



Exorcism

Introduction

The Latin Church Bishops of the 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. In the course of the approval process, a list of frequently asked questions on exorcism and its use in the Church's liturgical life was developed by the Secretariat of Divine Worship. Answers were provided by specialists in this ministry and by experts in canon law.

Since so much of the common perception of the nature and application of exorcism is shaped by the exaggerations of movie scripts and television programs, the Committee on Divine Worship has approved dissemination of these basic questions and answers, in hopes that clear information is brought to bear on a topic that is often shrouded in mystery or misinformation.

Questions about Exorcism

What is an exorcism?

Exorcism is a specific form of prayer that the Church uses against the power of the devil.

What is the difference between an exorcism and the Sacrament of Penance?

Exorcism is a prayer that falls in the category of sacramentals, that is, one of a number of sacred signs instituted by the Church "to sanctify different circumstances of life" (Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 351), thus varying from the seven sacraments of the Church which were instituted by Christ himself. The Sacrament of Penance forgives our sins and reconciles us to the Church, renewing Baptism and bestowing grace to fight evil and grow in virtue. As a sacramental, exorcism prepares one for the grace of the Sacrament.

Why does the Church need exorcisms?

There are instances when a person needs to be protected against the power of the devil or to be withdrawn from his spiritual dominion. At such times, the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ for this protection or liberation through the use of exorcism.

Is there a scriptural basis for exorcism?

While the basis for exorcism is grounded in the ministry of Jesus Christ (cf. Mk 1:34, 39; Lk 4:35; Mt 17:18), there is no scriptural basis for a formal rite of exorcism apart from the use of the psalms and Gospel pericopes that were included in the rite of exorcism as it evolved.

What is clear, however, is that the Lord Jesus involved the disciples in his mission and through their commissioning continued the exorcistic work begun by Jesus himself (cf. Mt 10:8; Mk 3:14-15; 6:13; 16:17; Lk 9:1; 10:17). It was not a work they did in their own names, but in the name of the One who had bestowed it upon them. Thus the ministry of exorcism continues in the life of the Church as part of the regular pastoral care of souls.

Do the Fathers of the Church refer to exorcisms in their writings?

Several of the Fathers of the Church, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Athanasius provide us with insights into the exorcistic practices of their day through their extant writings. Through them we gain a glimpse into the unfolding developments in the structure and form of exorcism as a rite gradually took shape. In addition to the use of Jesus' name, other elements contributed to the shape of an early ritual such as the Sign of the Cross, exsufflation (breathing on the person's face), simple adjurations containing scripture, prayer, and fasting.

Are there different kinds of exorcisms?

Exorcisms are divided into two kinds (or forms). Simple or minor forms of exorcism are found in two places: first, for those preparing for Baptism, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) and the Rite of Baptism for Children both call for minor exorcisms; secondly, the appendix of Exorcisms and Related Supplications includes a series of prayers which may be used by the faithful.

The second kind is the solemn or "major exorcism," which is a rite that can only be performed by a bishop or a by priest, with the special and express permission of the local ordinary (cf. Code of Canon Law, can. 1172). This form is directed "at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation [of a person] from demonic possession" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1673).

When and how is an afflicted member of the faithful referred to an exorcist?

It is advisable that every diocese establish a protocol to respond to inquiries made by the faithful who claim to be demonically afflicted. As part of the protocol, an assessment should occur to determine the true state of the person. Only after a thorough examination including medical, psychological, and psychiatric testing might the person be referred to the exorcist for a final determination regarding demonic possession. To be clear, the actual determination of whether a member of the faithful is genuinely possessed by the devil is made by the Church, even if individuals claim to be possessed through their own self-diagnosis or psychosis.

May anyone receive a "major exorcism?"

Since the rites of exorcism are categorized as sacramentals, effectively as blessings, the practice of who may receive a "major exorcism" is governed by canon 1170 of the Code of Canon Law. The following are able to receive this specialized blessing if it is determined necessary: 1) Catholics; 2) Catechumens; 3) Non-Catholic Christians who request it; and 4) Non-Christian believers provided they have the proper disposition—meaning, they are sincere in their desire to be free of demonic influence. In cases involving a non-Catholic, the matter should be brought to the attention of the Diocesan Bishop (cf. ERS, no. 18).

How frequently is a "major exorcism" performed?

The frequency of exorcisms of this sort is determined by the credible need for the rite. That is why establishing a diocesan protocol is important. Through the centuries, the Church has moved cautiously when evaluating alleged cases of demonic possession. The reason for this is not to deny access to members of the faithful who are in genuine need. However, the Church is equally concerned that individuals not get caught up in a sensationalist mentality and thus create a kind of sideshow affair. Although rare, genuine cases of demonic possession should be addressed in a balanced manner with the utmost care being extended to the afflicted person.

