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And Let My Cry Come To You:
Exorcism in the Orthodox Christian Church

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Abstract

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The Orthodox Christian Church recognizes several exorcism prayers for the deliverance of the faithful from demonic attack, including the rare phenomenon of possession. They are found within the Church's *Great Book of Needs*, and these prayers are different than the exorcisms of baptism and other commonly celebrated services. There are three exorcisms attributed to Basil the Great and four to John Chrysostom; few rubrics accompany the liturgical texts, and the Orthodox Church offers clergy little official guidance in their use. These exorcisms are now rarely read within the daily life of the Orthodox Church. In addition to the guidance problem, there are concerns surrounding the intersection of medical, psychological, and spiritual issues with parishioners. Further complications in using these prayers include general cultural fascination with the topic of exorcism, the influence of Orthodox folk practices, and wide interest in unconventional spiritual practices, such as Wicca. The question of clergy fitness is also a consideration: while every Orthodox priest is technically an exorcist, perhaps not every Orthodox priest should take on this role. Despite these concerns and barriers, the prayers of exorcism exist within the *Great Book of Needs* for the sanctification and healing of the faithful. The Orthodox Church maintains their relevance, and these prayers connect the faithful to the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. The Orthodox Church can take action to address the issues surrounding exorcism, enabling the safe, efficacious use of these prayers within the parish setting. A primary aspect of this effort is the need for hierarchical direction: clergy need to understand paradigms for seeking permission for exorcisms. Clergy also need specific guidance on how to proceed once permission is given; mentoring relationships among clergy could be helpful, including field training. Further, a system of evaluation needs to be established by hierarchs, considering medical, psychological, and spiritual concerns. An investigative checklist would help ensure clergy are taking every factor into account before pursuing exorcism. Finally, the reintroduction of the ancient office of exorcist could be of help in addressing clergy fitness.

And Let My Cry Come To You:
Exorcism in the Orthodox Christian Church

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Introduction

For the Orthodox Church, demonic possession and exorcism are real. These beliefs are grounded deeply in scripture, as well as in the history and theology of the Church. Yet the prayers are rarely used. In addition to the simple fact that assumed possession is a rare occurrence, there are a host of pastoral concerns and administrative complications surrounding the use of exorcism prayers within the Church. Thus, clergy do not have a clear pastoral pathway to approach the question of exorcism; worse, some make their own path, to the possible detriment of their parishioners. Good pastoral intentions can still yield catastrophic results on a spiritual, psychological, and even medical level. Though exorcism manifests God's love and grace, and can be a tremendous spiritual resource, we do not, as a Church, know how to make sense of it in modernity. Unconventional suffering may require unconventional pastoral care—but how should this be approached? Because this question goes unanswered within the Church, the “cry” of the people often remains unanswered.¹

With these barriers in mind, this study will attempt to respond to this rare but valid pastoral need. The study will commence with an outline of the scriptural, historical, theological, and pastoral underpinnings of exorcism within the Orthodox Christian Church. Its current validity in the life of the Church will be affirmed and demonstrated. Then, the study will pivot to the proposal section. This will encompass two major components, discussed in a problem-solving manner. The first component will be an examination of the vast array of pastoral and theological concerns surrounding exorcism in the modern Church, specifically for parish priests. The discussion will range from the practice of exorcism itself to outlying factors, such as Orthodox folk practices and general cultural influences. The pressing need for hierarchical and

¹ Psalm 101(2) (NKJV).

administrative intervention will be made clear.

The second component will propose solutions for each major concern. I will outline recommended guidelines, procedural standards, and further analyses on this topic for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. The entire study will draw upon scripture, the Church Fathers, canon tradition, scholarly analysis, sacramental life, medical and psychological disciplines, and personal interviews, including interviews with two priests from the Metropolis of Boston with substantial exorcism experience.² The goal will be to provide the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese with a logical and pastorally responsible path to understanding and exercising this rare but vitally important office of the Orthodox Church.

Perceptions of Evil and Early Exorcists

The problem of evil has always been a strong consideration of the Church. Concerning the genesis of evil, the patristic Fathers were resolute on the innate goodness of God: “God is not the author of evil” but “prevents, permits, and draws good out of evil.”³ Basil argued this point from the position that “the contrary cannot proceed from its contrary.”⁴ Evil cannot proceed from a good God. The Church has consistently emphasized the state of evil rather than its ultimate cosmic origin, as its genesis is not completely comprehensible.⁵ It relates to the state of relationship with God—the state of the soul. The fall, the origin of ancestral sin, distorted the image and likeness of God within all people, and it muted our state of communion with the Holy

² Fr. Nicholas Krommydas (also a mental-health professional) and an anonymous priest who will be referred to as Fr. A. While Fr. A offered verbal consent to our interview and participated enthusiastically, written consent was not retained before his passing. Therefore, he will be treated as an anonymous source throughout this article.

³ Paul L. Gavrilyuk, “The Problem of Evil: Ancient Answers and Modern Discontents,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 9, no. 4 (2018): 21.

⁴ Basil, *The Hexaemeron*, in vol. 8 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Basil: Select Works and Letters*, eds. Philips Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 61.

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water & the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 22.

Trinity.⁶ Humans were not created for death but chose death.

The antidote to this tragic situation is the rescue mission of Jesus Christ: the incarnation, cross, resurrection, and the promise of eternal life.⁷ Yet, in addition to the self-inflicted wounds of sin, “the Church has always taught the devil and his angels—demons—as powerful adversaries both of God and his people.”⁸ This evil is not merely an absence of good but the “presence of something dark, irrational and very real....”⁹ Though the actions of this external evil, the Devil, have been under God’s control from the moment of the heavenly rebellion,¹⁰ the Fathers consistently emphasized the critical nature of spiritual warfare and striving. While all has been accomplished for our sakes and evil defeated,¹¹ we must position with these realities to keep ourselves spiritually free and on the path to salvation.¹² Human beings must intentionally choose, properly exercising the great gift of free will. Kalleres strikingly posits that the “crucifixion has not utterly destroyed Satan’s contract with humanity.... Instead, the event of the crucifixion has effected a renegotiation of the contract.”¹³ Salvation is not a given and must be

⁶ Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Living the Faith: The Praxis of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1992), 6.

⁷ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 241; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, in vol. 4 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: On the Incarnation with Against the Heathen*, ed. Archibald Richardson (Brookline, MA: Paterikon Publications, 2018), 139.

⁸ Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Contemporary Moral Issues Facing the Orthodox Christian*, Revised and Expanded ed. (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Company, 2015), 14.

⁹ Schmemmann, *Of Water & the Spirit*, 22.

¹⁰ Richard P.H. Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1988), 135.

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 241; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, in vol. 4 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: On the Incarnation with Against the Heathen*, ed. Archibald Richardson (Brookline, MA: Paterikon Publications, 2018), 139.

¹² Metropolitan Chrysostom of Aetna, “Demonology in the Orthodox Church: A Psychological Perspective,” in *Contemporary Traditionalist Orthodox Thought: A Second Volume*, eds. Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Aetna, Bishoper Auxentios of Photiki, and Archmandrite Akakios (California: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1998), 27.

¹³ Dayna S. Kalleres, *City of Demons: Violence, Ritual, and Christian Power in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 76.

pursued by each person.

As the image and likeness of God in every person is at stake, the Devil and demons take advantage of human weakness, “work[ing] through the world, and flesh, and the passions as they endeavour to defeat the eikon.”¹⁴ The great prize of the enemy is for human beings to believe themselves alien from God, unforgiveable and, ultimately, unlovable. As a result of his pride, which is what “made the devil a devil,”¹⁵ the evil one is in anguish because of his separation from God. Perversely, he relishes the opportunity to draw God’s people into his self-made hell. The greater the distortion of the image and likeness, the greater the victory for the Devil.

In addition to the important but mundane spiritual trials encountered by most of the people most of the time, prompted by the Devil or by internal desires, the Church also recognizes something different, something more pointed and dramatic: the possibility of demonic possession. While the Fathers always emphasized the “responsibility of the sinner,”¹⁶ possession constitutes a unique situation. The idea of responsibility must here be put into conversation with the Church’s further acknowledgement that human beings may be subject to evil situations which are beyond our control, beyond our willingness to choose.¹⁷ In fact, the early Church did not recognize a connection between personal transgressions and demonic possession.¹⁸ For the Church, possession is an assault on the image and likeness of God in a profound, personal, and catastrophic manner, which may very well (but not always) be disconnected from choice. No

¹⁴ Gabrielle Thomas, *The Image of God in the Theology of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 117.

