

Fr. Perozich comments —

People have shown an extraordinary interest in the power of the demonic.

I caution everyone to read the bible, speak with Jesus, receive the sacraments, allow Jesus into your life and not to get sidetracked by this CURIOSITY.

The reason I post this at all is not to try to satisfy CURIOSITY, rather, as is this last paragraph from Dr. Richard Gallagher, M.D., for each reader to get on board with one's personal spiritual battles.

“The main significance of God’s allowance of these episodes, throughout history and even in today’s world, may be to call our attention, via a more overt and blatant exhibition of these unequivocal realities, to the need to be more diligent in waging our personal spiritual battles.”



Diagnosing the Spectrum of Diabolic Attacks

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD
GALLAGHER, M.D.

By Michael S. Rose | April 2021

Michael S. Rose is author of the New York Times bestseller Goodbye, Good Men (Regnery), Ugly As Sin (Sophia Institute Press), and other books. He is Associate Editor of the NOR.

Richard Gallagher, a board-certified psychiatrist, is a professor of psychiatry at New York Medical College and a psychoanalyst on the faculty of Columbia University. He graduated from Princeton University with a degree in classics and trained as a resident in psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine. The world's foremost scientific expert on the subject of diabolic attacks, he has been an active member of the International Association of Exorcists since the 1990s. Dr. Gallagher wrote "A Case of Demonic Possession: Among the Many Counterfeits" for the NOR (March 2008). He is the author of Demonic Foes: My Twenty-Five Years as a Psychiatrist Investigating Possessions, Diabolic Attacks, and the Paranormal (HarperOne, 2020), a book he recently discussed with the NOR's associate editor, Michael S. Rose.

NOR: *Dr. Gallagher, you have written a unique and compelling book. Would you briefly explain your medical background and how you came to be a medical consultant to exorcists?*

Gallagher: It's a bit convoluted, so let me share my fuller background. I was born in New York City and brought up in an Irish-Catholic family. Before I decided to become a doctor, I studied classical literature and the history of religion at Princeton, winning a scholarship in Latin and ancient Greek. I enjoyed my studies immensely and was, I

thought, primed to go to graduate school to pursue one of those disciplines. Instead, I became interested in helping people more directly by trying to relieve their suffering. So, I decided to study medicine. I eventually chose to become a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, as I found psychiatry the most interesting field during medical school.

I began working primarily as a clinician, upon finishing my residency at Yale, as an attending physician at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical College. To my surprise, one of the nation's most prominent exorcists (at a time there were but a few) showed up unannounced one afternoon at my office door! He asked me to evaluate a complex case of a woman with bruises from what the priest thought were "evil spirits." I was skeptical, but after an exhaustive medical assessment, I concluded that there seemed to be no other plausible medical or psychiatric explanation for her condition and that, surprisingly, this priest seemed to be correct.

This pattern of not volunteering to be involved in this field, but, if requested, agreeing to help exorcists and other clergy (of varying faiths), has persisted. For instance, I was later invited to serve for a time as a scientific adviser to the Vatican-approved International Association of Exorcists and am now its longest-standing American member. I was still later asked to write some essays about this subject, including one for the Washington Post, and eventually also encouraged by colleagues and exorcists to write *Demonic Foes*.

I suppose I would like to view this decades-long pattern as in some way providential; in any case, I would

up, in just trying to assist victims and clergy, to have witnessed, I'm sure, more cases of serious diabolic attacks, and especially possessions, than any other physician in the world. I felt, therefore, that I should share these experiences in a book, with the permission and confidentiality of individuals who are not named, but with all the accounts scrupulously accurate.

NOR: *You acknowledge that your book — and the subject of exorcism in general — is controversial, not just from a scientific point of view but also from a religious one. We have, for example, religious academics who, disregarding historical evidence and contemporary firsthand reports, claim that accounts of demonic activity are myths or outdated cultural ideas. What, in your opinion, accounts for these “doctrinaire debunkers,” as you call them?*

Gallagher: The epistemological basis for recognizing demonic possessions and the like is, of course, historical, as are all genuinely spiritual events and phenomena. As spiritual (i.e., nonmaterial) phenomena, there are, of course, no lab results, x-rays, or double-blind studies. That doesn't make the topic “unscientific,” needless to say, but what it implies is that the evidence for such phenomena as possessions and oppressions (the two major examples of what's known as “extraordinary demonic attacks” upon individuals) is going to depend on sound eyewitness testimony throughout all of recorded history.

