

Exorcizing the Demons

By: Larry Greenfield

Posted: Tuesday, February 10, 2009

We don't call him an exorcist, probably because the term is so out of fashion; but that's actually what he is.

Instead, we call him the U.S. attorney for the northern district of Illinois and, once in a while, "special counsel" when the demons are at work in places like Washington, D.C.

As with those priests and pastors who were previously invested with the authority and power to cast out the evil spirits resident in people and their societies, Patrick J. Fitzgerald seems not to be intimidated by the extra-human and supernatural powers at work for the cause of the devil in individuals and systems -- particularly social and political systems.

We saw the first fruits of his exorcizing ministry recently when, just in time, he exposed the evil powers at work in our (now former) governor. Otherwise, we here in Illinois would likely have had a new U. S. senator who purchased rather than earned her or his appointment.

That particular exorcism continues, we hear, as our exorcist-in-chief pursues not only a criminal conviction of Mr. Blagojevich but also others who are systemically corrupting the political process in Illinois.

Neither is Exorcist Fitzgerald letting up a bit on his ministry in the city of Chicago. Last October he and his staff indicted former Chicago police sergeant John Burge on charges related to torture of suspects in the 1980s. (The actual charges were for perjury and obstruction of justice in order to get around the statute of limitation for the crimes of torture themselves). But now we've learned that he is going after Burge's associates for their unlawful violence against victims.

But already we can see how our Illinois politicians are doing their best to avoid thoroughgoing exorcisms, or do end-runs around them.

That has some precedent in the city of Chicago. Some political analysts contend it's because the current Mayor Daley was Cook County's state attorney at the time of Burge's reign of terror. Even though Daley was sent a letter from the police superintendent requesting counsel on how to proceed with evidence clearly obtained by means of torture, he did nothing to prosecute. Now Daley acknowledges that he probably got the letter, but darned if he can remember it. In 2007, a \$7 million special inquiry into the abuse under Burge's command found that there was only "a bit of slippage" in the state attorney's office back then.

But still today, local politicians don't want to chance provoking the wrath of police personnel,

especially with the code of silence police use to protect each other against prosecution.

So while we expect Fitzgerald and his federal legal team to plow ahead, they must know that they won't get much cooperation from local authorities. And that could mean, despite the Exorcist's best efforts, the demons of torture and abuse will find residence in the city's police department on a continuing basis.

At the state level, political reform is in the air -- at least rhetorically. The new governor is using that language and setting up a commission. And a joint legislative committee is being established to pursue reform proposals, including those focusing on campaign finance practices. That's what a decent exorcism should provoke.

But we shouldn't set our hopes and expectations too high.

Senate President John Cullerton (Democrat from Chicago) has signaled that there are limits on where the reform movement can go. He's not about to curtail the ability of Senate and House leaders to collect huge sums of money and then distribute it to their underlings in both chambers of the General Assembly for campaign use. It's the old way of making legislators in Illinois more responsive to their party leaders than their home constituencies. By implication, this limitation on what can be addressed in the reforms means we aren't likely to see limits placed on campaign contributions themselves -- the source of the greatest electoral abuse in the state -- although, bless her, Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno (Republican from Lemont) believes those contribution limits should be considered in the reform debates.

Cullerton thinks the current system is just fine, and actually has the gall to declare that the distribution of campaign funds by party heads to those they lead in the Senate and the House isn't actually about directing and dictating votes, but is only, as he says, to protect a party's "types of legislation and our political philosophy."

That kind of thinking only emphasizes the need for Exorcist Fitzgerald to stay focused on the demons of political corruption in Illinois.

Another Chicago-Illinois politician appears to favor banning exorcisms altogether, especially when it comes to exposing and casting out the evil spirits of torture and abuse at the national level.

President Barack Obama doesn't want to open up inquires about violations of the Bill of Rights and crimes under both national and international law committed by the Bush-Cheney administration. Some of us suspect that this is a calculated political decision -- that pursuing these possible crimes committed under the authority and with the blessing of the former administration would provoke opposition among Republicans and thereby sidetrack, if not completely derail, the new president's legislative agenda.

But demons left un-exorcised, he should surely know, may stay in hibernation for a while but

come to life again with a vengeance at a later time. They may not find a way of acting up in his own administration, but left unexposed, unchallenged and uncontested now, while freshly in mind and readily accessible for examination, only means that they will reappear to work their havoc in future generations.

My plea to my former Hyde Park neighbor, now residing in the White House, is surely not to remove and transfer our U.S. Exorcist for the northern district of Illinois. But, as mentioned earlier, there is precedent -- relatively recent precedent -- for assigning him temporarily as "special counsel" in the nation's capital to cast out demons there. My recommendation is: Do it again.

* * * * *

Patrick Fitzgerald is, of course, in the lineage of other great exorcists.

We Christians would have to place Jesus prominently in that lineage, maybe even in a defining and decisive place, although most modern followers of the Nazarene don't put a lot of emphasis on this part of his ministry.

But, truth be told, it's unavoidable. Whether we're comfortable with it or not, exorcism is a central component of Jesus' ministerial identity in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (but absent completely in the Gospel of John).

In Mark's Gospel, his first "miracle" is the exorcism of the person with an unclean spirit in the synagogue on the Sabbath at Capernaum (1: 21-28). That was in the morning. And then in the evening of that same day he casts out and silences demons in the home of Simon (1: 32-34), whom he had just called along with brother Andrew and James and John, to be a disciple (1: 16-20).

He does this, the people notice, with an authority that comes directly from God and according to God's will and purpose. That is, the exorcisms are performed both to heal the afflicted person and as a sign of what God is doing everywhere in the world -- as a sign of God's reign breaking into history.

The exorcisms of Jesus, it is no stretch say, are acts, they are demonstrations, they are performances of the truth that Jesus is proclaiming in word:

The time is fulfilled, and the dominion of God has come near; repent, and believe in this good news. (1: 15).

The exorcisms of Jesus, in short, are not incidental; they are a crucial component of his ministerial work to reveal the nature, will and behavior of the divine reality and to participate decisively in the divine action of redemption -- of transforming the world from its sin- and demon-filled condition back into wholeness and right relations. (In any particular exorcism, that

is, the possessed person is restored both to health and back into the community from which she or he has previously been excluded or marginalized, but any particular exorcism also discloses what God wills and is doing everywhere.)

Jesus initially keeps this important work of exorcism to himself, but by the sixth chapter in Mark he is ready to share the responsibility with his disciples:

Then Jesus went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits ... So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. (6: 7, 12-13; see also Matthew 10: 1 and Luke 9: 1-2)

This commissioning of his followers to be exorcists is never taken away. It continues to be an essential part of the calling to be a disciple of Jesus.

* * * * *

If that's the case, then it's not just Patrick Fitzgerald who is in that long lineage of exorcists; we, as followers of Jesus, are too -- or we ought to be.

And, again, if it is the case that the true follower of Jesus continues to be commissioned to engage in the ministry of exorcism -- of exposing and casting out demons in people, in communities and in the structures of societies -- then Patrick Fitzgerald and his staff ought not to be the only ones exposing and casting out demons in the city, state and nation.

Exorcising demons is our assignment, too.