

MAG – 020 – Desecrated Host

Content Warnings

- Hallucinations / altered reality
- Rituals
- Bullying
- **Discussions of:** Religion, exorcism, human remains, supernatural manipulation
- **Mentions of:** Ableism, emetophobia, blood, cannibalism, knives, suicide, scopophobia, alcohol use, police
- **SFX:** static, high-pitched tones

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Twenty Desecrated Host

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

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Continuation of the statement of Father Edwin Burroughs, regarding his claimed demonic possession. Original statement given May 30th 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

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(Read a loud from the archived witness statement of Father Edwin Burroughs)

It was the first time I had experienced anything like that. By this point I was starting to suspect that I may have been having hallucinations of some sort, but I had never before felt a... a presence within myself, inside my being. It was

a feeling so utterly awful it's hard to put it into words. Like a reflex reaction, your muscles moving without any instruction from your mind, but rather than a quick twitch of the leg, it's a slow movement of your jaw, your lips, forming your mouth into words. Worse things were to come, of course, but I don't think any of them were so profoundly unsettling as that feeling.

I only got a few streets away from Hill Top Road before I was no longer able to maintain my equilibrium and fell to the floor, violently throwing up. I could not deny then that there was something inside me, and I believed that whatever it was had entered me from Bethany O'Connor. I tried to pray, tried to cast my mind to G— I couldn't. As I tried, my throat closed and I struggled to breathe. I lay on the side of the pavement, and I wept. Wiping my eyes, I took out my Bible, and looked desperately within it for comfort but when I opened it, though the page was within the Gospel of Luke, the words were from Genesis: "Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me."

Around that passage the writing morphed and swam before my eyes. And wherever there were words that might give me comfort, I found them obscured by dark stains. The bile began to rise within my throat again, and I desperately wanted to hurl the book away from me. I held it, though, for just a moment before I placed the small volume once again in my jacket. It took more willpower than I could have believed, but I kept it. I stood up shakily, and staggered back to the presbytery.

I slept for a long time, and missed morning Mass, saying I was feeling unwell. It wasn't a lie, of course; I just lay there for hours. There seemed a safety in stillness, as though inaction could do no harm. It was the first good decision I

had made, and there isn't day goes by I don't curse myself for ever rising from that bed. Nobody bothered me – I think word had gotten round that I was having a difficult time and they were almost certainly trying to decide who would be best to talk to me, or even whether to ask the Bishop to intervene.

I decided that I needed to talk to Father Singh. I didn't think that he would be able to help me, but he was at least familiar with Bethany O'Connor's case. Perhaps he might have some insight into what was happening. I tried to find him quickly – the faces on each crucifix and painting I passed seemed to twist and sneer at me as I walked and my head was throbbing. The painted blood glistened as though still wet. I'm glad I didn't encounter anyone, for I was staggering so much they would likely have thought I was drunk.

Finally I found Father Singh in the small chapel. He seemed surprised to see me and as I approached, his face fell and he backed away ever so slightly. I can't imagine how bad I must have looked to get such a reaction from him, but I sat next to him anyway. I began to talk, to tell him everything that had happened. He remained silent as I spoke, until I began to talk about the exorcism I had tried to perform on Bethany. He held up his hand, and asked if I'd prefer to speak about it in confession. I was momentarily confused, and asked him what sin he felt I had committed. He looked at me, and I swear there was almost a smile on his face when he spoke. "Spiritual pride," he said, "that has led to quite a fall."

Unsettled though I was at his attitude, I could not deny that he was right. I agreed, and we left the chapel. Soon I was giving my account as a full confession, and I could not keep from crying as I described what happened when I attempted to lay a blessing upon that house on Hill Top Road. I finished my account, and waited for Father Singh to speak of my penance or absolution.

Instead, he paused for a few moments, then said, “No, your sins are deeper than that.” And he began to list them.

Every transgression I had made since I was six years old. The disabled child I had bullied in primary school, the time I stole money from my mother’s purse to buy cigarettes, the indiscretions I had had at the seminary. All of them. I had confessed them each before and been absolved, but not to Father Singh, and to hear them thrown back in my face as such a stark list of wickedness rattled me deeply. I noticed something else as he spoke: Father Singh only emigrated from Jaipur a decade or so before I met him, and he had always had quite a strong accent but the voice that spoke now to read my litany of wrongdoing had no trace of it. It was a clipped and crisp RP accent, though in tone it seemed to match that of my friend.

