EXORCISING AMERICA:
THE RISE OF CATHOLIC EXORCISM IN MODERN AMERICA

by

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ABSTRACT

This research explores modern changes in the American Roman Catholic Church pertaining to the Rite of Exorcism. Demand for exorcisms by Catholic laity has reached unprecedented levels in the United States, and the American Church has responded in two ways. First, by expanding Catholic deliverance ministry, and second, by adopting a policy of openness about deliverance work. In essence, the Catholic deliverance ministry has become a true “public ministry” in the United States, after at least fifty years of American Church secrecy about the rite (Thomas, 2012).
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Introduction

A swarm of media reports in the last two years have proclaimed that Roman Catholic exorcism is thriving in the modern United States. Most individuals I spoke with during my research, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, admitted surprise that exorcisms are still practiced. One classmate even told me that her high school teacher, a Catholic nun, taught students that exorcism no longer existed within the Roman Catholic tradition. Although the American Church had kept exorcism talk quiet for at least fifty years, the Catholic Rite of Exorcism is, in fact, practiced in modern Catholicism (Koningisor, 2011; Cuneo, 2012).

The rite is performed with regularity in some countries such as Italy and Mexico (Cuneo, 2000; Baglio, 2009; Cabus, 2011). Interest in exorcism is so high in Italy that the Catholic community of Milan, Italy created an exorcism hotline in early December by which concerned individuals can receive immediate advice and prayers from priest-exorcists via telephone (Speigel, 2012). Exorcists’ work is also respected in Mexico, where exorcists gathered to combat Mexico City’s high violence rates through prayers to expel evil (Cabus, 2011). Sociologist Michael Cuneo says that the United States is also on its ways to becoming a “hot spot” for exorcism (Cuneo, 2000).

My research confirms Cuneo’s claim. All of my correspondents agree that exorcism is in high demand in the United States. Additionally, the Church is responding to requests with institutional changes to make the rite of Catholic exorcism more accessible to American laity. The American Church was once silent about exorcism work but has recently decided to educate
all interested parties about the rite and has simultaneously expanded its Deliverance Ministry by training more exorcists and improving exorcist training programs.¹

One theory for the American Church’s modifications is that Church leaders, bishops and cardinals, are trying to boost Catholicism’s fading popularity in the United States (Koningisor, 2011). A second theory suggests that Catholic exorcism has become another alternative-healing method for American’s quick-fix culture (Baglio, 2009; Cuneo and Tennant, 2001). Both of these theories fail to consider all factors. Those who believe that Church leaders are only seeking to reclaim membership refuse to acknowledge the large number of requests for Catholic exorcism that are taking place in the U.S. The theory of quick-fix culture fails to recognize that exorcisms are not quick. They often require months or years worth of visits to an exorcist (Foley, 2012). I argue that the American Church is building its exorcism ministry in response to high public demand for exorcisms that has been growing since the 1970s.

In this paper I will explain the Church’s changing relationship with exorcism over the past fifty years through the lens of supply-side theory. Supply-siders believe that religious leaders shape a religion’s practices, doctrines and teachings at least partly in accordance with demands from adherents (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). In order to keep religion alive, Church leaders must be sure members’ needs are met so that members continue to participate in the religion. I begin this paper with a historical analysis of exorcism’s rise in the 1970s and conclude with a description of the changes the modern Catholic Church has made to its deliverance ministry. I argue that the American Church’s recent efforts to reclaim exorcism testify to supply-side theory because Church leaders, bishops and cardinals, are responding to the demands of their laity.

¹ Deliverance Ministry is the overarching term for expelling evil forces from locations, objects, or people. Exorcism is one specific type of deliverance work that deals with expelling a demon or multiple demons from a person’s body.
Literature Review

Sociological Theory

Nineteenth century theorists such as Max Weber, Herbert Spencer, Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim functioned under the paradigm of secularization, assuming that the importance of religion in social life would steadily fade with modernization because secular social institutions would replace religious institutions (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Studying Western society in the 19th century, Durkheim noticed that the Church had lost its monopoly over education when improved public education systems arose with industrial cities (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Likewise, responsibility for public health no longer fell to the Church when “medieval beliefs in magical cures, homeopathic remedies and spiritual healers were gradually displaced by reliance upon modern hospitals . . . and trained medical staff” (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Political authority also virtually evaporated for Church leaders as modernization brought about secular bureaucratic governments (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). As far as Durkheim could see, modernization had ushered in new secular societal structures that undermined the need for traditional religious institutions. He, like other sociologists observing society in those years, reasoned that religion would continue to lose significance and authority in all parts of social life (Norris and Inglehart, 2004).

Two significant indicators of a society’s secularization are privatization of religious belief and decreased levels of religiosity (Swatos, Kivisto, and Gustafson 1998). Privatization of religion is the process by which religion becomes a personal matter, completely removed from the public realm (Swatos, Kivisto, and Gustafson 1998). Instances of this would include people no longer identifying themselves with a particular religious group or no longer attending religious group gatherings (such as church). Secularization theory also predicted that religiosity,
a society’s level of religious belief, would diminish with modernization (Swatos, Kivisto, and Gustafson 1998). Religiosity often refers to the number of people who believe in such things as divine being(s) or who identify with a religious group (Swatos, Kivisto, and Gustafson, 1998; McFadden, 1979). Turnout at religious gatherings, such as church services, may also indicate levels of religiosity, though this is not always the best indicator of religious belief because some people who do not attend religious gatherings may have ‘privatized’ faith rather than no faith at all.

