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HORROR FICTION AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – A RHETORICAL
SYNTHESIS

Catholic horror – horror fiction that integrates Catholic perspectives into the fiction itself – is often seen by Catholics to be incompatible with the mission of the religion. These skeptics argue that popular culture media such as horror novels, horror television shows, and horror films are not appropriate forms of Catholic communication.

This article seeks to analyze and respond to these objections and establish the rhetorical value of Catholic horror fiction. Whereas a construction of a grand theory of Catholic horror lies outside of the scope of this article, this article looks to assess Catholic horror based on the traits of the popular genre, specifically, the roles of fear, shock, and explicit references to evil. Moreover, this article looks to fend off the categorical assumption posed by resistant audiences, which claims that all horror fiction is inappropriate to communicate Catholic theology.

Generally, the horror genre aims to “bristle,” frighten and/or repulse audiences: an affect that is paradoxically sought after and enjoyed by audiences of the genre.¹ Willing audiences of horror expect an uncomfortable affect. Due to these expectations, audiences are commonly not repulsed to the point of abandoning the art experience; rather, they often enjoy the adrenaline-charge because, as horror theorist Mathias Clasen maintains, audiences know that the frightening situation within the fiction is simulated “play behavior.”²

Much like nightmares where individuals eventually wake up in the comfort of their own beds, horror fiction allows audiences to experience danger and fear without facing actual consequences. Alongside this excitement, more thoughtful types of horror can kindle profound moments of reflection or contemplation. These reflections can be spurred by the urgency of the fictional events unfolding on the screen or on the page. In short, Catholic horror can command both characteristics. It can act to entertain but also to foster a reflective, urgent spiritual and philosophical experience.

As a specific genre of fiction, horror can offer a specific means of Catholic communication. Genres, as categories, offer sets of anticipated conventions that organize audiences’ expectations. In comedic genres, audiences expect

¹ Mathias Clasen. *Why Horror Seduces* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 58-59.

humor; in adventure genres, audiences expect action and thrills; in horror genres, audiences expect frightening content. As horror theorist Noel Carroll notes: horror's genre conventions consist of the inclusion of an "impure" – sometimes "incomplete" – "monster" that simultaneously evokes fright and disgust from characters and, by extension, the audience.³

Horror, as a type of fictional art, uses these common conventions as central narrative ingredients to take the audience on an adrenaline-fueled adventure. Catholic horror acts in a similar fashion. Using fright and disgust in a rhetorical manner, Catholic horror fiction intentionally references a particular Catholic theology; therefore, as a whole, Catholic horror fiction can act as a rhetoric that cooperates with this theology. Consequently, the traits of the genre act as a didactic and persuasive means to an end, and do not act as ends in themselves. In other words, the horror genre can provide a particularly persuasive communicative vehicle that conveys Catholic truths to audiences.

The following demonstrates how a Catholic brand of horror – when behaving as a means to an end – can act as an appropriate religious rhetoric. Still, genuine Catholic horror fiction is not commonplace in popular culture. Contemporary horror fiction often uses Catholic characters and references (especially in demonic possession narratives), but it is difficult to locate Catholic horror that showcase sincere and correct Catholic philosophical and theological processes. Only a handful of genuine Catholic horror fiction artifacts exist throughout popular culture, such as Dante's *Inferno* (epic poetry) published in the Italian vernacular around 1320, William Blatty's *The Exorcist* (novel) published in 1971, and Mikael Håfström's *The Rite* (film) released in 2011. This article looks to examine the broad genre traits of such successful types of rhetorical artifacts.

Catholic Moral Theology and the "Culture of Death"

On the surface, horror narratives may seem irreconcilable with Catholic moral theology and Catholic Social Teaching. Both connected areas of Catholic thought demand several crucial precepts. Fundamentally, Catholic moral theology and Catholic Social Teaching demand the sacredness of human life at all stages: not just regarding hot-button issues like abortion and euthanasia, but Catholic tradition also promotes the dignity of human life in between birth and death.⁴ Because God became human through Jesus Christ, Catholics maintain that all human beings maintain inherent dignity and infinite worth.⁵ As a result, both Catholic moral theology and Catholic Social Teaching also promote human community and the common good: that human beings are one family which require solidarity as they quest for individual fulfillment.⁶

³ Noel Carroll. "The Nature of Horror," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 1 (1987): 52-55.

