

Libera nos a Malo**Exorcism, prayers of deliverance and healing**

Notes in the margin of the Decree about exorcisms and prayers of healing and deliverance of the Sicilian Episcopal Conference

On May 14, 2024, the Sicilian Bishops' Conference promulgated the Decree [*circa gli esorcismi e le preghiere di guarigione e di liberazione*](#) with the aim of “bringing clarity by reaffirming the traditional teaching of the Church” in a particularly delicate and sensitive area such as that of protection and deliverance from the influence of the evil one. The Decree, as the Sicilian bishops write, originated from an analysis of the peculiar local situation that has seen, over time, a considerable increase in the number of the faithful requesting deliverance from alleged possessions or diabolic infestations, for this purpose turning to priests who, unfortunately, have not always acted “in a uniform and coordinated manner,” abusing the faculties granted to them and disorienting the community; on other occasions, then, the Sicilian faithful have resorted to lay people who, disregarding the well-defined and clear roles entrusted to them in this particular area, have not infrequently overstepped the possibilities attributed to them, leading to disorders and scandals, deceiving or plagiarizing¹ people. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that the authoritative intervention of the pastors of Sicily was prompted by the recent news events that shocked the island, for the tragic events in Altavilla Milicia (PA) in February 2024, where a man, who attended the Fratelli di Dio” group led by two holy men/preachers, killed his wife and two children during a pseudo “exorcism,” believing his family members to be possessed by Satan. Then, a few years ago, the conviction of a priest for sexual assault by a Palermo court, accused of molesting and groping some female parishioners during exorcisms, had caused a stir.

The Decree, reiterating the necessary and careful discernment², which must always be conducted to distinguish cases of diabolic influence from the physical or psychological problems of the faithful (CCC, no. 1673), aims to specify, and better explicate, the teaching of the Catholic Church as to exorcisms and prayers of healing and deliverance, different dimensions of the one great and perennial commitment of the Catholic Church to help the faithful in removing themselves from the power of the devil and in facing that “tremendous struggle against the powers of darkness” in which every man or woman “must fight without ceasing in order to remain united with good” (CCC, no.

¹ The Antiplagiarism report “*Magic, Pseudosciences, Artificial Intelligence and Other Addictions*” published on May 17, 2024 by the Antiplagiarism Observatory presents disturbing data from which it emerges that the phenomenon of using magicians, seers and mediums involves about 20 percent of the population in Italy, and in 96 percent of cases the clients are faithful Catholics: <https://www.antiplagio.org/rapporto24.htm>.

² Cfr. FRANCESCO BAMONTE, *Casi di possessione: come aiutare le persone? Discernimento ed accompagnamento spirituale*, paper given at the XXXIV Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary, March 5, 2024.

409). Exorcism is a particular form of prayer that the Church has always³ used against the power of the devil. Catholic doctrine counts exorcism among the sacramentals (CCC, 1667) “sacred signs by which, by some imitation of the sacraments, especially spiritual effects are signified and obtained for the Church's impetration” (can. 1166)⁴. “Major or great” exorcism is practiced on demon-possessed, obsessed or harassed⁵ faithful and is proffered, only after moral certainty about the real diabolic presence in the faithful has been reached, by a priest “adorned with piety, science, prudence and integrity of life” (can. 1172 §2) who has “obtained from the Ordinary of the place peculiar and express license” (can. 1172 §1)⁶; exorcism may also be formulated on houses, objects, places or animals infested by the devil's action by any priest, with the permission of the local bishop. In all cases, priests must adhere to the observance of liturgical books approved by the Church. There are two ways of enacting an exorcism: one invocative to God, so that he intervenes and delivers from the extraordinary action of the devil, and the other imperative, as a command or injunction given to the devil to leave a person, place or object under his extraordinary action. For the liturgical action of exorcism, one must follow the *Rituale De exorcismis et supplicationibus quibusdam*, a successor to Paul V's 1614 rite, promulgated by the then Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments on Nov. 22, 1998⁷, and translated into the Italian edition by the Italian Bishops' Conference (*Rite of Exorcisms and Prayers for Particular Circumstances*) promulgated, after *recognitio canonica*, by special decree on Nov. 25, 2001. An amended editio typica of the rite was published in 2004⁸. Then, in 2019, the International Association of Exorcists published useful Guidelines for the Ministry of Exorcism.

The Ritual specifies that the term “exorcist” should always mean the “exorcist priest.” As early as 1985, in fact, the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its letter *Inde ab aliquot annis* made it clear that the laity (as well as religious without holy orders) may not hold prayers of exorcism or even use the formula of exorcism against Satan and rebel angels extracted from that published by order of the Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII. Instead, the lay faithful may privately use supplications in the fight against the powers of darkness, as indicated in Appendix II of the Ritual *De exorcismis*, and have an important role in prayer of support for the exorcist and the possessed, in material help by attending exorcisms and in moral support, as the Ritual itself recalls. Distinct from these forms of exorcisms is the so-called “minor” exorcism, practiced during the celebration of baptism (see *Rite of Baptism*). In particular, the question of the person qualified to deliver such minor exorcism has recently returned to interest following the promulgation of the Apostolic Letter *m.p. Antiquum*

³ Cfr. NICOLA GIAMPIETRO, *Il rinnovamento del rito degli esorcismi*, in *Notitiae*, 3-4/1999, pp. 164-169.

