

EXORCISM

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Catholic priests fight fierce battle for the soul of mankind

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FAITH AND ETHICS REPORTER

A woman tells Father Bill Comerford she fears the devil is at work. Her bed is shaking at night.

Others come: a man wracked with guilt about some wrongdoing, a family mysteriously bedeviled with pain.

Increasingly, people seeking spiritual and physical healing are drawn to this quiet-spoken Catholic priest, who readily admits he may not understand these "manifestations of the extraordinary."

"We can hardly answer the phone, for people who need help," he says.

In his efforts to help, Comerford invokes the name of the Lord, and prays with and for those seeking help. "It's in the action of faith and love that healing comes and they get a sense they are loved and we are not going to abandon them," he says.

But this is not an exorcism, he

80 mourn as 'angel' Kira is carried to rest

BY MARK BELLIS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

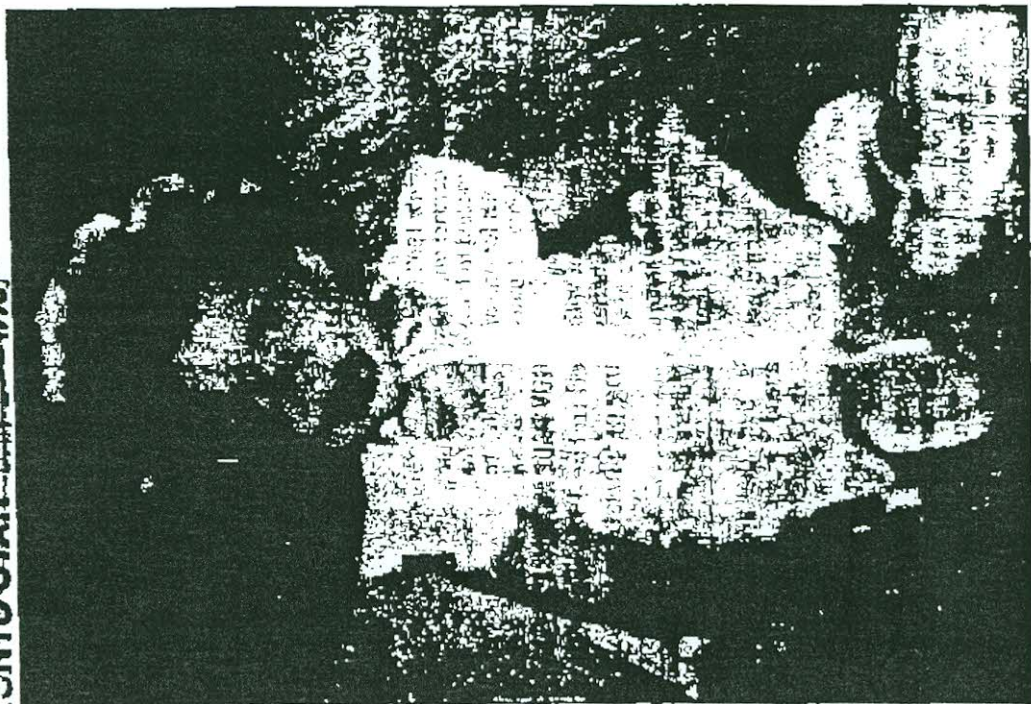
KITCHENER — A little girl who died during what police are calling an attempt to rid her of demons was laid to rest yesterday in a satin-covered coffin.

"God bless you little one, angel of innocence," was a verse at a funeral mass for 2-year-old Kira Canhoto of Cambridge.

And at the altar of St. Teresa's Roman Catholic Church, a young woman asked the 80 mourners to pray not only for Kira, but for "all the little children who have died in such a needless manner."

A tiny coffin bearing her body passed a line of uniformed police officers at the rear of the church. It was saluted, sprinkled with holy water and blessed. Kira's 20-year-old father Derek Ochoa followed behind his child.

Her mother, Maria, 22, and grandmother Ana Maria Canhoto, 44, were almost a 100 kilometres away in a detention centre in London, charged along



THE VICTIM: Photographs of a laughing Kira Canhoto were placed on the altar at her funeral yesterday at St. Teresa's Church in Kitchener.

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last week to hear of a 2-year-old Cambridge girl who died apparently during a ritual to rid her of demons. Her mother, grandmother and two neighbors have been charged with manslaughter.

It may seem strange and outdated to hear of the devil at play in our modern, rational world, in which science and reason handily explain away mysteries.



The evils of war, genocide and oppression, the cruelties in families and toward children can be seen as the malevolent works of humanity.

However, the Catholic church teaches the devil exists as a force of evil.