What, I think, surprises many people is that the cumulative evidence for such attacks is, in fact, massive.

This is not to maintain that phenomena like possessions happen often; they remain rare in any given area or society. Also, different cultures interpret such phenomena differently, though they are unequivocally alike in so many respects in their descriptions transculturally. If you examine the very sound documentation throughout the ages, the only sensible conclusion is that states of possession do exist, that they have been well reported in almost all cultures, and that the accounts of these episodes exhibit remarkable, often precisely overlapping, similarities.

I could cite many studies — including my own in *Demonic Foes*, in which I emphasize an unusual amount of case detail— but among the more massive compendia, I would cite especially the following two: (1) *Possession Demoniacal and Other among Primitive People, in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Modern Times* (1930), the magnum opus of an agnostic German polymath and professor of the emerging modern discipline of psychology, Traugott Oesterreich, who cites thousands of cases; and (2) an influential 1973 study by a prominent anthropologist, Erika Bourguignon, of 488 cultures, in which she concludes that clear evidence for possessions existed in at least three-quarters of them (and, to be sure, lack of obvious evidence doesn't prove its absence, especially in dealing with historical documents). I could also cite the many reports of myriad Christian witnesses and theologians over the past two millennia.

So, how is this disputed or controversial? It is not easy to convince someone who doesn't want to believe

something. Many individuals are simply ignorant of the impressive evidence or dismissive of the whole notion of evil spirits. For various reasons, others are highly disturbed by such ideas or ideologically opposed to their implications. I would put doctrinaire skeptics in the former category. **Unfortunately, of the latter position, there are even many Christians nowadays, including a number of latitudinarian clergy, who have convinced themselves that the clear teachings of Jesus and the obvious reports of possessions in the Gospels — a widespread belief of the time among much of the Jewish populace and of the wider Roman world, as it remains in most of the modern world, too! — must reflect anachronistic or confused ideas. Their consternation often seems to arise from the eschatological implications of beliefs in this realm, especially as many “professional” Christian academics in recent decades have turned to universalist leanings.**

As someone experienced in this rarefied field, as well as a seminary faculty member and teacher myself and long a serious student of the New Testament literature, a skeptical viewpoint regarding the existence of evil spirits seems to me completely untenable, but few people are dispassionate or unbiased in their reasoning. Disbelief in the plain truths of the Gospels is unorthodox, of course. But this trend may be seen as predictable, given the modern zeitgeist with its widespread religious illiteracy and seemingly wishful thinking by pseudo-experts, even

frequently those otherwise spiritually inclined in differing ways.

***NOR:** You've mentioned that your role as a medical consultant is to sort out true cases of demonic possession from the many unfortunate and far more common instances of people who only imagine they are under demonic attack. What are some of the ways you can identify demonic activity as opposed to psychosis or severe personality disorders?*

Gallagher: Of course, acknowledgement of these realities — of both possessions and oppressions — must include an awareness, too, that throughout history there have been many misascribed cases of such phenomena, sometimes from simple ignorance or lack of experience, sometimes from exaggerated fears and superstition. In ancient times, the error was more often in interpreting states of possessions as the action of gods and goddesses or deceased humans. This latter belief is not uncommon in many cultures to this day. Demons throughout history have often pretended to be either of the two, as the early Church recognized quite well.

In today's world, at least in the secular West, it seems demons want people to believe that the truly possessed person is simply "sick." Their ability to mimic illnesses is impressive in some ways, but they never quite "get it right," as I argue in the book. In many ways, demons generally have a remarkable ability to manifest themselves confusingly in highly variegated ways; this ability is what causes much of

the alleged “findings” of so-called parapsychology, a pseudo-science that creates more confusion than light.

