

**Understanding Exorcism:
An Interview with Father Jeffrey Grob,
Specialist in the Rite of Exorcism By JOSEPH O'BRIEN**

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved the English translation of
De Exorcismis et Supplicationibus Quibusdam, editio typica in November 2014.
The final text of *Exorcisms and Related Supplications* (ERS) was confirmed by the Holy See
in December 2016 and implemented in the dioceses of the United States as of June 29, 2017.

An early December story in *The Hollywood Reporter* recounts the first time that Hollywood actress Meryl Streep and legendary director Steven Spielberg met. “Most of the time,” Streep recalled in the December 5 story by Peter Galloway, she and Spielberg “talked about how his property was haunted and did I know anybody who did exorcisms? And of course, I did. I got him a priest.”

This comment from a member of the Hollywood community might come as a surprise to some people. After all, Streep works for the same business that produced a legion of movies about the devil—from *Rosemary’s Baby* to *The Omen* to *The Exorcist*—all in one way giving the devil more than his due by sensationalizing evil. Sure, images of devil and hellfire help maximize ticket sales—but do people in Hollywood actually believe all this Satan stuff?

While it’s not clear from *The Hollywood Reporter* story whether the famed director rid his house of the suspected evil, it is clear that even those who make fantasies for a living accept that the devil is real and that when he shows up on its doorstep, even the world of make-believe knows there’s only one place to turn: the Catholic Church.

Perhaps implicit in Streep’s recommendation to Spielberg is an understanding that believer and non-believer alike acknowledge, grudgingly or not—that the Catholic Church alone offers a direct, no-nonsense and effective solution to demonic affliction. To this end, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) recently published a booklet *Prayers against the Power of Darkness*, taken from the appendix to the Rite of Exorcism, called *Exorcisms and Related Supplications* in the United States.

The rite serves as only the latest reminder that the Catholic Church possesses a long-standing, measured, tried-and-true—and faith-filled—approach to demonic activity.

One person who wouldn't be surprised to find even Spielberg and Co. consulting the Church on matters undreamt of in their special effects is Father Jeffrey Grob, vicar for canonical affairs and judicial vicar for the Archdiocese of Chicago. An expert in the Rite of Exorcism, Father Grob received a doctoral degree in 2007 after writing a thesis on the revision of the Rite of Exorcism.

Ordained to the priesthood for the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1992, Father Grob was born in Cross Plains, WI. He studied for the priesthood at the Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, OH, and University of St. Mary of the Lake, Mundelein Seminary, Mundelein, IL. Today, in his capacity as vicar for canonical affairs and judicial vicar of the archdiocese, Father Grob has plenty of first-hand knowledge of the Rite of Exorcism and the ministry which serves those suffering spiritual affliction.

Adoremus Bulletin spoke with Father Grob about the nature, history, and need for exorcism, and why the Church provides such a ministry to a world broken by sin and tempted by the Evil One.

Adoremus Bulletin (AB): How did your interest in exorcism develop as part of your priesthood?

Father Jeffrey Grob (FG): After ordination, I was an associate pastor for six years but then was asked after a few years of ordination to work part-time in the chancery at Chicago, from 1994 to 1998. Then I went on to do studies in canon law, obtained my licentiate, and stayed on to earn a doctorate in canon law as well. The Rite of Exorcism had been revised and promulgated on November 22, 1998 and was published in

January 1999. Right after that, I wanted to do something in the area of liturgical law, and the priest who was my thesis director suggested I write on the revised Rite of Exorcism since virtually nothing had been written up to that time on the revision. It was a wide-open topic. So when it came to my interest in exorcism, there was no great planning or visions—I rather backed into it by way of academic work.

AB: How did that work take you to the work of processing exorcisms for the Archdiocese of Chicago?

FG: While I was working on my thesis, I also worked full-time in the Office of Canonical Services for the Archdiocese of Chicago. It was at that point that I started working with the Archdiocesan exorcist, helping to process intake—that is, responding to people making inquiries and seeking help to determine whether they were dealing with cases of spiritual affliction or even demonic possession.

AB: What is exorcism as defined by the Church?

FG: The Catechism of the Catholic Church specifically defines what exorcism is: “When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism” (1673). Effectively, the ministry is the Church freeing someone or something from some kind of attack from or domination by the Evil One, the devil. There are so many different names for the devil in tradition and scripture. Often I will refer to the devil as the Evil One. In the Lord’s Prayer, some translations say “Deliver us from Evil” while other translations say “Deliver us from the Evil One.” The world has lost, I think, that sense of evil as a personal reality and this name restores some of that sense.

AB: You mentioned not only persons but also things are capable of being possessed. How do “things” get possessed?