⁴ Jozef Zalot and Benedict Guevin. *Catholic Ethics in Today's World* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

Responding to these precepts in his 1999 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II specifically names “the helpless victims of abortion; the elderly and incurably ill, subjected at times to euthanasia; and the many other people relegated to the margins of society by consumerism and materialism” as misguided practice that “bears the stamp of the culture of death, and is therefore in opposition to the Gospel.”⁷ His statement harkens back to his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, where Pope John Paul II proclaims that if a culture that does not respect human dignity, it will “revert to a state of barbarism.”⁸ Today, Catholics may see this barbarism as romanticized and even celebrated in popular media in general: films, books, television, music, and internet websites.

A common Catholic attitude specifically assumes that horror movies, television, and books clearly promote this barbaric culture of death; therefore, Catholics should avoid these popular culture artifacts. After all, death, pain, and torture commonly pervade horror stories. In “slasher” horror films and novels, distressed damsels run from masked killers. In supernatural based horror fiction, malicious demons inhabit and torture innocent people. By showing so much death throughout these stories, it seems that popular horror fiction normalizes death and undercuts the dignity of human life by illustrating different scenarios that undermines human life. In response to these artifacts, particular questions arise: Can this genre be salvaged as a whole in respect to Catholic beliefs? Does horror merely advocate the “state of barbarism” that Pope John Paul II cautions against? Or can the nuances be separated out? Can Catholic communicators wield this genre of fiction as a powerful rhetorical force?

In spite of the increased “culture of death” in America, representations of death within Catholic horror frameworks can rhetorically highlight transcendental themes. After all, suffering and mortality has always been integral to the Catholic tradition. For example, unlike other Christian denominations, Catholicism does not shy away from the pierced corpus of Jesus that hangs behind altars in Catholic churches and around Catholics’ necks on chains.

The Catholic Mass itself, the celebration of the Eucharist, commemorates the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. Moreover, much traditional Catholic art such as stained glass windows, reveals the lives of saints who were brutally martyred, such as Saint Stephen who was stoned to death or Saint Sebastian who was tied to a post and shot with arrows. Unlike belletristic works of Catholic art like the Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling frescos or Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* mural, which radiate explicit beauty, goodness, and truth, some Catholic art represents darker dimensions of the faith in pursuit of similar pious ends. Ultimately, horror fiction can act as a similar type of representational vehicle.

⁷ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, January 22, 1999. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jpii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html, sec. 63.

⁸ John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, March 25, 1995, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html, sec. 14.

Finding God in the Culture

Horror literature and film is commonly categorized under the umbrella of popular culture, which is associated with vernacular everyday references and tastes of the general public. These popular cultural artifacts can juxtapose more exclusive high culture artifacts, such as avant-garde literature or art-house cinema, which appeals to more refined or educated tastes and references. Still, these distinctions do not always stand in stark contrast. For instance, Dante's eloquent epic poem *Inferno* was written in Italian, the vernacular language of the time, rather than the loftier Latin language. Therefore, even *The Divine Comedy* exhibits an appeal toward the popular culture of the time. Due to its more popular appeal of horror fiction, popular culture must be acknowledged in relation to Catholicism when investigating Catholic horror. Such an acknowledgement can help establish that Catholicism is not opposed to all aspects of the everyday world of which popular culture is a part; rather, it sees God as immanent in the world and culture.

Bishop Robert Barron, a Catholic authority known for his celebration of popular culture, provides insight into how to recognize Catholic truths within popular culture. Throughout the last 15 years, Bishop Robert Barron has gained popularity with his Word on Fire mission, website, and now, movement. In the early 2000s, he achieved initial traction through his YouTube reviews of popular culture and his supplementary commentary regarding Catholicism. Many of these recorded reviews were transcribed and collected into a volume entitled *Seeds of the Word*.

As a collection that analyzes Catholic Theology as it is represented in the popular world, *Seeds of the Word* represents a thorough understanding of Catholic truths in the culture. In this book, Bishop Barron riffs off of a point made by Robert Sokowolski, his theological mentor at Catholic University of America, explaining that kernels of Catholic truth are strewn about the world and find their way into popular culture.⁹ By extension, horror fiction is not exempt from these strewn Catholic truths. The horror genre can also explore and represent Catholic doctrine.