⁴ Cfr. PIO XII, Lettera enciclica *Meditor Dei*, 20 november 1947, in *AAS* 39/1947, p. 532; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 60.

⁵ Cfr. DAVIDE SALVATORI, *Indemoniati ed esorcismi: alcuni chiarimenti dal punto di vista terminologico*, in *Quaderni di diritto ecclesiale*, 27/2014, pp. 10-22.

⁶ Cfr. GIULIANO BRUGNOTTO, *Il ministero del sacerdote esorcista (can. 1172)*, in *Quaderni di diritto ecclesiale*, 23/2010, pp. 88-94; FABIO FRANCHETTO, *Il ministro dell'esorcismo*, in *Quaderni di diritto ecclesiale*, 27/2014, pp. 23-55.

⁷ Cfr. GIUSEPPE FERRARO, *Il nuovo rituale degli esorcismi: strumento della signoria di Cristo*, in *Notitiae*, 3-4/1999, pp. 177-222.

⁸ Cfr. FABIO MARINI, *La liturgia dell'esorcismo*, in *Quaderni di diritto ecclesiale*, 27/2014, pp. 56-68; MAURIZIO BARBA, «*De exorcismis*»: variazioni nell' «*editio typica emendata*», in *Rivista Liturgica*, 91/2004, pp. 901-909

ministerium of May 10, 2021, by which the ministry of the catechist was instituted, and with the subsequent publication by the then Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments of the Rite of Institution of Catechists (Dec. 13, 2021). The text of the Dicastery specifies that “truly worthy and properly prepared catechists” may receive from the bishop the task of celebrating such minor exorcisms (imparting them in the rite of baptism or on the occasion of the catechumenate). Therefore, today “minor” exorcisms, in addition to the priest and the deacon (ordinary ministers of the sacrament of baptism) can also be given by catechists to whom the bishop entrusts this task, but without this qualifying them—as recently specified by the International Association of Exorcists—to also perform major or simple exorcisms, the reservation in this field remaining valid in the head of the “exorcist priest” alone.

Deliverance prayers are primarily a form of private prayer through which any believer or groups of believers can pray to God for deliverance from the influences and disturbances of the evil one. Any believer may pray for deliverance, his or her own and that of other believers, but without ever reciting exorcisms, even joining groups that have this purpose, but taking care that abuses are avoided and rules of prudence are followed that prevent taking unnecessary risks, engendering ambiguity and lapsing into magical drift, idolizing, as is not infrequently the case, the faithful, especially lay people, who lead these prayers or coordinate groups of deliverance prayers.

There is no specific formulary or ritual of the prayers of deliverance, although the Ritual of Exorcisms offers in Appendix I (nos. 1-12) a series of celebrations and prayers, different from those of the actual exorcism, that can be used by the faithful personally or, only under the guidance of a priest, communally. The Ritual itself in Appendix II offers a series of prayers or supplications that the faithful only individually may use. It is also good to remember that the invocation of deliverance from Evil is present expressly in the “Our Father,” which is recited communally in every Eucharistic celebration. For any communal celebrations of deliverance, the permission of the diocesan bishop must be explicitly noted.

Prayers for healing also represent an experience present in every ecclesial epoch taking into account that always the faithful and the Church itself implore healing and health from God, even with recourse to the intercession of thaumaturge saints, to Masses pro infirmis or to places of prayer and pilgrimage where God's presence has been manifested through extraordinary healings. On Nov. 23, 2000, the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgated the Instruction *about prayers to obtain healing from God*, specifying that such prayers may be elevated to God by any of the faithful, unless they take place in a church or other sacred place making it convenient in this case that they be led by an ordained minister. The Instruction differentiates liturgical healing prayers, included in liturgical books approved by the competent authority of the Church, from non-liturgical healing prayers. As for liturgical healing celebrations, it is up to the bishop to issue particular norms for his own Church that all must adhere to, starting with the provision of explicit permission that must always be requested and must be noted for such celebrations. The Document states that a “healing charism” is not attributable to a specific class of believers (e.g., the leaders or leaders of a healing prayer group). It also specifies the substantial difference between this form of prayer and exorcism as well as the importance of keeping exorcism prayers distinct from healing

celebrations, whether liturgical or non-liturgical. Mutatis mutandis, the provisions for healing prayers are often referred to in the particular legislation for the handling of deliverance prayers as well.

That being said, it can be better understood how the Decree of the Sicilian Bishops does nothing more than reaffirm the teaching of the Church, systematizing in 18 points the main issues recalled and making them more explicit in some cases, also with the aim of making sure that all the suffering faithful feel welcomed, in the same way, by the ecclesial communities, avoiding that the lack of attention induces these people “to seek understanding elsewhere, with the risk of running into psychophysical and spiritual damage that is often very serious”⁹.