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, “Homily XIV,” in vol. 12 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. By Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 346.

¹⁶ Harakas, *Living the Faith*, 83; Tertullian, *The Shows, or De Spectaculis*, in vol. 3 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 90.

¹⁷ Harakas, *Living the Faith*, 84.

¹⁸ Cyril Mango, “Diabolus Byzantinus,” in “Homo Byzantinus: Papers in Honor of Alexander Kazhdan,” *Dumbar Oaks Papers* 46 (1992): 220.

matter what the specific circumstances and background of each possession, for the Church the antidote for this rare affliction is exorcism.

The Orthodox Church ultimately grounds its practice and belief in exorcism in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Christ is the “exorcist par excellence”: the first and greatest Christian exorcist.¹⁹ Christ’s simple commands to demons (for example, “Be quiet, and come out of him!”²⁰), and disuse of magical incantations and spell books, are often referenced as divergent from the practices of secular, pagan, and other non-Christian exorcists²¹; it is notable though, that Proctor debates this point and sees Christ’s terse approach as consistent with other contemporary exorcistic traditions.²² However, the specific tradition and style of the exorcism prayer is not paramount, as Christ often used common traditions and conventions to minister and make the old knew for the purposes of His mission. What does matter most is the intent, purpose, and efficacy of the exorcisms. The major exorcisms recounted in the Synoptic Gospels, for example, reveal principle themes (many overlapping) that point to the multifarious nature of Christ’s ministry to the afflicted: liberation (Matt. 8:24-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39); healing from suffering (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30); spiritual and physical restoration (Matt. 12:22-32; Mark 3:20-30; Luke 11:14-23); inclusion in the fellowship of believers (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30); and renewed faith (Matt. 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-49).

Christ’s exorcistic practices were emulated by Christians from the Apostolic Age, and by

¹⁹ Jesmond Micallef, *The Efficacy of the Exorcistic Prayers of the Athonite Manuscript of Xiropotamou 98 (2260) 16* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 4.

²⁰ Mark 1:25 (NKJV).

²¹ John Chrysostom, “Homily XLI,” in vol. 11 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Chrysostom: Homilies on Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 252.

²² Travis W. Proctor, *Demonic Bodies and the Dark Ecologies of Early Christian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 112.

the third century, there is evidence of the “minor order” of exorcist.²³ It is likely that not all Christian exorcists, or at least those who practiced it, were part of the clerical order. In fact, exorcism likely could have been carried out by any of the faithful as a “continuing witness to the potency of the Christian God.”²⁴ By the fourth century, the role was largely relegated to the ministry of clergy.²⁵ As in the case of Christ’s exorcisms, these ancient patients were troubled with “inexplicable misfortunes” attributed to demonic influence: “mental disorders, incomprehensible medical symptoms, or unacceptable behavior.”²⁶ Exorcism represented the antidote for many of life’s horrors. To banish a demon was spiritually—and perhaps physically—efficacious for the person, for the local community, and on a cosmic level: it was evidence of God’s victory over evil and prefigured the victorious second coming of Christ.²⁷

As mentioned earlier, nascent Christian exorcists were not alone in their efforts. Exorcism was a pan-religious phenomenon (including Jewish and pagan practitioners) and a secular one. Among early Christian communities, there was a host of “semi-professionals, wandering about with exorcism as their commodity.”²⁸ There were magicians and diviners who used charms, incantations, spiritual texts, and magical amulets to exorcise evil and protect from future evil.²⁹ Christian exorcists tried to emulate the straight-forward exorcisms of Christ and believed their practices to be distinct from those of other exorcists and spiritualists, which they

²³ Toon Bastiaensen, “Exorcism: Tackling the Devil by Word of Mouth,” in *Demons and the Devil in Ancient and Medieval Christianity*, eds. Willemien Otten and Nienke Vos (Lieden: Brill, 2011), 134.

²⁴ Proctor, *Demonic Bodies*, 108.

²⁵ George C. Papademetriou, “Exorcism in the Orthodox Church,” in *Exorcism Through the Ages*, ed. St. Elmo Nauman, Jr. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1998), 46.

²⁶ Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion in Later Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020), 1.

²⁷ Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1995), 93.

²⁸ Bastiaensen, “Tackling,” 130.

²⁹ Tomasso Braccini, “Revisiting the ‘Exorcism of Gello’: A New Text from a Vatican Manuscript, with a Typological analysis of the Known Variants,” *Medioevo Greco* 21 (2021): 151.

came to see as demonic in origin.³⁰ Echoing the charge against Christ, they were accused by Christians of exorcising “demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.”³¹

By the fourth century and into the early medieval period, the Church had a highly developed demonology; nearly everyone would likely believe in presence of the Devil and demons, as well as the practice of exorcism.³² As the exorcists of other religions were associated with the demonic, the same held true concerning the persecutions of Christians. The Church, under attack, worked to associate the persecutors with the demonic.³³ Demonic possession was fervently believed in; however, the Church also used it as a powerful metaphor to exclude those from other religions, differentiate itself from opposing religions, and protect itself from dangerous enemies.

These patterns of belief and practice were significant factors in the composition, recognition, and acceptance of the seven exorcisms within the *Great Book of Needs*. Preceded by a brief Supplicatory Office, there are three exorcisms attributed to Basil and four to John Chrysostom, though most scholars concur their ascribed authorship is dubious.³⁴ These are specific prayers for the healing of demonic possession.

It is important to note their relation to the exorcisms surrounding the sacrament of baptism. The baptismal exorcisms focus on the expulsion of past evil in anticipation of embracing a life in Christ.³⁵ As Alexander Schmemmann argued, this entrance rite of the Church

³⁰ Proctor, *Demonic Bodies*, 109.

³¹ Luke 11:15 (NKJV).

³² Mango, “Diabolus,” 218.

³³ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁴ Dionysios Stathakopoulos, “The Boundaries between Possession and Disease: Medical Concepts in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Exorcisms,” in *Madness and Ecstasy: Literary Configurations between Christian Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Imagines Medii Aevi. Interdisciplinary Contributions to Medieval Research)*, eds. Cora Dietl, Nadine Metzger, and Christoph Schanze (Wiesbaden, Germany: Reichert Verlag, 2020), 4.

³⁵ C. Oancea, “Chaoskampf in the Orthodox Baptismal Ritual,” *Acta Theologica* 37, no. 2 (December 2017): 128.

marks the start of a battle for the soul of the catechumen, and the enemy is clearly the Devil.³⁶ While baptism makes the restoration of the image and likeness possible, the journey is far from over. We still need to choose God over the Devil and keep actualizing the promise of our baptism.³⁷ For most Orthodox Christians, the life-long duration of this spiritual fight involves the reception of the sacraments and a general striving toward the promises of baptism.

Yet for some, the fight may take a more dramatic turn, and this is where the exorcisms of Basil and John Chrysostom become relevant. While these exorcisms have similar content to those of baptism—and are no more stark, powerful, and vivid—there is a difference in their use. The exorcisms of baptism are never read again after that specific service. In other words, every Orthodox Christian will be exposed to the baptismal exorcisms (assuming entrance to the Church through baptism and chrismation, rather than just chrismation), but few will need to hear those of Basil and Chrysostom. In this light, the exorcisms of Basil and John Chrysostom may be seen as further, if rarely needed, spiritual weapons to support the exorcisms of baptism.

The current *Great Book of Needs* (again, containing the seven prayers) has been in use—largely unchanged—since the seventeenth-century, and the earliest codex, containing two of the Chrysostom exorcisms, dates from the eighth century.³⁸ While there are a host of other Byzantine exorcism manuscripts in existence, none but those of Basil and John Chrysostom have been included in the Church’s great collection of prayers.³⁹ As “very little systematic work on exorcism exists,” it is difficult to know the circumstances of their composition, patterns of use since their composition, or the perceptions of them by clergy and laity, from the eighth century

³⁶ Schmemmann, *Of Water & the Spirit*, 30.

³⁷ Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life*, Minneapolis, Light and Life Publishing Company, 1983, 243.

³⁸ Stathakopoulos, “The Boundaries,” 5.

³⁹ Metcalf, *The Efficacy*, 18.

