

The Church Can Conquer Satan

By Father Albert J. Shamon

The other night a group of high school seniors, with their religion teachers (a man and wife team) went with me to see *The Exorcist*. After the film, we had a snack and discussion. Fathers Lynch and Kanka were also there.

One of the first questions that came up was, "How is it some people let the devil get inside them?" There were at least two answers.

First, **ghosts haunt empty houses.** Our Lord once told a parable about an unclean spirit being driven out of a man. The demon went into the desert seeking a resting place. Finding none, he returned to the home he had left. He found it unoccupied. So getting seven other spirits more wicked than himself, he re-entered the man. And the last state of that man was worse than the first. (Mt. 12:43-45).

In the movie, Regan's mother is a beautiful actress, but she is more "foul-mouthed" than a Billingsgate fishmonger. Her profanity and blasphemous language underscore her utter lack of faith. As the mother, so the child: Regan had no religion. To fill the inner void, she sculpts, watches TV (Captain Howdy), finds a ouija board and begins using it. There is an old saying: "The devil tempts man, but the idle man tempts the devil." As leaving one's keys in a car is an invitation to a car thief, so the spiritually empty soul invites the Evil One. He, too, like nature, abhors a vacuum and rushes in. Thus today drugs, drink, dames, and/or demons often rush into the vacuum-packed hearts of so many youths. Ghosts haunt empty houses. The house of Regan's soul was empty!

Another reason for demonic indwelling is **contempt for the cross!** The temptations of Jesus in the desert were simply an appeal to take the easy way out. When Peter sought to talk Jesus out of the cross, Jesus wheeled on him and called him, "You Satan!" (Mt. 8:33). It was His enemies who shouted, "come down off that cross" (Mt. 27:40). Regan and her mother lived the easy life. They had three servants for two people! St. Ignatius in the Spiritual Exercises likens the devil to a robber going down a corridor of rooms. He tries every door. If he finds one open, he enters and rifles the room. **We open the door to Satan by sins, especially sins of self-indulgence.** Regan had anything she wanted; her divorced mother was likewise self-indulgent. Both were portrayed as having no faith and little, if any, morals. Is it to be wondered at, then, that Satan snaked his way into Regan's house? The door was wide open (cp. Eph. 4:26).

Another question that came up, was about the frequency of possession. Some of the group confessed that, previous to seeing this picture, they never had the slightest inkling of such a thing happening to people. "Is possession a frequent occurrence?" they asked.

Yes and no. Before Christ, possession was quite rampant. Was Satan lying when he showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world and said, "All these are mine"? After Christ, demonic power diminishes in proportion as the Church of Christ spreads the gospel. When the seventy-two disciples returned to Jesus after their first missionary journey, they were jubilant, saying: "Master, even the demons are subject to us in your name." Then in a flight of ecstatic vision, Jesus

replied elatedly, "I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Jesus was saying that the preaching of the gospel was the beginning of a quick ending for Satan.

Besides her word, the Church has her sacraments and sacramentals. I think it was a revelation to the young seniors of our discussion group when I told them that at every baptism there is an exorcism. The exorcism at baptism is not "drive out the devil," but to express the fact that the Christian life is a struggle with the powers of evil. "Our battle is not against human forces but against evil spirits" (Eph. 6:12).

I showed the group my stole, which most priests carry, and which is used at baptism. I explained that when the priest draped the stole around his shoulders, it signified that he was acting in the name of the Church. And because he is, the prayers he utters at baptism are so very powerful. The Church is the bride of Christ, and Christ always hears His spouse. Thus the Church has little fear of the outcome of the struggle between her children and Satan.

In conjunction with her prayers at baptism, the Church uses gestures. For instance, she signs the child with the sign of the cross. It is a "No Trespassing" sign to the devil. It says in effect that this child belongs to God — Stay Out! Then further to strengthen the child and to prepare it to become the abode of its Rightful owner, a temple of the Holy Spirit, the priest anoints the child's breast with oil. Should Satan ever enter a person so consecrated, as he did Judas, it will happen only if the Christian has first betrayed Christ.

