

Father O'Malley

... From a High School Classroom to an 'R' Rated Movie

By PAT PETRASKE

Can a movie that a priest-turned-actor found "excruciating" and that holds potential danger for the credulous, still win his approval?

"It's a film worth betting myself on," exclaimed Father William O'Malley in reference to the controversial film "The Exorcist." It was the kind of comment you might expect from someone who appears in the film. He was dealing with the question: "What's a Nice Priest Like You Doing in a Movie Like That?"

But despite his participation in the film and his friendship with William Peter Blatty, author and producer, Father O'Malley did not give a blanket endorsement to "The Exorcist," nor did he apologize for its shortcomings in his talk to the Alumnae Association of Nazareth College.

It could have been called "Father O'Malley takes on the Critics" as the youthful McQuaid English and drama teacher last week deftly answered the objections voiced by movie critics. "Even the critics who liked 'Last Tango in Paris' thought 'The Exorcist' should be rated X," Father O'Malley said.

He first saw the movie in its entirety when it opened for the critics in New York and it was enough to make him wonder if he had lent his "name, his order and his Church to an evil film."

If the movie is "evil" it is because so many "credulous people are going to attribute their neurosis to a scapegoat devil," he began. Of these people "99.9999 percent who think they are possessed are not." Already his phone is ringing with calls asking him to discuss or else perform exorcism on friends or relatives.

'Exorcist Is Harmful,' Priest Cautions

New York [CPJ] — A Catholic priest who has written and lectured widely on the occult has warned that books and films like Rosemary's Baby and The Exorcist can help to give people an erroneous idea of the Devil and his power.

Father Richard Woods, OP, a Dominican, gives considerable attention to the film version of William Blatty's novel, The Exorcist, in his own book, The Devil (Thomas More Press, Chicago).

"From my own experience with ordinary, nonsophisticated, Midwestern Catholics who think they are possessed — mainly because they have read The Exorcist — I do not think that a belief in the power of demons necessarily leads to belief in God or a reliance on his power," Father Woods writes.

Father Woods was challenging a statement attributed to Exorcist author and film producer Blatty, who said that his motive in writing the famed novel about the possession of a movie star's daughter was "to persuade those who do not believe that there is a case to be made for the supernatural and to offer the possibility that there is a supernatural force of evil in the universe whose game plan is to convince us that he does not exist."

Father Woods, who has taught a popular course on the occult at Loyola University in Chicago, responded further:

"The first step of the ritual for me would be to get the hell out of town," said Father O'Malley.

What the film does underline, and what many people miss is the Church's refusal to consider exorcism until the last resort. "When people see that movie they hear only what they want to hear. They don't hear that Regan (the young girl who is possessed) has been to 80 doctors or that it is not an ordinary priest who performs the ritual. The primary thing to emphasize is that most people don't need it," he said.

Father O'Malley has come a long way since the time he wrote his own play out of spite for not getting a part in the class play. His talent and knowledge of the theater prompted Mildred Boylan of the Friends of the Rochester Public Library to ask him to review Blatty's book for their weekly "Books Sandwiched-in" series. "I came so close to saying no," said Father O'Malley, shaking his head at the turn in events.

He sent his critique to Blatty, whom he had known at Brooklyn Prep School. Back came a three-page letter. "This is my 3,000 word thank you note to the Jesuits for my education," Blatty wrote.

Over dinner in New York Blatty and Father O'Malley dissected every aspect of the book. The priest-critic felt that the character of Father Dyer was "too cutesy-flip" and within two weeks he was again priest-actor, having been offered the role.

"I asked my superior for permission and he rolled his eyes to heaven and said okay," Father O'Malley laughed. "I play 'Joe-congenial-idiot,' real type-casting."

"I do not think that the new awareness of the supernatural gained from The Exorcist will do great good, any more than stock Dracula movies do, which are also replete with priests, crosses and other symbols of the sacred. "But unlike the Dracula films, The Exorcist can do a great amount of harm by convincing the credulous and fearful that demonic possession is an explanation for the felt presence of evil, that the power of Satan is greater than it really is, that God is silent when we need him most."