(and possibly earlier), to the present.⁴⁰ The prayers are accompanied by exceedingly few rubrics, just two brief paragraphs before the “Supplicatory Office” prayers.⁴¹ In the life of the Church, today, there are few hierarchs who have ever examined them and few priests who have ever prayed them. Clergy are largely “on their own.”⁴² Yet, these prayers exist, linking the modern Christian to Christ’s ministry to the suffering—and His ultimate defeat and exorcism of death from the world.⁴³

Exorcistic Prayers of *The Great Book of Needs*

This section will largely draw from the exorcism prayers of “The Occasional Services” of the *Great Book of Needs*.⁴⁴ This electronic source lists no page numbers. Therefore, in conversation with this source I will not use footnotes but instead rely on textual references.

The brief rubric for clergy precedes the start of the Supplicatory Office. It refers to the office of exorcism as “serious” and highlights the need for the priest to “receive the blessing of the Bishop beforehand.” This is in noteworthy contrast to Fr. A’s and Fr. Krommydas’ commentary on permission within their respective interviews. Father A mentioned only two archdiocesan bishops who would direct clergy to seek advice from him or another experienced priest, but there was no mention of formal permission or blessing.⁴⁵ Fr. Krommydas, during his fifteen-year tenure as Metropolis of Boston chancellor, was unaware of any kind of permission-seeking process, though he mentioned he would hear discussions of certain cases through casual conversations with clergy.⁴⁶ The only other item mentioned in the rubric refers to inconsistencies

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴¹ “The Occasional Services,” vol. 3 of *The Great Book of Needs: Expanded and Supplemented*, trans. St. Tikhon’s Monastery (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002).

⁴² Fr. A, personal interview with the author, June 2022, Danvers, MA.

⁴³ Nicholas Krommydas, personal interview with the author, June 2023, Weston, MA.

⁴⁴ “The Occasional Services.”

⁴⁵ Fr. A.

⁴⁶ Nicholas Krommydas.

with some texts concerning the use of “The Choir” or “The People” for responses to the prayers. The Choir option is presented for the case of a public exorcism and the People option for more private situations, with the latter suggested as the most common circumstance. Thus, while the more private option is most common, there seems to be a precedent for public exorcisms.

The supplicatory office begins with the reading or chanting of psalms, invoking God as protector, healer, and master: 142(3); 22(3); 26(7); 67(8); 50(1). These are followed by “The Canon of Supplication.” The canon contains nine odes, and each one focuses on the desire for deliverance from demonic affliction and for the mercy of God. God is referred to as the “Savior and Lover of Mankind”; the “Angels and Apostles, the Prophets and Martyrs” are called upon to intercede with Christ for the deliverance of the victim. Forgiveness of “transgressions” and “health of soul and body” are requested, and God is asked to deliver the victim “from the violence and tyranny of the evil devil ... and every lying dream, fantasy and fright of Satan, and all his tyrannical power which encompasses him (her). . . .” While the patient may very well be purely innocent in this encounter with evil, repentance and subsequent forgiveness of transgressions is always a central part of the journey to faith and healing in Orthodox Christian theology. Repentance is spiritually restorative,⁴⁷ always pivotal in the fight against both internal and external evil. It is “a constant and perpetual stance of those who truly wish to overcome sin and grow in the image and likeness of God.”⁴⁸

At the conclusion of the canon, there is the service of unction, one of the seven sacraments of the Orthodox Christian Church. This anointing oil is “the visible sign” of the “healing power of Jesus,”⁴⁹ and its presence here suggests the connection between the

⁴⁷ Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life*, 85.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Anthony Coniaris, *Introducing the Orthodox Church: It's Faith and Life* (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1992), 188.

sacraments of the Church and the healing and liberation of exorcism. The sacraments preserve and nurture the relationship between the human being and God; by nature, they oppose the Devil's intent to assail this relationship.⁵⁰ Offering this healing sacrament within exorcism would create a potent multipronged liberation effort.

Though the eucharist is not specifically provided for within the exorcisms, Fr. A mentioned several times how he, and other clergy he had known, offered both unction and eucharist in tandem with the prayers of exorcism.⁵¹ This practice would seem validated by Chrysostom's assertion that "wherever they see the Lord's blood, devils flee, and Angels run together."⁵² A further connection of eucharist to exorcism lies within the anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil, when God is asked to "[f]ree those who are held captive by unclean spirits."⁵³ This reference to exorcism within the greatest sacrament of the Church (eucharist) speaks to exorcism's validity and general acceptance.

At the conclusion of the Supplicatory Office, there are the exorcism prayers. The first two exorcisms are attributed to Basil, with the heading "For Them That are Tormented by Demons and for Every Affliction," suggesting that the exorcisms might have ancillary purposes for related spiritual maladies. The third Basil prayer appears after the Chrysostom exorcisms; it is virtually the same as the first prayer but with an added prefatory office. In the heading, it only mentions those "Suffering from Demons," perhaps suggesting more limited use than the first two, though the duplication aspect of the first and third prayers would seem to undermine this

⁵⁰ Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life*, 69.

⁵¹ Fr. A.

⁵² John Chrysostom, "Homily XLVI," in vol. 14 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 166.

⁵³ *Divine Liturgy of Our Father Among the Saints Basil the Great*, trans. Members of the Faculty of Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press), 33.

possibility. The first/third Basil prayers, outside of the prefatory office, are quite brief. They are addressed to God and invoke His supreme power over the enemy. They describe God as the “Creator of fiery ranks and Fashioner of the immaterial powers”; God did “commit to the darkness of the depths of Tartarus the angels that apostatized” with the “angelic commander.” The Devil must be banished, so that they “do no harm to the Image that has been sealed against him.” The Devil and demons are assailing the all-important image and likeness of God within the victim, so vital to the faithful’s identity in Christ.⁵⁴

The second Basil prayer stands out as much longer and is addressed to “the blasphemous originator of evil,” rather than to God. The first half of the prayer, rich with metaphor and symbolism (as all seven exorcisms are), invokes the relationship between God and humanity, divine power, the exorcisms of Christ, and compassionate healings: “Who madest man after His own Image”; “Who didst part the sea with a rod and leddest His people across dryshod”; “Who didst cast out a legion of demons”; and “Who didst cleanse the sores of lepers.” The second half is ripe with commands, all of them terse in the manner of Christ.⁵⁵ The Devil is thus commanded: “Begone, and depart”; “flee, flee, begone”; “cower”; and “return not.”

In addition, this exorcism offers a host of pointed adjectives, descriptive words, and phrases about the Devil. The intention seems to be to inform the Devil that he is “diminishing ontologically, rather than remaining unchanged....”⁵⁶ He is “unclean and defiled”; “abysmal, false, and ugly.” Further, the places where the evil one dwells and, perhaps, the situations in which he may be encountered, are numbered and recounted: in “disease,” “scourges,” “laughter,” “witchcraft,” “rages,” and “astrologers”; in “brooks,” “pits,” “a lake,” a “forest” or “pagan

⁵⁴ Thomas, *The Image*, 117.

⁵⁵ Metcalf, *The Efficacy*, 15.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *The Image*, 94.

tomb.” The purpose of this exhaustive listing may be to reveal the secret “hiding places” of the Devil, to leave him no shelter from the exorcistic attack. The references to witchcraft and astrology speak to long-standing beliefs that these practices are predecessors to possession,⁵⁷ and the invocation of “pagan tombs” may point to the demonization of pagan and other non-Christian religious practices by early Christians.⁵⁸

The first three Chrysostom exorcisms are brief, and they are all addressed to God. Like the prayers of Basil, they recount the mighty power and acts of God, including the exorcisms of Christ. God is “eternal” and has the power to command (first prayer); “didst adjure all the unclean spirits” (second prayer); and is the “supreme, untemptable, peaceful King” (third prayer). The first prayer asks that the exorcism might be successful, so that the victim may live “in a holy, righteous and pious manner,” pointing to exorcism as part of the long-term journey toward salvation. In the same manner, the second prayer invokes the sanctity of the human being “as a living temple of the Holy Spirit.” The third prayer asks that “an Angel of peace, a mighty Angel, a Guardian of souls and bodies” be sent to drive out the demon. This links to the mention of the angels and saints in the Supplicatory Office; it also suggests that not only Christ and human beings are exorcists—perhaps angels, too, also play a role.