Pope John Paul II in his statements and public audiences has also said it is in the evil spirit's interests to conceal itself. "Satan has all the skill in the world to induce people to deny his existence in the name of rationalism. . . . This, however, does not signify the elimination of man's free will and responsibility. . . . It is, rather, a case of the conflict between the dark powers of evil and the powers of redemption." And, says Father Tom Lynch, a professor of moral theology at Scarborough's St. Augustine's Seminary, "we believe there is too much evil in the world to be emerging from human perversity."

Not all Catholics share this view. Some see talk of the devil's influence as an attempt to frighten and thereby exercise control over church members.

"There is this temptation in people to project on external cosmic forces their own strug-

then reduces their own responsibility and personal blame. If it's an evil you can't deal with — it's the devil.

"Liberal Catholics don't believe in the devil and don't think about it."

Yet Comerford, liaison to the archbishop for the charismatic renewal in Toronto, and others see a pitched battle for mankind's salvation. "We're more aware that there is warfare for the human soul," he says. "Any one who denies it is blind."

There are various levels of demonic influence — oppression, obsession and, finally, possession — says Father Dennis Hayes, an Ottawa priest. "Possession is different from anything else. The devil or his fallen angels have taken over a person. But it's rare."

So rare that very few priests have ever seen it. Only a bishop can appoint an exorcist and, despite its large size, there is no exorcist in the archdiocese of Toronto.

Before proceeding with an exorcism, it must be clear that the problem is a spiritual one, not medical or psychiatric.

The exorcist should be a priest who is well trained, well educated and holy, says Lynch.

The popular movie image of a single priest holding up a crucifix to repel Satan is not accurate, he says. The ritual may include holy water that has been blessed and the presence of a crucifix, but deep prayer and invoking the name and presence of Christ are at its essence.

"If you open a person to the presence of God, evil cannot stand that," says Lynch.

In some cultures, those with serious psychiatric problems may be interpreted as being in a state of sin or out of favor with God. Children who are thought to be "demonic" may, in fact, suffer from convulsions or seizures. Or their symptoms may be the culmination of abuse.

With the occult, it tends to unnervingly and can be intimidating to other young people, says Rick Tobias, executive director of the Yonge Street Mission, which helps young people and families in need.

While affirming his belief in the spiritual realm, he recalled a teenager who thought he was possessed by demons. "He believed he was demonic; otherwise how could his parents hate him? He'd go into spasms and even use a demonic type voice."

"As we continued to work with him, there was nothing demonic about him. He had a Hollywood image of what a demon should be. We didn't exorcise him. We just hugged him a lot."

Reginald Bibby, an Alberta sociologist who has studied religious trends, found those identifying themselves as members of sects, cults and "para-religious" organizations grew more than 100 per cent between 1981 and 1991. But the numbers were very small — 28,160 people or 1 per cent of the population.



There's no evidence that belief in the devil or exorcism is on the increase globally, says Peter Beyer, a sociologist of religion at the University of Toronto. But these beliefs are not about to disappear and hold steady among many individuals and groups, he says.

"The notion, or expression of evil captures people's attention," Lynch says. "Evil fascinates and repels us — it's standing on the abyss, but we've got to get a handle on it and realize that it doesn't dominate."

manslaughter of Kira.

The child died Sunday at her Lumsden Cres. home in Cambridge in what police call an attempt to rid an evil spirit from her body.

Autopsy results show she died as a result of swelling of the brain.

Kira's middle name is Shakira, translated as African Princess. Her father and mother lived apart after Ochoa was released from jail in November for what he refers to as minor offences.

Photos of Kira released at the funeral show a smiling little girl described in a poem read by a tall man identified as Eric, a friend of Kira's godfather Tony Da Costa, as having "curly hair, laughing eyes and an infectious smile." The reader faltered and burst into tears.

Three police cruisers and a van were parked outside the church.

Security was heavy at a courtroom where Kira's next door neighbors Daniel Aguilar, 58, and his wife Donatilde, 44, appeared for a bail hearing.

The Aguilars were refused bail and justice of the peace Fred McPherson placed a publication ban on evidence presented as to why they should not be released.

The Aguilars, who live next door to the Canbros, will appear in court Feb. 7 in Kitchener. Kira's mother and grandmother will appear for a bail hearing in Kitchener Feb. 1.

Six officers were in the small courtroom and visitors were searched by Waterloo regional police.

Police spokesperson Steve Hubbard said no threats have been reported although the case has generated enormous publicity in the region.

"The heavy police presence at the funeral and the court were only 'precautionary,' he said.

With files from Canadian Press