

Be Our Light in the Darkness

By John La Boone

"Then Jesus rebuked the demon and it came out of him, and the boy was healed that very hour." – *Matthew 17:18*

As Episcopalians we are familiar with the orders of bishops, priests and deacons, which historically have been called the major orders or holy orders. But for most of our church history there were also these minor orders (in descending order): acolyte, lector, exorcist and porter. Originally, if you wanted to become a priest you would start at the bottom and work your way up through the minor orders first. When the English Church was reformed in the 16th-century, the minor orders were officially done away with as ordained ministries, but they have been an important part of our religious and cultural heritage for most of the time that Christianity has existed.



The minor orders did not really go away for good in Anglicanism. Today we see modern versions of these important jobs in various lay ministries. Every Sunday we see acolytes functioning in our church services by carrying the cross and torches, administering the chalice and assisting the clergy in other ways. We have lay readers and lectors reading our Bible lessons and the prayers of the people, or leading the Daily Office. Porters evolved into sextons and thank goodness we still have them performing a multitude of important duties. But what about exorcists – what are they and do we still have them? Yes, we do.

The title "exorcist" has been prominently used in Christianity since the early 2nd century of the Common Era. Exorcists are people who specialize in performing rites



or ceremonies on persons (or less frequently on locations or objects) in order to evict demons or other harmful spiritual entities. They are thought to have special skills for confronting evil spirits and facilitating a cure for the person afflicted with demonic possession. They may recite special prayers or formulas and also use gestures, symbols, (like the cross), amulets, icons, holy books, (like the Bible), holy water and/or the singing of hymns. The exorcist is

believed to be a conduit through which God applies his healing power to people in the clutches of demons.

By the 3rd century in Western Christianity, the Church began to ordain men as exorcists, which allowed it to control exactly who became an exorcist (at least officially). In the ordination ceremony, the bishop would present them with a book containing the formulas of exorcism and say: "Receive, and commit to memory, and possess the power of imposing hands on energumens (persons believed to be possessed by a demon), whether baptized or catechumens (persons studying for baptism)." Our English word "exorcism" comes from the Greek word *exousia* which means "oath," as one way to exorcise a demon would be to get it to swear a certain



oath, thus gaining power over it. But more familiarly, demons are just commanded to depart. The exorcist performed elaborate ceremonies over adults, older children and infants who were preparing for baptism. They would call on the name of God and Jesus or the Archangel Michael or others in heaven for assistance. The laying on of hands was used to channel divine power, but sometimes exsufflation (breathing on the candidate) was used.

There have been *minor* exorcisms, sometimes called *lesser* exorcisms, that were routinely performed as part of the baptism ritual. And then there were *major* exorcisms that were meant to rescue someone who was obviously possessed by one or more demons. Historically, there was a lot of attention given to expelling demons in preparation for baptism. Our current baptismal service is conspicuously concerned with getting rid of the Devil. ("Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?" – 1979 BCP, p. 302) The major exorcisms have gotten the most attention because of all the drama associated with them.

Today, exorcists are usually associated with the Roman Catholic Church, especially since the release of the notorious 1973 William Friedkin film, *The Exorcist*. The Catholic catechism states: "Jesus performed exorcisms and from him the Church has received the power and office of exorcising." All Catholic exorcisms must be approved by the local bishop on a case by case basis and, if approved, the job must be given to "priests of highest repute who have piety, knowledge, prudence and integrity of life." A Catholic priest can be appointed for individual exorcisms or he may be designated to the permanent position of exorcist. The practice of exorcism has been reformed by the Catholic Church at different times over the centuries, most recently in 1999. Today the official Vatican guidelines state: "The person who claims to be possessed must be evaluated by doctors to rule out a mental or physical illness."

Lutherans have an abbreviated form of an exorcism rite based on the 16th century Catholic model. Evangelical Christians use the name of Jesus, the authority of the Bible and the power of the Gospel for exorcism, but they do not have a special class of clergy or laity specifically trained and designated as exorcists. The Eastern Orthodox Churches have never had a minor order of ordained exorcists but instead have always called upon clergy or laypeople who seem to have a gift for that sort of thing when it is needed. Exorcists are also found in other faiths such as Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism and various shamanic religions. There are also exorcisms in the Coptic or Oriental Orthodox Churches. In fact, according to a recent poll, 74 percent of Ethiopians say they have witnessed an exorcism, indicating how common the practice is in some religious cultures.

