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The Exorcist: Father Gabriele Amorth



An Interview with the Church's Leading Exorcist

by

Gyles Brandreth of The Sunday Telegraph

On the bumpy flight to Rome I read The Bible all the way. The passenger on my left - a wiry businesswoman from Wisconsin - found this disconcerting. As the turbulence worsened and I moved from Jude to Revelation, she hissed at me, “Do you

have to?" "It's only background reading," I murmured. She grimaced. "What for?" I turned to her and whispered: "I'm going to meet the exorcist." "Oh Christ," she gasped, as the plane lurched and hot coffee spilled over us.

Father Gabriele Amorth is indeed the exorcist, the most senior and respected member of his calling. A priest for 50 years, he is the undisputed leader of the city's six exorcists (appointed by the cardinal to whom the Pope delegates the office of Vicar of Rome) and honorary president-for-life of the International Association of Exorcists. He is 75, small, spry, humorous, and wonderfully direct.

"I speak with the Devil every day," he says, grinning like a benevolent gargoyle. "I talk to him in Latin. He answers in Italian. I have been wrestling with him, day in day out, for 14 years."

On cue (God is not worried by clichés) a shaft of October sunlight falls across Father Amorth's pale, round face. We are sitting at a table by the window in a small high-ceilinged meeting room at his Rome headquarters, the offices of the Society of St Paul. Father Amorth has come to exorcism late in life, but with impressive credentials. Born in 1925 in Modena, northern Italy, the son and grandson of lawyers (his brother is a judge), Gabriele Amorth, in his late teens, joined the Italian resistance.

Immediately after the war, he became a member of the fledgling Christian Democratic Party. Giulio Andreotti was president of the Young Christian Democrats, Amorth was his deputy. Andreotti went into politics and was seven times prime minister. Amorth, having studied law at university, went into the Church.

"From the age of 15," he says, "I knew it was my true vocation. My speciality was the Madonna. For many years I edited the magazine Madre di Deo (Mother of God). When I hear people say, 'You Catholics honour Mary too much,' I reply, 'We are never able to honour her enough.'"

"I knew nothing of exorcism - I had given it no thought - until June 6, 1986 when Cardinal Poletti, the then Vicar of Rome, asked to see me. There was a famous exorcist in Rome then, the only one, Father Candido, but he was not well, and Cardinal Poletti told me I was to be his assistant. I learnt everything from Father Candido. He was my great master. Quickly I realised how much work there was to be done and how few exorcists there were to do it. From that day, I dropped everything and dedicated myself entirely to exorcism."

Father Amorth smiles continually as he tells his story. His enthusiasm for his subject is infectious and engaging. “Jesus performed exorcisms. He cast out demons. He freed souls from demonic possession and from Him the Church has received the power and office of exorcism. A simple exorcism is performed at every baptism, but major exorcism can be performed only by a priest licensed by the bishop. I have performed over 50,000 exorcisms. Sometimes it takes a few minutes, sometimes many hours. It is hard work *multo duro*.”

How does he recognise someone possessed by evil spirits? “It is not easy. There are many grades of possession. The Devil does not like to be seen, so there are people who are possessed who manage to conceal it. There are other cases where the person possessed is in acute physical pain, such agony that they cannot move.”

“It is essential not to confuse demonic possession with ordinary illness. The symptoms of possession often include violent headaches and stomach cramps, but you must always go to the doctor before you go to the exorcist. I have people come to me who are not possessed at all. They are suffering from epilepsy or schizophrenia or other mental problems. Of the thousands of patients I have seen, only a hundred or so have been truly possessed.”

“How can you tell?”

“By their aversion to the sacrament and all things sacred. If blessed they become furious. If confronted with the crucifix, they are subdued.” “But couldn't an hysteric imitate the symptoms?”

“We can sort out the phoney ones. We look into their eyes. As part of the exorcism, at specific times during the prayers, holding two fingers on the patient's eyes we raise the eyelids. Almost always, in cases of evil presence, the eyes look completely white. Even with the help of both hands, we can barely discern whether the pupils are towards the top or the bottom of the eye. If the pupils are looking up, the demons in possession are scorpions. If looking down, they are serpents.”