Father Woods points out that despite the "happy ending" of The Exorcist, with the devil being driven from the body of the child, Regan, no characters in the novel had their faith in God increased.

"Like Regan's mother (who ends up believing in Satan, not God), some people simply stop at the demonic because possession is sufficient to explain the conditions of the times, both within and without," Father Woods said of people who see Satan as the ultimate cause of all man's problems.

"While requesting exorcism, the Dominican scholar continued, "such persons are ambivalently loathe to relinquish their demons. Told that there is no real evidence that they are possessed, they are disappointed, often refusing to believe it."

They seem to prefer the demons to acknowledging their own responsibility for the moral

Pauline Kael wrote in the New Yorker (1/8/74) that few people would dare complain about the movie because "two Jesuits appear in the cast and served, with a third, as technical advisors." Another critic said the priests were "stripped of their objectivity" when given roles to play.

"All I did was to show Jason Miller (Father Karras) how to say Mass," Father O'Malley tossed back.

To Miss Kael's remark that "it's the biggest recruiting poster for the Catholic Church since Going My Way," Father O'Malley replied:

"She thinks the movie's purpose is to scare people to Church. Fear may not be a bad first motive but it's not going to make people keep on going. It's like it was after Kennedy's death; I was in the confessional box from 5 to 11 p.m. Masses were packed, but they aren't packed anymore. The Church has to get at the soul, not just the mind."

Father O'Malley realizes that critics like Miss Kael and Vincent Canby of the New York Times, who also "eviscerated" the movie "aren't dumb." "But I saw something that they didn't see," Father O'Malley contended. He discussed five main objections the critics had raised.

*Effect on Linda Blair (a 14-year-old girl who plays Regan) — "Anyone who's been on a film set knows there is not tension and realism but boredom. It's hard to get into a frame of mind when you have a camera man, directors, hairdressers and a makeup man standing around." The criteria for selecting Miss Blair included psychological stability. "She's not crazy about the movie; she'd rather ride