The fourth Chrysostom prayer is much longer than the first three Chrysostom prayers and longer than the second Basil prayer. Like the second Basil prayer, it is addressed to the Devil. While the Devil is referred to as “apostate,” along with several other epithets, there are far fewer examples of name calling than in the second Basil prayer. In the early stages of this fourth Chrysostom prayer, the mightiness of God is highlighted, along with God’s multifarious and miraculous works. God is “of immeasurable power,” “unoriginated and dreadful”; God did

⁵⁷ Fr. A.

⁵⁸ Mango, “Diabolus,” 218.

“bring all things out of non-existence into being” and “walketh upon the wings of the wind.” Having established God’s superiority over the Devil, the prayer moves into a system of refrains, all beginning with “The Lord expelleth thee, O Devil.” Each main refrain is followed by brief exhortations that invoke the glory of God and His mighty works: “Who didst slay death by death, and by His arising didst give life unto His people”; “Who wilt come again with glory on the clouds of heaven, to judge the living and the dead with His holy Angels.” These phrases point not only to God’s superiority; they also connect exorcism to the compassionate, life-saving mission of Christ. Exorcism is personal, but it is also cosmic and for the entire world.⁵⁹ Death is already destroyed, and the exorcism reflects and confirms this. The second coming will complete the great exorcism of evil from the world.

Significantly, the latter stages of this long prayer focus on the cross of Christ. The symbol of the cross has been prevalent in exorcisms since antiquity, and it is believed to have a unique power against demonic powers, as the great instrument of Christ’s passion.⁶⁰ The Devil is reminded that his expulsion is by “[t]he Lord ... Who didst plant the Cross firmly as the one foundation and salvation of the world, for the fall of thee and all the angels under thee.” The final sentences of the prayer move to a more pastoral tone. They reflect upon the salvation of humankind and the nurturing of Christ’s “true flock in a place of green pasture ... guided well and toward salvation by the staff of the Cross....” The reality of Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross seems integral to the success of the exorcism—the cross was motivated by pure love, as the prayers of exorcism must be.

All seven prayers thus affirm the superiority of God and the inferiority of the Devil and

⁵⁹ Robert M. Johnston, “Demon Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament,” *Journal of Adventist Missions Studies* 11, no. 2 (2015): 23.

⁶⁰ Greenfield, *Traditions*, 143; Metcalf, *The Efficacy*, 252.

the demons: the enemy's destructive bent toward humankind is no match for the ineffable power, glory, and compassion of God. The Devil, too, is only expelled by the word of God, never in the name of the exorcist or by any human power. This is life or death; this is a rare but impactful moment within one's journey to salvation. These prayers unite the faithful to the mystery of Christ's own exorcisms, to the exorcism of evil from the world by His sacrifice on the cross.

The Church's Conviction and Basis for the Proposal

In 1974, during a lecture at Cornell's Sage Chapel, then Archbishop Iakovos spoke publicly about the importance of exorcism in cases of demonic possession.⁶¹ This was likely prompted by the surge in cultural interest in demonic possession within that decade,⁶² but that public pronouncement, by a standing Archbishop of America, worked to validate exorcism for the modern Church, along with the ongoing presence of the seven exorcisms within the *Great Book of Needs*. The Church's ancient convictions concerning the reality of external evil, possession, and exorcism have not changed; indeed, they have been reconfirmed. As it is still possible to become children of God, the Church affirms it is still possible to become "children of the evil one."⁶³

Further, exorcism is intimately related to the life-saving ministry of Jesus Christ, to the mystery of suffering and healing. Christ's exorcisms and, indeed, the exorcisms of today, represent personal encounters with the healing love of Christ, as well as his exorcism of the Devil as leader of this world—a world fraught with evil, pain, and suffering. As Fr. Krommydas asserted, if we deny the validity of exorcism, we ignore aspects of "everything that we

⁶¹ Demetrios Koukouzes, "Exorcism and Exorcists in the Greek Orthodox Tradition," Homily presented at Sage Chapel, Cornell University (Ithaca, NY, March 10, 1974).

⁶² Michael W. Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001), 11.

⁶³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians*, in vol. 1 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 71.

experience and what Christ has done” and “erase an element that we don’t fully comprehend or understand.”⁶⁴ The services of exorcism are individual, communal, and cosmic. They are one aspect of the Church’s answer to the “cry” of those who supplicate the Lord.

Further, while a highly rare occurrence within the Orthodox Church,⁶⁵ possible cases do regularly arise. Exorcism is not just a theoretical concept; it is part of the fabric of parish life. Whether or not a particular case of possession is provable, if a person suspects or believes so it becomes a pastoral issue for clergy, who have a duty to respond to evil within the parish and beyond. Speaking to the urgency of exorcism, M. Scott Peck (a psychiatrist who was present for two exorcisms) asserts that whatever possession is, “it makes people very bad, very dangerous.”⁶⁶ Moreover, in his interview Fr. A spoke about the deep grief and trauma experienced by parishioners who have exhausted all ordinary psychological and medical possibilities, as well as the hope and, sometimes, relief exorcism can provide.⁶⁷ It seems a permanent phenomenon worthy of addressing and integral to the life of the Church. Across the centuries, within all geographies, and among all walks of life, possession “simply will not go away.”⁶⁸ It warrants the Church’s attention on an every-day level, and the Church demands the pastoral response of the clergy.

Yet, as will be outlined within this proposal, many complications and concerns surround the possible use of exorcism in a parish or other pastoral setting. This collection of seven exorcisms—these ancient, striking, and seemingly archaic prayers—often lie in the trembling, confused hands of modern Orthodox Christian priests. Direction, guidance, and training are

⁶⁴ Nicholas Krommydas.

⁶⁵ Fr. A; Nicholas Krommydas.

⁶⁶ M. Scott Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist’s Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 241.

⁶⁷ Fr. A.

⁶⁸ Mark Crooks, “On the Psychology of Demon Possession: The Occult Personality,” *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 2018): 45.

nearly non-existent; the possible intersection of spiritual, medical, and psychological factors is an issue; and general cultural influences and clergy fitness present major questions as well. Among many questions one might ask is, “Under what circumstances—if any—and in what manner should the Orthodox Christian priest approach exorcism in the parish context?”

The proposal will take the gravity of all these problems into account and outline possible solutions and paradigms. Further, it will offer suggestions and possible guidelines for archdiocesan hierarchs to adopt and utilize, in support of the clergy and faithful facing the unique issues examined here. As there is no formal process for such petitions or proposals within the Church, the best path toward sharing ideas would be on an individual level with a metropolis or archdiocesan bishop or chancellor. Moreover, given the sensitive nature of the topic, this may be the most discreet and pastorally sensitive manner to present my findings and recommendations.

Proposal: Problems, Solutions, and Recommendations

Hierarchical Permission

Considering the hierarchical nature of the Church, the issue of permission is a logical starting point to examine the problems surrounding exorcism. As mentioned earlier, there is a notable disconnect between the brief rubrics of the exorcisms, stating the need for hierarchical permission and blessing, and what seems to occur within the archdiocese and regional metropolises. As indicated earlier, Fr. A mentioned that he knew of only two archdiocesan bishops who would direct clergy to seek advice from him, or another experienced priest, but there was no mention of formal permission being granted by these hierarchs.⁶⁹ Fr. Krommydas, during his fifteen-year tenure as Metropolis of Boston Chancellor, was unaware of any kind of permission-seeking process, and stated that the issue was “difficult, because priests acted on their

⁶⁹ Fr. A.

own as far as their understanding of it.⁷⁰ His knowledge of such activity was largely based on casual conversations with clergy and, in some cases, laity.⁷¹ This general lack of oversight concerning such a sensitive, even dangerous, pastoral issue is striking. Orthodox Christian priests rarely act “on their own” on any issue, as each priest serves his parish as a representative of the local bishop.

As a first point in approaching a solution for this problem, it is important for hierarchs to establish a formal process for requesting permission for exorcism, with clear protocols and expectations. It is one thing to see the directive for permission in the rubrics but another to lay out what this entails. The haphazard “methods” existing now in the U.S. keep most metropolitans ignorant of possibly critical events in their parishes—and give clergy blanket permission to act on their own, with possibly dire consequences. Metropolitans could also establish discrete review boards to aid them in making decisions; experienced, pastorally sound clergy, and perhaps lay people from related health-care professions, could offer guidance. Peck emphasizes, over and over again, the need for a “team” when approaching exorcism: in addition to family and friends, “a team of pastors, counselors and medical professionals” are needed.⁷² Stavros further emphasizes the value of an “interdisciplinary approach,” with the assumption of honest and open communication between clergy, medical professionals, and family.⁷³ As exorcism was once a community-oriented spiritual event evidencing the work of God among His people, this could be a modern reality as well.⁷⁴

For this permission concept to function, there must be unified hierarchical vision and

⁷⁰ Nicholas Krommydas.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Peck, *Glimpses*, 165.