Besides her sacraments, the Church uses sacramentals. In the movie, Regan's mother asked the priest what holy water was. Holy water is water blessed by the Church — not just by the priest. First, he blesses salt. Salt preserves. Salt seasons. Here is part of the Church's prayer in blessing the salt: "I exorcise you that you may put to flight and drive away from places where you are sprinkled every apparition, villiany, and turn of devilish deceit, and every unclean spirit. . . May it protect from every assault of the evil spirit."

Then the water is blessed with words like these: "I exorcise you so that you may put to flight all power of the enemy, and be able to root out and supplant the enemy with his apostate angels." Then the salt is mixed with the water and the priest prays: "Wherever this water and salt is sprinkled, may it turn aside every attack of the unclean spirit and dispel the terror of the poisonous serpent."

These few excerpts from the blessing of holy water make it obvious that the specific target of holy water is Satan. How hum-

bling it must be to Satan's pride to have to submit to such weak and needy elements as salt and water! The humor of divine justice.

Teresa of Avila in her classic autobiography speaks of the times Satan came in person to plague her: "I know by experience that there is nothing which puts the devils to flight like holy water. They run away before the sign of the cross also, but they return immediately; great, then, must be the power of holy water, for when I used it, they would not return all that day."

One of the final questions brought up by the group went, I thought, to the very heart of the picture. The movie opens in Iraq. The ruins of an ancient pagan city are being excavated. The archaeologist is a Jesuit father later seen as the exorcist. Among the ruins of this ancient civilization a figurine of Satan is discovered. "What was the meaning of beginning the movie like that — among ancient ruins?" That was the question.

Director Friedkin is an "arty" director. The opening scenes, like the overture of an opera, set the theme of the entire movie. Friedkin was painting a contrast, an antithesis, between pagan civilizations and Christian civilization. The figurine unearthed revealed that in pagan civilization Satan had truly conquered, for he was worshipped. The Jesuit archaeologist, just before returning to America, is shown silhouetted on a bluff, confronting a winged statue of Satan. Below the mound a couple of dogs tangle in a fierce and furious fight foreshadowing, as it were, the titanic struggle between Satan and the Church.

The movie then proceeds to unfold the deadly combat. It is more vicious than a dog fight; but in the end, Satan is conquered! Thus the theme of the movie shines forth in glorious splendor: **in ancient civilization, Satan was victorious — he was worshipped; in Christian civilization, he is driven out — he is exorcised!** Thus were fulfilled the words of Christ to His followers: "I have given you power to tread on snakes and scorpions (the biblical images for demons) and all the forces of the enemy and nothing shall ever injure you" (Lk. 10:18-19).

The one criticism we shared about the film concerned the exorcism itself. The exorcism appeared to be effected by substitution — by Father Karras offering himself for Regan's release. To give one's life for another is indeed a beautiful gesture, yet in actuality exorcism is effected through the all-powerful prayers of the Church.

Men and women of faith have nothing to fear from the fury of hell, provided their faith is in prayer, in the sacraments and the sacramentals of the Church.

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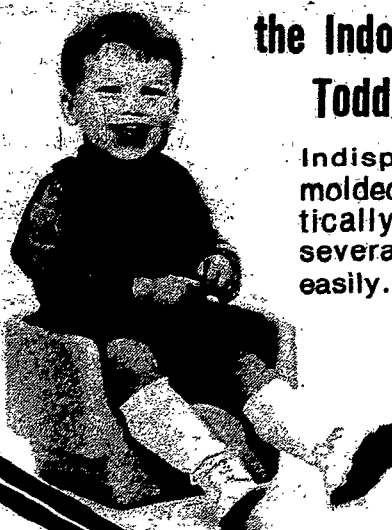
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