Another related mistake skeptics make is in failing to understand the rigor with which most churches, especially in the Catholic tradition, conduct their examinations, especially of possessions. To discern a genuine possession, there must be clear and indisputable evidence to a “moral certitude” of the literal presence of a foreign and malicious intelligence. These signs classically include features like superhuman strength, fluency in a foreign language unknown to the victim, or demonstration by the spirit of “hidden knowledge” that the human victim could have no possible way of ascertaining. Other signs are characteristic and/or required, too; a fuller treatment is outlined in my book.

The point is that one should not jump to a conclusion of a diabolic cause, but neither should one dismiss the possibility a priori. At times, especially regarding the often less dramatic “oppressions,” discernment may require considerable expertise. I sometimes mention to critics, the armchair experts who argue that all such cases are psychiatric, for example, that I am a professor of psychiatry and have never seen a psychiatric patient speak foreign languages out of the blue, reveal obvious knowledge beyond their natural acquisition, or levitate (as reported to me by about 30 witnesses over the years).

The technical discernment of possessions essentially involves noting this presence of the strict criteria enunciated by the Church for centuries. It is also helpful to be able to recognize and rule out what I call the

“counterfeits” of such attacks. These include, most prominently, cases of psychosis (in which patients believe they hear the “voices” of alleged spirits, for instance), some serious personality disorders, and patients who dissociate or are highly suggestible or easily manipulated. Other confusing diagnoses may include cases of epilepsy or other rare neurological or medical disorders. To a trained physician, these examples are not hard to distinguish from a true diabolic condition after a routine medical interview and mental status exam and, in some cases, after lab or radiological studies, if needed.

***NOR:** You mentioned that it is important to note the rarity of authentic demonic possessions. Exactly how rare is possession?*

Gallagher: I mentioned that possessions are rare, but that, in toto in every age, a very large number have been reported by sound and sensible witnesses. I suppose one could compare them to a highly rare medical disorder; these rarities exist, and quite obviously in the real world, as periodically seen by well-trained specialist physicians and as reported in the medical literature. Few physicians, however, might actually see such a case in their lifelong practices. Just so, most priests may never see a possession either.

Of the 25,000 or so psychiatric cases I have routinely evaluated during the course of my medical career, not one of them have I judged to be an example of a possession. No one has just strolled into my office during my normal

workday and presented as authentically possessed. The only reason I have seen so many examples is because exorcists typically send me cases who have been previously screened and are already suspected to be diabolically afflicted; or these individuals may have found me on their own (because of my known expertise) and are suspicious, from their odd afflictions, that they might be so affected, whether they are or not.

Cases we tend to call **oppressions** (terms differ over the centuries and in different countries) essentially can be defined as a genuine and overt attack upon an individual victim, while not to the level of a possession: The evil spirit is not in control of the victim but is “**harassing**” him in any number of highly varied ways. These cases are also not common, but they are definitely less rare than possessions, and, with their less flamboyant presentations, they may actually prove harder for the inexperienced assessor to diagnose.

***NOR:** Why would evil spirits choose to assault and even take over a person’s body in the first place, especially considering that we humans seem to be very good at doing evil on our own?*

Gallagher: Yes, we humans are indeed capable of evil on our own. In a genuine possession, by contrast, an evil spirit takes control of someone’s body and periodically one’s consciousness. Spirits cannot take over a victim’s free will, although when the demon truly possesses the individual,

then that entity is, at least temporarily, “in charge” to some degree.

Theologians speculate about the motives involved. “Misery loves company” is certainly part of demons’ modus. **Demons tend to be arrogant and sadistic, so they presumably enjoy tormenting and controlling their “inferiors.”** Their ultimate hatred and envy are directed, I believe, toward God, especially the God-Man, the Second Person of the Trinity. As humans are loved by God and created in His image, demons’ assaults on humans may reflect an indirect way of trying to attack God Himself or turn humans away from Him. All these ideas are theological hypotheses in a sense but have much scriptural support.

