**nterview with an Exorcist**

Fr. Gary Thomas wrestles with the reality of Satan

By: [Patrick Coffin](http://www.catholic.com/profiles/patrick-coffin)

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Editor’s note: Fr. Gary Thomas is the mandated exorcist for the Diocese of San Jose, California. In 2005, his bishop, Most Rev. Patrick Joseph McGrath, asked him to take training in Rome for the rite of exorcism. In Rome Fr. Thomas apprenticed himself to Fr. Carmine De Filippis, a veteran Italian exorcist, and his eyes were opened to the reality of evil as never before. His training was the subject of the 2010 book *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist* by Matt Baglio and the 2011 Hollywood movie based on the book, *The Rite* starring Anthony Hopkins.

In late 2012 Catholic Answers Live radio host Patrick Coffin conducted a phone interview with Fr. Thomas.

**Patrick Coffin: Can Satan read our thoughts?**

Fr. Gary Thomas: Satan can have some sense, I think, of our thoughts or our feelings, but Satan doesn’t know us as well as we know ourselves. He can’t predict the future.

**Is satanic activity on the rise in recent years?**

It would seem there are many more people today who have dabbled—or more than dabbled—in idolatry and paganism who are both Catholic and non-Catholic than twenty, twenty-five years ago. Benedict XVI said, “As faith diminishes, superstition increases.” And I would say, as a kind of corollary, “As faith diminishes, darkness increases.” Because we’re all spiritual beings, we’re all searching for meaning; and if we don’t find meaning in ways that the Church would promote, we’ll go search for ourselves. And because of our flawed nature, oftentimes we’re drawn to things that, down the road, can do more harm than good.

**How did you first hear about the ministry of exorcism and decide to pursue it?**

The ministry sought me out. The first priest who was asked by the bishop to take on this role happened to be in my priest support group, and we thought he was a superb candidate for it. But a month later he came back and said he had declined. And for whatever reason—I believe it was providence—I piped up and said, “I could do that. I could be the exorcist.” I was getting ready to go on sabbatical as it was, and Bishop McGrath said, “There’s a course you can take in Rome,” and the rest is in the book.

The grace of being in Rome was that I found a priest who does a lot of exorcisms, and I had the time. I had the time to read, to pray, to journal, and the time to spend with Fr. Carmine. So I was out three days a week in the afternoons for three and a half months. It was all meant to be. I could not do what I’m doing now without the kind of training, observation, and discernment that I had when I was in Rome.

**Let’s talk about the different levels of demonic activity, starting with what is perhaps on a lower rung. What is infestation?**

An *infestation* refers more to a thing or object. For instance, a demon or even a disembodied spirit can attach itself a house. It could be because a satanic ritual was performed there, or a satanic cult existed there for a long time.

**Segueing to the more intense degree of demonic activity, it would be oppression, which is a physical attack. The lives of the saints are rife with this kind of thing.**

Yes, an *oppression* would really refer to a kind of depression, where the person is filled with anxiety and very often there’s a sense of despair or despondency. The other word is *obsession*, where the person is overcome with or obsessed with the idea of Satan being in their life. But in both those cases a person can function to where you wouldn’t necessarily be able to detect anything demonic going on unless they disclose certain things to you. . . .

The idea that a demon is *in* somebody is a misnomer. Sometimes they can be attached to someone and work through someone and be around them in a sense but not actually in them.

**Let’s move to the most extraordinary and the rarest degree, and that would be possession, sometimes known as involuntary possession. Does the devil take full control of the person’s will so that they’re a kind of puppet to Satan?**

A demon can’t control a person’s soul; it can only control a person’s body. Now, the will thing is tricky, because to me the will has everything to do with the soul. However, I do think when a person is possessed their will can be compromised, because their functionality is limited. They may not even be able to take care of their own physical needs. A person who accepts the demon, we call that*integration*, whereas possession is involuntary. Nevertheless, a person who is fully possessed is not able to make decisions on their own.

**Have you witnessed full possession?**

Yes, a couple of them in Rome and one here [in the U.S.].

**One of the stories in the book that kind of threw me was the nun who had been seeing an exorcist for nine years. Now, when people here this, they think, wouldn’t she be in a state of grace? How can a professed religious be possessed?**

There were a number of professed religious who came to [Fr.] Carmine. We had one situation where the parents were actually Satanists, and she left the cult and was later baptized and joined the convent. I know of another situation where the mother dedicated the child in utero to Satan because she had failed to abort the child, and [the child] later became a professed religious.

**Can full possession be the result of someone putting a hex or a curse on the person?**

I don’t that a curse can lead to a full possession, but I think a curse done by a competent practitioner of the occult or the satanic certainly could create an oppression or an obsession. You have to go in and break the curse before you can remove the demon.

**I wanted to ask what are the classic signs of possession and how they’re distinguishable from mental illness.**

The classic signs. One would be the rolling of the eyes, and that’s usually because of an aversion to the sacred. So if someone was to walk into a church or even the parish center—this has happened a number of times—walk into the parish center and they cannot stand to look at the crucifix. Or if they walk into a church and cannot stay or can only stay with great difficulty because of the presence of the Eucharist or a crucifix or another sacramental, or a statue of the Blessed Mother or something.

