

WILLIAM PETER BLATTY'S  
THE EXORCIST: A MODERN  
HAGIOGRAPHY

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by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Julian C. Rice, Department of English. It was submitted to the faculty of the College of Humanities and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

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William Blatty's The Exorcist can be effectively read as a contemporary saint's life. A study of traditional hagiography reveals how closely Blatty's novel conforms to the traditional pattern. Father Karras, Blatty's hero, confronts the mystery of evil in the demon Pazuzu who has inhabited the body of an eleven-year-old girl. Like the traditional saints, Karras exorcises the demon only through personal sacrifice. In so doing he takes the sins of the other upon himself and becomes a living example of the "mystery of goodness." Like his hagiographic predecessors, however, Karras must suffer a fall into despair before achieving sainthood. In The Exorcist this fall (ultimately fortunate) takes the form of a tormenting religious skepticism and soul-killing scientific rationalism. By the end of the novel, however, modern rationalism has been redeemed by the reemergence of a mystical good, which, in the traditional Christian paradox, can only come into being through the machinations of a mystical evil.

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## INTRODUCTION

As a junior at Georgetown University in 1949, William Blatty had read an account in the Washington Post of a 14-year-old Mount Rainer boy who was freed by a Catholic priest of a possessing devil. The article excited him because it revealed tangible evidence of a modern miracle. And in 1967, although he had previously written only comic stories and screenplays, Blatty was persuaded by Marc Jaffee of Bantam Books to develop an outline for the novel that would become The Exorcist.

In the outline Blatty expressed an intention to explore thematically the "mystery of goodness."<sup>1</sup> Father Merrin would explain in the novel, that the demon's target is not the possessed but the observers. The demon would make us despair, reject our humanity and the possibility that God could love us. This would be a fortunate fall, however, culminating in Father Karras's climactic act of sacrificial faith, itself an expression of the "mystery of goodness."

<sup>1</sup>William Peter Blatty, William Peter Blatty on The Exorcist (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 10.

Nevertheless most reviewers have not revealed an awareness of this dominant theme. Even those critics who go beyond the usual superficial commentary on "sensationalism" miss Blatty's intention. William Hill, a Jesuit, writing in America mentions Karras's crisis,<sup>2</sup> but no resolution of the priest's problem.<sup>2</sup> Booklist only remarks that the novel explores man's despair and manifestations of possession.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there are inaccuracies in the reviews, perhaps indicating that the critical establishment has not read Blatty carefully enough to see the serious implications in his work. Both John Alfred Avant and Peter S. Prescott believe Regan was possessed by many evil spirits contrary to Merrin's explicit statement that there is only one.<sup>4</sup> Although Webster Schott realizes that Karras's faith, restored by love, enables him to undergo sacrifice for reward in another world, he believes that the possession may have been induced

<sup>2</sup> William Hill, review, America, 125 (1971), 432.

<sup>3</sup> Review, Booklist, 67 (1971), 929.

<sup>4</sup> John Alfred Avant, review, Library Journal, 96 (1971), 1634; Peter S. Prescott, review, Newsweek, May 10, 1971, p. 112.

by suggestion or that Satan was the inhabitant.<sup>5</sup>

Irma Pascal Heldman inaccurately calls Karras "a self-proselytized Jew."<sup>6</sup>

Only in replying articles in Commonweal by two Jesuits are the themes of the novel discussed.

Raymond Schroth suggests that the emotionally exhausted priest-psychiatrist simply cracks under the weight of his own tension in a sacrificial

suicide. Schroth also considers the alternative, i.e. an objectively existing evil force which literally abandons one victim for another.<sup>7</sup> William O'Malley

rebuts Schroth's belief that there are only two alternatives to the climactic ending of The Exorcist.

He comes closest to Blatty's intended meaning when he interprets the novel as a demonstration of experienced faith for Karras, the paradigmatic modern rationalist.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Webster Schott, Life, May 7, 1971, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Irma Pascal Heldman, Saturday Review, June 5, 1971, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond A. Schroth, "Exorcising the Exorcist," Commonweal, 97 (1972), 110-12.

<sup>8</sup> William O'Malley, reply to Raymond A. Schroth, Commonweal, 97 (1972), 252-54.

Blatty's own commentary clarifies the significance of the novel's climax, "Has Karras's faith been restored by the incredible encounter? Yes. But not by the exorcism itself, for finally the exorcist is still not sure what really happened. What reaffirms Faith is simple human love, which is surely the fact of God made visible."<sup>9</sup> The appearance of the "mystery of goodness" in the climax of The Exorcist places the novel in an ancient literary genre - hagiography, Karras resembles the medieval saints in many ways, and his conflict with Pazuzu, the possessing demon, parallels similar accounts in the lives of the saints.

First, the adversary Pazuzu is gradually revealed to Karras and the reader as a literal demon and not a metaphor for human evil in a paranormal manifestation. As Karras evolves toward sainthood, he must recognize the reality of the adversary. While demons opposing medieval saints disguised themselves within wooden idols of mythical pagan gods, Karras's demon takes refuge in the abstract guise of Karras's doubt.

<sup>9</sup>William Peter Blatty, William Peter Blatty on The Exorcist, p. 12.

The demon then attempts to evoke the despair implicit in scientific materialism and psychological determination.

This study will attempt to place The Exorcist within an ancient literary tradition. The novel will be explicated and structurally analyzed to the extent that such analysis will reveal it as part of this tradition. The Exorcist, as I shall show is neither merely sensational nor existentially despairing, but thoroughly Christian. But perhaps only a historically oriented cultural perspective can make this evident. In the following pages The Exorcist will be seen in the light of its cultural sources. Although the novel is popular literature, not great art, Blatty like the medieval hagiographer Jacobus de Voragine wrote for an uncritical audience and perhaps inadvertently, like him, touched some deep universal nerve of faith and hope in the human spirit.

## CHAPTER ONE

### PAZUZU

On the first page of the novel, Blatty cites several reports of demonic activity. The first is the New Testament account of Christ's healing a possessed man through the exorcism of a demon called Legion. The second is an excerpt from a wiretapped conversation between Cosa Nostra members describing a sadistic torture-murder. The third is a description of Communist atrocities committed against a priest and seven young boys. The demonic possession in the first instance is clearly supernatural; that of the other springs from natural human evil. By these illustrations Blatty suggests that if evil arising from natural causes is as rampant in the world today as it ever was, then the possibility of supernaturally caused evil may not be unthinkable.

In a General Audience address on November 15, 1972, Pope Paul VI emphasized that modern theologians too often dismiss diabolic activity as the workings of man

rather than the devil.<sup>1</sup> His Holiness implies that the devil does not vanish with the passing of time or with technological advancements but remains an undiminished threat to mankind. The reality of such demonic force is the underlying assumption of Blatty's novel. Pazuzu the demon, who possesses Regan, is more than a symbol of pathological or psychosomatic illness. He is explicitly described and alluded to throughout the novel as a real entity.

Implications of his demonic presence begin in the first chapter. The existence of a demonic entity is suggested by the tolling of a bell from the Georgetown campus clock tower,<sup>2</sup> an allusion to the medieval practice of ringing a church bell to disturb the demon-filled air. The story begins at Eastertide,<sup>3</sup> appropriately the time of the devil's

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from the address found in the New York Times Magazine, 4 February 1973, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> William Peter Blatty, The Exorcist (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 17. All further references to material found in The Exorcist will be followed by page numbers in the text.