As I report this now, it sounds absurd. As Father Amorth told it to me, it felt entirely credible.

I had gone to Rome expecting — hoping, even — for a chilling encounter, but instead of a sinister bug-eyed obsessive lurking in the shadows of a Hammer Horror film set, here I was sitting in an airy room facing a kindly old man with an uncanny knack for making the truly bizarre seem wholly rational. He has God on his side and customers at his door. The demand for exorcism is growing as never before. Fifteen years ago

there were 20 church-appointed exorcists in Italy. Now there are 300.

I ask Father Amorth to describe the ritual of exorcism.

“Ideally, the exorcist needs another priest to help him and a group nearby who will assist through prayer. The ritual does not specify the stance of the exorcist. Some stand, some sit. The ritual says only that, beginning with the words *Ecce crucem Domini* ('Behold the Cross of the Lord') the priest should touch the neck of the possessed one with the hem of his stole and hold his hand on his head. The demons will want to hide. Our task is to expose them, and then expel them. There are many ways to goad them into showing themselves. Although the ritual does not mention this, experience has taught us that using oil and holy water and salt can be very effective.”

“Demons are wary of talking and must be forced to speak. When demons are voluntarily chatty it's a trick to distract the exorcist. We must never ask useless questions out of curiosity. We but must interrogate with care. We always begin by asking for the demon's name.”

“And does he answer?” I ask. Father Amorth nods. “Yes, through the patient, but in a strange, unnatural voice. If it is the Devil himself, he says 'I am Satan, or Lucifer, or Beelzebub. We ask if he is alone or if there are others with him. Usually there are two or five, 20 or 30. We must quantify the number. We ask when and how they entered that particular body. We find out whether their presence is due to a spell and the specifics of that spell.”

“During the exorcism the evil may emerge in slow stages or with sudden explosions. He does not want show himself. He will be angry and he is strong. During one exorcism I saw a child of 11 held down by four strong men. The child threw the men aside with ease. I was there when a boy of 10 lifted a huge, heavy table.”

“Afterwards I felt the muscles in the boy's arms. He could not have done it on his own. He had the strength of the Devil inside him.”

“No two cases are the same. Some patients have to be tied down on a bed. They spit. They vomit. At first the demon will try to demoralise the exorcist, then he will try to terrify him, saying, 'Tonight I'm going to put a serpent between your sheets. Tomorrow I'm going to eat your heart'.”

I lean towards Father Amorth. “And are you sometimes frightened?” I ask. He looks incredulous. “Never. I have faith. I laugh at the demon and say to him, 'I've got the

Madonna on my side. I am called Gabriel. Go fight the Archangel Gabriel if you will.' That usually shuts them up."

Now he leans towards me and taps my hand confidentially. "The secret is to find your demon's weak spot. Some demons cannot bear to have the Sign of the Cross traced with a stole on an aching part of the body; some cannot stand a puff of breath on the face; others resist with all their strength against blessing with holy water."

"Relief for the patient is always possible, but to completely rid a person of his demons can take many exorcisms over many years. For a demon to leave a body and go back to hell means to die forever and to lose any ability to molest people in the future. He expresses his desperation saying: 'I am dying, I am dying. You are killing me; you have won. All priests are murderers'."

How do people come to be possessed by demons in the first place? "I believe God sometimes singles out certain souls for a special test of spiritual endurance, but more often people lay themselves open to possession by dabbling with black magic. Some are entrapped by a satanic cult. Others are the victims of a curse."

I interrupt. "You mean like Yasser Arafat saying to Ehud Barak, 'Go to Hell' and meaning it?"

"No." Father Amorth gives me a withering look. "That is merely a sudden imprecation. It is very difficult to perform a curse. You need to be a priest of Satan to do it properly. Of course, just as you can hire a killer if you need one, you can hire a male witch to utter a curse on your behalf. Most witches are frauds, but I am afraid some authentic ones do exist."

Father Amorth shakes his head and sighs at the wickedness of the world. At the outset he has told me he is confident he will have an answer to all my questions, but he has a difficulty with the next one. "Why do many more women seem to become possessed than men?"