I leapt to my feet and ran from the room, and towards the front door. I needed to get out, to get somewhere I could breathe. In the hallway I ran past two other priests, who looked more worried than ever. One of them was Father Singh.

It was dark when I left the presbytery. I had no idea where I was going or why; I just had the desperate need to be somewhere else. The streets of Oxford should have been full of drunken students at that time on a Sunday night, at least, I thought it was Sunday, but they were almost deserted. Occasionally, I would see figures standing or walking at the end of the narrow streets, but they were shadowy, silhouetted against what little light there was, and were always gone when I approached. I tried once again to pray but the words died on my tongue. I have never felt despair on the sheer scale I did at that moment.

The streets of Oxford are winding, and speak to the age of the place, but I had lived there for no small amount of time and knew them well. That night, though, it was as though I had never walked them before. I saw roads that I had travelled a hundred times, but they seemed different, my eyes focusing on details I had never before marked, and at each turn I found I did not know where I was going or what place it would take me to. The world I knew had become alien to me, and I simply didn't know what to do.

Finally, I found myself in front of The Oratory on Woodstock Road. The church's large round window shifted as I watched, as though it were a tremendous eye that were turning to focus upon me. The door was open and from within, a warm light spilled out. Even in the depths of my – I suppose you could call it mania – there was something comforting about that light. A man appeared at the door. He was tall and pale, and dressed as an altar server.

I walked up to him. My vision was blurred, though I could not tell you whether it was my state of mind at the time or simply that I was crying. I should have known that something was wrong. I did know that something was wrong, but it didn't matter. I had no fight left within me, so when he told me that it was time for Mass, I simply nodded and followed.

He led me through the church. It was bright, so bright. Candles covered every surface, each glowing so powerfully that I could barely look directly at them. The layout was how I remembered, but the pews were all empty, and I could see none of the statues or crosses that I expected. The man led me unresisting into the vestry, where I found my cassock and stole laid out in front of me. The stole was not green as I would have expected for a normal Sunday mass, nor was it violet or red or any other liturgical colour. Instead it was a pale, sickly yellow. I felt the eyes of the altar server upon my back, and dressed quickly.

At that moment the bell rang to mark the start of the mass. It was a single, jarring tone that cut through the air and made me almost double over in pain, so badly did it pierce into my pounding skull. I regained myself, gripping the thin, bony arm of the altar server, and walked out into the church. The pews were full now. Row upon row of people, far more than had ever before attended a mass that I had said. Each was dressed in black from head to toe, and their skin was fevered, jaundiced yellow. The eyes of every man, woman and child stared blankly forward, and their mouths hung open, wide and smiling, like their jaws had locked in silent rictus.

I could have left. I know that now. I know that my will and my actions were my own, and even at the time I knew that what I was seeing was so wrong. So very wrong but... it didn't feel like at the time I could have made any other choice. Even in that strange place, stared at by hellish parishioners I must have known weren't really there. G—... Forgive me, even then, I thought to find some comfort in the liturgy. The odd smelling incense swirled about me from the altar server's brazier and my head swam with a scent that felt so familiar, yet so foreign.

Finally, I stood before the altar and began the mass. I was surprised as I spoke, and the holy names slipped from my mouth without hesitation, but the congregation I addressed were quiet, and each pause for a response was met with only that oppressive, wide-mouthed silence, a jarring void that tightened the fear I felt gripping my soul. When the Liturgy of the Word began, I watched in silent dread as the altar server stepped to the pulpit to deliver the first reading. He stood there, dark eyes scanning the open bible, before he raised his head and looked up as though to speak, but all that came from his throat

was the single tolling sound of that bell, and my head pulsed in pain. The same thing happened for the second reading, that long, drawn out chime.

Then came the reading of the Gospel. I walked to the pulpit myself, and saw the passage indicated was Mark, chapter 9, verses 14-19. I began to try and read it, but my voice was gone and from my own mouth came the sound of that bell. I fell to the floor, but no-one moved to help me.

Eventually I was able to stand again, and a dull panic began to rise within me as I realised that next came the liturgy of the eucharist. The thought of these people, these things, taking the body of J – taking the sacrament of holy communion felt like the direst of blasphemies. I didn't stop, though. I didn't know what else to do, and my mind was swimming with the sound of the bell and the collective horror of all the things that I had seen and felt.