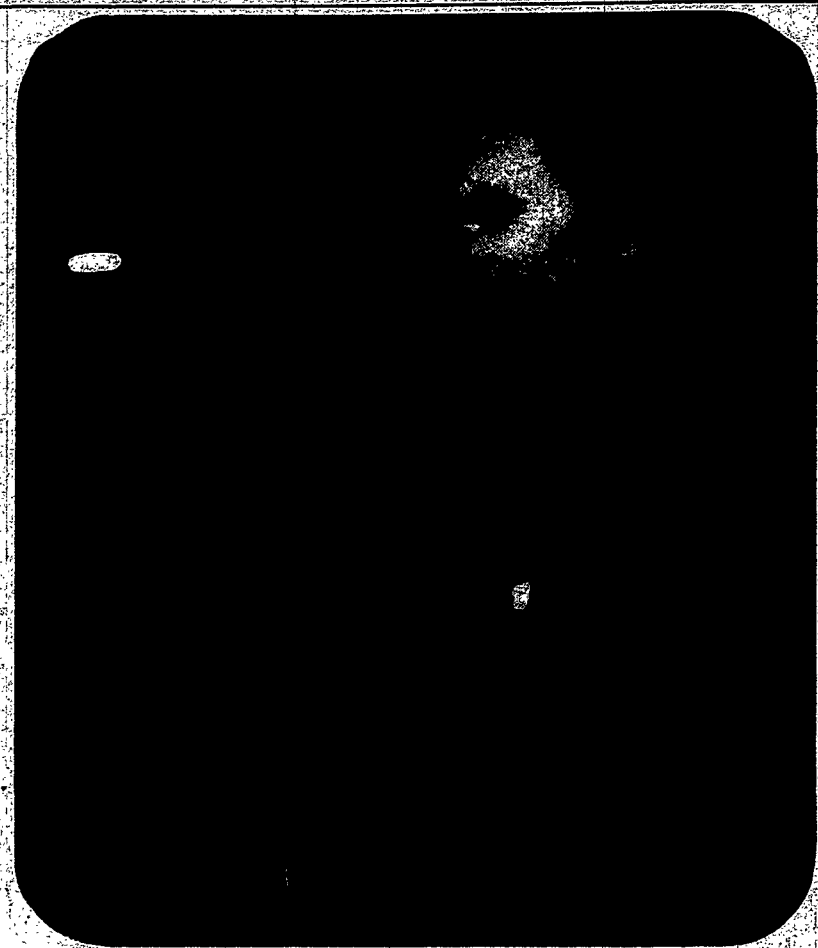


Photo by Susan McKinney

horses." Father O'Malley indicated that Miss Blair was assisted by a psychiatrist and a stunt woman.

*The prologue — Canby described the beginning of The Exorcist as "an eerie sequence at an archeological dig that is not especially essential." Father O'Malley's comment: "The opening sets the framework of the film and reveals that it is not going to be demon against the mother or demon against Regan, but the demon against Merrin. The prologue foretells who the intended target really is."

*Romanticizing of evil — "Surely he jests," exploded Father O'Malley who believes it is movies like the "Kung-Fu-Eastwood genre" that make evil look like fun. "The movie is almost unbearably repellent; no one is going to say 'Gee that looks groovy, let's go out and buy a Ouija Board.'" But the events

depicted have happened, but Father O'Malley is not sure "whether they are due to a demon or a sickness of the mind."

*Anti-intellectual — This is perhaps the greatest bone of contention for the priest. He chastises those who believe "gullibility is a cardinal sin." The movie's purpose is "to make us think about a transcendent God. Is it irrational to accept transcendent realities?" he asked. Father O'Malley is firm in his belief in God but is agnostic about the existence of demons. "The movie shows how we need to grapple with the question of how man stands in the universe."

*Revolutionary — "It was the most excruciating two hours I've spent. Use discretion when going to see it, and for heaven's sake don't take the children." The use of obscenity is more than an attention getter. "Possession does become obscene; events like these have happened."

ON THE LINE

The President of the United States was as touchy as a boil, and now he had an audience composed mainly of White House correspondents, cartoonists and others who had been critical of him and some of his most trusted associates.

The President, his jowls a quiver, said, "You are like the character in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, the man with the muckrake. He could look no way but downward at the muckrake in his hands, the man who was offered a celestial crown for his muckrake but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth on the floor."

The President got a lot of other things off his chest that night. He condemned the press for undermining public confidence in the government and harming public morale by looking only at the bad sides of things. He called the media "reckless and irresponsible" in its exposes, and made it clear that he had his own private "enemies list."

President Nixon? Nope. President Theodore Roosevelt, circa 1906.

He was further angered when his outburst — made in the course of his speech at the Gridiron Club dinner, at which everything said was to be off-the-record — was "leaked" all over Washington the following morning. This led him to call an on-the-record press conference a few weeks later. His tone was

more moderate this time, though he did not back up on "reckless and irresponsible." Indeed, he had a few words of praise for writers and cartoonists who attacked social ills "legitimately."

But by word and deed, the President was at war with the press as Presidents before and after him often found themselves.

"Teddy was furious at Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Samuel Hopkins Adams, David Graham Phillips, Upton Sinclair and other writers and their editors," observes historian Clark Kinnaird. "He was against anybody who aroused public feeling against the Administration and its supporters. On the whole, he did not think it fair to expose corruption in the big cities, the shady deals by Republican members of Congress, and the finagling of bureaucrats. He was particularly incensed by the revelation that the Administration had taken no action on cynical adulteration of food and drug products. Ida Tarbell was hardly welcome at the White House after her devastating treatise on the ruthlessness of John D. Rockefeller in making himself oligarch of the petroleum world, and the first hard-money billionaire."

Roosevelt was sensitive to what he considered the lese majesty of cartoonists. No President since Lincoln was caricatured more disrespectfully. But it was the investigative reporters — the muckrakers, as he named them — who mainly gave him umbrage.

It all sounds so familiar