In the nineteenth century, sociologist and secular theorist Max Weber surmised that the United States, like its industrialized counterparts in Western Europe, would fall victim to secularization as the nation continued to modernize; its people would become less religiously inclined and religions would eventually cease to exist (Swatos, Kivisto, and Gustafson 1998). Eventually, scholars realize that Weber’s predictions for American secularization were falling short because levels of religiosity in the United States have remained high (Konieczny, Chong and Lyvarger, 2012). A 2008 study of American religiosity uncovered that 79.8% of American adults self-defined as religious (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Some respondents indentified with particular religious group or institutions while others remained unaffiliated or non-denominationally religious. This research did not assess America’s privatization level, but nearly 80% religious affiliation is a strong indication that religion remains strong in the United States, counter to Weber’s original projection. Many academics debate secularization’s progression in the rest of the world, but few scholars would venture to argue that religion is fading from public life in the United States.

No single model has filled the void left by secularization theory’s shortcomings in the United States, but Norris and Inglehart (2004) argue that supply-side theory is a convincing candidate
for explaining America’s religious trends. Supply-side theory has three main premises. First, that religion will not fade away with modernization because “public demand for religion is constant” (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 7). People desire a religious component to their world, so religious organizations will always have a place in society. Second, religious leaders are suppliers of religion (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). They determine the teachings, practices, rules and doctrines of the religion, and therefore what a religion offers its adherents. Third, supply-side theory posits that a religion’s members indirectly shape their religion’s organization and doctrines (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). If a religion does not exist without adherents, as supply-side assumes, religious leaders must appease members to encourage religious participation (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Religious leaders do this by supplying what is relevant to and desired by members. Essentially, religious leaders decide what to supply their people, but they often respond to the needs or demands of adherents in order to retain membership.

American Exorcism Research

Two significant works on modern American Catholic exorcism deserve thorough attention. The first is a book by Sociologist Michael W. Cuneo called American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty. The second is Matt Baglio’s The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist.

Michael Cuneo conducted research for his book in the late 1990s. His work delves into exorcism’s historical development in the United States, beginning primarily in the late 1960s. Much of the book is historical, and asserts that exorcism was nearly non-existent in American Christian denominations, including Catholicism, by the late 1960s, but quickly re-emerged in the 1970s (Cuneo, 2000). Cuneo argues that the release of William Blatty’s The Exorcist (1973) movie sparked high requests for Catholic exorcism during the 1970s (Cuneo, 2000). Further, he
believes that subsequent films have solidified Catholic exorcism in American’s entertainment culture (Cuneo, 2000). Cuneo assumes that most American viewers do not believe what they see of exorcisms on the big screen, but that a portion of viewers do take it to heart; affecting the return of requests for Catholic exorcism in the 1970s and their continued presence today (Cuneo, 2000). Cuneo also spends a great deal of time speaking about the American Church’s unresponsiveness to demands for exorcism help when requests for exorcism were rising throughout the 1970s and 80s. He attributes much of the Church’s silence to its desire to fit into American culture, a culture that condemned the bizarre and seemingly superstitious rite of exorcism (Cuneo, 2000).

Unlike Cuneo who is a Sociologist and a professor, Matt Baglio is a reporter, and he researched American Catholic exorcism in depth while writing his book *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist.* The work tells the story of Fr. Gary Thomas’ exorcist training. Much of the book takes place in Rome, Italy, where Fr. Thomas gained experience in the rite. However, Baglio weaves a thread of dialogue throughout his narrative that discusses the current state of exorcist work in the United States. Most notably, after speaking extensively with a number of American exorcists, Baglio makes the far-reaching statement that “almost all exorcists are unanimous in their belief…that more people than ever are becoming possessed today than in the recent past” (Baglio 2009: 49). Baglio not only asserts that requests for exorcists have risen, but conveys that many practicing exorcists are frustrated with bishops who have not yet provided exorcism resources for the Catholic laity in their dioceses (Baglio, 2009).

Literature on exorcism is few and far-between, but Cuneo and Baglio both contribute heavily by documenting the modern state of Catholic exorcism in the United States. Their works provide a detailed glimpse of exorcism throughout the United States and the changes that have occurred
Methodology

The data for this study has largely come from primary sources and interviews. Primary sources include American newspaper and journal articles from the past ten years, a biographical novel, and several video sources. The articles come from a wide range of news sources and journals from different corners of the United States. From the Midwest to the California coast, newspapers and journal articles have captured Catholic exorcism as it has surfaced in United States current events over the past decade. The articles have come from a diversity of sources including the New York Times, Portland Tribune, the San Francisco Chronicle and a range of Catholic news sources. The diversity provides a well-rounded taste of United States public discourse on Catholic exorcism. Matt Baglio’s biography of an American priest offers a window into modern Catholic exorcist training and illuminates the Church stance on evil and its approach to modern-day exorcism in the United States. Like the article resources, each video source conveys a different theory as to why American exorcism has increased over the past decade and offers images of demonic possession and the rite of exorcism in a way only film can portray. These sources were the foundation for my interview questions because they informed me on current events within the Catholic Church and offer some insight into the sensationalized history of exorcism in the United States.

