

Jun 3 FILM / Finding the Sacred Among the Profane: The Exorcism of Emily Rose / Sean Woodard

Film (/2017-posts/category/Film)

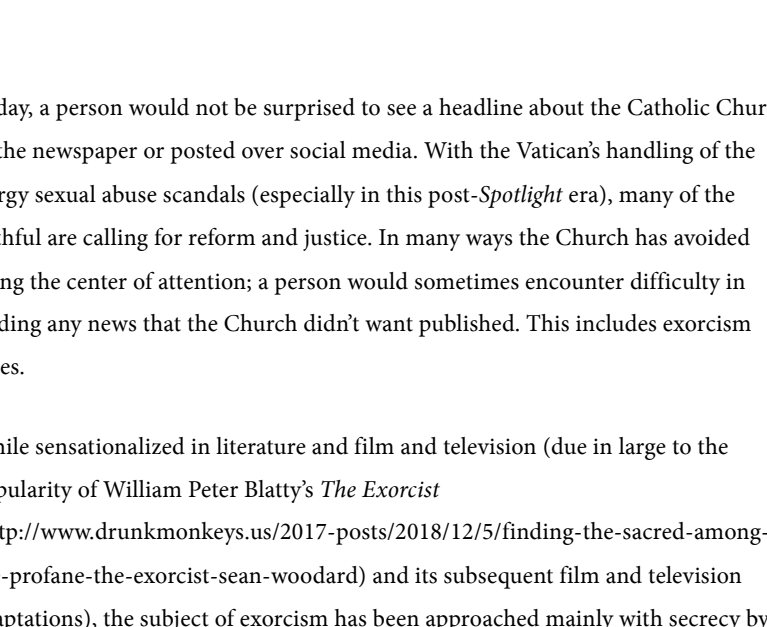


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Today, a person would not be surprised to see a headline about the Catholic Church in the newspaper or posted over social media. With the Vatican's handling of the clergy sexual abuse scandals (especially in this post-*Spotlight* era), many of the faithful are calling for reform and justice. In many ways the Church has avoided being the center of attention; a person would sometimes encounter difficulty in finding any news that the Church didn't want published. This includes exorcism cases.

While sensationalized in literature and film and television (due in large to the popularity of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (<http://www.drunkmonkeys.us/2017-posts/2018/12/5/finding-the-sacred-among-the-profane-the-exorcist-sean-woodard>) and its subsequent film and television adaptations), the subject of exorcism has been approached mainly with secrecy by Church authorities. In recent years, there have been motions to train more priests to become exorcists in response to allegedly increasing numbers of demonic possessions around the world. However, the number of officially sanctioned exorcisms is relatively unknown.

In many cases, the public remains unaware, unless something bad happens—such as in the case of 23-year-old Ameliee Michel, who died under the care of two Roman Catholic priests who were performing the rite of exorcism upon her. Although she had been medically diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy and depression, Michel's family believed their daughter was possessed and turned to the Church for help. Her parents and the two priests were found guilty of negligible homicide in 1978. The publicized trial provided the basis for three films loosely based off the incident, the most well-known being *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005).

Scott Derrickson's (*Sinister*, *Doctor Strange*) film follows an agnostic attorney (Laura Linney) named Erin Bruner who defends Father Richard Moore (Tom Wilkinson), who is in court for negligible homicide. Critical consensus was mixed at the time of its theatrical release. Despite its flaws, *Emily Rose* happens to probe deeper into the realm of spiritual belief while also commenting on the medical versus religion dialogue on the validity of demonic possession.

The film employs the use of flashback to introduce us to Emily Rose (portrayed by the brave and underappreciated Jennifer Carpenter, who contorted her body into bizarre postures without the aid of visual effects). This allows us to empathize with her character and draw our own conclusions on whether we believe the defense's position in court.

The filmmakers also used altered color palettes to delineate between fantasy and perceived reality. A featurette available as a supplement of the DVD and Blu-ray explores how color was used. For example, orange was introduced into shots to suggest something supernatural is about to occur. A good scene that exemplifies this is when Emily is alone in her dorm room and she feels an evil presence in the building. She steps outside her room, the length of the hallway bathed in orange and teal light. She is attacked by an invisible force and she leaves the building, screaming. As she runs through the pouring rain, she sees demonic faces on people passing by. As she races down a path, buildings in the background are bathed in that same orange glow.