The altar server brought me the communion wafers and the wine, and I took them. My hands felt strange and clammy as I held them, but I brought them to the altar and began to speak. This time my words came out crisp and clear, and as I said them I noticed fewer and fewer of the parishioners seemed to be in the pews. Hope began to rise within me as it seemed the words would work to banish these jaundiced watchers and I pressed on. Finally, the pews were empty, and my heart soared as I turned towards the tabernacle to retrieve the rest of the host.

It was strange, the rich cloth curtain that covered that ornate metal box seemed stuck, so I pulled and pulled and eventually it came free. I opened the door and retrieved the Host, returning it to the altar. Then I... I lifted it to my mouth, and I ate. It did not taste as I expected.

I'm sure you've guessed the reality of what it was I was eating. I don't even know where I was, some dingy basement from what it seemed when the light fell from my eyes and I returned to reality. At least, I assume this is reality. I dream, sometimes, that perhaps this is the illusion – my arrest and imprisonment merely a hallucination. That I'm not a murdering cannibal.

It doesn't matter. At that moment, seeing those bound corpses before me, I made the decision to take no action ever again. I will not commit the further sin of ending my life, but I sat there until the police came. I pled guilty to all the charges they laid before me, and now here I am, doubting everything I see and hear. I do worry about the state of my soul, of course, but there is little to be done. My old colleagues have come by on occasion, and even the Bishop once, but it doesn't help. Whatever they may be actually be saying, all I can hear is the sound of the bell.

Thank you for your time.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

As it turns out the second part of this statement was simply misfiled in the next folder, which was useful, although it does beg the question of who was reading it last? Martin is still absent, but Tim and Sasha both swear they haven't seen it before. Was my predecessor reading it at some point? That seems unlikely given the state of the place; I find it hard to credit the idea that Gertrude Robinson actually read any of these files. Still, it's hardly our biggest concern.

It's difficult to know where to begin with a statement like this. If the person giving their testimony is unable to distinguish the real and the unreal, that doesn't usually bode well for anyone trying to find evidence. Let us begin with

Bethany O'Connor. From what Sasha could find in the records of St Hugh's College, she was indeed a student with them, studying archaeology, matriculating in 2008. Everything Father Burroughs says about her faith, her hospitalisation and her death appears to match up with official records. However, college records appear to list her as one of the students living in halls during her second year, rather than in an off-campus house, and it was a porter who she attacked with a kitchen knife, rather than a housemate. In fact, according to the letting agent, there was no-one living at 89 Bullingdon Road that year, so whatever Bethany was doing in that house, it wasn't living there legally.

Father Burroughs' old colleagues from the Church certainly remember his falling apart following the failed exorcism. They were apparently in the process of talking to the Bishop to get him some help when the 'culminating incident' occurred that led to his incarceration. Prior to meeting Bethany O'Connor, none of them had anything but the highest praise for the man.

As for the incident itself, Father Burroughs was found in one of the back rooms of 89 Bullingdon Road. He was wearing a butcher's apron and sat in front of two students, Christopher Bilham and James Mann. They were both tied to chairs and quite dead. Cause of death was listed as blood loss from multiple lacerations all over their legs and torso, as well as removal of both their faces with a sharp blade, possibly a scalpel. The face of James Mann was found to have been partially eaten by Father Burroughs. He pled guilty to all charges brought before him and is currently serving two life sentences at Wakefield Prison, though HMPS refused our request for a follow-up interview.

What interests me is the paralleling of Father Burroughs' climactic hallucination with reality, and the fact that at no point did he perform any

actions that might be analogous with the binding and actual murder of the students. Also, it strikes me that the altar server he described seems out of place with most of his other delusions, in that he appeared to have active agency, which is uncharacteristic for these visions the priest describes. Finally, there is the small detail mentioned in the police report that none of the tools used to kill or mutilate the victims were found at the scene. This all leads me to believe that there may have been a second person there that night, although from talking with the police, I get the impression that there is little appetite for re-opening the case, considering how successful the initial prosecution was.

There's one other detail Tim uncovered that sticks out to me. It's a name I recognise, though I have no idea what it could mean. The Oratory was obviously not the actual scene of Father Burroughs' crimes, but there was one strange thing that happened a few days prior. They received delivery of a pale yellow stole, which apparently vanished less than a day after they signed for it. This would be unusual, but not necessarily noteworthy, if it wasn't for fact that one of the deacons recalled the package was handed to them by a company called Breekon and Hope Deliveries.

Recording ends.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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listening.