Interview and email correspondence constitute a significant portion of my data. I first spoke with Father Patrick Foley of Sacramento, California. Fr. Pat explained Church theology surrounding free will, the devil and demonic affliction. Fr. Pat made himself available to answer questions and clarify Catholic theology throughout the course of my research. After gathering a more thorough understanding of Catholic teaching than I previously possessed, I emailed all 185 diocesan bishops in the United States, hoping they could direct me toward an exorcist or
deliverance ministry representative in their diocese. More than sixty bishops, their offices, or
their diocesan exorcists responded to my inquiry. Many regretfully informed me that their
diocese had no resources to assist me. Others admitted that they do not release such information
to protect exorcists from harassment or from stresses that are unrelated to their ministry. Close to
twenty bishops responded with helpful information. Some shared their own experiences of the
Catholic deliverance ministry, directed me to knowledgeable Church figures, or referred me to
their diocesan exorcist or exorcism contact person.

I ultimately interviewed two priest exorcists in depth and corresponded with two others via
e-mail. Additionally, I read interviews with several other American priest-exorcists and explored
hundreds of Catholic deliverance websites.
What is Exorcism Really?

Formal Catholic exorcism came into being in 1614 with the *Rituale Romanum*, a guidebook for exorcists and the first published rite of catholic exorcism (Ebon 1975: 89). Some revisions have taken place since the document’s origin, but the basic rite has remained constant since 1614 because “the symptoms described by traditional exorcists often parallel those seen today” (Ebon 1975: 225).

Catholic priests are only meant to conduct exorcisms on individuals who demonstrate signs of diabolic possession. Possession is “a rare state in which the demon [or multiple demons] takes total control of a person’s faculties” (Csordas, 15). This level of demonic interference is rare. More common are the three other types of demonic affliction that Catholics recognize: Infestation, oppression and obsession (Baglio, 2009; Foley, 2012; Di Bugnara, 2011). Infestations include haunted houses and cursed objects (Baglio, 2009; Foley, 2012). Oppression takes place when demonic forces leave marks or wounds on a person’s body such as bruises or stigmata (Baglio, 2009; Foley, 2012). Obsession is a lesser form of demonic possession in that demonic powers infiltrate one aspect of a person’s life or thoughts, making them obsessive and destructive in one area, while the rest of their function seems entirely normal (Baglio, 2009; Foley, 2012). Every priest and priest-exorcist I spoke with said that obsession is far more common that full-blown possession, which is relatively rare.

It is important to note that “the traditional view of possession by a demon is that the possessed person has, in some way, become open to invasion by an outside entity, or several such entities” (Ebon 1975: 6). The person may have had a curse cast on them or they may have opened the door through participation in Satanism, witchcraft, the occult or other similar activities (Baglio, 2009; Di Bugnara, 2011). Priests frequently cite card-readers and Ouija boards
as common ways that individuals open themselves up to affliction and full-on possession (Baglio, 2009; Di Bugnara, 2011; Catholic News Service, 2012).

In cases of alleged demonic possession, a trained priest-exorcist must discern whether or not a person is actually possessed by demonic forces before considering exorcism (Baglio, 2009; Ebon, 1975; King, 2012). A priest will thoroughly explore claims of possession during a meeting with the person and may even go so far as to interview friends, spouses and co-workers of the person seeking help (King, 2012). A priest’s assessment can only turn up so much information, however, so he will consult medical professionals on any case he thinks may be worth pursuing. The official Catholic rite of exorcism has always demanded that full physical and psychiatric examinations be administered prior to an exorcism to confirm that there is “no medical explanation” for the person’s sickness. From its original print, “the Rituale Romanum…[has] emphasize[d] the need for…diligence in ruling out psychophysical illnesses that might mimic possession,” and in the last four hundred years, this emphasis has not changed (Ebon 1975: 11).

If thorough discernment and medical examination convince a priest that a person may be suffering from diabolic possession, he is required to present the case to his diocesan bishop (Baglio, 2009; King, 2012). Formal Catholic exorcism requires explicit permission from a bishop as an added layer of protection from harm that may accompany unnecessary exorcisms (Sadowski, 2010; Ebon, 1975). The Catholic Church generally asserts that receiving an exorcism when not diabolically possessed can be harmful to a person (Baglio, 2009; Cuneo 2000). On one hand, this may prevent a person from getting the professional medical help they may need (Baglio, 2009). Moreover, Cuneo explained that receiving an exorcism when not in need is equivalent to “spiritual rape”, and can be harmful to the recipient (Cuneo 2000: 110).
Hollywood has long sensationalized demonic possession and behavior that can occur during the rite of exorcism, using the most gory and supernatural symptoms of demonic possession to captivate audiences (Cuneo, 2000; Barnes and Sered 2005). *The Exorcist* (1973) portrays the exorcism of a young girl who levitates, projectile vomits a bright green liquid, and rotates her head in a complete circle during the course of her treatment. All sources I consulted on exorcism tell that common manifestations of demonic forces during exorcism include a strong reaction to Holy Water, knowledge of unknown things, abnormal strength and ability to speak unknown languages (Baglio, 2009; Foley, 2012; Thomas, 2012). Fr. Gary told me that levitation is extremely rare but not unheard of. Fr. Pat told me that Satan and demons work better when they are undetected, so manifestations like those listed above only occur when prompted by an exorcist during an exorcism. The signs of demonic possession have not changed between when the *Rituale Romanum* (1614) came into being and the modern day (Baglio, 2009; Ebon, 1975).
Exorcism in American History 1970-1989

The American Catholic Church rarely performed exorcism by the 1960s but interest in the rite emerged in the United States during the 1970s (Cuneo, 2000). Despite growing interest throughout the 70s and 80s, American Church leaders remained secretive about exorcism and offered no additional resources for the rising number of people seeking help (Koningisor, 2011; Cuneo, 2012; Ebon, 1975). A movement within the Church did embrace exorcism and deliverance, however, and they assisted individuals for the twenty years that Church leaders remained unresponsive.