What is the difference between a major exorcism and a minor exorcism?

While both forms of exorcism are directed against the power of the devil, the Rite of Major Exorcism is employed only when there is a case of genuine demonic possession, namely, when it is determined that the presence of the devil is in the body of the possessed and the devil is able to exercise dominion over that body.

Minor exorcisms are prayers used to break the influence of evil and sin in a person's life, whether as a catechumen preparing for Baptism or as one of the Baptized faithful striving to overcome the influence of evil and sin in his or her life.

Are there examples of each in the text of Exorcisms and Related Supplications?

The ritual text Exorcisms and Related Supplications is comprised of an introduction, two chapters ("The Rite of Major Exorcism" and "Various Texts"), and concludes with two appendices. The second chapter provides a series of additional texts which serve as options in the administration of the rite itself. The first appendix contains exorcistic prayers to be used at the discretion of the diocesan bishop when a thing or place has become demonically penetrated or the Church herself faces persecution and opposition. This latter series of prayers is not to be confused with the Rite of Major Exorcism itself. Finally, the second appendix provides prayers and supplications for the private use of the faithful.

Who may perform the various kinds of exorcisms?

The minister of a minor exorcism is the designated authorized minister of the sacrament (RCIA or Baptism for Children) or blessing being celebrated. Thus, the prayers in Appendix II, "Supplications which May be Used by the Faithful Privately in Their Struggle against the Powers of Darkness" may be offered by any member of the clergy or by the lay faithful. However, the Rite of Major Exorcism is to be celebrated only by a bishop or a priest who has obtained the special and express permission of the diocesan bishop.

How does a priest become an exorcist?

A priest may be appointed to the office of exorcist either on a stable basis or for a particular occasion (ad actum) by the diocesan bishop. In either case, the exorcist should work closely with, and under the direction of, the bishop.

What criteria are used for deciding which priests are given this responsibility?

As specified in canon 1172 §2 of the Code of Canon Law, the priest being appointed to the ministry of exorcist should possess piety, knowledge, prudence, and integrity of life. The Introduction to Exorcisms and Related Supplications further directs that the priest "has been specifically prepared for this office" (ERS, no. 13).

How are exorcists trained and prepared for this ministry?

Classically, the exorcist has trained for this specialized ministry through an apprenticeship model, working under the direction of an experienced exorcist. Additionally, in recent years, several programs have been established to foster the training of exorcists.

A solid theological and spiritual foundation is essential when preparing to minister as an exorcist. Bearing in mind the qualities already mentioned in the preceding question, the candidate must also maintain a balanced approach to this particular ministry, possess a spirituality that is grounded in the sacramental life of the Church, and be able to keep his curiosity in check. The guidance of a skilled spiritual director is critical in the life of the exorcist.

What, if any, rites in this text may be performed by the lay faithful?

As has been mentioned previously, the Rite of Major Exorcism is to be administered only by an authorized priest or bishop (sacerdos). If it is deemed useful, members of the lay faithful may be present for the rite, supporting the work of the exorcist by their prayers either recited privately or as instructed in the rite. However, the text cautions that the lay faithful are not to recite any prayers reserved to the exorcist (ERS, no. 35), not only because the prayers are reserved to those ordained to act in the person of Christ the Head (in persona Christi capitis), but also to protect the faithful from possible spiritual harm.

When an afflicted member of the faithful is female, there should be at least one other female present for the sake of propriety and discretion. At no time should the exorcist be alone with an afflicted member of the faithful, neither during consultation nor for the celebration of the rite.

How does an exorcist determine "with moral certitude" (ERS, no. 16) that the one to be exorcized is truly possessed by demonic forces, and not merely suffering from physical ailments or psychological issues?

Moral certainty is classically understood as falling between the two poles of absolute certainty and probability. Bearing that in mind, moral certitude is achieved through the examination of proofs which are weighed in accordance with the conscience of the one passing judgment. Therefore, the exorcist must utilize whatever resources are available to him when investigating a claim of demonic possession along with input from medical and mental health professionals.

The exorcist is instructed to employ the "utmost circumspection and prudence" before proceeding to the rite (ERS, no. 14). Throughout his ministry, an exorcist must establish a balance within his own mind between not believing too easily that the devil is responsible for what is manifesting, and attributing all possible manifestations solely to a natural, organic source.

Do afflicted members of the faithful undergo medical or psychological examination prior to the use of exorcism?

As part of the evaluation process (which can be established in a diocesan protocol), the afflicted member of the faithful should avail himself/herself of a thorough medical and psychological/psychiatric evaluation. Frequently, individuals present themselves claiming to be afflicted in any number of ways. Historically, however, the Church has exercised caution when evaluating such individuals for fear of unnecessarily drawing attention to the machinations of the devil or giving credit where no credit is due.