⁷³ George Stavros, email exchange, Dec. 19, 2023.

⁷⁴ Proctor, *Demonic Bodies*, 108.

direction. Hierarchs need to clarify the Church's teaching on exorcism. Further, while Archbishop Iakovos' 1975 statement was powerful, hierarchs must provide clergy with an updated statement of its current convictions. Clergy need specific directives concerning the utilization of the seven prayers of exorcism within the parish setting. This would need to happen on both an archdiocesan and metropolis level, assuming cooperation and mutual understanding among the archbishop and the presiding metropolitans of each metropolis. The messaging of one metropolitan must be that of another; contradictory statements and viewpoints would only add to existing confusions and perhaps even create scandal within the Church.

Guidance and Training

In addition to the permission question, guidance and training are also almost nonexistent. The incredibly brief rubric accompanying the exorcism prayers has already been highlighted. Beyond that, it would seem any sort of guidance for a priest seeking help with a possible case is unlikely and, perhaps, undependable; there is also no official training available at the metropolis or archdiocesan level. As an illustrative example, Fr. A's first experience with exorcism was by happenstance, while filling in for another priest at a small Maine parish.⁷⁵ After finishing Divine Liturgy one day, a local retired priest asked Fr. A to drive him to a nearby hospital, so he might read the exorcism prayers over a female parishioner. While skeptical and taken off guard, Fr. A agreed, and another local priest joined their effort in order to humor the older priest. After reading some of the exorcisms over the woman, "she was stone cold," and there was no effect.⁷⁶ However, after several more visits and exorcisms spanning several weeks, she eventually "emerged from her trancelike state." She recovered and went on to live a healthy, fulfilling life.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Fr. A.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

There is no indicator or proof her recovery process was initiated or spurred on by the exorcisms.

Fr. A never dreamed he would have been reading the prayers of exorcism during this brief stint in Maine.⁷⁸ He had no idea how to read the prayers, how to offer responses, or how to carry himself. He was not even sure if it was responsible (was he the right person or right priest for this role?), especially as he was only recently ordained and finished with seminary.⁷⁹ With no official guidance, he was simply and rather casually taught by praying with his colleagues, who perhaps had little idea what they were doing as well. One may wonder what kind of guidance his retired colleague had ever received—or if he was sufficiently aware of the woman’s medical and psychological situation.

When it comes to exorcism, most clergy are left with just such “guidance” and “training.” Clergy are pulled into critical pastoral situations and depend on collegial relationships for guidance, in the absence of official direction. The possibility, here, for immense problems, is evident: in inexperienced hands, the dramatic prayers of exorcism, with the presumption of possession, could psychologically and spiritually damage the patient. Fr. A at least had the caring guidance of the retired priest, but what if he had not? While the greatest “safeguard” against doing damage in exorcism is love,⁸⁰ this will not necessarily prevent dire mistakes from being made, such as the unwitting insertion of one’s own authority—rather than Christ’s—into the service or ignoring underlying medical and psychological conditions.

There is, too, the question of official educational training within the seminary experience at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology or through other archdiocesan resources. According to Fr. Krommydas, who taught pastoral theology at Holy Cross for twelve years, there

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 188.

was no commentary on exorcism within the school's curriculum during his tenure, and this is likely still the case.⁸¹ Considering the direct line between Holy Cross and future parish leadership, the school should at least equip the students with the basic tools to assess the question of possession and other unconventional spiritual issues.

In response to these issues, the hierarchy may feel that official field training for clergy would be too complex, sensitive, or possibly scandalous (this may also be true for the seminary setting). With this in mind, a helpful alternative would be discreet guidance and mentoring. Hierarchs could begin to identify "experts" in their metropolises and, on a case-by-case basis, direct clergy with unique pastoral situations to these figures. Thus, in addition to having the guiding hand of the metropolitan, there is at least another individual sanctioned by the metropolitan to offer specific guidance and mentoring. As a possible model for this concept, in the Metropolis of Boston this role was unofficially served by Fr. A before his passing. Recently, in consideration of my doctoral study focus, my metropolitan has appointed me to this role, though it bears no specific title or office. His chancellor simply told me, "Alex, you're our new guy for this stuff." I invoke this appointment only to show that even though this appointment is rather casual, there is hope for better understanding and practice surrounding exorcism. This may be a small but tangible step toward purposeful guidance and mentoring, at least within my metropolis.

This guidance and mentoring should not just be on the theoretical level, either. There needs to be in-person support, some level of field training. One can imagine the encouragement offered by senior clergy, who might discreetly accompany less-experienced priests on critical pastoral visits, act as sounding boards afterward, and be available for further in-person support.

⁸¹ Nicholas Krommydas.

For example, after a pastoral visit, there could be a discussion about what seemed to be most efficacious about the encounter. Based on what occurred, the senior priest might make recommendations for future visits, like avoiding the second Basil prayer and fourth Chrysostom prayer because they may unnecessarily agitate the patient (both addressed to the Devil). Such seemingly basic direction could make a critical difference for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the patient.

Besides the importance of general guidance by these senior clergy, their hands-on mentoring and presence is needed on a deeper theological and pastoral level. It is within exorcism that a human being comes “closest to being invested with individual power over the demonic forces,” and there is thus “a constant danger of transgressing the bound of what could be accepted as compatible with orthodox doctrine....”⁸² With such a mighty spiritual task before a clergy person, the presence of sanctioned, seasoned spiritual guides is paramount. A misuse of power, a misinterpretation of doctrine, or an unnecessary escalation of the situation by clergy could have a devastating effect on those who need the Church the most.

Mental Health and Medical Factors

Another complexity surrounding the use of exorcism is the intricate relationship between spiritual ailments and psychological disorders, such as schizophrenia.⁸³ In addition, Davies points to both Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and Possession Syndrome (PS) as psychological pathologies that might easily be mistaken for true demonic attack by clergy, family members, and other concerned individuals.⁸⁴ DID is “almost always caused by specific traumatic instances in the past, usually during childhood, and those instances are more often than

⁸² Greenfield, *Traditions*, 147.

⁸³ Samuel Pfeifer, “The Demonic Attribute in Nondelusional Disorders,” *Psychopathology* 32, no. 5 (1999): 252

⁸⁴ Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1995), 86.

not instances of child abuse.⁸⁵ The traumatic instance is highly difficult to face and process. Thus, it is suppressed and denied. As Lieberman also asserts, the suppression “suffices until the person matures into adulthood, when the repressed experience begins to seek expression through some new form of dissociation, including an emulation of psychosis or demonic possession.”⁸⁶

Conversely, PS is usually connected to an immediate situation of extreme stress or trauma.⁸⁷ The instance often occurs within a nuclear or extended family situation, and the person affected is often a “socially subordinate individual.”⁸⁸ The possession serves as a way for the individual to “respond and to cope with circumstances that cannot be effectively dealt with otherwise.”⁸⁹ In a situation where one feels powerless and there is, perhaps, a seemingly impossible problem to face, this is a kind of last defense, a cry for help and compassion. This “socially unacceptable” behavior is necessarily met with attention and sympathy; the situation could even lead to family coming together and discovering solutions.⁹⁰ Even though the “subordinate” aspect of PS is usually on a familial level, there are also possible connotations for one’s relationship with the greater community: when a person is—or at least feels—powerless in the face of neighbors, government, and socio-economic paradigms. Interestingly, Davies also points to the fact that though unique pathologies, DID and PS are not mutually exclusive and could both manifest within individuals at the same time.⁹¹ Though speculative, Davies suggests the possibility of DID and PS as factors in Christ’s exorcism “patients.” With her seven demons, Mary Magdalene is examined as a possible victim of DID.⁹²

⁸⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁸⁶ Jeffrey A. Lieberman, *Malady of the Mind: Schizophrenia and the Path to Prevention* (New York: Scribner, 2022), 20.