In his article "From Correlation to Assimilation: A New Model for the Church-Culture Dialogue" found in the academic journal *Nova et Vetera*, Bishop Barron more formally explains this approach to "finding God in the culture," that is, interpreting popular culture through the lens of Catholicism. In this article, Bishop Barron highlights John Henry Newman's theory of assimilation outlined in the influential Catholic text *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Drawing parallels to how organisms survive in the wilderness, Newman suggests that the Church must absorb what allows it to thrive and repel anything that compromises the essence of the Church.¹⁰

⁹ Robert Barron. *Seeds of the Word: Finding God in the Culture* (Word On Fire, 2015), x.

¹⁰ Robert Barron. "From Correlation to Assimilation: A New Model for the Church-Culture Dialogue," *Nova et Vetera* 7, no.2 (2009): 393.

However, Bishop Barron is sure to point out that this assimilation does not mean that the Roman Catholic Church needs to adopt worldly ideas. Such assimilation moves in the other direction. As defined by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Catholic Church is not to mirror the world, but rather it should help the world mirror the Church.¹¹ Therefore, in the Catholic tradition, Roman Catholic perspective should not adapt to horror fiction; rather Catholic horror fiction should adapt to Roman Catholic perspective. Accordingly, Catholic horror should follow the tenants of Catholic doctrine.

But why should Catholics embark on such a perilous search? Why should they wade through a potential “culture of death” —that is, horror fiction—in search of Catholic truths? Why should they parse through the weeds popular culture to locate hidden treasures of inner beauty? Unlike past Christianized eras like the European Middle Ages, it is sometimes difficult to find contemporary Catholic communication that is untouched by secular culture.¹²

As a result, Catholics find Christian dimensions where they can, including within popular culture. Moreover, in today’s pluralistic post-Christian world, Catholics can easily misinterpret their own complex Catholic doctrine; therefore, they may find it valuable to look to comprehensible representations that reveal genuine Catholic attitudes. As Bishop Barron models and promotes, Catholics can seek out these representations within the popular culture and use New Media to disseminate evangelical messages. The Second Vatican Council endorses such activity. The Second Vatican Council’s *Inter Mirifica* invites Catholics into “the means of social communication” through popular media in accordance with Church teachings.¹³ To this end, Catholic artists can use particular genres to craft powerful narratives that harness particular rhetorical functions and emphasize Catholic values (the good, the true, and the beautiful) to lead others toward clearer understandings of the Catholic faith.

Horror fiction provides a distinctively apt type of narrative for Catholic kernels of truth to grow in the hearts and minds of audiences. Naturally, such an endeavor requires active, thoughtful, discerning audiences. But more importantly, the artist requires surgical precision to strike such a delicate balance. After all, it can be challenging for Catholic communicators to shape aggressive stories into inspiring sacramentals that help others grow in grace.

Ultimately, the form and content of the discourse need to be oriented toward sacramental ends. As articulated by Thomas Aquinas and highlighted by Bishop Barron: the sacraments, as instrumental causes, unfold grace.¹⁴ In Catholicism, the sacraments perform that causal function. Functioning similarly (but not identically) to the sacraments, Catholic fiction—which can include Catholic horror—can provide instrumental causes that can move

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Barron, *Seeds of the Word*, x.

¹³ Second Vatican Council, “Decree on the Means of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, 4 December, 1963,” in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello, 1994), sec 1-2.

¹⁴ Robert Barron, “The Eucharist as the *Telos* of the Law in the Writing of Thomas Aquinas,” in *Exploring Catholic Theology* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 138-139.

audiences to participate in the divine love as promoted by the Roman Catholic Church.

Censorship and Individual Discernment

From my experience, Catholics are generally apprehensive about horror fiction. According to many Catholics I have spoken with, horror fiction can seem too provocative and obscene to be accepted by the Catholic Church. This stance is natural. Throughout the history of Catholicism, the Church has censored certain popular works if they were defined as “obscene.” Famously, The National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL) acted as an American Roman Catholic pressure group from late 1938 through 1969. The NODL pressured businesses and vendors to restrict American youth from access to magazines, comic books, and paperback books that were considered offensive according to its specific code.¹⁵

Official Roman Catholic Canon Law administered from the Vatican ultimately supported the NODL’s pursuit. Importantly, the Legislation of the Code of Canon Law recommended censorship of particular books, as it pertained to Catholics and not the wider public. After all, Canon Law does not explicitly extend to secular civil law. Specifically, Canon 1399 proclaims that literature is forbidden to Catholics that “professedly discuss, describe or teach impure or obscene matters.”¹⁶

However, as Jesuit scholar Harold C. Gardiner points out, Canon Law does not define “obscenity” here; rather Canon Law states that if a book is obscene, then Catholics should not read it.¹⁷ Since the Canon Law is so vague, Gardiner insists that theologians can be consulted on determining what the term “obscene” actually means. According to theologians, the term “obscene” relates to complete works of literature, not merely quotations or passages from the work in question.