In particular, after reaffirming the provisions about the prohibition for laity and priests not duly licensed to pronounce solemn prayers of exorcism and any other prayer that has the imperative character to the evil spirit or to pronounce - for laity and priests not authorized by the Bishop - the formula of exorcism of the Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII, it is explicatively provided, that lay persons and religious without holy orders shall never pronounce on any diabolic possession, vexation, obsession or infestation without having received explicit written permission from the diocesan bishop, and that no one shall be permitted, absolutely, to tell a believer that he has received an evil spell and especially to point out the person who would have done so, since this could trigger feelings of hatred in people.

Regarding healing prayers, the 2000 Instruction's indications about the distinction between non-liturgical and liturgical prayers are reiterated, it is recalled that it is not lawful for lay people and religious without holy orders to organize and lead celebrations of liturgical healing prayers, even in the presence of ordained ministers, and presbyters are reminded of the prohibition against organizing community celebrations of liturgical healing prayers without the explicit written permission of their diocesan bishop (Art. 4 Instruction about prayers to obtain from God to healing). With regard to communal prayers of deliverance, however, it is specified, in order to give a more precise direction in the case, that they should always be done under the guidance of a priest, using the prayers in Appendix I of the Rite of Exorcisms, with the exclusion of exorcism formulas.

The Decree prescribes not to admit, in community prayers for deliverance or healing, possessed persons in order to avoid phenomena that might disturb the faithful present and especially children and the weakest; it calls for the avoidance of those who lead community prayers reaching forms similar to hysteria, artificiality, theatricality or sensationalism (Art. 5 §3 Instruction about prayers to obtain from God to healing); calls for making sure that prayers for deliverance and healing are conducted by manifesting the faith of the Church, eschewing any interpretation of the event as an act of magic or superstition and recourse to the help of psychics. It is forbidden, in line with general provisions, to introduce prayers of deliverance and healing, liturgical or non-liturgical, as well as exorcism in the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacraments and the liturgy of the hours (Art. 8 §3 Instruction about prayers to obtain from God to healing).

⁹ GIAMPAOLO CREPALDI, Pastoral note for the Diocese of Trieste “*Vedevo Satana cadere dal Cielo...*”. *Esorcismo e preghiere di liberazione*, 2018, n. 9.

The bishops invite the faithful who lead prayers of deliverance and healing to live the contemplative and penitential dimension of the Christian life and order that the same should refrain from laying hands on the body parts of the person asking for prayer and from anything that might only arouse suspicion in others about their chastity.

It is reiterated that every Mass as such is always a source of sanctification and that, therefore, it is not possible to “label” a specific Eucharistic celebration as a “liberation” or “healing” Mass, while recalling that it is possible for the Holy Mass to be applied for the liberation of one or more persons attacked or possessed by the evil one, using the appropriate forms of the Roman Missal.

Finally, it is admonished that prayers of healing and deliverance, as well as the pastoral action of exorcism, be freed from any form of connection with cash offerings; the prohibition of passing among the faithful blessing them one by one with the Most Holy Sacrament for any reason is recalled; and it is clarified that solemn exorcisms or prayers of healing and deliverance that have as their object the liberation of the family tree are not permitted.

The concern of the Italian bishops on the subject, especially in order to ward off abuse and confusion among the faithful, is certainly not new. For example, in 2010, the Archbishop of Benevento promulgated a diocesan norm On the ministry of exorcisms and prayers of deliverance; in 2013, the Bishop of Brescia issued a *Vademecum* for the ministry of the exorcist; in 2014, the Tuscan bishops resubmitted and expanded, 20 years later, the Pastoral Note “*A proposito di magia e di demonologia*”, supplementing it with “pastoral indications and norms” on “Exorcisms and prayers of healing.” in 2015, the Bishop of Isernia-Venafro published a decree on the ministry of exorcisms and prayers of deliverance; in 2018, the Bishops of Piedmont launched the Disciplinary Provisions about the so-called “Masses of Healing,” and the Bishop of Trieste did the same, also in 2018, with a special Pastoral Note. Beyond reiterating the stringent norms on the subject of exorcism, these local provisions focus, in particular, on the subject of prayers of healing and deliverance and on the phenomenon of the so-called “masses of deliverance” or “healing masses,” clarifying the role of the laity, the boundaries of intervention for non-exorcist priests, the obligatory nature of the necessary authorizations for community celebrations and the limitations for priests in celebrating so-called Masses of liberation or healing; however, in not a few cases, provisions do not appear unified, clear and terminologically precise, thus not favoring the necessary balance that appears indispensable in the management and exercise of such a complex service and ministry, in which one has to deal with Evil, who is not an abstraction or a splatter film frame but a person, “with whom one does not discuss, does not dialogue, does not negotiate” (Pope Francis).

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