FG: The underlying question for possessed objects is similar to that of a possessed person. You don't simply wake up one morning and find yourself demonically afflicted or possessed. The same is true with things. If it's a house or a building, we have to ask what brought darkness or evil into this place. Was it by some kind of action—Satanic worship, or some sort of violence through homicide or suicide? There can be numerous doorways through which the darkness can enter. And at times we struggle to understand theologically how it happens.

AB: What are some common misunderstandings of the Rite of Exorcism?

FG: First, we don't want to give the devil too much authority or power. At the same time I'm not trying to downplay the fact that he is very powerful and has honed his craft for a very long time. But some people want to put him on a par with God. There is only one God, though, and the Evil One is a creature. He has a beginning. So in that sense the dog is on the leash. It doesn't mean the devil doesn't retain the supernatural gifts he possessed before the fall, but he can't do anything unless God allows it. He's not God so he doesn't have the privileges of God. God creates *ex nihilo*. The Evil One can only manipulate already-created matter—and he's good at it. He lives to instill fear and isolation in the human soul.

Second, there's a tendency to want to lump all kinds of demonic activity together without making distinctions between temptation, obsession, oppression, and demonic possession. We can't equate these activities. The only time a person needs to see an exorcist, I maintain, is when the person is demonically possessed.

Third, there's the misapprehension that the individual will plays no part in these activities. What does a person open himself up to in allowing the affliction in the first place? It can happen through human sinfulness, weakness of the will, or by directly engaging of the occult—there's a lot of woundedness in the world for the devil to work with. The Evil one loves woundedness. How can he get manipulate that?

On the other hand, what responsibility is mine? How have I engaged or invited the Evil One? These activities are all relationships. In a certain sense, it's no different from our relationship with God. How do we develop a relationship with God? For Catholics, the sacraments are the center of our life. It is a life of grace and prayer.

AB: What is the difference between the kinds of affliction—temptation, obsession, and possession?

FG: First, temptation is part of the human condition, part of life in the body and in the world. As humans, we are tempted. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the temptation of Jesus before beginning his public ministry shows that all humans are subjected to the same challenges that Jesus had, although he was of course free from sin. It is part of the ordinary activities of evil.

But then crossing the line from ordinary temptation to extraordinary affliction, we say a person has actively opened a doorway to something—to a darkness. A person has engaged or started a relationship with the Evil One. The Church has used two terms—demonic obsession and demonic oppression—to describe this sort of affliction. Interestingly, obsession is the oldest term, and the only one that appears in the older rite. In classic theology books, three terms are used—temptation, obsession, and possession.

Oppression appears on the scene in the 1970s and 1980s, in an attempt to differentiate between afflictions, attacks or manipulations of the mind (obsession) and of the body (oppression) by the Evil One.

Then demonic possession is the radical extreme by which a mind and body is afflicted by the Evil One.

AB: How are exorcists trained to discern these kinds of affliction?

FG: The exorcist should always be evaluating. It's worded well in the *praenotanda* or guidelines of the revised rite—that exorcists shouldn't be too quick to either believe that the devil is there or that he isn't. What has been added in the guidelines that are not found in the ancient rite is that the exorcist should have moral certitude (#16). It is similar to a judge in a marriage nullity case: moral certitude is not absolute certitude, but it's more than possibility. It's based on proofs and that's how the exorcist determines moral certitude.

AB: Clinically, what is the difference in terms of symptoms between obsession and oppression and possession?

FG: The person is assessed physically and psychologically first. The most difficult cases are a both/and—both mental health issues and demonic affliction. It's easier for the exorcist if it's one or the other. But in the process of evaluating, there may be something more than the psychological. At that point, the exorcist needs to find out what that "something more" is.

Since the Middle Ages, the exorcist has used four criteria to find out what that “something more” is—four phenomena which may serve as proofs that the problem is more than psychological.

First, there is the knowledge of languages, which is more than picking up a phrase book of a language an individual doesn't know and spouting off a few well-known expressions in French or Italian. Rather the individual is conversational in a language that the individual has no knowledge of.

Second, there is knowledge of occult things. An exorcist may walk into a room where someone is afflicted and the victim may reveal things about the exorcist that he wouldn't be privy to even with a Google search. They would be personal kinds of things.

Third, the person would have extraordinary strength. It's one thing for an Arnold Schwarzenegger in his heyday to bench-press 300 pounds; it's quite another for a 70-year old woman of slight build to throw five or six grown men around like ragdolls.

Fourth, the person would exhibit an aversion of the sacred, a hatred of either prayers or objects such as crucifixes or holy water.

Those are the four criteria used, and they appear in the ancient rite, and revisited in the revised rite.

AB: How does possession differ from obsession?