<sup>3</sup> The Word "Easter" is derived from Ishtar, an Assyrian goddess related to Pazuzu and in whose ruined temple Father Merrin is first aware of the demon's presence. Calvin D. Linton, "And Pilate Said, 'Make it As Sure As Ye Can,'" Christianity Today, 17 (1973), p. 705.

temporary triumph over the body of Christ. The traditional manifestations of a demonic presence are initially established by rappings which Chris MacNeil hears in her Georgetown apartment (p. 12). They are signs of the first stage of possession, i.e. infestation, which is an attack through the child's surroundings in the forms of noises, voices, odors and the displacement of objects. They are manifested to Regan and her mother by the "smell of something burning" (p. 57) and the chilling draft of "cold in the room" (p. 69). Obsession, the second stage of possession, takes the form of a physical attack on Regan, designed to instill terror and personal injury by blows (p. 225). The attack is made by the demon, who makes the child's mattress "quiver violently back and forth" (p. 79), "lifts her about a foot," and with his "unseen hands picks her up and throws her down, wrenching her breath" (p. 107). The final stage is possession proper, the demonic inhabitation within the body of the child. Throughout

these stages Blatty specifically identifies the demon as Pazuzu, the Assyrian god of disease. He is first recognized by Father Lanckester Merrin, a Jesuit archaeologist, while on a dig in Northern Iraq. The derivation of Pazuzu from a specific mythological tradition helps to emphasize Blatty's theme of demonic reality.

Blatty describes Pazuzu in detail twice at the beginning of the novel (pp. 6-7) so that Pazuzu's specific attributes can be thereafter readily identified. Father Merrin first finds an amulet upon which Pazuzu's image was stamped, worn as a shield for the purpose of using "evil against evil" (p. 6). Feeling the demon's presence, the priest anxiously searches through the ruined temples of Nabu and Ishtar, where he finds a limestone statue of the demon (p. 7). In Assyrian mythology he is the demon of the southwest wind, son of Hanpa, king of the evil air spirits, who traditionally sweeps

down from the mountains spreading disease.<sup>4</sup> His head is shaped like a monstrous dog's with great goat horns. It is attached above an exaggeratedly thin naked body. There is a strikingly ugly "bulbous jutting, stubby penis" (p. 7) between his gaunt thighs. The carnivorous shape of his head and body and the ugly form of his penis symbolize the demon's malevolent and devouring qualities. His shape also foreshadows his attempts to make other characters despair over the ugly aspects of human animality. Attached to his body are four "ragged wings" and at his feet are the claws of a beast

<sup>4</sup>William Peter Blatty (Interview, "The Merv Griffin Show," January 30, 1974) identified the possessing demon as Pazuzu. The demonic characteristics are found in: A. Lefevre, "Angel or Monster? The Power of Evil in the Old Testament," Satan, ed. Frank Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 54 quoted in Henry Ansgar Kelly, The Devil, Demonology and Witchcraft (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968), p. 4, n. 1; Auguste Valensin, S. J., "Satan in the Old Testament," Soundings in Satanism (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972), p. 107; Dennis Wheatley, The Devil and All His Works (New York: American Heritage Press, 1971), p. 93; Andrew M. Greeley, "The Devil You Say," New York Times Magazine, 4 February 1973, p. 14; Wade Baskin, Dictionary of Satanism (New York: Philosophical Library Press, 1972), "Pazuzu," p. 255, and "Demon of the Southwest Wind," p. 301.

of prey, tipped by razor sharp talons with which he drives down and seizes his victims. His mouth"stretched taunt in feral grin" identifies the demon throughout the novel.

Blatty alludes to the specific characteristics of one particular demon in order to support the novel's implicit view that Pazuzu has a literal reality and is not just a metaphor for negative traits in human nature. When Father Merrin arrives in Georgetown for the exorcism, he immediately recognizes his enemy as a real adversary whom he has encountered in an earlier exorcism and not the destructive form of split personality or mental disease (p. 311). He explicitly tells Father Karras, "there is only one demon" (p. 299).

Pazuzu's presence is specifically affirmed by repeated allusions to evil in the air, an appropriate image for the demon of the southwest wind. In the prologue, the air of the desert chills the base of Merrin's neck, alerting him to Pazuzu's presence. Later, a similar icy chill springs especially from the southwest (p. 141), as Police Lieutenant Kinderman, investigating a diabolic murder, tells the child's mother Chris MacNeil, to "watch out for drafts"

(p. 137), unintentionally and ironically alluding to the actual cause of Regan's plight.

In addition to the evocation of Pazuzu through wind and cold references, Blatty consistently inserts allusions to Pazuzu's talons, especially in those situations which describe the demon's fatal grasp upon the lives of his victims. The psychiatrist, attempting to elicit information from Regan through hypnosis, suddenly gasps in pain as his youthful subject's hand grips his scrotum "like an iron talon" (p. 125-26). But the talons not only inflict physical pain, they appear as a sign of mental suffering as well. Father Merrin's anxiety "clung to his back like chill wet leaves" (p. 3) and [he] "felt a vague prickling at the base of his neck" (p. 5). Father Damien Karras, the Jesuit psychiatrist investigating the possession, similarly feels Pazuzu's grasp. During the first interview with the demon, he flinches from the shock of the sight of Pazuzu's terrible eyes and Regan's voiceless shriek for help. Pazuzu then presents different personalities in rapid succession, while Karras sits stunned, feeling "the glacial hands at the back of his neck again, more palable now, more firm" (p. 207). Later, during the second interview, Karras recoils from Pazuzu's challenge

when he feels icy cold hands lightly touching the back of his neck (p. 234). Exhausted by earlier meeting with the demon, Karras forces himself to study accounts of earlier possessions. The "shattered, clawed" (p.230) body of Father Tranquille, who exorcised the nuns of Loudon, reinforces a personally vivid image of his own anxiety and fear. A similar image of fear disrupts Chris MacNeil, as she reads a book of the occult in the hope that she may discover a remedy for her child's illness. She comes upon a page sheared by the demonically murdered director. The book, found in her daughter's room, inexplicably binds Regan to the diabolic execution. Chris cannot move; she feels as though she has been gripped by the "talons" of a "bird of prey" (p. 189).

The specific allusions to Pazuzu in the prologue are further reinforced in the novel by the repeated descriptions of his "mouth stretched taut in feral grin" (p. 7). While she is under hypnosis (p. 124), Regan's face contorts into a duplicate of Pazuzu's feral grin; the image is used again just before her first interview with Karras (p. 191). In the interview, Karras initially sees Regan with her "lips stretched taut into a feral grin, into bow-mouthed

mockery" (p. 204), and as the interview between them continues, the demon speaks to him still with the "hideous grin that now seems to be her permanent expression." Later, after his research leads him to a book plate of the demon Pazuzu, Karras identifies the demon's grin with the expression of the diabolical entity in Regan (p. 230).

The demon's four great "ragged wings" (p. 7) are also alluded to in this interview with Karras. Pazuzu tells the priest that he is a "demon." "I feel free. Like a wanton. I spread my great wings" (p. 235). As Karras listens, he feels the cadence of the demon's feverish gibberish, "pulsating in the same rhythm" as the "fluttering of wings in his stomach" (p. 239). The winged demon further clarifies his identity as he says he is a "prince" (p. 205), affirming his status as the son of the king of the evil air spirits.