⁸⁷ Davies, *Jesus the Healer*, 88.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

In addition to complications surrounding DID and PS, the so-called “Satanic Syndrome” has been identified as a pathology connecting psychopathy and depression to an obsession with satanic ritual, occults practices, black magic, seances, and related practices.⁹³ Psychopathy and depression can be “significant predictors of the Satanic syndrome” and are, in turn, exacerbated by the presence of the Satanic Syndrome.”⁹⁴ Crooks also recognizes a certain “oppressive occultism” and “atmospheric poisoning by widespread occult practices,” which can adversely affect those who are psychologically vulnerable.⁹⁵

There are few parish priests who would be anywhere near equipped to discern between such delicate, complex psychological realities and a true possession situation, worthy of the exorcism services. As revealed, the language of all the exorcism prayers is full of suggestive diction, dramatic adjurations, horrifying imagery, and accusations concerning the evil one. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which a well-meaning priest does some level of counseling and research within the family of a patient dealing with conditions like DID, PS, and the Satanic Syndrome, but he simply does not have the knowledge base, and understanding of scientific disciplines, to make accurate decisions. The power of suggestion could easily come into play, and the situation could be made even worse. Patients could internalize the accusations against the Devil within the exorcisms and, perhaps, begin to believe that they are indeed the Devil or at least possessed.⁹⁶

Working toward a wholistic counseling and treatment approach to possession cases, Exline, Pargament, Wilt, and Harriott offer a “three lens” concept: the psychological, medical,

⁹³ Zlatko Sram, “Psychopathy and Depression as Predictors of the Satanic Syndrome,” *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 101.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹⁵ Crooks, “The Occult,” 46.

⁹⁶ Matthew W. Dickie, “The Fathers of the Church and the Evil Eye,” in *Byzantine Magic*, ed. Henry Maquire (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008), 16.

and spiritual, recognizing that all three are valid concerns to patients.⁹⁷ Though seeing a possible value in “normalizing” possession in psychological patients for the sake of introspection and exploration,⁹⁸ they still have serious concerns about the possible effects of exorcism on patients with psychological pathologies. There is the distinct possibility of “secondary trauma” and the complications of “dissociative disorders.”⁹⁹ Exorcisms often can involve features like “physical touch, public humiliation, yelling or shouting, physical restraint, and being jerked, shaken, or hit.”¹⁰⁰ Fr. A, in fact, recalled several instances in which parishioners were exorcised in his parish and family members and friends restrained the patient and had fairly violent physical confrontations with them.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, concerning the aftermath of exorcism, these authors contend that results tend to be either highly positive or negative; in negative cases, patients often feel a sense of failure or personal responsibility, adding to their level of distress.¹⁰² They might even see the failure as due to their own “lack of faith, or a refusal to turn away from evil.”¹⁰³ While the Exline study focuses on the involvement of counselors in cases of spiritual ailments, the authors’ concerns hold true for clergy.

Specifically concerning the medical “lens” invoked above, there may indeed be serious and purely medical or medical-psychological issues behind the “magical thinking” associated with possession.¹⁰⁴ For example, Stavros asserts how certain conditions may present as possession: “Substance abuse conditions can also manifest in ways that might be interpreted as possession, such as unusual physical strength and pain tolerance associated with crystal meth

⁹⁷ Julie J. Exline, et al., “Mental Illness, Normal Psychological Processes, or Attacks by the Devil? Three Lenses to Frame Demonic Struggles in Therapy,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 221.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Fr. A.

¹⁰² Exline, et al., “Mental Illness,” 224.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

use.”¹⁰⁵ The Exline study also raises questions about substance abuse and other pathologies like sleep disorders—such conditions may lead patients to “hear demonic voices or sense evil presences.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, the authors of the study recommend that patients undergo “medical tests, neurological evaluations, or medication referral” as part of their “assessment and intervention.”¹⁰⁷ Stavros further echoes the need to “rule out complicated medical conditions.”¹⁰⁸ There could also be something spiritual at work—yet these pathologies are possibly part of the condition and must be considered. The medical “lens” comprises one more critical problem facing clergy and the question of exorcism.

With these psychological and medical factors in mind, the Church should establish a system of necessary evaluation for clergy, as a predecessorial step to approaching the permission-seeking process. A Catholic model—highlighting stages of demonic influence from the most basic to possession—may be studied and adopted, at least as a starting point.¹⁰⁹ In addition, the Exline study, focusing on psychological, medical, and spiritual approaches to counseling those suffering with demonic ailments, could be a helpful paradigm for adoption or at least reference.¹¹⁰ This could become a kind of “check list” for parish clergy, creating space for them to pause and examine the situation, along with a pathway for utilizing medical and psychological records and every other available resource. While trying to help parishioners with dramatic situations and troubles, it is easy to get taken away in the moment. This paradigm, demanding that clergy research the psychological and medical background of their parishioners, would create this helpful space for meaningful contemplation. It would draw them into a more

¹⁰⁵ George Stavros.

¹⁰⁶ Exline, et al., “Mental Illness, 219.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 219.

¹⁰⁸ George Stavros.

¹⁰⁹ Gabrielle Amorth, *An Exorcist Tell His Story*, trans. Nicoletta V. MacKenzie (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990).

¹¹⁰ Exline, et al., “Mental Illness.”

wholistic conversation with the possible possession situation. After careful, exhaustive examination, cases which, at the outset, seemed fit for discussion with one's hierarch may then seem to require a different pastoral approach.

As the priest delves into multi-disciplinary conversations with the patient, family, and other resources, his understanding of what might truly be ailing the parishioner will be enhanced. The importance of certain medical conditions, underlying psychological pathologies, trauma, and so many other complexities might be discovered, and this would help prevent harmful actions. For example, the best direction might be revealed as further pastoral counseling, while “normalizing” the belief in possession and tending to an underlying trauma or addiction¹¹¹; it may lie in blessing the person's house as a starting point, while discussing fascinations with folk and occult practices in a non-judgmental manner. While all questions might not be answered, the process would be an invaluable exercise and reference point for both clergy and metropolis authorities.

Cultural Phenomena, Orthodox Folk Magic, and Further Concerns

In addition to psychological and medical concerns surrounding exorcism, the reality of cultural interest in the topic—often sensationalized by the media—is another problem. Indeed, public interest in the demonic,¹¹² and its remedies, was a great preoccupation of early Christians and is certainly a modern reality. Specifically concerning the U.S. in the 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam War and countercultural movement there was an explosion of interest in demonology within literature and film. William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* and subsequent film adaptation, along with a host of other supernatural thrillers like *Rosemary's Baby* (also both a novel and film adaptation), captivated audiences and had a strong, often disturbing effect on

¹¹¹ Ibid., 223.

¹¹² Greenfield, *Traditions*, 166.

viewers. Fr. Krommydas mentioned counseling a young woman in San Francisco, in the mid-to-late 1970s, who was morbidly obsessed with *The Exorcist* film and came to wonder if she, too, might be possessed.¹¹³

“Real life” studies of possession and exorcism were also highly influential in the 70s and helped shaped public belief and understanding, such as the aforementioned M. Scott Peck’s *Glimpses of the Devil* and Malachi Martin’s rather dubious *Hostage to the Devil*.¹¹⁴ Further, the 1980s to early 1990s have been called “Satan’s decade in America,” due to the “Satanic Panic” revolving around supposed satanic cults and crimes in the U.S.¹¹⁵ This phenomenon was not only characterized by interest in the satanic but, especially, a tremendous fear; there was a level of public gullibility, and many were quick to believe reports and rumors of actual satanic crimes—including murder—overtaking the country. White asserts the “hysteria” was driven by fundamentalists Christian groups¹¹⁶; whatever the case, the concerns were deemed newsworthy, grossly sensationalized, and became a cultural obsession.

Subsequent decades have seen public interest in the general topic of the demonic continue and expand, from the 2000s “Charmed Generation” phenomenon, to the “Teen Witchcraft Movement,” to the “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” craze, along with the slew of new books, seminars, conventions, theatrical releases, and documentaries that surround us today.¹¹⁷ This ongoing cultural phenomenon is recently well-represented in the truly bizarre *Eli Roth Presents: The Legion of Exorcists*,¹¹⁸ as well as the blockbuster *The Pope’s Exorcist* movie

¹¹³ Nicholas Krommydas.

