way of Fighting the Battles of the Lord Under the Banner of Mary are – Part 5

"[The Devil] absolutely believes in God. He absolutely believes every word of Scripture; he just hates it."[1]

Chuck Konzelman

I am ready to offer some thoughts about the 2023 movie *Nefarious*, directed by Cary Solomon and Chuck Konzelman. Both are Catholic, and the film reflects the Catholic position on some of the day's hot-button issues. It is based on the book *A Nefarious Plot*, written by Steve Deace. It is a fictional story about a criminal named Edward, convicted of having committed several murders, who is scheduled to be executed. Dr. John Martin, a psychiatrist and an atheist, is called to evaluate whether or not Edward Wayne Brady is possessed by a demon named Nefarious or if the claim is a ruse to avoid the electric chair.[2]

For my purpose, I want to situate the film within the context of a culture that is decidedly secular and hostile toward belief in God, let alone the existence of the Devil. That mindset mirrors the demon's thinking, especially his preference that we pay no attention to him. Denying his existence provides the cover he needs to wreak havoc on humanity. The movie attempts to warn us that the real battle is not between human beings, though we can easily believe that is the case. St. Paul puts it this way, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)

Samuel Mangold-Lenett, in his review of the movie, makes a similar point: "Evil is all around us, in both the often-unnoticed ignorance of modern banality and in glaringly obvious manifestations."[3] He points out that the psychiatrist, Dr. John Martin, with his preconceptions and his secular worldview, is ill-equipped to engage with the reality that confronts him. There are consequences for those who abandon their Christian faith in favor of adopting a secular worldview, and it has ripple effects on society.

Again, I want to quote Dr. Gallagher, who observed, "It's quite clear that mainstream religions, not just Christianity, have declined in recent decades. People generally develop a substitute belief system when giving up a mainstream or orthodox religion. That often involves ideas about energy forces, occult

[1] 'Nefarious': Filmmakers Take the Mask Off Evil in New Exorcism Film| National Catholic Register (ncregister.com).
[2] For a more in depth treatment of the plot, go to https://thefederalist.com/2023/04/14/new-movie-nefarious-tackles-the-horrors-of-modern-secularism/.
[3] Ibid.

themes, and visitation by spirits. A lot of exorcists feel that, through alternate spiritualties, people have opened themselves up to evil forces and evil spirits in ways that more mainstream religious people are protected from."[4]

While the number of atheists in this country has grown of late, so has the number of people who turn to the occult. Interest is growing in Spiritism, Tarot cards, Ouija Boards, witchcraft,[5] divination (fortune telling), and paganism. No doubt, the Devil sees the irony in people not believing in the existence of God but open to believing in the existence of pagan gods that do not exist and practicing the dark arts of the occult to communicate with them. Pagan gods and the occult come from and lead back to the Devil.[6] The Devil must like what he sees. The movie is a warning that if you play with the occult, you are playing with the Devil, and he will come. Getting him to leave can be a long, painful struggle.[7]

The further irony is that, unlike the secular man or woman, the Devil knows God exists. He hates God and humanity made in God's image, regardless of their race, creed, ethnicity, politics, religion, or lack thereof. That is why I think this movie is important. It argues persuasively and forcefully that the Devil exists without relying on the paranormal to compel us to take him seriously. His keen intellect and the force of his personality are his primary weapons. Both are rooted in his angelic nature, which is superior to our human nature. We make up for that deficiency by having God on our side.

If nothing else, the Devil motivates us to hold our ground. Cary Solomon, one of the directors, put it this way in an interview for the National Catholic Register, "If you really truly believe in the Devil, you will change your life because you will suddenly realize: 'Somebody is after my soul. If I lose this battle, where do I go?'"[8] Deciding to resist and stand firm is half the battle.