The most striking visual detail in the description of Pazuzu in the prologue is his "bulbous, jutting, stubby penis" (p. 7). It symbolizes an aspect of his character which receives major thematic emphasis in the novel. Pazuzu consistently attempts to impose aesthetically repellent sexual thoughts and guilt feeling

in specific characters in varying instances.<sup>6</sup>

The demon debauches Regan and attempts to upset the psychological balance of the other characters by having her voice and mime crude sexual obscenities. Throughout the novel, Pazuzu, exploiting the "purtanical" view of sex as obscene, plays upon sexual fears and repressed impulses. Using Regan, the demon transmits his own inhumanity and attempts to strengthen the universal human aversion to full acceptance of the animal self by literally making the child a beast. She, "barks", "neighs," "oinks," "mews like a cat," "slithers and hisses like a snake," "howls like a wolf," "yelps like a jackal," "roars like a lion," and "lows like a steer" (pp. 108, 109, 126, 216, and 304). Pazuzu calls the child by the common demonic address of "sow"<sup>7</sup> and refers to

<sup>6</sup> The reason for evil's concentration on human sexuality is explored by Thomas Aquinas as quoted in Kramer and Sprenger's Malleus Maleficarum, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1970), p. 147; "Since the Fall, there exists in everything that pertains to sex 'a greater corruption than is the case of other human actions.'"

<sup>7</sup> Leon Cristiani, Satan in the Modern World (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), pp. 105-06. Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich, Possession: Demonic and Other (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1966), p. 35.

Chris as the "piglet's mother." This perpetuates the subconscious human fear that man may be no more than a beast. In particularly striking examples of Pazuzu's dramatic effectiveness, the child twice feverishly masturbates (pp. 108 and 189), before the doctor and her mother, clutching a "bone white crucifix in raw-knuckled hands" (p. 189) poised at her vagina, ripping away at her symbolic innocence and humanity.

During the exorcism, Pazuzu lashes out in demonic mockery against the natural feeling of the characters. He consistently perverts potential or unconsciously real attraction between them into unequivocal lust. Alluding to Sharon Spencer, Chris's secretary, who is assisting the priests, Pazuzu continues his verbal assault on Karras, "Do you want her? She is yours! yes, the stable whore is yours! You may ride her as you wish! Why she fantasizes nightly concerning you, Karras! She masturbates dreaming of your great priestly..." (p. 308). Later, following Merrin's death, when Karras "picks up Merrin's hands and starts tenderly to place them in the form of a cross" (p. 328), Pazuzu mocks him as a "homosexual."

Karras "stares eyes bulging" in an "electrifying spasm of hatred and rage" (p. 329) at the demon for so perverting his natural feelings of respect and affection. Pazuzu's slander echoes the psychological fears Karras has encountered in trying to calm a young priest's apprehension of homosexual tendencies. Similarly, the church desecration, involving a latinized account of homosexuality between the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, connects Pazuzu's covert activity and the psychological fears of the characters. (p. 90).

Pazuzu perverts natural functions into demonic ceremony. He alludes to the Black Mass where human feces and urine are consecrated to the devil in the shape of a host. He calls the holy water used by Merrin in the exorcism "holy urine, the semen of the saints" (p. 301). The sense of inversion in the sacrilegious consecration is reinforced by the phonetically reversed language Pazuzu speaks to the doctor and Karras (pp. 107, 123, and 239). He perverts spiritual and natural order into the diabolic, telling Merrin during exorcism to "bend and fart out clouds of incense! Bend and show the holy rump that we may worship and adore it! kiss it! lick it!" (p. 301). This travesty

of Holy Rite parallels the traditional Satanic rite of adoration. Instead of a host of unleavened bread offered before an image of Christ, a host of human excrement is offered to the naked backside of the devil. As Merrin prays, Pazuzu, beginning his own transubstantiation, "excretes diarrhetically, mocking 'For this is my body!'" (p. 308) Merrin, reciting the Roman Ritual for exorcism, adjures Pazuzu to cease the debauch of the innocent, the murder of God's people and the perversion of nature. "I adjure you, you corruptor of justice! you begetter of death! you prince of murderers! you inventor of every obscenity! you enemy of the human race!" (p. 306). Pazuzu is the culprit who has perverted natural order. The demon's menace ignites fear, suspicion, contempt and guilt for what by natural law should be accepted. He embodies the Puritanic consciousness which creates obscenity through a contemptuous rejection of a part of God's work, i.e. human nature.

Before the exorcism Merrin warns Karras, "he knows, the demon knows where to strike" (p. 312). Throughout the novel, Pazuzu attempts to define sexuality as sinful and to make man despair of the

value of his humanity. In the beginning of the novel, Karras reflects uncomfortably on the human "need to rend food with the teeth and then defecate" (p. 48). The demon attempts to enlarge these human doubts of God's beneficence in light of aesthetically repellent aspects of His creation. Sex, biological functions, natural desire and repulsion are manipulated by the demon to produce guilt, despair and contempt in the characters. His ultimate failure after a temporary success and his final defeat by the forces of acceptance and love express a major theme of the novel. His attack makes the characters come to grips with their problems as spiritual yet corporal beings, who eventually accept their humanity with dignity. Without a demonic pedigree, Pazuzu would be less effective as an adversary; the theme of the novel involves the universal reality of evil, not the perverse hallucinations of human imagination.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SAINTS

In the novel, Blatty develops a contemporary story which vividly parallels the trials of faith, suffering, and anguish found in the scriptural references to Christ, His Biblical precursors and disciples, and the legendary lives of the saints. He re-tells their stories through the confrontation between Father Damien Karras, a modern scientist and Catholic priest, and the demon Pazuzu. In the novel, Karras is initially attacked by Pazuzu through forms of mental anguish arising from severe doubt, both in his humanity and in his God. As his story unfolds, Karras's internal spiritual struggle leads the priest to the real demonic source. The effects of demonic influence, in the forms of guilt, self-contempt and doubt, are created and developed within the mind of the priest, to undermine his faith.

Karras's mental anguish, however, is not a source from which an illusory demon is created, but the ramifications of a real demonic presence. Similarly in the legends of the saints, the real power and prowess of

demonic influence is often masked in human suffering. Pazuzu's demonic influence is masked by psychological causes that Karras's training and inclination as a scientist lead him to attribute to Regan's condition. Pazuzu also appears in the guise of Karras's self-doubt, which finally culminates in a crisis of faith and identity. Eventually Karras confronts the demon in all his horrifying reality. The legends of the saints, however, progress historically in the opposite direction. The saints of the first three centuries confronted real demons. The saints of the following seven centuries confronted demons in the forms of demonic possession and later in personal, mental and physical suffering. By the eleventh century, however, many saints met their demons in the guises of doubt and self-contempt, resembling the struggles which torment Karras.

During the first three centuries emerging Christianity was diametrically opposed to the paganism and the theocracies which lingered from pre-Christian times. The early adherents were regarded by the state as cannibals who symbolically devoured the body and blood of an executed criminal, and as politically dangerous anarchists

who revolted against the order of the state, preferring allegiance to a supernatural kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In a more subjective, but no less intense manner, Father Karras struggles not against an ancient religion, or political state, but against the negative aspects of scientific rationalism, the religion of his time. The basic conflict in the novel, however, goes beyond any specific historical situation.