"Ah, that we do not know. They may be more vulnerable because, as a rule, more women than men are interested in the occult. Or it may be the Devil's way of getting at men, just as he got to Adam through Eve. What we do know is that the problem is getting worse. The Devil is gaining ground. We are living in an age when faith is diminishing. If you abandon God, the Devil will take his place."

"All faiths, all cultures, have exorcists, but only Christianity has the true force to exorcise through Christ's example and authority. We need many more exorcists, but

the bishops won't appoint them. In many countries - Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain there are no Catholic exorcists. It is a scandal. In England there are more Anglican exorcists than Catholic ones.”

Although the post of exorcist is an official diocesan appointment (there are about 300 attached to the various bishops throughout Italy) and Father Amorth is undisputably the best known in his field, there is some tension between Amorth and the modernising tendencies in the Church hierarchy.

Devil-hunting is not fashionable in senior church circles. The Catholic establishment is happier talking about “the spirit of evil” than evil spirits. The Vatican recently issued a new rite of exorcism which has not met with Father Amorth's approval. “They say we cannot perform an exorcism unless we know for certain that the Evil One is present. That is ridiculous. It is only through exorcism that the demons reveal themselves. An unnecessary exorcism never hurt anybody.”

What does the Pope make of all this? “The Holy Father knows that the Devil is still alive and active in the world. He has performed exorcism. In 1982, he performed a solemn exorcism on a girl from Spoleto. She screamed and rolled on the floor. Those who saw it were very frightened. The Pope brought her temporary freedom.

“The other day, on September 6, at his weekly audience at St Peter's, a young woman from a village near Monza started to shriek as the Pope was about to bless her. She shouted obscenities at him in a strange voice. The Pope blessed her and brought her relief, but the Devil is still in her. She is exorcised each week in Milan and she is now coming to me once a month. It may take a long time to help her, but we must try. The work of the exorcists is to relieve suffering, to free souls from torment, to bring us closer to God.”

Father Amorth has laughed and smiled a good deal during our three-hour discussion. He has pulled sundry rude faces to indicate his contempt for the pusillanimous bishops who have a monopoly on exorcism and refuse to license more practitioners. In his mouth it does not seem like mumbo-jumbo or hocus-pocus. He produces detailed case histories. He quotes scriptural chapter and verse to justify his actions. And he has a large following. His book, *An Exorcist Tells his Story*, has been reprinted in Italy 17 times.

Given his shining faith and scholarly approach, I hardly dare ask him whether he has seen the notorious 1973 horror film, *The Exorcist*. It turns out to be his favourite film. “Of course, the special effects are exaggerated. but it is a good film, and substantially exact, based on a respectable novel which mirrored a true story.”

The film is held to be so disturbing it has never been shown [until recently] on British terrestrial television and until last year could not even be rented from video shops. None the less, Father Amorth recommends it. "People need to know what we do."

And what about Hallowe'en? The American tradition has made no inroads in Italy. "Here it is on Christmas Eve that the Satanists have their orgies. Nothing happens on October 31. But if English and American children like to dress up as witches and devils on one night of the year that is not a problem. If it is just a game, there is no harm in that."

It is time to go to the chapel where our photographer is waiting. Father Atnorth, used to the ways of the press, raises an eyebrow at us indulgently as he realises the photograph is designed to heighten the drama of his calling. Pictures taken, he potters off to find me one of his books.

"What do you make of him?" asks the photographer. "Is he mad?"

"I don't think so," I say. The award-winning Daily and Sunday Telegraph Rome correspondent, who has acted as interpreter for the interview, and is both a lapsed Catholic and a hardened hack, is more empathic: "There's not a trace of the charlatan about him. He is quite sane and utterly convincing."

Surprised at myself I add: "He seems to me to be a power for good in the world." With a smirk, the photographer loads his gear into the back of the taxi. "So he's Peter Cushing then, not Christopher Lee," he says.

Father Amorth reappears with his book and smiles. "Remember, when we jeer at the Devil and tell ourselves that he does not exist, that is when he is happiest."

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