Consequently, we can expect the Enemy, the Devil, to engage us in spiritual battles. That should not surprise us. Just as Jesus battled Satan, his disciples should expect to do the same.[9] It is a necessary part

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[4]Dr. Richard Gallagher, Demonic Possession Expert, Isn't Trying to Convince You, by Adrienne Westenfeld, October 2, 2020. Dr. Richard Gallagher, Demonic Possession Expert, Isn't Trying to Convince You (esquire.com).

[5] Msgr. Rossetti noted that in the state of Washington, a witch has over 400,000 followers.

[6] "What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything. No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons." (1 Cor. 10:20-22)

[7] Podcast, *The Devil in the Modern World, Fr. Carlos Martins*, 34:20, "So an exorcism given once a week, it takes typically 75 weeks, a year and a half, in order to expel the devil on average. So why is it not instantaneous? I don't have any idea. I can give an educated guess. When we're talking about demonic affliction we're talking about a state. Some bad choices were made that brought the individual into this state. If God made it too quick, too simple, too cheap… exorcism is a great gift from God. But it's not one to be taken lightly because it's not instantaneous and the victim often goes through some pretty horrific stuff before he or she gets to a place of freedom. When demons stop manifesting, then you know it's done and by that time to the person has full freedom." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvPMVzsXqgo&t=6s.

[8] 'Nefarious': Filmmakers Take the Mask Off Evil in New Exorcism Film| National Catholic Register (ncregister.com)

[9] All of this is included in the Marist theme, Discipleship in the spirit of Mary.

of being disciples of Jesus and growing in holiness. However, we do *not* fight alone, nor will we win alone. Our decision not to surrender but to fight is what our Lord will use to win the day and make us saints.

Battling with the Devil is not what we want to hear. Life is complicated enough without having to contend with the Devil's machinations. However, it is manageable. By analogy, imagine your neighborhood has been warned that some homes have been robbed. How do responsible homeowners respond? They strengthen their home security by thoroughly checking their homes, upgrading the locks, installing cameras and an alarm system, purchasing a dog, etc. Returning home, they are alert for any signs of a break-in. Once they make all of the needed improvements, they go on with their lives. They adjust to living with the threat of being robbed while refusing to let it paralyze them with fear. That is the template for dealing with threats of demonic incursions. I will refer to this later.

Fr. Martins, himself an exorcist, endorses the movie without hesitation. He says that "it is the best movie portraying demonic possession ever produced. Rather than getting bogged down—like every other movie—in diabolical phenomena and power (levitation, extraordinary strength, and other "same-old" signs), this one brings the viewer into the demonic mind. While the movie trend has focused on displaying demonic rage, *Nefarious* deftly exhibits the Devil's insatiable craving and formidable intelligence. Far less concerned with ostentation than demonstrating the Devil's thought and intellectual character, the movie accurately depicts how he smothers his victim's hope."[10]

Fr. Martins expands on this insight. "Cary Solomon and Chuck Konzelman—the film's writers, directors, and producers—have encapsulated the conundrum into which a demon always presses his victim: Whether you choose option A or B, you're damned either way, so cooperate on the Enemy's terms and choose one."[11] We would be wise to take seriously the threat the Devil poses and not underestimate his resolve to destroy us by recreating us into ***his*** image and likeness.[12]

While I could say more, let me conclude with these words from Fr. Martins, "As an exorcist, I can affirm it is true to life and a must-see for anyone who desires to understand the Enemy."[13] It is disturbing, so be forewarned. Since all of us, without exception, will be called to enter the fray, if we have not already, it is best to get to know our Enemy. Lent is the ideal time to watch this movie and renew our commitment to be faithful disciples of Christ in the spirit of Mary.

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[10] https://www.ncregister.com/interview/nefarious-filmmakers-take-the-mask-off-evil-in-new-exorcism-film.
[11] Ibid.
[12] The Devil is the ultimate narcissist. It is impossible for him to love. He can only hate which equates to eternal damnation.
[13] Ibid.

In the following reflection in this series, I will address this topic from the perspective of the Society of Mary.