FG: With obsession and oppression, to use an image, the walls of the castle are being scaled, but entry has not been gained. But in possession, that entry has been made. Oftentimes, with obsession, the person could be hearing voices, which isn't a clinical

issue but a spiritual one. The person finds he's unable to pray or focus because of these voices. Also, there can be an enticement to suicide.

Oppression, which targets the body, usually entails an attack of the senses; for instance, everything a person smells or tastes is putrid. There could be lesions, cuts, or scrapes on the body that appear without explanation as physical attacks. The person can see things or hear things audibly instead of voices in the head. It is usually in that window of time, once a person has crossed over into the extraordinary activity of the devil but before he becomes possessed, that the individual reaches out for help. Sadly some people go to other places before they show up at the doorstep of the Church. They'll go to a healer or some sort of occult medium, which will often make matters worse.

AB: Can souls be possessed against their will or does possession take place by “invitation only”?

FG: The question is debatable. There is no absolute rule, but by and large possession happens when someone willfully—and not always ignorantly—opens himself up to something dark or evil. On the other hand, there are cases—look at the saints—where horrible things happened to them. Theresa of Avila was pushed down the stairs by a demon; Padre Pio and John Vianney and Mother Teresa of Calcutta were all demonically afflicted. Did they open themselves up to it? No, but as in the case of Job, God permits such things to happen from time to time in a way to refine the gold in the soul.

Also, exorcists have seen situations where the parents of a child are in a satanic cult and dedicate the child to Satan. It is a sort of false version of baptism, but it could very well have a catastrophic effect on that child. There's no volition in such a situation and before the child knows it he's being afflicted in different ways. It's much more easily

remedied in that way, too, though, because it does not involve the will. For instance, baptism removes not only original sin but also anything evil that has touched the child.

At other times, it might not be as obvious but as you pray with the person, and time goes on, the exorcist finds out that the person did something that inadvertently opened a door to darkness. The Ouija Board is a good example. Many don't know it's harmful but think it's merely a party game.

AB: In determining the line between the supernatural and natural causes, does the exorcist prefer a team of medical specialists who are believers or non-believers?

FG: If the specialists are going to be helpful in assessment, my sense is that they have to believe on some level. They must at least be open to the possibility that there may be "something more" than what is explainable only in the medical realm. Their honest opinion is necessary—is it medical or psychiatric? They also should be able to say there's "something more." Can they at least ask what that "something more" is? Most exorcists welcome the opportunity to work with a medical professional who offers an assessment that remains open to explanations outside of what modern science deems "possible." If the specialist, whether a believer or not, simply said it's not possible that there is a supernatural explanation, then that doesn't help the matter.

AB: There's a tendency to sensationalize exorcism, especially given the fare coming out of Hollywood. How close is the celluloid account close to the reality of exorcism?

FG: Are there cases similar to what was depicted in, say, *The Exorcist*? Yes, there are. But, perhaps to the disappointment of the sensation-seekers, the vast majority of cases

is much more low-key. Hollywood is in the business of selling seats and tickets, but not necessarily to be a purveyor of the truth and accuracy in what the Church does.

AB: How do you respond to the criticism that exorcism is antiquated, especially given the strides in modern psychology and psychiatric medicine?

FG: Generally speaking, there are whole classes of people who believe that there's no problem that can't be resolved by psychology. Modern science to the rescue! But isn't that the Evil One working there too? C.S. Lewis said a long time ago in the *Screwtape Letters* that the devil's greatest victory is that people no longer believe in him. What is there to fear?

There is a polarity between extremes—either the Evil One doesn't exist at all and was a creation of the Middle Ages which nuns ever since have used for centuries to torment students to make sure they behave in the classroom—or he's responsible for everything, hiding behind every rock, bush, shrub, you name it. Neither extreme is our tradition. Know our tradition if you want to understand exorcism. It's very clear and goes back to the time of our Lord.

AB: Scripturally, what are the most powerful passages exorcists use against the power of the Evil One?

FG: Interestingly enough in all the ancient forms of exorcism, long before it was promulgated for the Universal Church in 1614, the most frequently cited text was the Prologue of St. John. "In the beginning was the Word...." Most especially effective has been the declaration that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).

AB: Briefly, how did the Rite of Exorcism develop in the Church?

FG: Early on in the Church, figures such as St. John Chrysostom and Tertullian said that anyone in virtue of their baptism could exorcise. It wasn't a rite but a name—the name of Jesus. But this notion is grounded in scripture. The Apostles suffered persecution for the sake of Jesus's name. That was the case for the first several centuries of the Church. Then at the Fourth Council of Carthage [398] we see for the first time the ordination of the exorcist. It remained a minor order for centuries.