In The Golden Legend, a fifteenth-century anthology by Jacobus de Voragine, the legends of the saints are not conceived to show the particular personalities and deeds of individuals so much as the ideals of the peoples from whose hearts the legends sprang.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Karras in his first stage represents the people of the present who have placed their faith in science and technology. He initially resembles some modern theologians

<sup>1</sup>Maxmillian Rudwin, The Devil in Legend and Literature (New York: AMS Press, 1970), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup>Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, trans. and adpt. from Latin by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger, 2 volumes (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1941), I, x. All further references to material found in The Golden Legend will be followed by page number in the text.

who consider demonic influence to be a matter of psychological disturbance or pathological disorder.<sup>3</sup>

Although trained in scientific technique of observation and analysis, he is blind to the observable phenomena of real demonic influence in himself. Ironically Karras studies a text which explores the flaw of scientific technique applied without benefit of religious and philosophical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Yet he remains firm in his skepticism toward the unrefutable reality of demonic presence until necessity forces belief at the end of the novel.

In contrast to Karras, as might be expected, the early saints saw demons and their influence everywhere. Clear evidence of such influence was seen in the deluded worship of idols, which masked demonic godheads. The early saints' belief in supernatural demons, distinct from idolatrous man-made constructs, required them to combat demons on supernatural terms. Simply destroying idols would not do, since the demons could readily find another

<sup>3</sup> Charles-Edward Winslow, The Conquest of Epidemic Disease (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1967), p. 35; G. C. Berkouwer, "Satan and the Demons," Basic Christian Doctrine, ed. Carl Henry (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> S. Vernon McCasland, By the Finger of God (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 8.

disguise. The idols themselves usually symbolized mis-understood natural phenomena distinct from the demons which inhabited them. To exemplify this in the novel, Pazuzu's personality is identified with the southwest wind which blew malaria from Africa to Mesopotamia. The natural phenomena of the disease-carrying wind existed before his worshippers developed Pazuzu's personality. His physical attributes were designed by men as symbolic manifestations of his effects. However, it should be remembered that Pazuzu is essentially alien and remote from human attempts to symbolically define him. The definitions of symbols may themselves enhance the demon's effectiveness by masking his presence. For Karras, the confrontation with the demon, worshipped in idolatrous form by the ancient Assyrians, provides the priest with a connection to the problem of the early saints. In his struggle, Karras first had to accept the reality of the demon, contrary to scientific doctrine, and had to become aware of the demon's far-reaching influence in himself in order to triumph by reliance on faith. He had to abandon his intellectual reliance on natural medicine and psychology which idolatrously masked the source and potential cure of the affliction. His eventual reliance on supernatural power and mercy, by his sacrificial act of faith,

reflects the early saints' faith that God would defeat supernatural foes.

The distinction made in early hagiography between idols and demons, between representations of natural phenomena and supernatural destructive forces (Dt. 32:17; Ps. 105:36-37; I Cor. 10:20 I Kgs. 5:4-7; II Kgs. 24:15; Ex. 7:20-21, 8:1-2, 13, 20, 9:1-6, 10, 15-26, 10:12-15, 22, 4-8 C.C.D.) is similar to the distinction Karras eventually makes between the natural phenomena of mental disorder and demonic possession. Saint Andrew, one of Jesus's twelve apostles, aiding a woman thought to be obsessed by the goddess Diana, tells her she has been beset by a demon and not the goddess identified with virginity. Again, during his travels to Achaea, the apostle makes a distinction between idols and the demons they mask to the proconsul Aegeus: "your idols are demons and their doctrine is offensive to God."<sup>5</sup> Saint Thomas the Apostle in India, when forced to worship an idol, commanded the demon in the idol to demolish the image

<sup>5</sup> Jacobus, The Golden Legend, I, 11.

to illustrate the separate existence of the demon (Legend, I, 45). Saint Peter compelled demons dwelling in idols to depart to a desert place (Legend, I, 339). Saints Apollinaris, George, Mamertinas, Protus and Hyacienthus admonished their congregations against worshipping the idols of natural phenomena. "All the gods of the Gentiles are devils; but the Lord made the heavens" (Legend, II, 536). Saints Bartholomew, Simon and Jude recognized the distinctions between man-made idols and their supernatural inhabitants: "In order that ye may know that these idols are filled with demons, behold we command them to come forth and each of them to shatter his graven image" (Legend, II, 638). Saint Valentine clarifies the distinction: "your gods are but the wretched fabrications of men and are sodden with uncleanness" (Legend, I, 165). Saint Martin of legend does not confront the idols of Jupiter, Mercury and Venus, nor supernatural gods, but demons masked in the forms of these idols (Legend, II, 670). Saint Blaise commands: "give not the names of gods to the demons who are burning in Hell with those who honor them" (Legend, I, 155). An explanation for demonic habitation in idols, which produces insight in the novel concerning

Karras's struggle with demonic influence, is exemplified in the legend of Saint Longinus. The first century saint smashed a multitude of idols with a great axe and entreated: "if these be gods let them show themselves." With this, demons issued forth from all the idols and entered into the bodies of the governor and his aides. In a parallel to Karras's conversation with Pazuzu, Longinus asked, "why do you dwell in the idols?" The demons' answer identifies Karras's own doubt and despair as a breeding ground for demonic influence: "We dwell wherever the name of Christ is not invoked and the sign of the cross does not appear" (Legend, I, 191).

Following the first three centuries, the emerging dominance of Christianity gradually suppressed demonstrations of idolatry in the West. Hereafter demons began to appear in "natural" forms (forms found in nature, not human artifacts). As in the exorcisms of the gospels (Mt. 8:32-34, 9:32-34, 12:22-25, 17:14-21; Mk. 1:23-28, 5:1-20, 9:13-28; Lk. 4:33-37, 8:26-39, 11:14-27; Acts 16:16-18, 19:11-16) the pre-medieval saints' legends abound in stories of demons found in natural forms. Saints Ambrose, Peter Martyr,

Cyriacus, Hippoltus and Peter the Exorcist adjured residing demons to leave their possessed hosts. In these legends the demons were not masked by the forms of idols, but disguised in the natural forms of dogs, pygmies, large Ethiopians and dead men (Legend, I, 10, 99: II, 446, 482, 638). In these cases, demonic presence appears by the gradual unveiling of assorted disguises. Saint Jerome, living in the desert during the fourth century, was alternatively tried by Roman dancing girls and the forms of past acquaintances until he realized that the figures masked tormenting demons.<sup>6</sup> In the novel, Pazuzu's presence is revealed by a progression from psychological trick-playing to cynicism to his blantly revealed identity as a tempter of faith, and perpetrator of physical suffering. Karras's self-examining doubt and the child's apparently psychosomatic disorder represent the demon's deceiving use of natural-appearing phenomena. Karras's eventual discovery of his adversary's

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Thurston, S.J., and Donald Attwater, eds., revised and supplemented Butler's Lives of the Saints, 4 volumes (New York: P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1962), III, 686.

reality unintentionally leads to a personal affirmation of faith, as well as an inspiring exemplum for his doubt-racked contemporaries.

The later saints, on the other hand, consciously set out to provide such exempla in personal confrontations with demons. Although these saints meant to stimulate greater faith in Christ, they were often thought by the less faithful to have conquered the demons themselves. This inaccurate attribution of success is clearly refuted by Bernard of Clairvaux in the late eleventh century. He admonishes a woman formerly possessed by a demon to give thanks not to Saint Syrus or to Bernard, but to the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Only by direct confrontation with a demon could the saints demonstrate the power of God. James I concluded in his expose, Daemonologie, that there is no better way to know God than by directly confronting the devil.<sup>8</sup> However, the confrontation often took an indirect form, when the demons disguised themselves

<sup>7</sup> Thurston and Attwater, Butler's Lives of the Saints, I, 475.

