

More Letters

Reader Missed Intent of Novel

Editor:

Since Miss Anne Christoff has chosen your "letters" page (2-2-72) to fire off a few salvos at me and my ostensibly diabolical practices and friends, may I ask the courtesy of a few rounds myself on the same firing range?

Miss Christoff says first that "The Exorcist" "was written by a sick man about sick people." Taken as a criticism of any book, that is hardly as damning as Miss Christoff suspects. The same thing could have been said about Dostoevsky and "The Brothers Karamazov". However, I know Bill Blatty, and as his friend I resent the calumnious assertion that he is "sick". I can testify from personal experience that he is not only quite well-balanced mentally but also is a very gentle, extraordinarily generous and even holy man.

Miss Christoff's allegations about The Exorcist are more a criticism of her own unfamiliarity with the way novels communicate than with the novel she censures. My own first and unjustifiable suspicion was that she might not have read the whole novel, or at least that she had not read it with an eye to its deeply Christian statement. Those who go out with their nasty-nice sensibilities honed for action at the first vulgar word they spot in a novel ordinarily miss anything altruistic. But such a suspicion is unjustified on my part, since I apparently know far less about Miss Christoff than she purportedly knows about me. Let me say simply that if she missed the exchange between Fr. Merrin and Fr. Karras regarding God's possible reasons for allowing diabolical possession, she ought to give the novel a fairer chance.

She also says that The Exorcist is "bizarre, unnecessarily explicit about Black Masses, possession, etc." Of course it is bizarre. Could it be otherwise? Of course it is about sick people. That is Blatty's whole point — that those people are sick, out of kilter, missing the whole point of human living. Regan MacNeill, the possessed girl, is only more dramatically sick, not sicker than her empty mother, or the bibulous and casually foul-mouthed director, or the servant slavishly feeding his own daughter's drug habit, or even Karras, the psychiatrist — priest, whose self-detestation undermines his faith and blinds him to God's forgiveness.

Furthermore, how does one treat a Black Mass delicately? It is rather like asking Renoir to paint the carnage of Hiroshima — to make it, prettier, less offensive. Doesn't Miss Christoff realize that such bowdlerizing only allows us to bury our heads in the sand, that muting down the ugliness of evil allows us to rest easier with it and thus absolve ourselves of any need to do anything about it? May I remind her that Black Masses are ugly, vile, obscene. That is, of course, no justification for parading them. However, if Miss Christoff would acquaint herself with the growing thousands of young people who are tempted to dabble in the occult, she might understand that in this novel Bill Blatty has what he believes to be — and I quote him — an "apostolic purpose". The Exorcist is to lamper with the occult exactly what all those ugly picture of junkies and needles are to kids tempted to smoke pot.

But this was his negative apostolic purpose. Positively, he attempted to show at least to the discerning reader that without the Light, the Darkness is overwhelming, brutal, obscene. Our only hope is to become the Sons of Light, and if Fr. Merrin isn't one of those,

I don't know many literary characters who are: It is by an act of love, of gut trust in the mercy of God that Damien Karras redeems Regan — and himself. It should not escape Miss Christoff that we ourselves were redeemed from the same Darkness by the God-Man who cried out "My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me!"

I resent also Miss Christoff's condescension to my students, whom she describes as my "young readers". This calls to my mind — and I presume to others who read her letter — a picture of rosy-cheeked children, unsullied by the ugly world of adults. Since she didn't bother to inquire before attacking me in print, may I inform her here that my "young readers" are all 17 or 18 years old, in an Advanced Placement English class, all with IQs over 130, trained for three years to see the whole context of a novel and not to snigger sophomorically over the dirty parts.

Finally, I bristle at her statement that Bill Blatty's acknowledgement of gratitude to the Jesuits "doesn't say much for the Jesuits". I bristle not because she negates 400 years of work and thousands of men with an ill-considered phrase, but because the acknowledgement didn't make her stop and think: "Maybe this is not a sick man. Maybe — just maybe — there might be something in the novel that I missed."

Miss Christoff says she is "thankful that Fr. O'Malley is going to Hollywood where he belongs." Even an arrogance as notorious as my own could not interpret that as meaning she is pleased that my histrionic talents have at last been recognized by the hitherto heartless media. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I interpret her little prayer of gratitude to mean she is glad that I am going back to my hellish fellows in diabolic Cinemaville. Before she assumes the full role of separator of sheep from goats, may I suggest she stop guessing what I do and what I teach and what kind of man I am. She might do the same for William Peter Blatty.

Fr. William J. O'Malley, S.J.
McQuaid High School

Fr. O'Malley, Jesuits Lauded

Editor:

Although the Courier-Journal has gradually been acquiring a new look with area columnists, cartoons and the "One Parish" column, I didn't realize it had also acquired a new book reviewer. That is until I read Anne Christoff's critique of "Exorcist" in a letter to the editor, (2-2-72).

Mrs. Christoff doesn't like "Exorcist". That could be considered an understatement. She found it "bizarre", about "sick people", written by a sick man. Since the author thanked the Jesuit Order for training his mind, Mrs. Christoff is also having second thoughts about the Jesuits, and in particular, Father William O'Malley.

I haven't read Exorcist yet so I can't quibble or question her judgment. However, three of our sons received Jesuit training and teaching at McQuaid High School. If teaching still means to impart knowledge, and if training still means to develop habits and behavior through discipline and instruction, I have to join the author and thank the Jesuits, too.

I also have to disagree with Mrs. Christoff when she wishes Father O'Malley "Godspeed to Hollywood". After enjoying his performance in The Glass Menageries last month, I'm sure that MGM would surely like to add him to their firmament of stars. Wouldn't it be a shame though to deprive many of the McQuaid of boys their confidant,

mentor, teacher, and spiritual adviser? Our family sincerely hopes that Father O'Malley will receive his 50-year pin at McQuaid. We can think of nothing finer than having him teach our grandsons to live each day using their talents and abilities to their fullest with an abiding love in God. In other words, to follow his example.

Mrs. Richard Rapp
Lima

DENTAL HEALTH WEEK
Brockport — The Tri-County Dental Assistants Society will mark Children's Dental Health Week by sponsoring a puppet show Saturday, Feb. 12, at the Big N department store 6465 Brockport-Spencerport Rd.

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Tickets may be obtained by contacting Mrs. James Brown at 607-734-5596 after 6 p.m. Tickets also may be purchased at the door.

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