***NOR:** What most people know about demonic possession is derived from movies like *The Exorcist*. Is the Hollywood version accurate? If not, how does the reality of demonic possession differ from its dramatized portrayal?*

Gallagher: Hollywood pretty much gets everything important about the topic wrong. First, filmmakers generally over-sensationalize and distort the typical nature of such episodes, exaggerating the phenomena in sundry ways, often to a ludicrous degree. Perhaps more disturbingly, they often turn the whole topic into a show of wizardry or superstition. They might portray the exorcist as a sort of magician, when, in fact, **any sound exorcist**

understands the victim's liberation is performed by Our Lord Himself, not by the priest.

Most significantly, filmmakers don't portray or even realize that exorcisms are part of a larger pastoral process by which **victims must work on their own deliverance as well. The exorcism prayers are often critical, but victims must also engage in their own spiritual efforts and progress on their personal religious journey; they have to join in the battle against the evil spirit(s) through their own intensified devotional practices and prayers.**

***NOR:** Early in your career as a medical consultant to exorcists, you learned that demonic attacks and possessions “don't just arise out of the blue.” Would you explain what you mean by that?*

Gallagher: There is always a reason an individual comes under demonic attack; it doesn't just happen “out of the blue.” *With a genuine possession, the victim has usually invited the demon in, though perhaps unwittingly or involuntarily. The most common cause of a possession is that the victim either turned to occult involvement of a serious nature and/or engaged in a high degree of truly evil activity.* Less commonly, the victim — perhaps with varying levels of culpability, or at least vulnerability — was “assigned” a spirit by a practitioner of the dark arts.

Lesser demonic attacks may occur for a variety of reasons — even holy individuals are not so infrequently

subject to them — though in all these cases, the causes almost invariably can be discerned.

***NOR:** During the past several decades, many New Age practices have recaptured the popular imagination. Well-meaning people have consequently become involved in yoga, astral projection, crystals, energy healing, mandalas, reiki, and the like. Can involvement in any of these pursuits open New Age enthusiasts to demonic attacks?*

Gallagher: Among the more common ways someone may open himself to demonic influence is by getting immersed in so-called New Age practices (which are hardly “new”). Such activities are ultimately aimed at gaining some benefit or piece of knowledge from the darker realm, whether the individual is aware of it or not. These practices include some of what you mention, like engaging with psychics, seeking energy healings, using crystals, etc. The danger is that, as one begins to turn to darker (i.e., demonic) entities for some alleged benefit, even perhaps without realizing it, one is allowing a kind of entry to a variant “authority,” to an alternate “power” to God’s own. These entities want to ensnare us in their world, in their occult ways, and they seem to feel, once humans have allowed themselves to be so engaged, entitled to their continued submission. Establishment of this “contact” can be seen as a kind of participation — for wrongheaded purposes — in an alternative belief system. That is why these types of practices were traditionally condemned in

the Old Testament as contrary to the First Commandment. Contact with spirits of this sort has always been seen by more orthodox religions as a mark of disobedience to God's legitimate authority, again as a kind of turn to a rival allegiance, even if inadvertently.

Paradoxically, perhaps, especially when someone tries to "move on" or renounce involvement in the occult, the evil spirit(s) may try to exact revenge or re-assert the control they feel the human established of his own choice and is now trying to disavow.

***NOR:** One common attribute in diabolic possession seems to be the ability of victims to speak languages completely unknown to them while they are in their periodic trances. You clarify that this "special ability" comes from the demon itself. Why would a demon speak in foreign tongues, especially during an exorcism?*

Gallagher: Essentially, we assume the evil spirits are showing off or engaging in acts of distraction. Experienced exorcists will command the spirits to be silent, though powerful spirits can elude such directives for a time. I once heard a demon during the victim's possessed trance call the exorcist "you monkey priest." **Evil spirits, being fallen angels, are far more intelligent than even the most brilliant humans, and, therefore, seem to derive satisfaction from regarding us as stupid animals by displaying their superior knowledge — of languages and the like.**

