DEVIL IN THE DETAILS: ITALIAN EXORCIST DESCRIBES LIFELONG BATTLE AGAINST DEMONS AND THE OCCULT

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At a time when the planet is gripped by a pandemic, science and faith have again come into conflict in the public square, including news reports. That nagging age-old question about good versus evil (“theodicy”) and the role of God in our lives is on the minds of many (click for tmatt “On Religion” column) while our houses of worship remain shut down for safety reasons. ...

To be blunt: Debates about the nature of evil now loom over many front-page headlines. It is in this quarantine life of ours that the book “The Devil is Afraid of Me: The Life and Works of the World’s Most Famous Exorcist” has hit our bookshelves. Open-minded journalists may want to check this one out. While most people think of the Hollywood version of good versus evil as portrayed in the 1973 movie “The Exorcist “(which would end up spawning a series of less-than-spectacular squeals), this book assures us that the fight against Satan should not be trivialized as part of an afternoon watching a Halloween movie marathon. The book (originally in Italian and now available in English through Sophia Institute Press) goes into great detail into the life and times of Father Gabrielle Amorth, a Catholic priest who performed scores of exorcisms over his lifetime. The book, edited by a fellow Italian priest named Marcello Stanzione, delves into great detail regarding Amorth’s biggest cases of demonic possession over the years. While the English translation from the original is, at times, a little stilted, this is a book that forces the reader to explore the supernatural and try to grasp how the fight against evil can take on many forms. Amorth claims to have conducted some 100,000 exorcisms over a 30-year span before his death in 2016 at the age of 91. Beloved in Italy, Amorth may be the world’s most famous exorcist, but he isn’t alone. Some 200 priests around the world are tasked with taking on demons following the consent of a local bishop. Amorth was just one of the most famous since he worked in Rome and gained a high-profile thanks to his books and many TV and radio appearances. Amorth led a group called the International Association of Exorcists, which was founded in 1990 by a group of priests. The group gained the blessings of the Vatican in 2014. Amorth, as the book highlights, spent his life battling the occult and the supernatural and how the church is equipped to combat these forces. The Vatican, in turn, has been skittish about exorcisms. In 2000, the Vatican refused to call an encounter between then-Pope John Paul II and a disturbed teenage girl as an exorcism — something Amorth did in various interviews with the Italian press. St. Pope John Paul II had personally confirmed that he had performed exorcisms — inside the Vatican, no less. What exactly is an exorcism? In the Catholic tradition, exorcisms are the spiritual practice of driving demons from a person or place believed to be possessed. Ordained priests who specialize in this area, such as Amorth, perform elaborate rituals that challenge the evil spirit to depart in the name of God. As part of the ceremony, a priest recites Saint Michael’s Prayer against Satan and the Rebellious Angels — attributed to Pope Leo X who ruled the church during the early part of the 16th century — in addition to reciting the rosary. There has been a rise over the last few years of people around the world seeking the Rite of Exorcism. All this may sound like something straight out of a horror movie because of The Exorcism films of the 1970s and ‘80s that made the subject part of our pop culture. The original film, adapted from the 1971 novel by William Peter Blatty (who was an active Catholic layman), details the demonic possession of an 11-year-old girl named Regan MacNeil and the two priests who attempt to exorcise a demon. The tome, which is also worth a read, was inspired by a case of demonic possession and exorcism from 1949 in Maryland that Blatty had heard about while a student at Georgetown University. For those who have seen the movie, Georgetown, a Jesuit university located in Washington, D.C., is featured prominently as part of the story line. The scientific community doesn’t recognize demonic possession as a thing and has described such cases as people suffering from an array of mental or physical disorders such as hysteria, Tourette’s syndrome, epilepsy or even schizophrenia. In a 2018 documentary called “The Devil and Father Amorth,” “Exorcist” director William Friedkin filmed Amorth while he conducted a real exorcism on a woman named Cristina. The film is chilling as is this new book. Continue reading “Italian Exorcist describes his lifelong battle against demons and the occult” by Clemente Lisi, at Religion Unplugged.