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The devil is back

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Not since the early 1970s, and the novel and movie "The Exorcist," in which the main signal of satanic possession of a pubescent girl was her accuracy at picking off ministering priests with projectile vomiting, has the devil enjoyed so much attention. This time, however, the wily one's card is placed on our tray not by moviemakers admittedly out to make a buck but by church officials apparently out to make us pay attention to them.

Pope Benedict XVI himself, donning his Hercule Poirot outfit and gathering us all in the Vatican Library to name the guilty person, sees the devil behind the sex abuse crisis that has shaken the church worldwide. Just check out the timing, Benedict says, and you will see that it was no accident that just as the church was celebrating the Year for Priests, the scandal exploded again.

"It was to be expected," he observed, non-infallibly we presume, "that the new radiance of the priesthood would not be pleasing to the enemy. He would rather have preferred to see it disappear, so that God would ultimately be driven out of this world."

This comes closer to claiming that the dog ate my indulgences than it does to explaining what was not, as the pope implies, a new outbreak of child-molesting in the Year of the Priest but rather a revelation of the covered up sex abuse by clergy that had been going on for decades across the supposed European homeland of the faith.

At the same time, Spanish theologian Fr. Jose Antonio Fortea Cucurull crossed swords with Fr. Gabriel Amorth, described as a "renowned exorcist" for saying, in his memoirs, that satanic influence operates even in the Vatican. But would you want Fortea playing defense with statements like, "Cardinals might be better or worse," and, as to Amorth's claim that in exorcisms you could hear demons I.D.ing certain

cardinals as paid up members of satanic cults, " ... Among exorcists, some have come to similar conclusions as Fr. Amorth. Others have not."

Then, of course, there is the American church's Joe Biden, Bishop Thomas Paprocki, who is still trying to untangle his claim that the devil is behind, not the sex abuse by clergy, but the lawsuits filed by the victims of this abuse. Bishop Paprocki has also sponsored a seminar, for bishops only, of course, on exorcism to prepare them to hold off the devil -- Look out, Monsignor, he's right behind you!

The last time the devil made a smoky appearance was in the terrible protracted struggle of the Vietnam War that drained the country and bitterly divided it. Are we surprised that we objectify evil again in a similar period of a protracted struggle in Afghanistan that has also drained the country and divided it? That's the kind of frustrating scene that leads everybody to greater susceptibility to blaming the devil, a phantom intruder from another realm, for cursing us and causing all our woes.

That is why vampires make a comeback in bad times as well. The first Dracula movie appeared in 1931 at the worst moment of the Depression. Vampires are everywhere right now, in a series of movies and television shows, taking the midnight shift for Satan in sucking out our blood and sprinkling it on the devil's crop of evil.

Average people deserve better of their spiritual leaders than the trivialization of evil implicit in this return to these wild and, to them, apparently weirdly satisfying fantasies. Evil exists, but we will never overcome it unless we recognize that it is something for which we are responsible. It comes from within us and not until we come to terms with that truth can we overcome it.

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