

CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

Letter to Ordinaries regarding norms on Exorcism

29 September 1985

Your most Reverend Excellency,

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of prayer groups in the Church aimed at seeking deliverance from the influence of demons, while not actually engaging in real exorcisms. These meetings are led by lay people, even when a priest is present.

As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has been asked how one should view these facts, this Dicastery considers it necessary to inform Bishops of the following response:

1. Canon 1172 of the Code of Canon Law states that no one can legitimately perform exorcisms over the possessed unless he has obtained special and express permission from the local Ordinary (§ 1), and states that this permission should be granted by the local Ordinary only to priests who are endowed with piety, knowledge, prudence and integrity of life (§ 2). Bishops are therefore strongly advised to stipulate that these norms be observed.
2. From these prescriptions it follows that it is not even licit that the faithful use the formula of exorcism against Satan and the fallen angels, extracted from the one published by order of the Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII, and even less that they use the integral text of this exorcism. Bishops should take care to warn the faithful, if necessary, of this.
3. Finally, for the same reasons, Bishops are asked to be vigilant so that – even in cases that do not concern true demonic possession – those who are without the due faculty may not conduct meetings during which invocations, to obtain release, are uttered in which demons are questioned directly and their identity sought to be known.

Drawing attention to these norms, however, should in no way distance the faithful from praying that, as Jesus taught us, they may be delivered from evil (cf. Mt 6:13). Finally, Pastors may take this opportunity to recall what the Tradition of the Church teaches concerning the role proper to the sacraments and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Angels and Saints in the Christian's spiritual battle against evil spirits.

I take the opportunity to express my deepest respects,

Your most esteemed in Christ,

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger
Prefect

Alberto Bovone
Secretary