When the details of that first night are called into question at the trial, prosecuting attorney Ethan Thomas (Campbell Scott) makes his argument that Emily may have been hallucinating as a result of what a medical examiner would later argue to be epileptic psychosis. The flashback scene is then shown in neutral colors and people's faces appear as normal, providing a distinct contrast to the fantastical nature previous shown. Furthermore, the present-day sequences involving the trial are shown with a drab, almost metallic pallet to emphasize the sanitized nature of the proceedings.

Even though Bruner brings in an anthropologist to testify on the stand in order to sway the jury's opinion away from the medical evidence that Emily may have developed a mental illness, the stakes don't look good. A doctor present at the exorcism who agreed to testify to refute the mental illness angle conveniently dies for the sake of a plot contrivance to heighten the suspense. In addition, the Church doesn't want Father Moore to testify because anything he says may reflect negatively upon it. Instead, Church authorities insist that Bruner pursue a guilty verdict, but Father Moore changes her mind.

Further focus on the trial would result in an ad nauseam regurgitation of the movie's plot. Instead, I would like to focus on the film's two strong female roles for the later half of this discussion. While Jennifer Carpenter and Laura Linney have both been praised for their performances, I believe the strength in their performances rely on how well-written their characters are. Both Erin Bruner and Emily Rose feature complete and compelling character arcs.

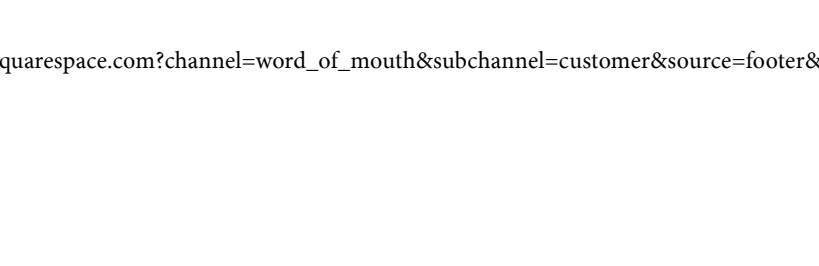
Linney's Erin Bruner is a career woman. After winning a well-publicized case, she longs for a full partnership at her law firm. When approached by her boss with the prospect of defending Father Moore, she uses the opportunity to help her achieve that goal, given the quid pro quo arrangement between them. A self-described agnostic, her beliefs are challenged when she meets with Father Moore, who believes that unseen forces are trying to work against them. One night she finds her apartment door wide open; another incident causes her to arrive late to a court appointment. When she finds a locket with her initials while out walking someday, she feels that the moment could not have been a mere coincidence. Upon hearing Bruner repeat that story, Father Moore replies that she sounds more like a mystic than an agnostic.

Ultimately, Bruner's doubt comes into play in the trial. This provides an interesting foil to her opponent—Methodist Ethan Thomas considers himself a man of faith, but in his pursuit of what he believes to be morally right, he casts aside belief in favor of tangible facts to win the case. Upon the outcome of the trial, Bruner—changed by the experience—is approached by her boss again, but she chooses not to accept his offer of partnership at the firm. What began for her as a selfish endeavor ends in one of personal growth and self-discovery.

Carpenter's Emily Rose is easy to empathize with. She has dreams of going to college and becoming a teacher. Her faith in God appears to be unwavering. Even when she becomes possessed, she retains lucidity and understands what she is going on after the entity (or entities) recede from view. She willingly discontinues her medication (which she and Father Moore believe isn't improving her condition) and gives permission for the exorcism ritual to commence.

When Father Moore reads the letter that Emily wrote the night before she died, it is revealed that she believed she was visited by the Virgin Mary. In this vision, she was offered the choice to either leave her body or remain so that her tribulations would reveal to the outside world that evil does exist. Emily's decision to stay behind and endure further pain shows how strong her faith is. The teacher inside her never left; she undergoes this torment to further educate others and bring them to God through her selfless sacrifice.

Horror films such as *Emily Rose*, *The Rite* (2011), *Deliver Us From Evil* (2014) and countless others that populate the demonic possession subgenre are wrought with clichés that originated with *The Exorcist*. And yet, some like *Emily Rose* present the material in a new way and rise above those pitfalls. Given the film's strengths and the fact that it is approaching its 15th anniversary, I feel it is a ripe time to reevaluate the film based on its own merits.



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