How may an exorcist ensure that an exorcism is not perceived as a magical or superstitious activity?

The exorcist himself can serve as a catechist in this matter by the way he faithfully administers the rites as provided by the Church in her wisdom. Fundamentally, the rites of exorcism are just one more way the Church tends to the pastoral care of souls, even souls that are not of her flock. However, the more obscurely and mysteriously the rite is portrayed, the more magical and superstitious the perceptions become. Given the super abundance of confusing and inaccurate information available in the public arena surrounding this particular topic, the manner in which this revised rite is announced provides for a teachable moment to believers and non-believers alike.

What ritual symbols are used in exorcisms and what do they symbolize?

In addition to the use of the Psalms and Gospel readings and the recitation of the exorcistic prayers, a series of sacred symbols is utilized in the Rite of Major Exorcism. To begin, water is blessed and sprinkled recalling the centrality of the new life the afflicted person received in Baptism and the ultimate defeat of the devil through the salvific work of Jesus Christ. The imposition of hands, as well as the breathing on the person's face (exsufflation) by the exorcist, reaffirms the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the person as a result of his/her Baptism, confirming him/her as a temple of God. Finally, the Lord's Cross is shown to the afflicted person and the Sign of the Cross is made over him/her demonstrating the power of Christ over the devil.

Should other members of the faithful be present when an exorcism is performed?

This text strongly recommends against the exorcist working in isolation (ERS, no. 34b). Even though in rare instances this may be unavoidable, the practice of performing an exorcism in solitude should be discouraged at all costs.

Where should an exorcism be performed?

The norm is to celebrate the rite of exorcism in an oratory or other appropriate place (for example, a small chapel) discreetly hidden from plain view (ERS, no. 33). It is to the advantage of the exorcist whenever possible to utilize a place that is dedicated to God's honor and not the home of the afflicted person, for instance.

Is the use of exorcism kept confidential?

For the integrity of the afflicted person's reputation as well as for those individuals who might be assisting, the preservation of confidentiality is important. It is also strongly suggested that the identity of the exorcist be kept secret or at most known only to the other priests of the diocese so as not to overwhelm the exorcist with random calls and inquiries.

May an exorcism be performed without the recipient's permission?

Given the nature of the devil's workings and the afflicted person's possible complicity in the resulting demonic possession, the exorcist should ascertain the person's consent if at all possible before proceeding with the Rite of Major Exorcism.

Are exorcisms the same everywhere, or are there regional and cultural differences?

The rites of exorcism are to be celebrated consistently following the directives (praenotanda) prescribed in the ritual. The rites are not to be altered at the discretion of the exorcist beyond the options clearly stated in the official text. However, before proceeding with the use of the rite, it is helpful for the exorcist to be aware of any cultural differences and regional influences that may have impacted the current state of the afflicted person. An evaluative instrument can assist

in shedding light on such categories as: 1) the places where the person may have visited (healers, mediums, psychics); 2) the practices in which the person may have been involved (cleansings, New Age religion, Reiki); and 3) the ways that the person may have opened himself/herself directly to the dominion of the devil (magic, witchcraft, Satanic worship).

In the formulas of exorcism, what is the difference between the deprecative formulas and the imperative formulas?

The deprecative formulas are exorcistic prayers, addressed to God, which request the liberation of the afflicted person. The imperative formulas are addressed directly to the inhabiting demonic spirit, commanding it to depart in the name of Jesus Christ.

When would each be used?

The deprecative formulas and the imperative formulas are presented as sets in the rite of exorcism with the deprecative formula always being used first with the option of then using the imperative formula. The deprecative formulas may be used without the imperative formulas but the opposite is not permitted (ERS, no. 28).

When would the rites contained in the appendices be used, and by whom?

The prayers of supplication and exorcism found in Appendix I ("A Supplication and Exorcism which May be Used in Particular Circumstances of the Church") may be likened to the prayers that Pope Leo XIII appended to the previous rite of exorcism in 1890. The focus of these prayers is to address and remedy any demonic influence on places and things in particular, as well as to remedy attacks against the Church in a more general way. As in the case of a "major exorcism," the ordinary minister of these prayers would be a priest appointed for this purpose or the bishop himself.

The prayers and invocations that comprise Appendix II ("Supplications which May be Used by the Faithful Privately in their Struggle against the Powers of Darkness") are intended for general the use of the clergy and of the lay faithful in combatting the temptations of sin or spiritual attacks by the devil.

When would a bishop or pastor appropriately recommend Appendix II to a member of his flock?

When it is learned through such avenues as pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, or the Sacrament of Penance that a member of the faithful is experiencing assaults by the devil, the prayers and invocations found in Appendix II may be recommended. (Appendix II is available as a separate publication in both English and Spanish from USCCB Communications.)