Exorcism as Distasteful

It remains somewhat unclear why the Church ignored rising requests (Cuneo, 2000). Contributing factors may have been that many clergymen did not believe in diabolic possession, that Church leaders were unaware of the true number of requests, or that the Church wanted to avoid a bad reputation for practicing the presumably superstitious rite of exorcism (Cuneo, 2000). I would not rule out the first two theories or the possibility of other contributing factors, but my research suggests that the Church’s fear of stigmatization played a heavy role in their lack of action during the 70s and 80s.

In an interview with Christina Koningisor of The Atlantic, Dr. Mathew Schmalz said that “historically, Catholics in the United States have been concerned with successfully assimilating into a majority-Protestant culture” so “they began to distance themselves from religious practices that came across as odd or out of place” (Koningisor, 2011). Schmalz says that exorcism is one such practice from which Church leaders turned away (Koningisor, 2011). Although official Catholic doctrine embraces exorcism, Schmalz suggests that American leaders and laity historically pushed the rite into the background to avoid stigmatization or condemnation from the
American public. To practice exorcism openly or regularly would have been detrimental to Catholics’ reputations in the United States, so Church leaders chose to minimize that aspect of Catholicism in the American Church. Ultimately, as exorcism fell to the side of American Catholicism, exorcisms rarely took place in the United States for many years.

Pentecostals experienced America’s historical hostility toward exorcism in the same way as Catholics (Cuneo, 2000). Pentecostals openly practiced the expulsion of demons into the early twentieth century but they, like Catholics, eventually moved away from the ritual (Cuneo, 2000). Cuneo suggests that as the Pentecostals became more affluent in American society by the 1930s and 40s, their practice of “exorcism was consigned to the back room, out of sight and, mostly, out of mind” in order to avoid defamation amongst American religions (Cuneo 2000: 89). Cuneo attributes exorcism’s dormancy and secretive nature to Church leaders’ attempts to protect their religion, both in the Pentecostal tradition and in the Catholic tradition (Cuneo, 2000). Each group adjusted to American culture by silencing exorcism.

Though other factors possibly played a role in separating Pentecostals and Catholics from exorcism practice, evidence suggests that fear of stigmatization contributed heavily to the distancing. Moving away from exorcism helped Church leaders maintain their religion in the United States because it enabled them to offer laity a respectable, non-stigmatized religious identity. This is supply-side theory because the Church constructed its stance toward exorcism according to members’ cultural opinions.

Exorcism Returns: Charismatic Renewal

Cuneo says that Catholic exorcism had nearly vanished by the 1960, but in the 1970s, a growing population of people took interest in the Catholic rite (Cuneo, 2000). Charismatic
Renewal is a religious movement within Christian denominations, including Catholicism, and it played a fundamental role in the return of American exorcism during the 1970s (Cuneo, 2000).

Charismatic Renewal catalyzed Catholic exorcism’s return in the United States by building a community of Catholic people who accepted and embraced exorcism and other types of deliverance work (Cuneo, 2000; Pereira, 2002). The Charismatic movement arose in response to “a spiritual restlessness of sorts was making its presence felt across the United States” (Cuneo 2000: 87). Traditional religious institutions were not satisfying many people seeking intense spiritual experiences during the 1960s and 70s, so many turned to exotic, non-Christian traditions such as “Zen Buddhism, magic, astrology, Satanism, and the occult” (McLoughlin 1978: 6). Others found answers to their restlessness in the Charismatic movement, which offered a revitalized form of Christian prayer and worship. Charismatic Renewal emphasizes being overcome with God’s Holy Spirit during prayer and receiving spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and miraculous healing (Csordas, 2002). The movement quickly took hold in nearly every mainline Christian denomination during the 1960s and early 70s, including the Catholic Church (Burgess, 2007). To clarify, Charismatic Renewal is a movement of people within Christian denominations; the whole religion does not belong to the Charismatic movement. For example, one will commonly find a group of Charismatic Catholics within a congregation and in some cases, an entire Catholic congregation may be Charismatic, but the entire Catholic Church has not adopted Charismatic practices such as speaking in tongues or miraculous healing.

The miraculous healing practiced within Charismatic circles supposedly cures ailments such as tumors, arthritis, and addictions; and expelling demons eventually made its way into Charismatic practice as well (DiGiulio, 2012; King, 2007). Cuneo says that exorcism was still not widely accepted or approved by American culture by that time, so “many prominent
Charismatics wanted nothing to do with the ritual, and some worried that it might jeopardize
their movement’s still-fragile credibility (Cuneo 2000: 96). The Charismatic Renewal made
miraculous healing more mainstream than in past decades, and it opened the door for exorcism
and deliverance ministries in the United States, where American culture had long looked down
on them as silly and superstitious.