Moreover, the “obscene” work must arouse in a reader, or be intended to arouse, “venereal pleasures” – which includes the voluntary act of thinking about venereal pleasure.¹⁸ Outside of the realm of sexual desire, Gardiner’s point is that obscene literature has to arouse voluntarily thoughts of immorality or acts of immorality. This type of indecency differentiates obscene literature from literature that may be considered vulgar, disgusting, or crude. Subsequently, the Catholic Church may discourage vulgar, disgusting or crude media, but the Church cannot officially forbid such media.¹⁹

In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council modified the Church’s perspective on censorship officially within their council documents *Inter*

¹⁵ Thomas F. O’Connor, “The National Organization for Decent Literature: A Phase in American Catholic Censorship,” *The Library Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1995): 386.

¹⁶ Harold C. Gardiner. “Moral Principles Towards a Definition of the Obscene,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 20, no. 4 (1955): 561.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Harold C. Gardiner, *Catholic Viewpoint on Censorship* (New York: Image Books, 1961), 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Mirifica and *Dignitatis Humanae*.²⁰ In June 1966, one year after the close of the council, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (previously the Holy Office) issued a notice repealing the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the list of publications deemed heretical.²¹ The Church could still warn Catholics about particular books, and Catholics were still advised to avoid books that were dangerous to faith or morals, but the ultimate decision was allocated to the conscience of the individual.

This profoundly moved Catholic censorship away from a system of canonical prohibition toward a system of individual moral rebuke.²² Like many of the Vatican II changes, the laity became more empowered and did not need to rely so much on clerical authority. As a result, this shift opened more expansive and creative avenues for freer Catholic communication and art. It seemed to have taken some of the formal pressure from artists who wished to communicate Catholic themes and ideas. The bishops still dispersed “*imprimatur*” – official seals of Catholic approval – to certain texts; however, much of the discernment shifted to artists’ and audiences’ hands.

As a result, Catholic laypeople have to consult their conscience in accordance to the teachings of the Church before creating or participating in particular art. Rather than depending on Catholic authority to tell the laity what is acceptable, Catholic laypeople are taught to consult their consciences. In Catholicism, the term “conscience” is a complex concept. In *Veritas Splendor*, a papal encyclical written in 1993, Pope John Paul II explains that having a good conscience involves seeking the received objective truth and making evaluations in accordance with that same received objective truth without being confused by what one subjectively considers to be true.²³

Such freedom to evaluate the truth and goodness of particular art can be seen as a democratization of the censorship process; however, it can also lead to confusion – especially for those Catholics who may not be particularly educated about Catholic doctrine. Therefore, John Paul II implores that Catholics should consistently “form their consciences” and “make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good” in consultation with one’s “heart” and in accordance to the dogmas established by the magisterium of the Catholic Church.²⁴ After all, as the pontiff recognizes, “the conscience is not an infallible judge and therefore it can make mistakes”²⁵ – especially for Catholics who do not continuously refine their consciences in accordance with doctrines of truth and goodness.

Although numerous other factors contributed to the changing literature and film trends in the 1960s and 1970s, the shift in Catholic censorship certainly played a role. Overall, the line between obscenity and vulgarity became blurred in particular pieces of art in the 1960s and 1970s. Horror literature and film became a hotbed for such blurring. Consequently, Catholic audiences

²⁰ O’Connor, “The National Organization for Decent Literature,” 407.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ John Paul II, *Veritas splendor*, encyclical letter (Boston, MA: Pauline Press, 1993), sec. 62-63.

²⁴ Ibid., sec. 64.

²⁵ Ibid., sec. 62.

had to difficultly discern whether a horror novel or a film was being provocative for its own sake or whether the novel or film's provocativeness served a more dignified message. As additional complexity, some of this obscene/vulgar horror media seemed to champion Christianity in the art. For example, novels/film adaptation such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1967/1968), *Amityville Horror* (1977/1979), *The Sentinel* (1974/1977), and *The Exorcist* (1971/1973) all emphasize spiritual and practical benefits of Christianity.