¹¹⁴ Peck, *Glimpses*; Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Contemporary Americans* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

¹¹⁵ Cuneo, *American Exorcism*, 51.

¹¹⁶ Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief, and Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Eastborne: Sussex Academic Press, 2015), 46.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹⁸ Brian Knappmiller, dir, *Eli Roth Presents: The Legion of Exorcists*, Season #1 (Aired on Travel Channel: 2023).

(2023), very loosely-based on the writings of Fr. Gabriel Amorth.¹¹⁹

With these realities in mind, and the strong public interest in such topics often shaped by our culture, Orthodox clergy are extremely vulnerable when approaching the question of exorcism. Moreover, there is a danger of great harm befalling those who need the help of the Church. Within a parish the rumor of an exorcism could lead to tumultuous gossip about both clergy and patient; because of a lack of understanding, the word “exorcism” may very well turn the minds of parishioners toward what novels they have read and movies they have watched. While the exorcism of a person might often be a calm, prayerful, peaceful, and even healing experience, most people’s minds might race in a different direction: the image of Russell Crowe (*The Pope’s Exorcist*) battling demons in a volcanic pit or Jason Miller (*The Exorcist*) hurling himself out a window to save the soul of a young girl possessed by the Devil. One can imagine how easily the liturgical reality of exorcism could be conflated with the imaginative perceptions of the faithful. Such scenarios could also cause a great deal of embarrassment for Church hierarchy, especially if permission were not sought and care not taken in the research of the case. Most importantly, the spiritual—and total well-being—of the patient and parish could be terribly affected because of misunderstandings and distractions. This would be a damaging “sequel” for the individual and the Church as a whole.

As an added complexity, there is a direct link between our cultural obsession with the demonic and the psychological power of suggestion among the faithful: the sheer popularity and pervasiveness of the topic can help create the idea of possession within a vulnerable person. The example of Fr. Krommydas’ San Francisco parishioner, obsessed with *The Exorcist*, was

¹¹⁹ Amorth, *An Exorcist Tells*; —, *An Exorcist: More Stories*, trans. Nicoletta V. MacKenzie (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2002).

highlighted earlier and serves as a strong example here.¹²⁰ Believing one is possessed could certainly be as dangerous as actually being possessed and could further compromise one's mental and physical health.¹²¹

A further complication for clergy surrounding possession and exorcism is the collection of various folk and magical practices, originating in traditionally Orthodox countries and manifest in parishes. Such practices, in one form or another, are mirrored throughout all Orthodox Christian jurisdictions, from Greek and Russian to Romanian and Albanian Orthodox. They are not, largely, part of official Church doctrine, yet they exist within the sphere of parish life. In some cases, they are ancient practices that speak to the different ways in which the faithful have experienced the faith and the world around them. They can range from simple practices like wearing amulets to ward off evil to more dramatic assertions about the invisible world—even the undead. One fifteenth century canonist recorded and condemned belief in “apparitions, animated corpses, and vampires;”¹²² it might surprise many to hear that such beliefs persist within certain Orthodox Christian demographics, in one form or another. From antiquity to the present, what is believed by the Church, and espoused, does not always reflect the actual beliefs and experiences of the people. For the parish priest trying to aid those with a serious spiritual ailment, this disconnect between official and popular belief is difficult to navigate.

A primary and ubiquitous example is belief in the “evil eye.” Roussou offers a comprehensive definition: “The evil eye (*kako mati* or simply *mati*) refers to the phenomenon where some individuals, possessed by envy, meanness and general bad—but sometimes good—

¹²⁰ Nicholas Krommydas.

¹²¹ Dickie, “The Fathers,” 16.

¹²² Patrick Viscuso, “Vampires, Not Mothers: The Living Dead in the Canonical Responses of Iosaph of Ephesus,” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2000): 179.

feelings in their soul transmit a form of energy to fellow human beings.”¹²³ There is even a more dangerous level of “the eye,” which is known as the “Vaskania, meaning to kill with the eye.”¹²⁴ While the Church Fathers were skeptical of the evil eye, they were also willing to concede that perhaps the “virtuous or fortunate do have something to fear from envious forces or that a supernatural force may use the eyes of the envious to cause harm.”¹²⁵ The Devil may not be in the eye, but the eye may be used by the Devil.¹²⁶ The Church teaches that the greatest danger of the “evil eye” really “comes from within,”¹²⁷ but the journey to this level of understanding takes time and effort.

The “Vaskania” prayer is read quite often and surprisingly rather willingly by many clergy, especially at larger, urban churches with a significant amount of first and second-generation U.S. its congregants.¹²⁸ The faithful will fight “the eye” at home with folk remedies, or approach clergy for the prayer, or do both. At many baptismal services, the infant will have a “mati” pin on the back of the baptismal garment, in the event anyone might cast an envious or malicious glance.

While the most popular, the “eye” belief, and its associated practices, is just one of many that are manifest in the homes and churches of Orthodox Christians. Fr. A asserted that “there are as many prayers as there are people.”¹²⁹ Some attempt to read the future in tea or coffee grounds; some try to lift curses and spells by dipping burning coals in water, thus extinguishing the fiery

¹²³ Eugenia Roussou, *Orthodox Christianity, New Age Spirituality and Vernacular Religion: The Evil Eye in Greece* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021): 2-3.

¹²⁴ Theodora Dallas, et al., “The Power of the Divine: Religion, Rituals, and Healing in Greece,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23, no. 8 (October 2020): 724.

¹²⁵ Dickie, “The Fathers,” 11.

¹²⁶ Fr. A.

¹²⁷ Mark 7:23 (NKJV).

¹²⁸ Fr. A; Nicholas Krommydas.

¹²⁹ Fr. A.

malice of the demons; there is the “filakto,” a small pillow that can deliver a blessing or curse.¹³⁰ These practices, like the evil eye, exist somewhere between Orthodoxy and the unique spiritual practices of the people.¹³¹ Dallas asserts that in Greece, as in many Eastern European cultures, “illness is conceptualized as biopsychospiritual rather than biopsychological as it is in many Western cultures.”¹³² The answers to many of life’s problems and ailments do not just have their origin in the body and mind—but also, very much, in the spiritual realm.

While these practices, including the Church’s condescension to the “Vaskania,” cause plenty of confusion within the basic ministry of clergy, there is a subtle but poignant implication for the question of exorcism as well. The main issue seems to be a level of spiritual misunderstanding and exaggeration. As these practices focus on a belief in constant spiritual and magical assault, they can provide a quick “springboard” to the rare and delicate question of exorcism. If one already believes that this vivid and malicious spiritual warfare is going on in full force, looking to exorcism is the next and seemingly logical step. Both Fr. A and Fr. Krommydas recognized a noticeable desire for the “quick fix” of exorcism in parishioners who believed in and practiced folk remedies.¹³³ I have witnessed the same trend in my own ministry. It is much easier to avoid the rigors of psychological therapy and spiritual discernment than to seek a dramatic, though likely unnecessary and damaging, conclusion to years of mounting spiritual anguish over “magical battles.” Unfortunately, as Fr. Krommydas asserted, some Orthodox clergy are more than happy to oblige.

Beyond this Orthodox spiritual baggage, the faithful are also influenced by a host of other unconventional spiritual and cultural phenomena, like Wicca and other contemporary pagan

¹³⁰ Fr. A.

¹³¹ Roussou, “Orthodox Christianity,” 3.

¹³² Dallas, et al., *The Power*, 729.

¹³³ Fr. A; Nicholas Krommydas.

practices. The general movement in the U.S., spurred on by the wider countercultural movement of the 1960s, is incredibly popular on college campuses and among people of all ages and walks of life.¹³⁴ Members and adherents have “celebrated seasonal festivals, venerated re-imagined ancient gods, and worked magical rights by the light of the moon,” and continue to do so today.¹³⁵ While such practices are not proportional to deep occult practices and phenomena like the “Satanic Syndrome” mentioned earlier,¹³⁶ they still impact the spiritual outlook of Orthodox faithful. Fr. A cautioned about “dabbling with witchcraft, even white magic,” as a kind of gateway to exploring possibly confusing and dangerous spiritual paths.¹³⁷ Further, a recent analysis of an Italian exorcist’s records (spanning a ten-year period) affirms the connection between “new age” experimentation and possession,¹³⁸ as does the experience of Peck.¹³⁹

As with the Orthodox folk magic concerns, these interests also bring with them a misdirected sense of spirituality that diminishes the association of the faithful with the person of Christ—or at least reduces this association to a superficial level. For example, spiritual confrontations at seances could lead to a belief in possession and thus the “need” for exorcism: a ritual for a ritual. An innocent trip to the tarot card reader’s booth at a town fair could create unnecessary anxiety and fear of something malicious approaching. A young, first-year college student could begin reading about the “white magic” Fr. A mentioned, but that study could lead to spiritual confusion and the pursuit of ideas like “mystical states of consciousness,” which is very common to contemporary pagan spiritualities.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ White, *Wicca*, 52.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁶ Sram, “Psychopathy,” 90.