Episcopalians don't normally get too worked up about demons. Most of us see the outward manifestations of things like epilepsy and schizophrenia as indicators of illnesses that need medical attention, rather than being the work of the devil. However, that is not to say that we don't believe there is actual evil in the world. All too often we are faced with evil that is impossible to ignore, for example the senseless mass shootings that have become almost routine in our society or the calculated, deliberate cruelty done to the most vulnerable. But someone taking evil actions is different from the model of someone involuntarily being possessed and having his or her soul hijacked.

There are echoes of exorcism found in some of our Anglican prayers ("From all evil and mischief; from sin; from the crafts and assaults of the devil; from thy wrath, and from everlasting damnation, *Good Lord, deliver us.*" – *Litany and Penitential Office, 1928 BCP*). But most of us tend to see the need to battle against evil in ways other than performing exorcisms. The Episcopal Church's *Book of Occasional Services* discusses exorcism but does not have ceremonies that are formulated for use; however, it does provide this guidance: "Those who find themselves in need of such a ministry should make the fact known to the bishop, through their parish priest, in order that the bishop may determine whether exorcism is needed, who is to perform the rite, and what prayers or other formularies are to be used." Diocesan-approved exorcists do exist in the Episcopal Church here in America, and they usually continue to be available for that purpose even after normal retirement. I don't think there are a lot of them around these days, as the demand for their services is low.



Exorcists see their role as part of a venerable tradition. “And he [Jesus] summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits” – *Mark 6:7*. There have been famous exorcists throughout history. For instance, there was the Rev. Gabriele Amorth, a Catholic priest of the Diocese of Rome who was an officially designated exorcist from 1986 until his death in 2016. He claimed to have performed exorcisms on about 30,000 people. I don’t see how he had much time to do anything else. He said that some of those people had more

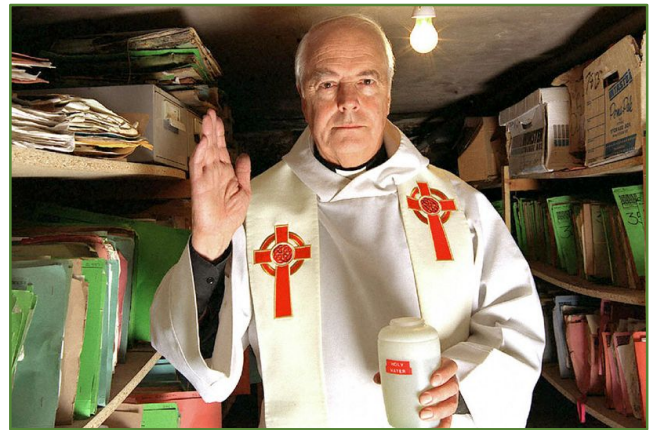


than one demon, and the number of demons a person might have could conceivably be in the thousands. Amorth’s favorite film was *The Exorcist* and he said it portrayed exorcisms accurately, although he thought the special effects were exaggerated. He was a man who enjoyed his job and took pride in it.

Exorcism has played well in popular culture, especially in movies. *The Exorcist* became one of the highest-grossing films of all time and there were two sequels and two prequels that were made later, plus a bunch of other movies ripped off its theme of demon possession. When *The Exorcist* was first released, people who saw it quickly went in droves to their local clergy or mental health professionals with fears that they, too, were possessed. Civilization never gets too advanced to have mass hysteria.

Many exorcisms have gone terribly wrong even in the modern era. In 1976 a 23-year-old German woman named Annaliese Michel died of malnutrition and dehydration after more than 60 exorcisms had been performed on her over a 10-month period. Previously, she had had seizures related to her temporal lobe epilepsy, she heard voices and was understandably depressed. Her family convinced two priests to perform the exorcisms. After she died, her parents and the priests were convicted of negligent homicide. The film *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* was based on her story. In 2005, there was the case of Romanian nun Maricica Irina Cornici. She felt that the Devil was trying to communicate with her inside her mind. Initially, she was treated for schizophrenia. However, her fellow nuns were totally freaked out and felt that she was an excellent candidate for exorcism. So, with the help of a monk they tied her to a cross, shoved a towel into her mouth and left her that way for several days without food or water. She died of suffocation and dehydration. Her “exorcists” were sentenced to 5 to 8 years in prison for murder. Local culture can have a lot to do with these extreme beliefs. After all, Romania is where all the vampire legends come from.