A knowledge of hidden things can be a sign. So people who know something they have no reason to know, either about me or a situation or to predict the future.

Another sign would be being able to speak in a language they have no competency in. This would usually occur either in a deliverance prayer or a formal exorcism.

The person possessing inordinate strength—that will often come out in an exorcism in cases where the demons are very violent.

The person can have very extreme facial contortions and a change in the voice. Sometimes their whole body language, including their face, can take on the look of a reptile or a snake, and I’ve had that happen a number of times.

**So this is a physiognomic change—not just they’re doing some strange thing with their mouth or their tongue but almost a temporary bone structure shift.**

Yes. I know that seems off the charts, but I’ve actually seen that in people’s faces, where there is a change in the contour of their face. I wish I could describe it better, but I’ve seen that happen a number of times.

**What else?**

In general, the animation of legs and arms during the prayers, where their using their limbs to either intimidate me or put their hands in the form of fists with every intention of using them to injure me or the people around them. All these things can be signs.

It’s usually within the context of the efficaciousness of the prayers. During the praying of the rite, the naming of saints, the direct address to Satan or to the demons—demanding they leave—can actually cause great pain to the demons. The use of holy water or placing a crucifix on a person can cause a sensation of burning.

**Are the prayers [of the ritual] prayed in Latin or in the vernacular?**

They’re prayed in Latin [in English-speaking countries].

**With no interruptions, how long does it take to recite from beginning to end?**

Approximately thirty-five to forty-five minutes. But when you superimpose the presence of a person, what lengthens the ritual is the reaction and observation. You’re looking for reactions to either the prayers in general or some of the words of the prayers to see whether or not those are having any kind of effect on the demon.

**Could you liken it to a wrestling match where you’re looking for holds and advantages and signs of victory?**

I think that’s fairly accurate. You can intersperse—and the ritual calls for this—the Lord’s Prayer or the Hail Mary between the prayers that directly address the demon. And you’re looking for advantages based on the reactions you’re getting from the demon that’s operating and acting through the person.

**Tell us about the preparation that goes on beforehand.**

When a person comes to me, I may say, let’s pray for a while, I want to learn more about you. I’m always listening for doorways, so, you know, if there’s any pattern of practice with the occult or history of sexual abuse. Eighty percent of the people who come to me have been sexual abuse victims, usually as a child. But I’m asking questions about pornography and drug use, habits of their growing-up years, experiences in their family. Any kinds of traumas—the suicide of a person—I wouldn’t rule out any traumas as presenting an opening [to demons].

Then I may refer them to our clinical psychologist. If they’ve been under psychiatric care I might have our psychiatrist look at them. If they start manifesting in ways I’ve never seen before I might refer them to our doctor. If we get to the point of doing a formal exorcism, I always have our prayer team involved, even before the exorcism is going to happen, just praying for the person, praying for me.

**Is the rite done in a church or in a home?**

I do them only in a church, because it’s a sacred place, and I want the proximity to the Blessed Sacrament. Plus, we have more control in a church. We can lock the doors.

We meet in a circle in an area of the church where there’s a lot of space. If we need to have the person lie on the floor, they can. I bless the whole group with holy water, the team and the person. Then we would lay out these pre-exorcism prayers that give glory to God, that acknowledge that God is in charge and that clearly tell the demons what they can and cannot do. All those steps are taken before the formal exorcism begins. What that does is tell the demons who’s in charge and that they’re not. And that I have the power of the local bishop, which is important for me to say, even though they may not recognize it, it’s important that it’s said. And that they can do no harm to the team or anybody in the parish or to this person over whom we’re praying. All that is established first, and it’s not in the actual ritual.

**When do you know that the evil spirits have departed?**

You know the exorcism is over when the manifestations stop. But you don’t stop the prayers immediately, because the demons will try to trick you into thinking they’ve left when they haven’t. So when the manifestations end, you continue for a serious period of time praying the rite, and when there’s no more, then you have to make a judgment as to whether they’ve left. And you also ask the person, “Do you sense anything within you?” So you rely on them to some degree, and you rely on what you’re observing.

**How much of a gateway to Satan has been opened by the wide availability of pornography on the Internet?**

Porn is a click away. I think it has incredible power of being an addictive activity. I think it’s nothing but objectifying one or both sexes. Sometimes there’s an incredible amount of violence that is attached to it. Depending on the frequency, I do think people’s minds after a while become amalgamated into a life of darkness. And when people are involved in this—it’s usually very hidden, much like Satan, who is hidden—I think it can open doorways to the demonic.

**Let’s talk about the armor—the light, the hope, the joy—that is found in a life with Jesus Christ.**

In order to wear the armor of protection, one needs a moral life, a faith life, a prayer life, a sacramental life. So it takes action on our part: How do we conduct our lives? How do we engage and serve other people? Because part of our mandate as a baptized Christian is to be in service to one another.

**Do you recommend that people nurture a relationship with the Blessed Mother?**

Yes. She’s the first disciple, the first to say “yes” in the Gospels, she’s the first vocation in the Church, she’s the carrier of the Word. From the point of view of an exorcist, Satan and the demons hate the Blessed Mother in a very different kind of way than they hate Christ. And very often the Hail Mary can be more powerful than the prayers of the rite of exorcism.