*Roman Catholicism and Deliverance*

Charismatic Renewal reached the Catholic Church in January of 1967 when two faculty
members at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania organized a retreat for thirty of
their students, spouses and colleagues (Espinosa, 2000; Mansfield, 1992). Several months earlier,
the two men had received baptism in the Holy Spirit while attending a Charismatic prayer
meeting, and the experience was significant enough that they replicated this sort of Charismatic
prayer on their retreat (Espinosa, 2000; Blumhofer, 2000). Cuneo says that “before it was over,
almost the entire group [had] fallen under the Pentecostal spell” (Cuneo 2000: 85). Catholic
Charismatic Renewal spread like wildfire, first to college campuses such as Notre Dame and
Michigan State University and within a short time, the movement appeared in congregations all
over the country (Blumhofer, 2000).

Some Catholic Charismatic congregations had begun deliverance work by the 1970s, but the
greater American Catholic Church did not board the exorcism train (Cuneo, 2000). When
“deliverance [requests] continued to rise in popularity throughout the seventies,” the Church did
not respond (Cuneo 2000: 111). Cuneo says that there may have been one or two priests-
exorcists at the time, but Church leaders appointed no additional priests to answer increasing
calls for help (Cuneo, 2000). Cuneo says that obtaining an official Catholic exorcism was
extremely difficult throughout the 70s because the Church’s resources remained scarce, since
Catholic leaders still kept the rite silent. The Church’s hesitation toward exorcism continued into the 1980s (Cuneo, 2000).

A handful of “maverick” priests, largely Charismatic priests, performed Catholic exorcisms throughout the 1970s and 80s since Church leadership did little to ease demands (Cuneo, 2000). Cuneo says that these maverick priests appeared around the country out of frustration at the American Church’s apparent apathy (Cuneo, 2000). Their methods tended to be unofficial and they rarely, if ever, sought approval by their diocesan bishops (Cuneo, 2000). Persons seeking help for their alleged possession problems stood little chance of assistance from official Catholic exorcists, so maverick priests maintained solid footing throughout the 1980s. Although these men did not represent the official American Catholic Church because they did not have approval, their contribution to Catholic exorcism was substantial. Maverick Charismatic priests, and Charismatic Catholics as a whole, nurtured exorcism and deliverance work while Church leaders would not. They fed the market for Catholic exorcism that arose in the 70s and prevented the rite from fading out of practice again. Additionally, Charismatic Catholics’ experience with deliverance work has made them an asset to American Catholic leaders who are currently trying to supply better exorcism and deliverance resources to their Catholic laity. I will explore this last point more thoroughly later in my paper.
The Church Makes a Change: 1990s

The American Church made no institutional changes during the first two decades that requests for exorcism were rising, but leaders took a first step toward meeting demands during the 1990s. They did so quietly because they were not yet willing to publicly admit modern exorcism work (Cuneo, 2000).

By 1990, Cuneo says that the United States had only one officially trained exorcist for the entire country (Cuneo, 2000). If Cuneo’s research is correct, the number of trained exorcists in the United States decreased between the 1970s and 1990s, while the demand for Catholic exorcists had supposedly risen in the United States during that period. This statistic suggests that Church leaders made no effort to ease demands for exorcism by expanding deliverance resources during the 70s and 80s. The 1990s, however, mark somewhat of a turning point in the American Church’s unresponsiveness to requests for exorcism. Cuneo reports that “over an eighteen-month period, beginning in fall of 1996, ten Catholic priests in the United States were appointed to the office of exorcist” (Cuneo 2000: 258). In those eighteen months, the number of official exorcists grew from one to eleven. Such a significant increase cannot be mistaken as coincidental. Church leaders collectively decided to expand America’s exorcism and deliverance ministry. The appointments occurred quietly and Church leaders successfully avoided media attention (Cuneo, 2000).

Whether the American Church knew the extent to which its laity demanded exorcists during the 70s and 80s is not clear, but by the 90s, Church leaders had certainly caught on. The late Fr. Le Bar was a Catholic exorcist who performed exorcism in the 1990s. While alive, he confirmed that interest in exorcism was high during the 90s because requests flooded his desk as soon as he gained his appointment in 1992 (Burnell, 2000). He told a reporter for the Catholic National
Register that ‘he had seen a ‘large explosion’ in cases since 1990” (Burnell, 2000). In fact, in the eight years between his initial appointment (1992) and his interview (2000), Fr. Le Bar confessed that he went from no cases to a staggering 300 per year (Burnell, 2000). Fr. Le Bar’s experience demonstrates that demand for exorcists was high throughout the nineties and also implies that the Church leaders who appointed him knew that demand was high.

I believe that high demands on exorcists from Catholic laity pushed American Church leaders to appoint the ten new exorcists between 1996 and 1997. The Church clearly did not appoint their exorcists for publicity reasons; they kept their decision low profile. The decision likely occurred at least partly in response to demands from Catholic laity, as supply-side side theory would have predicted.
Twenty-First Century Exorcism

Demand for Catholic exorcism has remained high in the 21st century and has forced the American Church to further expand its deliverance ministry in three primary ways: By training more exorcists, by improving exorcist training programs and by adopting a policy of transparency that more eagerly educates individuals seeking information on evil, possession, modern exorcism and related topics. Some scholars and reporters remain skeptical about supposedly high requests for Catholic exorcism. These individuals believe that the Church’s claim of high demand is part of their ploy to attract Americans back to the Church (Goldstein, 2010; Koningisor, 2011; Rothschild, 2000). My research reveals that exorcists are overloaded with requests for assistance, which supports my assumption that pressure from Catholic laity has played a role in the Church’s growing deliverance ministry.