A skeptic once asked me why some demons seem to speak only “church Latin,” speculating that it was “mind reading” of a sort. I replied that my own experience, and that of others, is that they appear during exorcisms to know all historical languages as they are so intelligent and have been observing us closely since the dawn of mankind! **NOR:** *You mention in your book that some dedicated diabolists are granted “special abilities” even outside an overt, possessed state. Would you give some examples of what you mean by that?*

Gallagher: The most dramatic case of possession I’ve spoken about often (and written about at length in *Demonic Foes*) was a self-styled “queen” and high priestess of a devil-worshipping cult. She never renounced her membership in the cult or her “bargain” with Satan to become her “master.” (And, therefore, she was never liberated.) She confidently felt that in return for her explicit service to the Devil, she had received many “special favors.” These included, in her view, some rather obvious and quotidian psychic “abilities” in her “normal” state outside any possessed trance condition. She demonstrated these to me frequently. For instance, she had obvious access to “hidden knowledge”; she told me, correctly, that my mother had died of ovarian cancer, and she “knew” many similar matters, including how other people close to me had met their deaths.

This woman also had obvious skill at what parapsychologists have labeled “remote viewing.” In a vignette included in my book, she described to me exactly

what the chief exorcist of her case was not only doing at the moment she was conversing with me — he was about a hundred miles away at the time — but even what he was wearing! These kinds of things go way beyond the “cold readings” speculated about by the formal “skeptics crowd.” I myself verified all details of her description by telephoning the priest immediately. I still remember the exorcist’s response: “Rich, she’s something else, isn’t she?”

***NOR:** I am reminded of Marlowe’s play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, based on the real-life chronicles of the German necromancer Johannes Faustus. He was perhaps most famous for making a “deal with the Devil,” what has come to be known as the “Faustian bargain,” promising one’s eternal soul in exchange for some short-term reward such as demonic protection, the working of magic, or some special intelligence. Did these individuals you mention make some sort of Faustian bargain?*

Gallagher: It is certainly true that some individuals have literally attempted to “trade their souls” in exchange for favors from Satan. A young man who admitted to me to having done so in exchange for “success with women” and other benefits suffered one of the most continuous and intractable cases of possessions I have witnessed. Some individuals are reluctant to admit their past and foolish “bargain.” Once an interviewee admitted to having done so only after several prior conversations; the exorcist had asked that I meet with him a few times as he hadn’t been

able to discern any ostensible reason for the man's affliction after praying with him over many months.

***NOR:** A few years ago, a religious-order priest from rural Kentucky told me that when the Protestants in his area want assistance in cases of suspected hauntings, poltergeists, and possessions, they abandon their own ministers to seek the guidance of the local Catholic priests. You mention that evidence of demonic possession and exorcisms is extant in all major religions and cultures, both ancient and modern. Do properly trained Catholic exorcist-priests have more efficacy in driving out demons than do ministers or laymen of other religions?*

Gallagher: In my experience, yes. I have found that victims receive better results when they turn to ordained clergy in general, and in particular trained exorcists of the Catholic (and, I'd add, Orthodox) traditions. This is not to say, for instance, that faithful and holy Protestant clergy don't also at times receive good results with the demonically attacked or even possessed victims; I have seen those successes, too. There has developed a perception, however, that Catholic clergy may have special expertise and sometimes enhanced efficacy in these matters.

In *Demonic Foes*, I discuss a woman who had been "assigned" a demon as a teen by an alleged Satanist couple in her neighborhood. During a very unsatisfactory type of exorcism ritual conducted by a Protestant deacon, the petite possessed woman, who was perhaps 90 pounds

soaking wet, threw the 200-pound deacon clear across the church hall. The woman and her husband told me that at that point they decided to find a Catholic priest. In fairness, the deacon was both inexperienced and perhaps naïve spiritually. However, the episode reinforces the idea that training, expertise, and holiness all matter in the exorcist, whatever his denomination.

