The Rite: the devil is back and he's still mad

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The devil returns to the silver screen this week with the opening of director Mikael Hafstrom's "The Rite", based on journalist Matt Baglio's 2009 book "The Rite: the Making of a Modern Exorcist."

Baglio's book explores the current reality of Satanic activity in our day and follows the training of Father Gary Thomas of the Diocese of San Jose, CA, as an exorcist in 2007 during a course at the Regina Apostolorum University in Rome. Both witnessed exorcisms during this time.

Pope John Paul II revised the rite of exorcism in 1998 "De Exorcismus et supplicationibus quibusdam" (Concerning Exorcisms and Certain Supplications), however, the original rite has been in existence since 1614. One major difference, according to John Allen, writing in the National Catholic Reporter in September 2000, is that some of the more colorful descriptions of the devil were removed in keeping with ecclesial teaching that Satan is "a spirit without body, without color and without odor."

Allen notes that the document states that exorcists "must not consider people to be vexed by demons who are suffering above all from some psychic illness" and wants exorcists to ascertain the difference between diabolic possession and those who are "victims of imagination."

"The Rite" is produced by Beau Flynn and Tripp Vinson, who also produced the 2005 box office hit "The Exorcism of Emily Rose" which I reviewed for The Tidings

http://www.the-tidings.com/2005/0909/moviemain.htm as an example of theological horror.

With "The Rite", however, the screenwriter, Michael Petroni, who has a list of religious themed films to his credit, and the filmmakers, focus on the man's faith journey as revealed when he deals with the devil. This new film is a fictional look at the experience of the exorcist, rather than the possessed.

Recently ordained to the transitional deaconate, Michael Kovak (newcomer Colin O'Donoghue) has a crisis of faith. He emails a letter of resignation to the head of the seminary, Father Matthew (Toby Jones), who sees Michael's doubts as a sign of faith rather than a lack thereof. He suggests that Michael go to Rome to take part in a course in how to become an exorcist. Michael, the son of an undertaker, has a sense of the supernatural from growing up so close to death, including the loss of his dear mother when he was a boy. Although skeptical, he heads to Rome.

Father Xavier (Ciaran Hinds) notes Michael's doubts, even about the existence of the devil, and sends him to visit a priest, who has been an exorcist for decades, Father Lucas Trevant (Anthony Hopkins). Father Trevant, also a physician, carries out exorcisms in his residence and makes house calls. It is required that a physician be present for all exorcisms.

A young woman, Rosaria (Marta Gastini) is pregnant with her father's child and has been judged to be possessed. Michael questions whether Rosaria is suffering from trauma from the rape or true possession. One of the demons answers that he entered her through the father's semen. Fr. Lucas demands to know the names of the demons that

possess the girl so he can command them in the name of Christ to depart. There is a terrible struggle. Michael is deeply impressed, but not quite convinced.

But this is what the devil wants, Fr. Lucas explains to him. The devil's greatest pleasure and power comes when someone denies his existence.

They visit a young boy who is tormented externally by the devil; the hoof prints of a mule are all over his body and he has visions of them in his dreams. Lucas accuses the mother of beating her son, but she denies it. This is the exorcist's way of determining, and eliminating all other explanations, including psychological, for the terrifying phenomena these victims experience. Lucas is following the new rite of exorcism.

Michael must face the paradoxical dilemma of what he experiences, what he knows, and what he believes. He is on a faith journey that includes more than belief in the demonic. He struggles with the reality of the existence of Satan. This gets played out at the café he frequents when he meets with a female journalist who is called "Il Sogno" – meaning "the dream" in Italian. Perhaps Angeline (Alice Braga), who is also taking the course to investigate demonic possession, is part of a dream that Michael must address.

Above all the young man grapples with what Fr. Lucas keeps repeating: to disbelieve the devil is what the devil wants. C.S. Lewis, writing in "The Screwtape Letters" (1942), states this well: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

Layered upon Michael's interior state is what he witnesses regarding Satan and Fr. Lucas; we are all vulnerable when it comes to the devil and his minions. Yet we are strengthened and protected by prayer and the symbols of our faith, in particular the Creed, the invocation of the Holy Trinity, the name of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Litany of the Saints, and the power of sacramentals, such as the crucifix. The film showcases this quite well.

Film, as we know, has a sacramental quality in that it is the external manifestation of the inner realities of the characters. So "The Rite" uses reptiles, a mule with glowing red eyes, and contortions of the possessed to show us the reality of the evil works of the devil that we cannot see. "The Rite" is not a remake of "The Exorcist" or any other film about exorcism that I have seen. It does give a nod to "The Exorcist" when Fr. Lucas says to Michael, "What did you think? That this was about pea soup?"

At one point a woman is run down by a car and it seems that the deacon Michael gives her absolution, however, he does not. His words are about faith and forgiveness. I think this was actually a strong moment in the film. I also liked the subtle and intuitive way the film grasps the essence of what ritual means for humans. At one point, Michael is walking through Rome, lonely and rather downcast, when he sees the golden arches of McDonalds in the distance. As anyone who has traveled abroad knows, seeing familiar signs and food in a foreign land is a source of comfort. The Rite of Exorcism, as all rites of the Church, is a source of grace and comfort.

That Rosaria, the pregnant girl, is a victim of incest is noteworthy, too. The violation of persons through sexual attacks is endemic in our culture and equating it with diabolical evil is more than appropriate.

My one complaint about the film is the lack of clarity about deacons and priests. Although Father Thomas, whose story inspired this fictional tale, was a consultant to the film, neither the writer nor producers were able to grasp the difference between deacons and priests, equating ordination with first vows and final vows, as if the men were in religious orders rather than the diocesan priesthood. Also, there is an overuse of the image of the rosary in the film, though it was a way to show the crucifix throughout. I would also have liked to see the celebration of the Eucharist somewhere in the film but I had to leave it to my Catholic imagination.

Hans-Jurgen Feulner, professor of Liturgical Studies and Sacramental Theology at the University of Vienna, attended the same screening as I. "Liturgically and ritually I find 'The Exorcist' somehow better and more authentic, but theologically I think 'The Rite' is a great movie."

"The Rite" is theological and supernatural horror because it is faith seeking understanding in terrifying and inexplicable circumstances. It is deeply Catholic in its sensibilities, though I think all believers will find it interesting. It also attempts to teach the audience that though the Church believes in Satan, it continually tests those who claim the devil dwells within them. Exorcism is a last resort to treating the disorders that people think are satanic. New norms and protocols were also necessary to ascertain that people did not get hurt, or die, as a result of an exorcist's over zealous actions. Matt Baglio's book describes some of these events though they are only alluded to in the film. I did not find Michael's journey as emotionally charged as it might have been. It is more of an honest intellectual inquiry where he learns to trust his heart and find meaning in his

experiences. Just as St. Thomas Aquinas never met a question he feared, neither does Michael fear to ask them.

Some scenes are quite frightening; the camera work is up close and personal. (I had my little bottle of Lourdes water in my bag for good measure.) Yet more than panic, I found myself examining the paradoxes and layers of meaning in the film. Is this of God, or not? Is this of the devil, or not? How can one be sure? Honest inquiry, a lively faith, and passionate prayer.

This is a both/and situation, I think. I saw the film and you can be sure the next time I renew my Baptismal promises with the congregation at our local parish during Mass when baptisms are celebrated each month, I will be rejecting Satan and all his empty promises with all the energy and fervor I can muster.