Modern Demand

Priest-exorcists around the country have admitted that they are overwhelmed by the mere quantity of cases coming across their desks (Thomas, 2012; DiGiulio, 2012; Pfeifer, 2012; Weisenburger, 2012; Sadowski, 2010). From New York to California, exorcists report that their ministry is in great demand and shows no sign of slowing.

Fr. Gary Thomas is a well-known priest exorcist in northern California. He is a parish priest and performs deliverance work for the Diocese of San Jose. Fr. Gary learned the rite of exorcism during a training course that he completed in Rome during the winter of 2005. He signed up for the course at the request of his bishop who had encountered an increasing number of requests for deliverance help (Thomas, 2012). The San Jose Diocese was in need of a local exorcist in 2005 and Fr. Gary says that demands for his help remain high. He told me that he “receive[s] anywhere from 5-10 calls or emails per week asking for assistance” (Thomas, 2012). He also
reported that his life is very stressful at the moment because he is currently exorcising ten people in addition to his typical parish responsibilities (Thomas, 2012). During our correspondence, Fr. Gary hired helpers to take his phone calls and manage his email account because the quantity of requests and inquiries had become too much for him to do alone.

Fr. Richard DiGiulio, like Fr. Gary, attests that exorcism is in high demand this decade. Fr. DiGiulio is a Charismatic priest exorcist in the Diocese of Buffalo. In my phone interview, he told me that he has witnessed a strong need for exorcism and deliverance in the United States and that his diocese receives many requests for assistance (DiGiulio, 2012). Dozens of calls come through his office monthly and he is currently exorcising 16 people (DiGiulio, 2012). Like Fr. Gary, Fr. DiGiulio has a staff that helps him manage the extensive ministry that he cannot execute alone.

Most priest-exorcists that I spoke with or tried to contact have staff members to help them manage deliverance affairs. I spoke with more staff teams than exorcists during the course of my research and all hinted at the same thing: exorcists are swamped with inquiries. I received several direct emails from priest-exorcists who apologized that they were too busy with their ministry to offer help. Some bishops also contacted exorcists for me and most emailed their apologies that the exorcist could not help because he simply had no time. A bishop in Colorado wrote me:

I spoke with the priest whom we consult for those who experience troubles with evil, and he told me that he simply does not have the time to respond to your request. He is very busy. I hope you understand. (Pfeifer, 2012)

Responses like this one arrived frequently during my quest for exorcist correspondents. Bishops, staff teams and exorcists were all remarkably gracious and frequently offered every tidbit of assistance that they could. Exorcists frequently offered their kind apologies, but they could not
sacrifice time to my research because their ministry consistently demands a great deal of time and energy.

Some reporters learned of exorcism’s popularity early in the century. Among the first was Bertram Rothschild’s journal article entitled “Exorcism Lives!” Rothschild admits skepticism about the notion of demonic affliction and about the need for exorcism but he also understands that exorcism in the United States is indisputably present (Rothschild, 2000). In fact, he reports that there is a “growing demand” for the ritual in modern American Catholicism (Rothschild, 2000). Soon after, The New York times ran an article entitled “Exorcism making a Spirited comeback in U.S.” (Reardon, 2001). Requests have not subsided and more recently other news sources have caught onto the phenomenon (Reardon, 2001). Hundreds of stories peppered newspapers over the last couple of years. Oliver Libaw of ABC news wrote that “exorcism is increasingly widespread” and taking place now more than ever in the United States (Libaw, 2012). Even the Catholic News Service told readers that there is a “growing interest in the rite of exorcism and a shortage of trained exorcists nationwide” (Sadowski, 2010). However, a larger movement is taking place in the American Church than reporters understand. The Church was beginning a large-scale expansion of its deliverance ministry by training more exorcists and by improving exorcism-training programs.

American Initiatives

The extent to which American Church leaders have reformed Catholicism’s healing and deliverance ministry in the 21st century makes a strong case for supply-side theory, which states that Church leaders often shape religion according to demands from their laity. Even after adding ten exorcists in the 1990s, the Church recently admitted that exorcists are burdened with inquiries (Sadowski, 2010). As a result of high demands, Church leaders are expanding a
formerly miniscule exorcism ministry. Additionally, after decades of silence and secrecy surrounding Catholic exorcism in the United State, American Church leaders are more willing to speak publicly about the rite for the first time since interest in Catholic exorcism emerged during the 1970s.

Charismatics are at the forefront of American Catholic deliverance growth because their years of experience with deliverance work have made them more knowledgeable than many Church leaders who ignored exorcism and deliverance (Cuneo, 2000; Sadowski, 2010). Before I elaborate on the importance of Catholic Charismatics to modern deliverance ministry growth, I will explain two circumstances by which the Church has proven that it is expanding its deliverance ministry to meet its laity’s needs.

**Vatican Letter:**

The Church’s first big movement toward an improved deliverance ministry in the 21st century was many bishops’ response to a letter from the Vatican asking that all diocesan bishops appoint a trained exorcist. The late Pope John Paul II issued the decree shortly before his death “due to the growing increase in occult activities taking place in Europe” (Thomas, 2012). Pope Benedict the XXIV, John Paul’s predecessor, has supported his predecessor’s mandate. Prior to the 2005 letter, only eleven officially trained priest-exorcists served the United States Catholic Church (Cuneo, 2000). Now, reports indicate that there are at least sixty official exorcists in the United States (Thomas, 2012). This statistic demonstrates noteworthy progress toward a stronger deliverance ministry within the modern American Catholic Church.

