

Prayer for Deliverance from Evil Spirits: *What is permitted by the Catholic Church?*

Revd Dr Gareth Leyshon – a Priest of the Archdiocese of Cardiff

Version 2.0 – 28th June 2016

This leaflet is a companion to a much longer document which makes an exhaustive survey of current church teaching on the subject. The exhaustive document may be found online at www.garethleyshon.info/Deliverance-X.pdf and copies of *this* leaflet are also available on the same site: www.garethleyshon.info/Deliverance-Q.pdf

In the context of Catholic Charismatic Renewal, situations may arise where a person who asks for healing prayer seems to be afflicted by some evil spirit(s). This could arise during prayer groups or ministry training workshops; quite often, there may be no priest present to assist and advise.

Three prohibitions

A letter issued 29 September 1985 (some sources say 1984) by the then Cardinal Ratzinger as Prefect of the CDF (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) specifically forbids any Catholics without express permission from:

1. Attempting to exorcise a possessed person. (This permission is only given to priests who are designated as exorcists by the local Bishop.)
2. Praying Pope Leo XIII's rite of *Exorcism against Satan and the fallen angels*. (Bishops can give permission for this to priests but not laity.)
3. Addressing questions of any kind directly to any evil spirit. (This permission is also only given to priests designated as exorcists.)

Is it 'possession'?

The Church strictly restricts ministry to the possessed; only a priest-exorcist duly mandated by the Diocesan Bishop may carry out this ministry. But possession is rare; in a presentation made when the 1999 *Rite of Exorcism* was published, Cardinal Medina Estévez summarised the signs of possession as follows:

“Possession is characterised by spectacular features in which the demon takes control, in a certain manner, of the strength and physical abilities of the person possessed. It cannot, however, take over the free will of the subject... Among these criteria are: speaking or understanding many words of unlearned languages; disclosing things at a distance or hidden; exerting strength beyond the possessed person’s natural ability; and these together with vehement aversion to God, the Virgin Mary, the Saints, the cross and holy images.”

Dealing with manifestations

The symptoms described by Cardinal Medina Estévez are extreme, and will rarely be encountered in practice. If a person seeking healing **does** seem to meet these criteria, ministry should not be attempted, but the case referred to a priest-exorcist – through your bishop’s office, if the identity of the exorcist is not public.

It may be that a person who does not initially seem to be possessed begins to manifest some of these extreme symptoms during the course of the prayer. In such a case the leaders should not pray binding prayers or attempt to cast out the demons – rather, they should keep speaking to the human soul being ministered to, assenting the love of Jesus, encouraging that soul to “take control of your body and mind in the name of Jesus. Open your eyes.” In due course the person can then be referred to the diocesan priest-exorcist.

Permitted prayers for deliverance

If the person seeking ministry seems to be afflicted in some way which falls short of possession, the law of the Church does not forbid lay ministers from praying for deliverance. It may be more appropriate to refer the person to a priest who is authorised to make use of the deliverance prayers restricted to priests (Appendix I of the 1999 *Rite of Exorcism*, or Pope Leo XIII’s rite of *Exorcism against Satan and the fallen angels*); nevertheless, there is nothing in the discipline of the Catholic Church to prevent lay ministers from carrying out prayers of deliverance, providing the following norms are observed:

- i. The ministers must not ask questions of the spirit(s) present. [1985 Letter of Cardinal Ratzinger #3] ***This does not, of course, preclude asking the Holy Spirit to reveal the identity of evil spirits to be delivered, e.g. through a word of knowledge or the gift of discernment of spirits.***

- ii. Leo XIII's formula of Exorcism must not be used – so the Extraordinary Form prayer from *Exorcizo te...* through to *Sanctus Sanctus Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth* is expressly forbidden. [1985 Letter of Cardinal Ratzinger #2]
- iii. If the gathering is *private* (which could be achieved at a publicly advertised event by taking the afflicted person aside to a room with only members of the prayer team present), prayers from Appendix II of the 1999 rite may be used. [1999 Rite of Exorcism, rubrics for Appendix II]
- iv. Sacramentals blessed and exorcised according to the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Ritual may be used. [*Summorum Pontificum*]
- v. Prayers for deliverance should not be administered during a liturgical service. (But again, this does not prevent leaders from taking the afflicted person out of the liturgical assembly and ministering to them in a room with only members of the prayer team present.) [This is implicit by extending Article 8 of the CDF's 2000 *Instruction on Healing* and the same document's general ethos that non-liturgical prayers should not be mixed with liturgical ceremonies.]
- vi. Since deliverance is a form of healing ministry, the general principles of the CDF's 2000 *Instruction on Healing* must be followed:
 - If the prayer takes place in a church or sacred place, it is preferable that the *overall* event be led by an ordained minister. This does not exclude lay ministers from playing their proper part. [Article 1]
 - Those with the most appropriate charisms (rather than those who happen to be the overall leaders) must carry out the actual ministry. [Paragraph 5]
 - If the need for deliverance manifests during worship, care must be taken that the main assembly remains focussed on worship of God rather than attending to the manifestation. [Paragraph 5]
 - All forms of hysteria must be avoided. [Article 5§3]
 - The ministry must not be broadcast (on television, as a podcast, or in any other way) without specific permission from the Bishop. [Article 6]
 - Any norms issued by the local bishop must be respected. [Article 5§1]

Good Practice Guidelines

In addition to the official teaching of the Church, the following advice for good practice will be useful. It is taken from the ICCRS (International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services) *Guidelines on Prayers for Healing* and from the book *An Exorcist: More Stories* by Revd Gabriele Amorth, who has served as Chief Exorcist of the Diocese of Rome.

- Prayers for deliverance should be offered in a sober and restrained way. It is not fitting for persons other than the leader to lay hands on the one receiving ministry, though hands may be extended *towards* that person by other team members. (Amorth pp. 92-99)
- If the recipient manifests violently, it may be necessary for trusted persons (ideally, family members) to restrain the person and/or to move the ministry to a more private room. (Amorth pp. 96-97).
- Anything which arouses curiosity among passive spectators, or even prayer team members, is not helpful. The mere presence of members of the faithful motivated by curiosity can seriously impede effective ministry. (Amorth pp. 92-99)
- Apparent healings may be greeted with joyful praise but prudent caution should be taken about making public claims of specific healings. (ICCRS p. 45)
- When deliverance does not take place, the afflicted person must not be accused of “lacking faith for healing”. (ICCRS p. 44)
- Prayer ministry should not be offered in isolation, but insofar as possible, the recipient should receive aftercare and – if not already a believer – be given encouragement to accept the Gospel. (ICCRS pp. 45-46)
- Ministry leaders who seem to have particular charisms of deliverance or discernment of spirits should not be unduly exalted. (ICCRS p. 46)



This document is released under the Creative Commons
Attribution NonDerivatives [license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) 4.0.

*This license allows for redistribution, commercial and non-commercial,
as long as this document is passed along unchanged and in whole, with credit to the author.*