***NOR:** Some people who claim to have psychic powers such as “remote viewing” or hidden knowledge regard these as “gifts.” Would you say there’s any situation whereby these inexplicable abilities can be regarded as gifts rather than deceptive products of the demon world?*

Gallagher: A different, if loosely related, question involves the nature of spiritually sound individuals who are “gifted.” The topic of special charisms, visions, gifts of “prophecy,” etc., is an enormously vexed one in religious literature and spiritual history, and too complex a topic to address with any justice here. Certainly, in Church history, there have been many saintly individuals with great spiritual gifts: of discernment, for example, and even (as vehicles for Our Lord) as conduits for working miracles. On the other hand, Christian tradition has also always expressed caution about assuming facilely the source and validity of certain presumed charisms, of whatever sort. That is why the Church doesn’t obligate the faithful to be bound to any view of such phenomena, let alone require them to believe any special revelation associated with any seer or saint, however gifted or exalted.

In evaluating many gifted as well as demonically assaulted individuals over the past few decades, I have always kept in mind the great caution expressed by the spiritual master and great student of spiritual phenomena, St. John of the Cross. This highly experienced Doctor of the Church not only cautioned the Christians of his day against overemphasizing the ultimate significance of many charisms and alleged extraordinary supernatural phenomena, he often warned of their possible, even frequent, counterfeit nature by clever demonic trickery. I have often encountered those unsavory simulacra.

NOR: *You mention that, as part of the Catholic Church’s Rite of Exorcism, the first question asked by the officiating priest once a demon manifests itself is “What is your name?” What is the significance of this question? Why is it asked?*

Gallagher: I have attended many major exorcisms, as an observer, and no two are exactly alike. However, in the Catholic tradition, they are intended to be sober affairs with only the priest-exorcist addressing the possessing spirit. Interspersed with the prayers and commands of the Roman Ritual, the priest is to focus on a few key questions — viz., Why have you chosen to possess this victim? What is your name? When will you leave? Questions should not be posed out of idle curiosity. Asking the name of the spirit is intended, in my opinion, in part to demonstrate some initial command and authority over the ritual’s target. Evil spirits are proud and arrogant creatures, and forcing them

to reveal their names may establish a certain degree of commanding control over them, as they start having to submit to Our Lord's authority, not their own or Satan's.

***NOR:** I've read your book as a kind of cautionary tale. Did you intend it, at least partly, to be a cautionary tale? And if so, how would you summarize your moral message or warning?*

Gallagher: Cases of demonic oppression and possession certainly do serve as cautionary tales to anyone who takes the faith seriously. They underscore the reliability of the Gospel teachings about a realm of evil spirits, a kingdom of darkness trying to ensnare and corrupt us all, sometimes quite overtly (while, paradoxically, otherwise generally trying to remain somewhat hidden). Just as clear evidence of modern miracles makes more plausible the reporting of Jesus' own miracle-working, modern cases of possessions and successful exorcisms give more credence to their common mention in the New Testament, despite the challenge posed by demythologizers and other skeptics who question their interpretation or historicity and regard them as anachronistic notions.

***NOR:** What do you think we can learn about God and our own faith by knowing about demonic activity as you've laid it out in *Demonic Foes*?*

Gallagher: These accounts, modern and ancient alike, also serve to emphasize related truths of the faith, as

emphasized clearly in the introduction to the Rite of Major Exorcism. For instance, exorcisms demonstrate Christ's obvious lordship over all aspects of creation, including over Satan and his kingdom of darkness. Our Lord Himself saw His success at driving out demons as evidence of His messianic status and the ushering in of the Kingdom of God foretold in the Book of Daniel, and as an indication of the authority He bestowed on His followers and the Church as signs of His continuing presence and His victory until the day of His return.

Finally, there is a sobering, pastoral message exemplified by these cases of demonic attacks. The spiritual nature of this warfare can be seen as a kind of microcosm, and reminder, of the stark truth that we are all engaged in a spiritual struggle of our own, whether we realize it or not. **The main significance of God's allowance of these episodes, throughout history and even in today's world, may be to call our attention, via a more overt and blatant exhibition of these unequivocal realities, to the need to be more diligent in waging our personal spiritual battles.**

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