The Church first issued a mandate that all dioceses have a trained exorcist in 1917 but the Church revoked that particular code of Cannon Law in 1983 (Cuneo, 2000). Between 1917 and 1983 the code was not strictly observed. As I mentioned earlier, by the 1970s there were no more
than one or two Catholic exorcists in the United States, a nation with over 150 dioceses (Cuneo, 2000). There was clearly a disjunction between the mandate and American Church practice, so why are many bishops now answering the Vatican’s most recent request? What has changed?

A bishop in California, for instance, said he appointed an exorcist because his diocese “was receiving an increase in requests for exorcism…at the time” he received the letter (Thomas, 2012). My correspondence with American bishops uncovered that some were seeing high numbers of requests, so it seems likely that other bishops appointed exorcists for the same reason as the Californian bishop: in response to high exorcism demands.

**Educating Bishops:**

A pivotal moment for the American Church’s relationship with exorcism occurred in 2010 when the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops welcomed a presentation on exorcism at their annual national conference (Sadowski, 2010). The presentation aimed to educate bishops, many of whom knew little about the rite of exorcism when the Vatican’s letter arrived in 2004 (Deffner, 2012). The event is most significant because it signifies the Church’s collective effort to expand deliverance work and its public recognition that the rite is still heavily sought in modern America.

Although priest-exorcists have admitted high demands for exorcism in the last two decades, many bishops remained unknowledgeable about the rite because the ritual was not commonly discussed in the American Church prior to 2004 (Thomas, 2012). Exorcism is also not thoroughly taught in American seminaries, so many clergy were relatively unexposed to that aspect of Catholicism (Thomas, 2012; Coelho-Kostolny, 2012; Cuneo, 2000). As Fr. Gary Thomas put it, upon receiving the Pope’s decree, “most bishops really did not know how to go about appointing an exorcist or even what the requirements were for an exorcist … few people
really had any grasp including bishops and priests” (Thomas, 2012).

Leaders of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) recognized the obstacle of uninformed bishops and arranged a two-day presentation to educate the nation’s bishops (Sadowski, 2010). USCCB sponsored the presentation at their national bishops’ conference in 2010. The Catholic News Service reported:

Interest in the Nov. 12-13 Conference on the Liturgical and Pastoral Practice of Exorcism proved great. When registration closed Nov. 1, 56 bishops and 66 priests had signed up (Sadowski, 2010).

Many priests who attended the conference represented their bishops, who for some reason or another could not attend (The Associated Press, 2010). This was a sizable turn out. During the two-day conference, Bishops and priests who are trained in the rite of exorcism “[educated] interested clergymen on the spiritual, the theological and the practical: components of evil and modern exorcism” (Sadowski 2012). Sponsoring a national conference assembled interested clergy in one place at one time and facilitated easy and uniform education for the nation’s bishops.

The 2010 exorcism presentation was a central event in the American Church’s relationship with modern exorcism for two main reasons. First, USCCB’s participation in exorcism education and ministry expansion signifies that the American Church, as a whole believes in demonism and intends to expand the national deliverance ministry. The USCCB is the collective voice of American’s Church leaders. It self-describes as “an assembly of the hierarchy of the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands” (About USCCB, 2012). American Church leaders differ in opinion on many topics, but the USCCB is one organization that represents the American Church in its purest, Vatican-approved form (Foley, 2012). Though individual bishops or clergymen may dispute the legitimacy of demonic forces, the USCCB-sponsored presentation in 2010
demonstrates that American Church supports adherents who believe they may be afflicted by evil.

Additionally, the 2010 conference marks a historically significant change in Church relations with exorcism because Church leaders spoke publicly about exorcism for the first time since the rite’s emergent popularity in the 1970s (Cuneo, 2000). Even in the 1990s, when the Church finally decided to expand its deliverance ministry slightly, it did so quietly, quite differently than it has done in the 21st century.

A large number of requests for exorcism are weighing on American priest-exorcists. Lay demand for exorcism has caused American Church leaders to reorganize American Catholicism with a greater embrace of deliverance work. In recent years, Church leaders have trained more exorcists, educated American bishops and improved educational resources for clergy and lay people with encouragement from Catholic laity who have demanded more deliverance attention. The Church’s decision to supply improved exorcism and deliverance ministry testifies to supply-side theory in that leaders reorganized their institution in order to meet the growing need of their people.

Charismatics Leading Ministry Growth

Charismatics played a significant role in the growth of Catholic deliverance work in the 70s and 80s, and continue to contribute today. Charismatic priests and laity have nurtured deliverance ministry within their Charismatic circles for decades, while the official American Church kept its back turned to those seeking exorcism help throughout the 70s and 80s (Cuneo, 2000; Foley, 2012). Charismatic priests and bishops have years of experience in Catholic exorcism and deliverance work while many other priests and bishops know little due to the silence and secrecy that American Church leaders historically maintained around exorcism
Charismatic Catholic efforts to serve Catholic laity exemplify the openness and enthusiasm that American Church leaders have recently adopted toward their exorcism and deliverance ministry.