In 1974, the Church of England set up the Deliverance Ministry after an exorcism gone wrong in Yorkshire that is described as “unfortunate.” It’s hard to get information on what actually happened. These ministries are a little different from the work of exorcists but not completely different. Whereas exorcisms directly confront a demon inhabiting a defenseless person, Deliverance Ministries seek to remove influences that allow the demon to have power over the person. The possessed person must take responsibility and play an active part in the deliverance process. Each Anglican diocese in England has a Deliverance Ministry team that is trained both in exorcism and psychiatry. Deliverance ministers are normally selected from among priests who are considered level-headed with their feet on the ground, rather than demon-busting zealots. These priests get special training which has an emphasis on how to distinguish between people with psychological disorders and those who may have manifestations of evil. Often, unusual perceptions are triggered by bereavement, traumatic events, injury or abuse among people who are not schizophrenic. Load on enough stress and anyone can begin to mentally fray, even more so if alcohol, illicit drugs or dabbling in the occult are involved. In actual practice, a lot of what they end up dealing with are claims of poltergeists in homes rather than people who have howling devils inside them. Within these parameters, the Church of England has done well with figuring out who is ill and who is having a spiritual crisis.



Many years ago, my wife, Jan, was an administrator in a small, rural school system where there was an elementary special education student who was having some significant behavior problems that caused many difficulties. The parents approached Jan because they had heard that Jan was Catholic, and they asked her about performing an exorcism on the child. It was a startling and completely unexpected request, but for the level of understanding the parents had, it made a lot of sense to them. Needless to say, there was no exorcism performed, and the school system continued to work to help the student in normal, safe and compassionate ways.

Does demon possession exist and can demons be exorcised? Should we take the Bible stories about demon possession literally or should we look for the symbolic lessons they offer? Interesting questions. Different Christians have different ideas about all that. We have the stories in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures that tell of exorcisms, including some that are attributed to Jesus and his followers. On the other hand, we now know a lot more about how mental and physical illnesses can dramatically torture the sufferers while baffling and frightening everyone else. The mentally unstable are not the only ones at risk. When ordinary people (individuals, groups, or whole societies) are put into fearful situations where

there are no satisfying explanations or obvious solutions, they tend to *create* demons in order to have a focus for their fears. Down through history various leaders have made profitable use of that fact of human nature to enhance their own power, thus giving us the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the Klu Klux Klan, the anti-Semitic pogroms in eastern Europe, the Holocaust, and many contemporary ethnic cleansings. None of those terrible things would have happened except that they were fueled by fear.



“But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.” – *2 Thessalonians 3:3*. I believe that what we really have to watch out for is the devil known as *human fear*. It hardly matters whether there are demons with horns and tails on the loose, because the demon of fear can easily take people into to a profound darkness where it is hard to remember how much better it is to live in the light of God’s love for all of humanity. Runaway fear – including fear of demons – is more than sufficient to lead people into

dark and even evil places, and Christians are not immune from that danger simply because they are Christians. I think that’s where the real devilish activity is usually found. But in our tradition we do have much wisdom to guide us: “When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” – *John 8:12*. I believe that was the major purpose of Jesus’ ministry: to show people that *everyone* can spread the light and love of God, not simply through membership in a religion but through their everyday actions. It takes ongoing striving toward the light of God’s love to have a way of thinking and believing that keeps us from giving in to the darkness of fear that is so present in this world. That darkness can be diminished through all kind, humane and generous actions by ordinary people. Wherever people care for each other, there is the light of God, and there is the kingdom of heaven that Jesus often preached about.

Be our light in the darkness, O Lord, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this life; make us calm in the face of fear, turn our minds toward caring for all people, incline our hearts to seek truth and to spread hope; all for the love of your only Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.