At Mundelein Seminary here in Chicago, visitors to the chapel can see printed on the steps leading up to the sanctuary each of what the Church considered the minor orders, including that of exorcist. The exorcist continued as a minor order until 1972 when Blessed Pope Paul VI revised the minor orders altogether.

But in the development of the Rite of Exorcism, it isn't until 1614 that we see a formal rite of exorcism for the universal Church, which was, like much else in the Church at the time, such as the seminary system and liturgical books, formalized and standardized during the time of the Reformation. There were many indigenous, localized prayers used, and a few small manuscripts here and there, many of which contained the Prologue of John as a principal scripture piece in those prayers. Effectively, from 1614 down to 1998, there were a couple minor changes to the rite down through the centuries. In 1998, the revised rite was promulgated, which was already called for as a result of the Second Vatican Council.

AB: What did the revisions to the Rite of Exorcism entail?

FG: The changes entailed the reordering of contents in the rite, but the revisions also sought to evoke the catechetical process of the early Christian Church. If you put side

by side the outline and structure of the ancient rite and the revised rite, you see that there is very much a catechetical movement in the revised rite, as reflected in the emphasis on the renunciations and a renewal of baptismal promises, among other things.

AB: What does Canon Law say about exorcism?

FG: The current Code of Canon Law of 1983 speaks specifically in canon 1172 about exorcism. In the first paragraph, the canon speaks to the express permission a priest needs to perform an exorcism. This law is necessary because, as with all laws of the Church, it is meant to protect the faithful. In this case, without proper authorization, a priest who performs an exorcism puts himself and the individual in question at risk.

The second paragraph talks about the qualities of a priest in terms of piety, knowledge and basic holiness of life. It's a brief canon. Interestingly, it finds itself among a handful of canons that speak about sacramentals, because the Rite of Exorcism is a sacramental. These would be the principal laws regarding exorcism. As a priest, you have to have the express permission of the bishop. You have to be appointed to that role. Not any priest can simply pick up the Rite of Exorcism and have at it. He should have that letter granting the express permission of the bishop.

Performing the Rite of Exorcism isn't for everyone. The individual who is doing this has specialized training and knowledge. It's a unique rite that's used, not with frequency. In the revision of the rite, it restored an earlier sense of how closely the exorcist is tied to the ministry of the bishop and his authority and pastoral care of souls in a particular diocese. There are enough folks, priests included, who are overly curious about this ministry. It's not child's play. In the permission, the priest who is an exorcist has the protection of the Church.

AB: How frequently is the Rite of Exorcism used today?

FG: It's used as often as is needed. I've not kept records of how often exorcisms have been performed in the Archdiocese of Chicago. I do believe full-blown demonic possession remains rare. There are a lot of borderline cases, obsession or oppression; those have increased because of the number of people opening themselves up to all sorts of dark things.

AB: What is the general shape or outline of the rite?

FG: It begins with preparation of the exorcist and the team who pray with the person. We put on the armor of Christ through confession, Mass and personal prayer. In general, the rite starts with the Litany of the Saints, the ancient and revised versions both talk about the use of the Litany. Then there are preparatory prayers—the psalms and gospel readings. Then the core prayers appear in a set, addressed to God first and then invoking God in a prayer which is addressed directly to the possessing spirit or spirits. In many ways, it's a simple series of prayers. The rite is clear but exorcists can add other prayers as they go along or between the formal praying of the rite—such as other litanies and prayers to the Mother of God and to other specific saints.

There's an order to the prayers, too. You must always address a prayer to God first and then you may wish to use the prayer addressed to the demonic entity. But you never reverse that order. You never address the prayers to the demon only. After all, this is God's work—Jesus is the exorcist, not the priest.

AB: Do exorcists find some prayers more effective than others?

FG: That's unique to every case. That's why oftentimes, exorcists do have someone as part of the prayer team who keeps notes of those kinds of things. Those are the things you want to revisit. In this ministry, exorcists are trying to bring solace and relief to the suffering; we're not looking to make them suffer more. But we are looking for the hot-spots and pressure points, the prayers which elicit a response, if you will—and return to those prayers, phrases, references to saints, or titles of Mary—it could be a whole host of things—that have a demonstrable effect.

AB: Why has the USCCB issued the *Prayers against the Powers of Darkness*?

FG: There is a second appendix in the revised rite which is a collection of prayers. Effectively that is what has been published in a little booklet as *Prayers against the Powers of Darkness*. These prayers were intended to be used by the laity because, truth be told, there are so many pamphlets and booklets and prayer books with a whole host of authors—including some questionable authors who do not have the approbation of the Church and, frankly, have poor theology. So, this collection, forming Appendix II of the revised rite of exorcism, the laity can use with peace of mind, knowing it has been approved by the Church.