Charismatics are leading the charge on exorcism education. One Charismatic ministry I spoke with possesses many fliers and pamphlets about evil, demonology and modern exorcism work. The priest I spoke with was excited to send a stack of information to me by mail. He also told me that his openness and efforts to educate comes from a desire to be accessible to those in need of deliverance help (DiGiulio, 2012). While the American Church has adopted this perspective in recent years, Charismatic priests and organizations are more forward about educating the public (DiGiulio, 2012; Pereira, 2002). The 2012 Southern California Renewal Communities (SCRC) Catholic Renewal Convention exemplifies Charismatic efforts. Of forty-eight presentations, conference organizers included two talks on exorcism; one on each day of the conference. The first presentation offered attendees the stories and experiences of two Catholic priest-exorcists, while the other explained discernment in depth for those looking to understand the responsibilities of priest-exorcists in the Catholic tradition. Dozens of similar conferences take place around the country because the Church now emphasizes candidness on the topic.

One leading Catholic Charismatic organization in the United States is Healing Ministry of Deliverance and Exorcism, which is run by charismatic priests and laypeople. This Charismatic group is dedicated to strengthening exorcism training programs and community in the United States (“Healing Ministry of Deliverance & Exorcism,” 2012). The group sponsors an annual five-day conference for clergymen and women involved in deliverance work. The conference invites prominent Catholic exorcists to speak on various topics related to spiritual growth and
deliverance work. Conference leaders hope their gathering will strengthen America’s exorcist community and will aid clergy in their deliverance ministry (“Healing Ministry of Deliverance & Exorcism,” 2012). These sorts of conferences are occurring across the nation and have heavily assisted the expansion of American Church’s deliverance ministry. The organization has also founded the Pope Leo XIII Institute, which is a two-year-long training program for priest-exorcists in the U.S. The program consists of four weeklong academic training sessions over the course of two years. Between sessions, trainees apprentice with trained exorcists. The Institute’s goal is to produce a cohesive group of knowledgeable, practiced exorcists at the end of the two-year program, who can competently serve their congregations (“Healing Ministry of Deliverance & Exorcism,” 2012). Small-scale exorcist training conferences and workshops exist across the United States, but the Pope Leo XIII Institute is the first long-term apprenticeship program in the United States. To establish an American exorcist training program shows dedication to deliverance and exorcism work that the American Church has never previously demonstrated.

Charismatic Catholic clergy and laity adopted deliverance work early in their movement’s history (McLoughlin, 1978; Barnes and Sered, 2005; Synan, 1997; King, 2007). While the greater Catholic Church kept quiet on the topic of exorcism, Charismatic people accepted and encouraged deliverance from demons within their own groups and congregations (Cuneo, 2000; McLoughlin, 1978; Barnes and Sered, 2005; Synan, 1997; King, 2007). When America’s Catholic leaders decided to supply more resources for exorcism and deliverance help, Charismatics naturally became a helpful resource because they had been practicing deliverance work since the 1970s. Charismatic Catholics embody the Church’s efforts to supply a more extensive and transparent deliverance ministry with their education for interested clergy and laypeople, and their initiatives to improve training programs for Catholic priest-exorcists. The
Charismatic priests and exorcists with whom I spoke emphasize that their efforts in deliverance ministry are for the people; they are responding to a demand amongst laity, just as the greater Catholic Church seems to be doing.
Conclusion

I chose to investigate the Catholic Church’s exorcism and deliverance ministry after reading news stories that Catholic exorcists are currently in high demand. What I have discovered is that interest in Catholic exorcism is more prevalent in the United States today, than perhaps at any point in American history. Each exorcist I communicated with and those I read about have said that dozens of individuals contact their offices every month. This trend is present across the Country, from Colorado to Florida and from California to New York. I have argued that demand for Catholic exorcism throughout the United States has influenced the American Church to expand its exorcism and deliverance ministry over the last fifteen years. Between 1990 and 2012, American bishops have appointed over sixty exorcists; boosting the number of official Catholic exorcists from one or two, to more than sixty. Also, in 2010, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, an organization that represents Americas Catholic leadership, spoke publicly about modern exorcism in the Catholic Church. What’s more, Church leaders even encourage education for clergy and laypeople who are interested to learn about the rite of exorcism. The Church’s expansion of and openness to exorcism contradicts their historical distance from the rite. Not three years ago, Church leaders still kept their exorcism works low profile. Supply-side theory, which asserts that religious leaders often take membership demands into account when shaping religious practices, rules and doctrines, makes sense of the Church’s sudden shift. Assuming supply-side theory, Catholic leaders have begun to build their deliverance ministry in response to high demands for exorcism from their Catholic laity.

At the end of the 19th century Max Weber reasoned that capitalism would bring about an increasingly secularized world. In the end, citizens would lose touch with their religious institutions, practices and beliefs because religion no longer served a purpose in modernity.
However, Weber and secularists underestimated religion in a fundamental way. They did not give enough weight to religion’s ability to adapt alongside the cultures and societies in which it exists. Unlike secularization theory, supply-side theory recognizes that religious leaders have the power to transform religion in order to keep it relevant to members. My research into American Catholic exorcism exemplifies supply-side perspective, and demonstrates that religion is adaptable. American Church leaders now embrace the ancient healing rite of exorcism, a ritual that they once kept at a distance to avoid defamation. As American culture and Catholic membership have changed, the Church has made changes of its own to remain relevant. My finding suggests that religious leaders will continue to shape religion in a way that grows and changes with its membership. If my analysis is correct, I do not see religion losing its relevance at any point in the foreseeable future.
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