The Marist Way of Fighting the Battles of the Lord Under the Banner of Mary – Part 3

"The Devil is like a dog in chains, and he'll bite if you draw close." Pope Francis

I want to situate the discussion about the demonic in the context of our contemporary culture. Pope Francis has spoken about the Devil from the earliest days of his pontificate. In 2014, he formally recognized the International Association of Exorcists, cofounded by six priests in 1994. The Pope's concern about the heightened activity of the demonic in the world was captured in a 2019 book published by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Pope Francis Rebuking the Devil*.[1] The Pope himself reminded the Church that "*Christ's entire ministry is a struggle against the evil one in its many manifestations*: *healing from illnesses, exorcisms of the possessed, forgiveness of sins."* Should his disciples expect to be exempt from such a struggle?

During his pontificate, the Pope increased the number of exorcists in the Catholic Church and required each diocese to designate one priest as an exorcist.[2] In response to increased demand, the Pope Leo XIII Institute was established in 2015 to train priests and deacons to become exorcists. The training involves 10-day sessions at Mundelein Seminary in the Archdiocese of Chicago twice a year for two years[3].

Msgr. Esseff, the chief exorcist for the Diocese of Scranton, pointed out, "The only one that can overcome Satan is Jesus. He overcomes the kingdom of evil with light. In addition, every priest represents Jesus. The Devil does not see the priest—he sees Jesus."[4]

That should come as no surprise. Priests are ordained *in persona Christi.* That is not the same as acting in the name of or in place of Christ. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest acts in the person of Christ, especially when celebrating the Eucharist. The Sacrament of Holy Orders empowers priests to act in a specific, sacramental identification with Christ, the head of the Church. That is why exorcists act *in persona Christi*, meaning Christ is

[1] Keeping an eye on the Devil: How should today's Catholics think about the prince of darkness? | America Magazine.

[2] It would appear that the Devil has taken notice of this unwanted attention. Pope Francis has been subject to unprecedented criticism that includes being called an apostate, Satanic, the Anti-Christ, fomenting a schism, invalidly elected, a heretic, and that is on a good day! These accusations recall the critics of Jesus' who also accused him of being in league with the Devil.

[3] Https://ktxs.com/news/nation-world/vatican-to-hold-training-next-month-as-demand-for-exorcism-continues-to-rise-catholic-church-prayer-ritual-priests-internation-association-of-exorcists-paranormal-supernatural-psychiatry-mental-health.

[4] https://www.catholicherald.com/article/local/retired-exorcist-reminds-students-of-the-power-of-jesus-within-them/.

acting and speaking through the priest praying the liturgical rite of exorcism. It has been said that once a priest is ordained, he has a target on his back.

When the Devil looks at the laity, who, through baptism, are united and conformed to Christ and make up the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, he also sees Jesus. The Devil's influence is no doubt involved, but not determinative, in the increase in the laity who no longer practice their faith, have joined the ranks of atheists, or are unaffiliated with any organized religion (Nones). The Devil cannot read our minds nor predict the future. However, he can influence our imagination by suggesting a line of thought or a course of action that will lead us away from God and toward him. The Devil applauds while we weep at the growing number of former disciples of Christ becoming atheists or joining the ranks of the unchurched.

Fr. Carlos Martins[5] noted in 2023 that 18-29-year-olds abandoning religion increased by a third during the past five years. Another survey of the same age group reported that 63% believed someone could be demonically possessed. Fr. Martins concluded that something in their lives had convinced them that the Devil was real. Sadly, they do not have the safeguards to guide them that religion provides.[6]

What has brought about this upsurge in the reported cases of demonic possession and influence? Dr. Richard Gallagher, a board-certified professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College and Columbia University, works with a Catholic diocese to sort demands for exorcisms (into genuine incidents of mental health afflictions and actual cases of supernatural incidents).[7]

He told *Esquire* in 2020, "There are two theories about that. I think they both have some merit. One is that there's more preoccupation with this stuff, so people think they need an exorcism when they don't. Nowadays, young people are brought up in movies, TV shows, and paranormal beliefs. That's different from when I was a kid when this stuff was dismissed and frowned upon."[8] I would add that serious sin has become more acceptable, and that plays into the Devil's hands.

The other factor is the collapse of traditional religious institutions and religious beliefs. Dr. Gallagher observes, "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 themes, and visitation by spirits. A lot of exorcists feel

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[5]Fr. Carlos Martins, podcas, 6.28, *The Devil in the Modern World.*

[6] Ibid.

[7] 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).

[8] Ibid.

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."[9]

I mentioned earlier that the exorcist Msgr. Stephen Rossetti identifies the following as footprints of Satan: discord, violence and death, disease, decline of faith, rage, victimization, isolation, vice and sin, and conflict.[10] While these exist in any historical period, their sheer preponderance and the intensity they generate in our context feel different and more ominous.[11]

[9] Ibid.
[10] Msgr. Stephen Rossetti podcast, 16.08, *Spiritual Warfare Today*,
[11] For a clearer picture of how these footprints leave their impression on our contemporary world, refer to Part One.