

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 50 (2023)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Chur diocese purges the exorcist
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051798>

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Chur diocese purges the exorcist

Until a few years ago, the diocese of Chur had its own bona fide exorcist who purged the faithful of their supposed demons. The exorcist recently died – and now the controversial post will remain empty. People in emotional, spiritual or psychological distress should seek conventional therapies, says the diocese's new bishop.

SUSANNE WENGER

Exorcism rids people of evil and cleanses them of their inner demons, say those who believe in it. Even today, this spiritual practice still has a following. Vicar-General Christoph Casetti performed the role of exorcist in the diocese of Chur – until his death in 2020. Chur has now decided not to fill the vacant exorcist post, it was announced at the end of last year. “We are all human, with our own strengths and weaknesses,” Bishop of Chur Joseph Maria Bonnemain explained in an interview on Swiss radio. There were “normal ways to treat people in distress – medical, psychological and psychotherapeutic”, he added. There was no need to go looking for “occult causes”.

Based in the cantonal capital of Grisons, Chur is a diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, one of Switzerland's three official churches. Pope Francis appointed Bonnemain, 74, as Chur's new bishop two years ago. Bonnemain is a trained physician who studied medicine before moving into the field of theology. During his time as a priest, he worked as a hospital chaplain in the canton of Zurich. Throughout his entire clerical career, he had never met anyone whom he thought required a major exorcism, he said in his radio interview. People with emotional, spiritual or psychological burdens needed “support, prayer or appropriate church services, but not necessarily an exorcism”.

Holy water and crucifixes

By abolishing the office of exorcist, the new bishop has discontinued a service for which Chur had been widely known. Commentators say the move is linked to tensions that have been bubbling for over 30 years



Christoph Casetti († 2020) served in the diocese of Chur for a long time as “Switzerland's best-known exorcist”. He was the last-ever clergyman to hold the office of exorcist in Chur. Photo: Keystone

between conservatives and reformers within the diocese. Two of Bonnemain's predecessors, bishops Wolfgang Haas (1988 to 1997) and Vitus Huonder (2007 to 2019), were arch-conservatives and controversial figures. The current bishop is regarded as quite broad-minded and open to dialogue. It is thought that

Rome appointed him with the mandate of healing divisions among the almost 700,000 Catholics in the diocese, which comprises the Zurich area in addition to rural cantons.

Exorcism, both “minor” and “major”, has a long tradition in the Catholic Church. Minor exorcism consists of prayers, while major exorcism is a

rite that dates back to the 17th century. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, exorcisms are aimed at the “expulsion of demons” and “deliverance from demonic possession”. Besides prayer, the rite involves the use of holy water and crucifixes. In Switzerland, minor exorcisms have always been more common than major exorcisms. The latter may only be performed by a bishop or a priest who has obtained the special and express permission of the diocesan bishop. Christoph Casetti was the most senior exorcist in the diocese of Chur. His obituary mentioned the fact that he had carried out the role officially since 2014, in addition to other offices.

Criticism

A German radio station once referred to Casetti as “Switzerland’s best-known exorcist”. Casetti himself often defended the concept of exorcism from criticism both inside and outside the church from people who said that the practice was reactionary. Invoking the devil has always been a means for arch-conservatives to enforce their controlling, archaic brand of Catholicism, said a Lucerne-based theologian on Swiss television in 2017. Psychiatric specialists warned that there was a risk of worshippers refusing proven therapies to treat mental illness.

Casetti did not agree. A priest may only begin to consider exorcism once they can ascertain that the person in question is not merely suffering from an ailment, he explained. Casetti also rejected the “archaic” label. Exorcisms of “demonic powers” have been necessary throughout history, he said, adding that Jesus himself was a “healer and deliverer”. He claimed that he received dozens of



By deciding to abolish the office of exorcist, Chur's bishop Joseph M. Bonnemain has departed from the course of his arch-conservative predecessors.
Photo: Keystone

inquiries from people every month who thought they were possessed by evil spirits. And these inquiries not only came from within the diocese – many people from Germany contacted him too.

Experts welcome abolition

According to religious expert Georg Schmid, the diocese of Chur was a magnet for people in the German-speaking world who were looking for an exorcist. He once called Chur an “exorcism hot spot”. Schmid runs the Relinfo centre near Zurich, which advises people of all faiths. In Relinfo’s view, Chur officially calling time on exorcism is to be welcomed. “In our experience, people who believe they are plagued by evil spirits and turn to the church for help are much better off receiving spiritual guidance than any sort of exorcism.”

Relinfo has been fielding an increasing number of inquiries in recent years regarding exorcism – or “deliverance”, as the practice is also called. Schmid says this increase is partially down to immigration from

countries in which people have an ingrained belief in evil spirits. However, Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in Switzerland also perform deliverances, as does a Salvation Army officer in the canton of Zurich, whose services have become very popular. The practice of expelling evil spirits, known as “ruqya”, plays a role in some forms of Islam. People also perform ruqya in Switzerland, according to Schmid. Then there is the boom in esoteric and neo-shamanic rituals aimed at driving evil spirits from people’s homes, he adds.

No monopoly

It is not uncommon for people to try out these services one after the other. “This does not say much about their effectiveness,” says Schmid. The Roman Catholic Church in Switzerland clearly has no monopoly on exorcisms, which are now no longer available in Chur. The diocese of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg and the diocese of Basel still perform deliverances. Two exorcists appointed by the bishop carry out this service in French-speaking Switzerland, while Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus Martin Gächter holds the post in Basel. Both dioceses are keen to stress that they work closely with psychiatrists. Gächter told the kath.ch news site that he essentially listens to people who come to him and then says a prayer for them. Only once in 30 years has he ever had to perform a major exorcism. A woman was possessed, and it took 15 sessions to deliver her.