<sup>8</sup> James I, Daemonologie, (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1966), p. 48.

in the saints' own self-contempt and doubt. Such feelings, however, were purifying trials preparing the saints for final judgement.<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, many saints consciously plunged into fervent self-examination of their doubted worthiness.

From the introduction of the devil during Christ's temptation in the desert to the doubt of the priest-psychiatrist, Christian theology has stressed an essential need for such trial.<sup>10</sup> The original trial and fall of the dissenting angels is, by Divine mandate, repeated in the trial of all human beings.<sup>11</sup> Either in direct demonic confrontation, or masked by mental suffering, demonic forces traditionally have been permitted, under the guise of assorted temptations,

<sup>9</sup> "A Selected Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church," Cassian's Conferences, p. 496; quoted in T. K. Oesterreich, Possession: Demonic and Other, trans. D. Ibberson (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1966), p. 164.

<sup>10</sup> With Christ's temptation in the wilderness there were no witnesses, but Christ's account Himself. He listened to the devil's attempt to subjugate Him and make Him deviate from His path. In a word, Christ had wished to be tempted and He was. Leon Cristiani, Satan in the Modern World, trans. Cynthia Rowland (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Cristiani, Why We Believe, trans. Dom Mark Pontifex (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959), p. 84.

to test men and will continue to do so until the end of time. According to the Apocalypse of Saint John, temptation and suffering springing from evil forces have a primary part to play in Christian redemption.<sup>12</sup> The twelfth question in Part I of Kramer and Sprenger's fifteenth-century work, Malleus Maleficarum, implies that God permits evil to be done although He does not wish it. The significance of the answer bears resemblance to the triumph over suffering in Blatty's novel: God can extract much good from particular evils by tempering patience and strengthening faith.<sup>13</sup> Because of the world's demonic dominance God permits the inflicting of suffering and temptation in order to drive man to despair, and to blasphemy, while He tests man's degree of confidence and faith in Him.

<sup>12</sup>Apocalypse 2:10; Leon Cristiani, Satan in the Modern World, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>H. Kramer and J. Sprenger, Malleus Maleficarum, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1970), p. 69.

However as Saint Augustine noted in Enchiridion:

So merciful is Almighty God that He would not allow any evil to be in His works unless He were so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil. He would not permit the suffering of temptation to be greater than our nature nor does He permit evil to do anything against us without our own will. Only the saints' consent is tempted and by their resistance is the force vanquished.<sup>14</sup>

As many religious traditions imply, the way down is the way out. In order to become a saint, it is necessary to feel despair before arriving at goodness.<sup>15</sup>

In the legends of the saints each saint requires a trial befitting his strength. As Father Merrin says, "the demon knows where to strike" (p. 312).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Augustine, Enchiridion, quoted in Kramer and Sprenger's Malleus Maleficarum, p. 69. Divine permission is also explored in: Richard and Eve Blum, The Dangerous Hour (New York: Schribners, 1970), p. 115; H. A. Kelly, The Devil, Demonology and Witchcraft (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968), pp. 97-107; Leon Christiani, Satan in the Modern World, p. 12; Nicolas Corte, Who is the Devil, trans. D. K. Pryce (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1958), p. 30.

<sup>15</sup>John Senior, The Way Down and Out: The Occult in Symbolic Literature (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 108.

<sup>16</sup>Bosset, Elevations sur les mystères, 6th week, 1st elevation, quoted in Nicolas Corte, Who is the Devil, p. 24.

Demonic influence masked by personal trial instills doubt in the rational and the need to love in the indifferent. Each saint is tested by his nature. The more holy a saint the more severe are the trials he meets.

The legend of Saint Anthony the Abbot, often depicted in art and literature, illustrates the frequent manner of demonic temptation. The saint, spending years alone in the desert, is continually attacked by demons concealed in the forms of monsters. However, his most memorable temptation concerns the Queen of Sheba's enticement to sin. Saint Thomas Aquinas writes in Evil that the demons tempting Anthony were able to manipulate internal body fluids in order to activate sense appetites. They managed to present to Anthony's mind a provocative image in order to allure the saint towards sin.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing the emergence of his lust, Anthony lashes out against the real demon, cursing his tormentor. The demon replies that it is not he but the saint's own consent which produces the anguish. Anthony then turns his supplication to God, asking why

<sup>17</sup> Aquinas, Evil, 16, 10-12; quoted in H. A. Kelly, The Devil, Demonology and Witchcraft, p. 108. In Aquinas's view demons had the power to manipulate matter in space.

He has not protected him from the demon. God replies that He is always present, but that Anthony has manfully and independently <sup>18</sup>withstood the enemy.<sup>18</sup> This legend implies the demon's beneficial role as tempter and strengthener of the saint under the benevolent direction of God. Similarly, Saint Patrick having been commanded by God to go down into the abyss of purgatory to expiate his sins, implores God for some sign of His protection, while standing at the edge of the abyss. In the pit, the saint faces torturing demons who tempt him to despair, but God tells him to call upon His name and be saved (Legend, I, 192). This legend possesses a metaphorical similarity to the story of Karras. Blatty develops a contemporary analogue by intentionally sectioning his novel (after the introduction) into parts called "The Edge," "The Abyss," and "And let my cry come unto thee..." illustrating Karras's despair in losing faith, his conflict with the demon, and his final reliance on Divine Providence.

<sup>18</sup>Jacobus, The Golden Legend, I, 101; Thurston and Attwater, Butler's Lives of the Saints, I, 104.

The demand for trials (Proverbs 18-3) tempers the saints' faith in specific ways. Many saints have a passion for physical mortification to purify their bodies from desire. William James stated that there are saints who have fed on the negative principle, on humiliation and privation and even suffering unto death.<sup>19</sup> Father Karras similarly over-emphasizes his incompetence as a priest and neglect as a son. He develops habits of austerity, exercising to the point of exhaustion, eating only bland food, and even smoking harsh cigarettes. Saints Hilarion, John of the Cross, Peter the Apostle and Eustuce inflict terrible punishment upon themselves by flagellation, starvation and solitary confinement in addition to demonic temptation in order to alienate themselves from every comfort. Saint Simeon Stylites is famous for nothing other than spending thirty years of his life alone atop a tall pillar. His legend tells of the manner by which he lived with a rope bound so tightly around his body that it became imbedded in his flesh. He later asked disciples to put worms that had fallen from his decaying body back into his wounds.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup>William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Random House, 1902), p. 50.

<sup>20</sup>George Lamb, "Simeon Stylites," Saints for Now, ed. Claire Booth Luce (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. 64.

Karras's adherence to this negative principle is a reflection of Saint Simeon Stylites's morbid self-punishment.

However, Karras's intense self-mortification for spiritual inadequacies may spring from a demonically influenced self-devaluation. Saint Therese of Lisieux, a "natural" saint of the nineteenth century, had progressed through her life from simple praise of God's beneficence to radical mortification for her own unworthiness. Her vocation to chastise herself for God's blessing reinforces a demonically negative principle which diminishes praise and glory to God while punishing man. Through demonic incitement and with her consent, she daily saw herself hidden from the warmth of God. She explains her misinterpretation of austerity and describes the emotional and physical coldness she experienced as she withdrew from all natural and supernatural consolation:

When my heart, weary of the enveloping darkness, tries to find some rest and strength in the thought of an everlasting life to come, my anguish only increases. It seems that the darkness itself, borrowing the voice of the unbeliever, cries mockingly: 'you dream of a land of light-and fragrance, you believe that the Creator of these works will be forever yours, you think to escape one day, from the mist in which you now languish. Hope on! Hope on! Look forward to death! It will give you not what you hope for, but a night darker still, the night of utter nothingness!'<sup>21</sup>

In The Perennial Philosophy, Aldous Huxley states that it is only to the austere that a mystical knowledge of God is granted. All suffering if supernaturally accepted becomes a prolongation or completion of atonement.<sup>22</sup> However, Saint Francis of Assisi, one of the most austere saints, differs. In a conversation with a demon, the demon tells him: "There is no sinner in the world, if he be repentant, the Lord will not pardon; but if anyone kills himself with harsh penance, that one shall not find mercy forever!"