¹³⁷ Fr. A.

¹³⁸ Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai, “Mastering the Devil: A Sociological Analysis of the Practice of a Catholic Exorcist,” *Current Sociology* 66, no. 1 (January 2018): 10.

¹³⁹ Peck, *Glimpses*, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Samuel Wagar, “The Wiccan ‘Great Right’—Hiermos Gamos in the Modern West,” *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 21, no. 2 (Summer, 2009): 4.

Certainly, spiritual ailments are often created by looking for answers outside of one's relationship with Christ; then, in desperation, healing is sought for within the Church—yet still with a misunderstanding of the Church's ministry of healing. The priest, the minister of Christ's sacraments, becomes another magician in a dualistic spiritual battle, the source of a quick religious fix. Even if patients experience a sense of temporary relief in such situations, there is no valid spiritual journey that is quick, and there is no ailment without a need for ongoing care. Certainly, the departure of an "unclean spirit" can lead to a return of that entity and "seven other spirits more wicked than himself," and "the last state of that man is worse than the first."¹⁴¹ The same holds true for all human maladies, from the medical to psychological and spiritual. A misguided healing journey can leave one worse off than before, whatever the cause or causes. With these realities in mind, the priest is then confronted with a host of bewildering and critical pastoral issues. The task of normalizing the experience of parishioners, walking alongside them in their pain, and creating a kind of spiritual and sustainable bridge back to an efficacious understanding of the Church is daunting and a remarkable challenge.

Outside of the question of clergy fitness, the problems outlined in this section may be among the most difficult to address. First, it is important to note that none of the problems mentioned in this section are likely going anywhere: cultural interest in possession and exorcism will remain strong, Orthodox folk practices will persist among the faithful, and occult dabbling and fascination with unconventional spiritual paths seems here to stay. Yet there is a way, and it is twofold.

First, there is the concept of thoughtful, non-reactionary education. Dialogues with parishioners can be initiated about the phenomena of culture interest in the demonic, Orthodox

¹⁴¹ Luke 11:24-26 (NKJV).

folk magic, and persistent interest in popular neo-pagan practices. This could involve everything from purposeful homilies, retreat topics, and youth and young-adult discussions to blog posts, pamphlets, and podcasts. Regarding blog posts, there are Orthodox resources such as Fordham's *Public Orthodoxy* website, a "public-facing" initiative designed to create dialogue around current contemporary and moral issues facing the Orthodox community.¹⁴² Clergy could offer non-judgmental pieces on such forums, inviting contemplation and dialogue about the intersection of Orthodoxy and such things as Wicca or folk practices. Informal and accessible projects like these, initiated by clergy and laity, could be of great benefit to the faithful as they strive to discern what is healthy and possibly destructive in their spiritual lives.

Second, and on a more intimate level, clergy can guide and teach during sacramental moments and within the context of pastoral counseling. For example, when discussing baptisms with families, clergy can thoughtfully address the issue of "mati" pins and other superstitious practices. When a person asks for the prayers for the evil eye or even exorcism, clergy—while also doing their due diligence in exploring any given case—can recommend more common, less inflammatory prayers like those for a house blessing or personal peace. If they discern that a grieving parishioner is trying to contact the dead with the help of occultists, they can speak about the power of prayer through the sanctioned memorials of the Church. Of course, ongoing pastoral care must follow these teaching moments and initial conversations. These examples highlight only several of myriad possible situations and conversations. The point is that clergy must not avoid conflict, uncomfortable moments, and the hard work of pastoral care; knowing that evil is real and that true healing is both complex and wholistic, they must be strong, clear, courageous, and, most of all, loving.

¹⁴² Fordham University Orthodoxy Christian Studies Center, *Public Orthodoxy*, accessed 22 January 2024, <https://fordham.edu>.

Clergy Fitness and Discernment

For the consideration of each hierarch, there is also the often-ignored question of the fitness of the priest for the task of exorcism. Fr. Krommydas mentioned the danger of “fundamentalism,” and clergy who may “be pushing them [parishioners] toward making possession a reality,” and this is only one of many possible issues.¹⁴³ Clergy in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese do not undergo any requisite psychological evaluation after their exit interviews in the third or fourth year of the Master of Divinity program at Holy Cross School of Theology. After this, they are on their own in so many ways. Outside of the personal knowledge a given metropolitan has of his clergy, there is little way to discern any given priest’s level of psychological, spiritual, and even medical fitness. One can imagine the extreme danger of a priest dealing with a significant psychological problem while exploring the question of possession and exorcism with a parishioner. His pathology could feed and worsen that of the patient beyond measure. Further issues like addiction, trauma, and medical conditions could add endless complexities and dangers to such situations.

To this point of fitness, Fr. Krommydas offered several different insights. He mentioned several times how he had performed exorcisms and was disappointed with the results; this made him question himself, his own power of belief.¹⁴⁴ In addition, he went so far as to suggest that while every Orthodox priest is an exorcist, every Orthodox priest should not necessarily practice exorcism: “I could read it [the exorcisms], I could read it like you read something, but if my heart’s not in it, if I have a whole bunch of questions myself, and if I’ve seen from my experience that it doesn’t do anything, then I might not be the right person.”¹⁴⁵ Fr. Krommydas

¹⁴³ Nicholas Krommydas.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

made himself vulnerable by examining the chasm between “reading” the prayers and experiencing the healing command of Christ. Faith is a journey and, in many ways, a battle. Sometimes our hearts eventually catch up to our holy readings and professions. Yet, these vulnerable words of an experienced priest and mental health professional are significant.

The response to this problem encompasses the final point of my recommendations: reviving the ancient practice of designated exorcists. Fr. Krommydas, when I asked him if there should be designated exorcists in each metropolis, agreed with the idea: “Why not have those individuals? That’s why there is a tradition of having people who have that experience, exorcists, who are more familiar with that.”¹⁴⁶ While the minor order of exorcist discussed earlier is no longer in formal existence within the Orthodox Church, in consideration of Fr. Krommydas’ testimony—and the challenging, complex nature of examining cases of possession and possible exorcism—perhaps that should change. These designated priests would, of course, labor under the auspices of their hierarchs. Certainly, the rigors and pastoral sensibilities of the office may be beyond the reach of most clergy, and it may not be possible for hierarchs to supervise large numbers of clergy exorcists. The purpose of exorcism, after all, is the healing and liberation of the afflicted; as a Church, we must humbly ask ourselves how this is best pursued. As Fr. Krommydas advised, “leave the surgery to the surgeon.”¹⁴⁷

Looking Forward

For the surgeon—for now, each parish priest—the proper “medical” procedure for addressing exorcism will likely remain a mystery, at least for the foreseeable future. Yet evil is a reality and affects the lives of the faithful on an individual and corporate level, every minute of every day. Evil is internal, but it is also external. The Church calls us to address both levels of

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

evil within the ministries of the parish and asserts the efficacy of exorcism. Further, the suffering of human beings in the grip of evil, which is intertwined with all the great complexities of life, is an urgent reality. The priest remains there, faced with these things and so often alone, unprepared, and unguided; he is concerned with doing something and with doing nothing. If he acts, he may be deemed a “nut”; if he waits too long, he may be derelict of pastoral duty. With these realities in mind, the proposal offered here will, hopefully, be of some small help with this pastoral problem in the years to come.

Thankfully, besides the mystery surrounding the proper navigation of exorcism, there is another and pervading force at work: the mystery of Christ’s ineffable love and healing—to those afflicted not only by demons but every malady of mind, heart, body, and soul. The supplications of those suffering biblical figures, so long ago, were heard and tended to by Christ; the lamentations of those today afflicted are heard and ministered to as well. God will not abandon His people. While the journey toward healing and liberation may be trying and even perilous, the clergy and the faithful do not walk alone.

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