

Do you remember your last exorcism? For most of us, it was probably at our baptism, when the priest or deacon intoned the words:

“Almighty and ever-living God, you sent your only Son into the world to cast out the power of Satan, spirit of evil, to rescue man from the kingdom of darkness, and bring him into the splendor of your kingdom of light. We pray for these children: set them free from original sin, make them temples of your glory, and send your Holy Spirit to dwell with them. We ask this through Christ our Lord.”¹

Any prayer of exorcism is simply a prayer that the Church offers asking God to free people from evil persons, places and circumstances. In the case of baptism, we ask God not so much to free, but to protect those being baptized from evil, and release them from the effects of original sin – that human inclination we all have to choose our own way rather than God’s, roll off the table and shatter on the floor.

This little exorcism prayer also sums up the mission of Jesus as it’s expressed in the gospel, and makes that part of his mission very personal for each of us. As the gospel passage clearly illustrates, Jesus makes the dominion of God present and active. Placing ourselves in God’s hands through prayer and frequent reception of the Eucharist allows Jesus to act through us too, making the dominion of God present and active in our own lives, full of the life and love God wills us to enjoy.

In the gospel, people sat up and took notice of Jesus’ power and authority. Maybe we would do well to do the same. Although none of us can perform an exorcism exactly as Jesus did, nor am I suggesting that we even try, it may just be that God, alive within us and empowering us through the Eucharist, wishes to make use of you and me to perform something very similar. Let me explain what I mean with a little story and perhaps you’ll agree.

My friend Dave has two daughters in their twenties now. Sally is a wonderful and talented young woman with a delightful personality. She’s a lot smarter than I am and is on track to become a

¹ <http://www.catholicliturgy.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/TextContents/Index/4/SubIndex/67/TextIndex/7>. January 22, 2018

physician, specializing in emergency care. Dave is awfully proud of her. Vicky is another story altogether.

“I think Vicky needs an exorcism, Tim,” Dave told me one day over lunch, “Can you do that?”

I told him I would be vaporized by the archbishop if I tried to pull off a stunt like that, but I asked him why he thought Vicky needed an exorcism.

“Sally understands love and service,” Dave said. “She and her friends volunteer their time to read to kids and visit folks in the hospital. They all go to mass together and share a pretty vivid prayer life. It’s really nothing more than what we did at home when she was growing up. Vicky doesn’t do any of that.”

“Why do you think that is?” I asked.

“She has some friends I wish she didn’t have,” Dave explained. “She doesn’t go to church with us and I have no idea if she even has a prayer life any more. When we invite her to join us she comes back with ‘What has your religion got to do with me? Are you trying to control my life?’”

I told him that sounded a lot like a gospel passage with which I was familiar, but the words didn’t come from the mouth of anyone we’d care to be like.

“If you’re thinking of the same passage I’m thinking of, then you understand why I think she needs an exorcism,” Dave said.

I suggested he keep praying, loving his daughter and be open to God’s action. If he really thought an exorcism was in order, he’d have to take it up with his pastor.

A few months later we were sharing lunch again and Dave was excited about some news he wanted to share with me. We unwrapped our sandwiches and he began.

“Vicky was at a party two weeks ago with some of those friends I wished she didn’t have,” Dave said. “They all got pretty drunk or worse. Then one of her closest friends, Rachel, fell to the floor, unconscious. That sobered everyone up in a big hurry. Someone called 911. Vicky noticed that

her friends were scurrying to get rid of things they didn't want to be caught with. No one was paying attention to Rachel. Vicky did what she could, and the EMTs arrived quickly enough. She went with Rachel in the ambulance to the hospital, telling the EMTs what she knew of what had gone on."

"Was Sally on call at the ED that night?" I asked.

Dave smiled and said "That's what I wanted to tell you. Vicky watched as her sister and the rest of the team took care of Rachel. When they had her stabilized, Sally walked over to Vicky they hugged the kind of hug people who love one another give after a close brush with death. Then she fixed her sister with a steely glare and said 'I hope it's not you I'll have to treat next time. When she wakes up, why don't you and Rachel go schedule an exorcism for yourselves. You don't seem to know what living a good life really means. Something evil's got a grip on you, Vicky, and you'd better get rid of it. Rachel's lucky – she'll live. Not everyone's that lucky."

Dave stopped, but there was still a little grin on his face.

"Awesome," I said. "I'll bet you're pretty proud of Sally - she sounds just like Jesus!"

"You bet I'm proud of her Tim," Dave said, "but not as much as I am as of Vicky. She's back in church again with us now. She's dropping her bad friends and is starting to follow her sister's lead to get back on the straight and narrow. That's hard work. Looks like all she needed was a good scare."

"A good scare," I replied, "or perhaps an exorcism by another name."

Therein lies the challenge for all of us as we do our best to follow Jesus today, doing what he did the way he did it. There's no shortage of unholy people, places and circumstances around us these days; you don't need me to tell you what they are. Can you and I allow Jesus Christ to act with authority in our lives and permit him to use us to cast out the evils that prevent us and those around us from having life to the full? That is what he came for and, through the Eucharist, what he will continue to do with us, for us and through us. All he needs is our cooperation.