

Confronting Satan's Wrongs With Rites

By William Gildea

"Father, I heard you were going to be an adviser for 'The Exorcist,'" said the woman across the dining room table. "Were you really? I mean, were you actually involved in something so, uh, well, gross?"

"Yes," said the Rev. John J. Nicola, nodding and smiling gently. A Catholic church expert on exorcism, Father Nicola had advised the movie's director on that subject on and off for a year and a half.

Rendered speechless momentarily, looking maybe as though she had witnessed a scene from the movie itself, the woman began to respond, but the words didn't come. She seemed to want to ask, "What's a nice guy like you mixed up in a business like this?"

After all, wasn't this the perfectly even-tempered diocesan priest, 45, tall and graying, who, earlier in the evening in his friend's Chevy Chase living room, had bounced the 2-year-old girl on his knee? Conversated easily with the family's three other

children? Recounted former good times in Washington, where he spent 5½ years, until last summer, as assistant director of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception?

Really? Father Nicola involved with "The Exorcist?"

Well, yes, and what's more, he has no major regrets, although the movie has drawn the wrath of various critics. Of course, he wishes certain obvious parts had come out differently. And yes, he worries about some reactions: viewers becoming physically ill, countless numbers seeking to be exorcised.

Locally, at the shrine and Georgetown University alone, more than 40 calls have been received recently from persons asking that the rite be performed or wanting information on the subject. Many calls are referred to the archdiocese, which does not have an exorcist but "would appoint one if necessary," according to a spokesman. Only a few exorcisms, however, have been performed anywhere in recent times.

See NICOLA, B5, Col. 1



By Joe Heiberger—The Washington Post

Exorcism expert Father John J. Nicola on the steps below "The Exorcist" set at the foot of Georgetown's 36th Street: "I recognize the power of the devil, his intelligence. When we take him on we must have God on our side."

Meeting Satan's Wrongs With Rites

For Father Nicola, whose aim as adviser was "to try to exploit the possible good effects" from the movie, his objectives were generally accomplished.

William Peter Blatty, the author, and William Friedkin, the director, had contacted him because he is one of the few persons who knows everything about the original 1949 case involving a 14-year-old Mt. Rainier boy on which Blatty based his novel.

"I became convinced the film was going to be a serious study," Father Nicola said, "and they became convinced I knew the subject better than anybody else." And so they worked together.

Father Nicola does not take the devil lightly. This is because he firmly believes he's been in contact with the devil. It happened, he said, when he was writing a paper on spiritualism in the seminary, where he fell onto the subject by chance.

"I was visiting another fellow's room across the hall, which was against all the rules," he said. "You weren't allowed to go to anyone else's room. Anyway, I was in the hall with my back to my room and the fellow says, 'Your light just went out.' We walked over to take a look and the light went back on."

It wasn't just a loose connection, he insisted. The light switch actually clicked up and down. With that, Father Nicola put down the subject for a

good long time because, he says, that's what you should do when the devil begins to make his presence known.

In fact, in the years since, as a result of further intense study, he has decided he wants no part of actually performing an exorcism himself. Though his investigations of more than a score of alleged possession have proven them no more than ailments from natural causes, he says the 1949 case is very much for real and is accurately set down in Blatty's novel, along with the dangers involved in exorcism.

Declaring that the more you know about possession the more you want to stay away from it, Father Nicola says he wouldn't perform an exorcism "unless I was commanded to." Very simply, it could kill you. At best, those who do it are no quite the same again.

"I recognize the powers of the devil, his intelligence," the priest said. "When we take him on we must have God on our side. Otherwise, it would be like a child sitting down to play chess with Bobby Fischer."

Thus having offered his knowledge and argued his viewpoints during the filming, Father Nicola returned to the United States last month from Rome, where he is studying for his doctorate in theology, to see what William Friedkin had wrought. When he saw, at a private showing at Warner Brothers in New York, he said, "My immediate reaction was like, wow, it was like the Louis-Schmeling fight — the second

one. Bamm, bamm, bamm. The hard punch. Continuous dramatic impact. And over before you know it."

And now? "I feel kind of satisfied that the triumph of faith has come across. I think kids today are trying to find if there are spiritual realities and this will help. I think it will prompt some people to look at themselves. Maybe some people who have rejected the Church, rejected angels and devils, spiritual creatures which we can't experience the way we'd like, maybe they'll think about spiritual things again. We've reached a point of great disbelief in spirituality in our society."

So he welcomes news of repentance: two persons in Arlington and another in the District who are said to have returned to the Catholic Church after seeing the film.

As for potential bad effects from the movie, "these type things I pray about," he says. "My greatest fear is that there could be a hysterical chain reaction among younger people identifying with Linda. Like the Bobby Soxer set reacting to Frank Sinatra with all that swooning. That's what scares me about it. Please God, it won't happen."

"Since the novel came out, I've handled eight or nine cases of pseudo-possession. I know of about 100 cases. Almost all have been with teen-agers. They read the book. They identify with it, and they begin to act it out in life. At least 99 per cent of cases where there's a claim of diabolical interfer-

ence are explained away by other causes."

Though concerned with young people's reactions, Nicola regrets more won't see it because of its rating, which brings him inevitably to the masturbation scene.

"Most of my objections to the movie involve that scene. Not that it's done in a way to be stimulating; rather, it's sexually repulsive, a gross offense against the public's sensitivity.

"I discussed my objections to that one scene with Billy Friedkin. Billy's a genius. I respect him. But he doesn't share my religious viewpoints or my ethical standards. I'm sure he'd tell you this was part of making a commercial success. He kept trying to impress on me people of all different persuasions would be watching this. No question, the movie is faithful to the book and he said if he were to back off on this, he'd be subject to the greatest criticism from his peers.

Still, I was given to understand initially it would be done in a way similar to the desecration scene. You'd get some general idea. The camera would pass over quickly. Maybe in the dark."

So Father Nicola is disappointed it's in there the way it is but as he himself said, "The devil isn't exactly considerate of our sensitivities."

Because of the decisions to put in some of the things that are there, Father Nicola staged his own small protest. "That's why I resigned my part

in the picture," he said. "First, I was going to play the dean of Georgetown University. Then I was going to be the bishop. But I stayed out, sort of to show I was half for, half against what was being included. But I stayed on as technical adviser. This was going to be seen by millions and there was that good aspect to it, and that should be exploited."

And how does he feel about widespread negative reaction that includes Catholics' daily telephone calls to the Archdiocesan chancellor's office, though that is the wrong department, wanting the Church to condemn the film?

"I'm not surprised," Father Nicola said. "You know, a lot of older people take spirituality for granted. They were taught that in the catechism and that's what they believe. So they tend to be concerned more with the extraneous effects, the icing on the cake."

In Rome, where he would be returning the following day, Father Nicola said he has been called on to give several lectures on exorcism because of the interest since the book was published. "But there's not the intense interest yet that the movie has created here. I guess that'll come.

He said he would like to come back, this year or next, as a guidance counselor at Georgetown Prep, more than anything. And he was glad he had come to see "The Exorcist."

He also said he'd be happy to get away from it again for a while.