<sup>21</sup> From her autobiography quoted by Karl Stern "Therese of Lisieux," Saints for Now, p. 306.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Marshall, "Cure of Ars," Saints for Now, p. 277.

(Legend, II, 601). However, Saint Francis wisely recognizes demonic influence which often incites austerity not in the spirit of God, but of the devil.<sup>23</sup> If suffering is instituted to torment one's self because of contempt for the human condition the austerity is demonic. If suffering is offered in the glory of God, by which one is drawn to Him, it is experienced in a holy spirit.

Like Saint Francis, Saint Radegonde of France was stern and unbending in austerity to herself, yet compassionate to the mortification of others.<sup>24</sup> Similarly in the novel, Father Karras's struggle with doubt and unworthiness, masking intellectual severity, burdens him with mental suffering, yet seeing it in others, he is compelled to take their anguish upon himself. This inconsistent behavior reflects similar sudden change in many saints' legends.

Similar to Father Karras's depression at the

<sup>23</sup> Thurston and Attwater, Butler's Lives of the Saints, IV, 22.

<sup>24</sup> E. I. Watkins, "Radegonde," Saints for Now, p. 73.

death of his mother, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who also previously had no doubt concerning his attentiveness and devotion to his mother, suddenly felt rejected at her death and was burdened with guilt. In 1137 Saint Bernard wrote that his life was "over-run in all quarters with anxieties, suspicious and cares."<sup>25</sup> Later, in the sixteenth century, Saint Teresa of Avila who had left for a convent against her father's wishes, was similarly racked by demonic influence in the form of guilt. As with Karras's demonstrations of subjective trials of demonic influence, Teresa suffered from exterior and interior trials from scruples and anxiety to the extent that her confessor told her she "was deluded by an evil spirit."<sup>26</sup>

Like Father Karras, Saints Bernard and Teresa entered the religious life without any reason to doubt

<sup>25</sup> Thurston and Attwater, Butler's Lives of the Saints, III, 360.

<sup>26</sup> Thurston and Attwater, Butler's Lives of the Saints, IV, 111.

their worthiness. Later, however, in the midst of their trials, each sought some supernatural affirmation that would dissolve their tormented sense of sinfulness. Forgetting God's providence and redemptive grace they became unnecessarily scrupulous in pursuing worthiness. Blessed Angela of Foligia, a thirteenth-century cloistered nun, was tempted by sensual desires that she had not previously even known. She tried unsuccessfully to atone by severe physical penance. The founder of Karras's order, Saint Ignatius Loyola, temporarily believed that he was unworthy to be a priest. Ritual absolution gave him no relief. Penance for his past sins and self-contempt for his ineffectual life sank him into an abyss of despair, until he almost was driven to insanity.<sup>27</sup> At this edge he at last found relief by active reliance on God. He developed the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises which trained his mind to abandon his egocentric self-contempt and to surrender redemptively to God.

<sup>27</sup> John Farrow, "Ignatius Loyola," Saints for Now, p. 180.

Like the saints, who confronted real demons in supernatural and natural forms, and who were tormented by physical and mental suffering incited by demonic influence, Karras is forced to abandon his skill and training as a scientist and to distinguish the demonic causes of his suffering. Only when he forsakes his self-punishment and embraces final martyrdom through the goodness of God, can he truly be called a saint.

We fools esteemed their life madness  
and their end without honor, Behold  
how they are numbered among the saints.  
(Wisdom 5:4)

## CHAPTER THREE

### KARRAS

Although no one saint's life is a complete parallel, the character of Father Karras in The Exorcist is developed as a composite of particular attributes, trials, and sufferings of various saints. Blatty attempts to retell a "classical story" of saintliness and places a modern priest-psychiatrist in a conflict as old as the Christian era. In my discussion of saints' legends, particular attention has been given to how the awareness of the demonic presence and influence evolves from the direct confrontations of earlier saints with demons, masked by idols, to demonic inhabitation in the natural forms of men and beasts, to internal mental and physical suffering, to intellectual skepticism concerning man's relationship with himself and God. In the story of Karras this progression of demonic forms is reversed. Demonic influence in the novel is initially observed in Karras's rationalistic questioning of his faith and his relationship with God. Mental and physical suffering, some of which is self-inflicted, results from his failure to resolve these questions. Finally Karras directly confronts a physical embodiment of the demon Pazuzu.

Karras is a contemporary physician, scientifically trained to observe facts before deducing conclusions. But he is also a priest and is oriented toward spiritual dependencies and ritualistic performances which are apparent anachronisms. However contradictory his two vocations may appear, a delicate balance between the two might have been maintained were it not for his fortunate fall into demonic temptation. Like Saints Therese of Lisieux and Bernard of Clairvaux, Karras, judged by his superiors to be diligent and competent in both professions, aspires to greater knowledge and awareness by reevaluating himself and his worth. Like the saints, he is demonically tempted to question his faith so that ultimately he may strengthen it.

For Karras the Jesuit, the problem of achieving Christian perfection is particularly difficult. The Society of Jesus is not a contemplative order whose reclusive members devote their lives only to prayer. They actively fight Church battles in the secular world. In 1629 Pere Louis Lallemanet, an instructor at the College of Rouen, held that the Society "joins together things which in appearance are contrary,

such as learning and humility, youth and chastity. In our life we must mingle a deep love of heavenly things with scientific studies and other natural occupations."<sup>1</sup> Lallemanet implies that it becomes easy, however, to neglect one or become too extreme in the other. Action, he says, "must be in direct proportion to contemplation. The more inward, the more we should refrain from trying to do good."<sup>2</sup>

Under demonic influence, Karras is deluded into believing that his brilliant and productive life is fruitless. He feels that without selfless introspection, as a condition of inspiration, his zeal and hard work will yield nothing of spiritual value. Similar self-examinations tempted earlier saints to abandon divine providence and to venture on a demonic quest for "inner truth." Saint Augustine in his Confessions censures this vain and curious desire of introspection, which is

<sup>1</sup>Aldous Huxley, The Devils of Loudon (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., Devils, p. 87.

"palliated under the name of knowledge and science."

This propensity is apt to lead one not only "into scrutinizing secrets of nature, which are beyond one and which it does one no good to know, and which men want to know just for the sake of knowledge, but also into searching through magic arts into the confines of perverse science."<sup>3</sup>

Intellectual rationalism becomes a perverse introspection instituted by demonic influence, which oppresses Karras with feelings of guilt, self-contempt and despair. Constantinus Africanus, writing over four hundred years ago in De melancholica, anticipates Karras's problem.

Many religious persons who live lives to be revered, but fall into the disease from their fear of God and contemplation of the last judgement and desire of seeing the summum bonum. Such persons think nothing and seek nothing save to love and fear God alone and they incur this complaint and become drunk as it were with their excessive anxiety and vanity.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, Confessions, 35, quoted by Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Sciences, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), I, 511.

