

Priests Get Refresher Course on Exorcisms

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ROME (AP) -- In a classroom ringed by Rome's pine-covered hills, 100 priests solemnly stood in prayer, made the sign of the cross and got down to business: a lesson on Satanism, demonic possession and exorcism.

Worried about ritual killings in Italy and simple adolescent angst, a Vatican-recognized university launched the course Thursday to help priests and seminarians understand what makes people turn to the occult. The class is billed as the first of its kind, with wide-ranging instruction by exorcists, psychologists and a police criminologist.

The Pontifical Academy "Regina Apostolorum" wants to clear up misconceptions - especially about exorcisms, a practice most priests do not carry out.

Thursday's lecturer, Rev. Gabriele Nanni, touched on the pitfalls of driving the devil from someone's body.

Priests must never be proud of their ability, remembering that they are merely conduits of Christ, he said. They must not perform exorcisms on people they suspect have psychological problems. And they should not get carried away and invent mystical gestures.

"Everything must be carried out in extreme sobriety," cautioned Nanni, an exorcist himself. Among the few acceptable tools are a crucifix and prayer.

In shop talk at the end of class, one priest admitted that in his decades of performing exorcisms, he wasn't always sure he was doing it right. Another asked if séances, for example, could leave people vulnerable to psychological problems.

"All contact with the occult and the esoteric is extremely dangerous," Nanni told the sea of priests in black jackets and white collars.

The class debuts as an Italian court prepares to try eight people believed to belong to a Satanic sect for their alleged role in three ritual killings. Sect members belonged to a heavy metal band called "Beasts of Satan."

One of the victims was a 19-year-old stabbed to death in 1998. She may have been targeted because her killers believed she was a personification of the Virgin Mary, prosecutors allege. Another victim was shot last year and buried alive.

Beyond the violence, Italian officials are concerned about young people who develop personal forms of Satanism, outside the sects closely monitored by police. They often learn about the devil through the Internet.

"It's a more spontaneous and hidden phenomenon, a problem of loneliness and isolation, a problem of emptiness, that is fulfilled by the values of Satanism," said Carlo Climati, an author who will teach a course on the devil's lure to young people.

The class at the academy - run by the Legionaries of Christ, a conservative order - drew both Italians and foreigners. Rev. Christopher Barak, who came from the Lincoln, Neb., area at his bishop's request, senses a renewed concern about the devil among Roman Catholics.

"In the '60s and '70s, people got away from that," Barak said. "Even theologians said, 'No, the devil is just a myth.'"

The course ends in April with the culminating lesson: "Testimony of an Exorcist." Two of Italy's some 400 exorcists are to tell their stories.

Widely accepted signs of possession - some of which were depicted in the 1973 movie, "The Exorcist" - include speaking in unknown tongues and demonstrating physical force beyond one's natural capacity. In 1999, when the Vatican issued its first new guidelines since 1614 for driving out devils, it urged priests to take modern psychiatry into account in deciding who should be exorcised.

The updated exorcism rite, contained in a red, leather-bound book, was a reflection of Pope John Paul II's efforts to convince the skeptical that the devil is very much in the world. At the time, he gave a series of homilies denouncing the devil as a "cosmic liar and murderer."

A former papal aide, the late Cardinal Jacques Martin, wrote in his memoirs that John Paul performed the exorcism rite in 1982, on an Italian woman who was screaming and writhing.

Associated Press writer Liza Keidan in Rome contributed to this report.
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