<sup>4</sup> Constantinus Africanus, De melancholica, quoted History of Magic, I, 752.

While demons were disguised as idols in the saints' legends, demonic influence is masked by man-made logical constructs in the novel. Father Karras employs his training as a logician and uses scientific terms and restrictions to debate principles that are beyond the realm of science. Demonic influence hides the impossibility of the task from his perception. If logic compels him to deny the existence of God, since His existence is "against all reason, against all knowledge," then faith is not a matter of logic and Karras should transcend his questions. He does not realize that he would not "pray to someone to hear his prayer" (p. 87) if he did not illogically believe in God. Like the nineteenth-century theologian, Georg Hermes, who believed that an intelligent Christian ought to doubt until he can prove the validity of his faith,<sup>5</sup> Karras should accept his doubt as a trial leading to faith.

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich J. Denzinger, Enchirition Symbolorum et Definitionum (Barcinone: B. Herder, 1965), pp. 3013-14.

Karras's formally declared belief in God and himself is held true only because of his anterior acceptance of a particular set of terms, from which his belief in salvation is constructed.<sup>6</sup> His dilemma as a rationalist employing logic out of its realm takes on thematic significance in the novel. Karras's theodicy considers the usual paradoxes in an individual context: "The need to rend food with the teeth and then defecate. His mother's First Fridays, Stinking socks, Thalidomide babies" (p. 48). He knew that an assertion of Divine beneficence would have sounded insane, for it would not be rooted in logic but in faith. The only logic of faith he sees is in the "silence of God." However, the belief in God's silence must be undermined by the existential logic that "a reasonable God

<sup>6</sup> Discussions of "Implicit Belief" found in Michael Polanyi, "The Stability of Scientific Theories against Experience," Witchcraft and Sorcery, ed. Max Marwick (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), 332-34. Excerpted from M. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 286-94). The fallacy of logical debate comes from the fact that although one may reason excellently in the idiom of logical science one cannot apply that idiom to observations where the scientific idiom is without basis. The ability to ingeniously reason within the idiom of science does not necessarily confer ability to reason well outside it.

would end the confusion among men of good will" (p. 49). The yearning for some logical sign to provide a basis for an illogical faith consumes him. He prays, "Lord give us a sign," without realizing that the very seeds of his doubt are planted by the Lord through the agency of demons.

Karras's request for some supernatural sign marking Divine presence can be compared to John's Gospel 6:30 where Christ's chosen disciples ask Him, "What sign dost thou that we may see and believe thee? What work dost thou perform?" Christ later went to the house of Martha and Mary, knowing that days earlier their brother Lazarus had died. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead as evidence of Divine presence and power, but Karras remarks that "the raising of Lazarus was dim in the distant past. No one now living had heard his laughter" (p. 49).

When physical evidence of a supernatural presence is manifested in Regan's possession, Karras initially rejects it. Blatty symbolically suggests in the description of the priest's narrow room that the scientific materialism of the protagonist is limited and sterile. "On the desk was an early photo of his

mother and in silent rebuke on the wall by his bed hung a metal crucifix. The narrow room was world enough for him. He cared little for possessions; only that those he had be clean" (p. 162).

The rejection of supernatural signs by men of good will blinded by rationalistic preconceptions is a major thematic point of the novel. The demon mockingly reminds Karras that the signs the priest requests are incarnate before him in a demonic deity. Pazuzu tells him: "You have no faith in me, dear Karras, in me! All these proofs, all these signs in the sky" (p. 205). Once Karras agrees to the demonically supernatural sign, the demon then instills the fear of an unsuccessful exorcism in him. "You see the trouble with signs in the sky is that once having seen them, one has no excuse. Have you noticed how few miracles one hears about lately? Not our fault, don't blame us. We try!" (p. 235). Karras persists in despiritualizing the miracles he directly perceives: "A bureau drawer pops open, sliding out its entire length." Karras immediately attributes the sign to psychokinesis. When Regan "speaks in an unknown tongue" (p. 237), Karras rejects it as telepathic

perception of formulated answers in his own mind. He attributes Regan's cry for help spelled out in raised script on her chest to paranormal ability to control blood vessels. Chris remarks that "miracles sure don't come easy with you" (p. 245). The priest's only proof will lie in direct confrontation with the demon not masked by currently accepted "paranormal" or natural phenomena.

As ritual exorcism begins, Karras is stupefied when he sees Regan's bed rise off the floor. Between ritual responses, the priest returns his gaze to the bed and "to his hopes of his God and the supernatural hovering low in the empty air." The proof of supernatural reality, the sign which Karras sought, has now appeared: "It's there! There it is!" (p. 303). Like the sunset, the sign in the sky, "once forsaken" (p. 163), rekindles his faith like a "promise remembered" (p. 325). The belief in the supernatural demonic reality "will somehow work out to the will of God" (p. 313).

Once Karras observes that Pazuzu's demonic presence is real, the demon no longer hides behind the mask of material reality. Instead he attempts to make Karras believe that his demonic power is greater than Divine power and that special Providence is an

illusion of faith.

Father Merrin implicitly counters this demonic despair in the following passage: "The demon's target is not possessed; it is us the observers. He makes us despair; to reject our own humanity; to see ourselves as ultimately bestial; as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity; ugly; unworthy. And there lies the heart of it, perhaps: in unworthiness. For I think the belief in God is not a matter of reason at all; I think it finally is a matter of love; of accepting the possibility that God could love us" (p. 311).

This is the major thematic point of the novel. Merrin believes that demonic activity in the world does not occur only in extraordinary phenomena, such as possession, but in "the senseless, petty spites; the misunderstandings, the cruel and cutting word that leaps unbidden to the tongue between. Between lovers. We have no need of Satan to manage our wars; these we manage for ourselves" (p. 312). When observers of these misunderstandings can see only demonic activity or human unworthiness, they may reject their faith in a benevolent God.

Karras's doubt and despair are repeatedly expressed in various contexts. At Mass as he says the words that transubstantiate bread into the body of Christ he thinks, "No bread! This is nothing but bread" (p. 229). And for rejection of faith he admonishes himself in the words of the rite, "Domine, non sun dignus" (p. 228). Lord, I am not worthy to accept your love. He further rejects the possibility that God could love him after abandoning faith. He logically presumes that if he rejects God, God will reject him. The demon employs the priest's extensive education in logic and science to interfere with Karras's search for God. Saint Augustine notes the same interference formal education may cause in the spiritual search for faith.

The unlearned start up and seize Him  
and we with our learning sink into Hell.  
Are we ashamed to follow them because  
they have gone before us? Is it not,<sup>7</sup>  
a greater shame not to follow them?

Within the novel, Pazuzu croaks that he "must give reason for doubt" (p. 237). If Karras had abandoned his education in matters outside its realm and had followed a single set of instincts, he would never have

<sup>7</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, II, 489.

come to reflect on the moral problem of worthiness and self-punishment. Out of this reflection his despair has sprung.<sup>8</sup> Yet he has followed his reason into a realm where reason has no meaning. Pazuzu thrives on the human tendency to overvalue the power of consciousness and rational thought. "That is why I'm fond of you. That is why I cherish all reasonable men" (p. 267). The demon has manipulated Karras's reason against him. The knowledge of the supernatural that Karras seeks cannot be discovered by the head, and as he walks to Regan's room before the exorcism he is finally aware that it "must be clutched by the heart" (p. 264). And if he cannot throw off the burden of self-defined unworthiness, he will burn in the fires of his logically circumscribed hell.

Karras's demonically inspired estimation of his faith brings him to a spiritual nadir. The Cloud of Unknowing calls this "the naked knowing and feeling

<sup>8</sup>John B. S. Haldane, Possible Worlds (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), p. 283, identifies this process.

of thine own being." He tries to transcend this personal hell by realizing within his finite consciousness the nature of his relationship with God and a sense of the ultimate union of all temporal particulars.<sup>9</sup> But his thoughts must usually be occupied with sensible things, particular causes and the examination of visible phenomena, so that he is unable to turn his thought to the contemplation of universals.<sup>10</sup> Karras's emphasis upon his personal importance is inversely expressed by his exaggerated awareness of unworthiness. His contemplation of God is dominated by demonically induced despair. He never feels that the despair may be a purifying trial.

Like the saints experience mental and physical suffering by demonic infestation and obsession, Karras is victimized by Pazuzu through internal stimulation. Like Saints Gregory and Teresa of Avila, Karras is guilt-ridden by his conviction that he has abandoned

<sup>9</sup> The desire to transcend a priest's vocation is explored by Huxley, Devils, pp. 68-69.

<sup>10</sup> The finite attempt to comprehend universals is discussed by Thorndike, History of Magic, IV, 128-29.

his mother. These guilt feelings are magnified by Pazuzu's continued imitation of her, "Why you do this to me, Dimmy?" (p. 313). "You leave me to be priest, send me institution" (p. 314).

In addition, he is acutely aware that his personal ministrations toward Regan's physical well-being may cause her death.<sup>11</sup> The demon induces guilt, calling him, "Bungler! She will die from your incompetence. Feel her pulse! She will die!" (p. 316).

Karras is further agonized by feelings that he has failed those who relied on him. He is "overcome by a sudden, draining weariness" (p. 47) when thinking of his mother and "wearied with sorrow" after a "failed encounter" (p. 89) with a young priest who sought his aid. Like earlier saints who mortified their bodies for personal inadequacies and failures, Karras runs grueling distances to "ease the clutch of grief that gripped at his heart" (p. 147), believing that physical self-punishment could grant him "healing sweat."

<sup>11</sup> The Second Latern Council in 1139 recognized that a priest as a result of his treatment of a patient might be detrimental and may cause death. Howard Haggard, Devils, Drugs and Doctors (New York: Harper and Row, 1929), p. 140.

Karras metaphorically resembles Saint Simeon Stylites, who had wrapped himself in a cord for years because of similar internal frustration. Karras tells Father Dyer, "I'm really in a bind" (p. 221), while trying to hide his research into demonic possession. Bound by seemingly contrary conceptions of his duties as spiritual consultant and empiric skeptic, he condemns himself in both professions, but still desires to help those who need him. His catch words become "mea culpa" (p. 150). Through demonic instigation, Karras accepts and suffers from unrequested responsibility.

During both meetings with the depressed young priest, Karras, unconsciously bearing his cross, "feels a weight easing slowing onto him" (p. 88) and again "feels the soft crushing weight" (p. 163) which he misinterprets as a burden he cannot withstand instead of the pressure of love which he generally accepts. Speaking with Chris MacNeil, he soothes her apprehension, "his voice cradling, stripping her of burden" (p. 196). As the exorcist, Karras, intimidated by Pazuzu's constant mental attacks on his worthiness, finally is "shocked into realization that the weight was on him, set now in concrete and shaped to his back" (pp. 256-57).

As Regan's condition worsens, he feels that "the burden would fall at last upon him" alone (p. 287). He chides the demon to direct unceasing attention to himself in full demonic confrontation, "Try me, Take me on!" (p. 329), finally realizing that the source of his own mental and physical suffering is before him.

In the end, Karras realizes that his former lack of faith had no personal origin, and that he had "fallen" like the angels into a rational hell<sup>12</sup> where the illusory constructs of logic seem real.<sup>12</sup> He had found stability in his denial of demonic existence, and in the naturalistic system which he had accepted as a sane logical structure; yet the demon "promotes" scientific theory.<sup>13</sup>

The final incontrovertible evidence of Pazuzu's

<sup>12</sup> For additional criticism of rationality ordering the chaotic world of evil and reality lapsing into appearance, see G. C. Berkouwer, "Satan and the Demons," Basic Christian Doctrines, ed. Carl Henry (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 71; William James, A Pluralistic Universe (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1916), p. 310.

<sup>13</sup> For further discussion on the empiric and rational approach to the reality of demons, see Michael Polanyi in Witchcraft and Sorcery, pp. 335-37; Harry G. Frankfurt, Demons, Dreamers and Madmen (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), p. 85.

reality is in the possession itself. As in ancient confrontations with demons, Karras battles Pazuzu who, although he is real, cleverly mirrors Karras's lack of faith. Because of his doubt, Karras had been replaced by Father Merrin in the performance of the exorcism (p. 278). Yet in his final sacrificial act Karras's faith is restored. As Karras lies dying, his countenance "glows with elation" (p. 331) resembling the dying faces of other perfect emulators of Christ-- Saints John of the Cross, Radegunde and Sisoës.<sup>14</sup> He squeezes Dyer's hand in affirmation, "yes" against all scientific rationality there was a demon; "yes," his faith is restored. "He pulled back his head and eyes filled with peace, and joy at the end of heart's longing. The eyes were staring. But at nothing in this world" (p. 331).

The saintly process has returned full circle,

<sup>14</sup> Kurt F. Reinhart, "John of the Cross," and Saints for Now, ed. Claire Booth Luce (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), pp. 72, 236; E. I. Watkins, "Radegunde," Herbert Thurston and David Attwater, eds., Butler Lives, III, 24.

again focusing on the Divine. Karras has sought some physical sign to restore his relationship with God. After suffering from self-inflicted guilt and intellectual questioning, he finally abandons science and logic. He fully accepts the reality of Pazuzu and his own corresponding worthiness and the possibility of God's love and mercy. These affirmations culminate in a final act of redemptive self-sacrifice.

## CONCLUSION

As the preceding chapter shows, Father Karras follows an evolving pattern toward Christian sainthood. He moves from rationalistic modernism (despair and doubt) to a reborn sense of self-worth and God's benevolence. He has sought and found a spiritual sign manifested in physical reality.

This sign, the possession of Regan by Pazuzu, a demon which Blatty carefully establishes as specific and real, also catalyzes the novel's form of traditional Christian trial. Although the demon is a literal reality, actually the "sign" that Karras has sought, he speaks to Karras in the language of demon-denying and God-denying cynicism, which previously tempted Karras to despair.

In the conflict with Pazuzu, two traditional obstacles to faith are merged - the external demon and the saint's own self-doubt. Just as earlier saints discovered their adversaries behind the diversionary masks of stone idols or pagan gods, so Karras sees through and beyond his existential despair to the eternal source of mental affliction. After achieving this vision of evil, he actively expresses the "mystery of goodness," redeeming sin through personal sacrifice.

By emulating Christ's removal of sin and repeating a "type" of crucifixion and resurrection, Father Karras has become a contemporary saint in the unlikely setting of a best-selling novel. Its traditional message, so unanimously misunderstood by the critics, makes The Exorcist a unique phenomenon in the multiplex world of pop culture. In his "controversial" and "sensational" novel, William Peter Blatty has written a modern hagiography.

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