Whereas other novels/film adaptations with Christian characters and themes such as *Witchfinder General* (1966/1968) and *The Devils* (1952/1971), could be ambivalently interpreted as either Christian or anti-Christian messaging. The authority being placed in the hands of the creator and reader/viewer opened up a range of possibilities; however, it also increased the importance of personal discernment within Christian readers and viewers. This discernment continues to play an important role within the rhetoric of Catholic fiction—specifically, since the horror genre depends on evoking repulsion and disgust in audiences, often in vulgar manners. Accordingly, Catholic horror fiction delicately walks the line between the disgusting content and obscene content. Effective Catholic horror can surgically uses repulsive and vulgar narrative elements without essentially breaching into obscene and blasphemous narrative elements. Ironically, Catholic horror may be able to actually counter the obscenity *through* the use of disgusting and vulgar elements.

Why Horror?

Before exploring how Catholic horror may counter the obscenity *through* the use of horrific dimensions, a foundational question should be answered: why Catholic *horror*? After all, Barron's "seeds of the Word" are strewn about popular culture via a variety of genres such as fantasy, mystery, drama, or science fiction. For instance, the fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien wrote as a Catholic. His *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is ultimately a Christian allegory for morality—specifically Catholic morality. Among many examples from Tolkien's trilogy, Frodo's Ring of Doom makes the wearer invisible. This dimension rearticulates the Ring of Gieges hypothetical scenario from Plato's *The Republic*—an influential text in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition—to indicate that Christian morality extends beyond individual happiness and pleasure.

Moreover, the ring represents the temptations of intemperate selfishness and how such sin can corrupt the individual, turning them into a monster like Gollum. Outside of Catholicism, C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series also show how fantasy lends itself to Christian themes. He represents Christ through the character of Aslan, including the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. However, Catholic and Christian themes are not only reserved for fantasy genres in popular culture. Alfred Hitchcock, as a Catholic filmmaker, integrates Catholic dimensions into popular mystery films as well.

As Barry and Eloise Knowlston point out in their 2011 essay "Murder Mystery Meets Sacred Mystery," Hitchcock's 1953 film *I Confess* expresses the Catholic sacrament of penance. According to the authors, the film illustrates the tension between crime and sin as well as the mysterious sacredness of

God's forgiveness.²⁶ Therefore, the initial question can be specified: if other genres have the representational power to convey Catholic or Christian truths, why can Catholic horror fiction be seen as a particularly apt genre of representation?

What specifically sets horror apart from other genres such as fantasy and science fiction? The distinction can be distilled down to the genre's affect of fear. As already established, horror is distinctive from other genres in that it fosters a feeling of fear in the audience. Some skeptics may think that fear, as an off-putting emotion, should be categorically avoided when discussing Catholic truths.

However, the affect of fear can serve a rhetorical role in Catholic discourse. As simply noted by F.X. Schoupe S.J., in his imprimatur text *Dogma of Hell*, sometimes the love of God can motivate people toward a more pious attitude; while other times, fear of damnation can motivate people toward a more pious attitude. In fact, Schoupe points out that even the benevolent Jesus made people afraid to warn others against the dangers of damnation.²⁷ Fear can offer an appropriate emotional response to eternal damnation.

Consequently, if horror fiction evokes fear in response to the Catholic reality of eternal damnation, then the response can be warranted because it can motivate a sinner to change their behavior and embrace a more pious, penitent life. As maintained by Thomas Aquinas in Part I-II, Question 24, Article 3 of the *Summa Theologiae*: if moderated by reason, passions can foster the moral life;²⁸ therefore, fear, as a type of passion, can be tempered to motivate individuals toward goodness.

Besides acting as a rhetorical motivator, how can fear be philosophically reconciled within Catholic piety? Using Aristotle as a touchstone, Thomas Aquinas explains that fear is a "special passion of the soul" specifically because fear is based on an external object. Like the special passion of hope which looks toward "a future good, difficult but possible to attain," fear looks toward "a future evil, difficult and irresistible."²⁹

Consequently, fear has to be directed toward an external object or condition. According to Aquinas, one cannot fear oneself.³⁰ Additionally, Aquinas explains that people become afraid only if there is a chance they can actually escape the imagined future of corruption or pain. If the future is fully certain, then one does not need to be afraid.³¹ Subsequently, fear, within moderation, can help an individual "take council and work with greater attention" so that

²⁶ Barry Knowlston and Eloise Knowlston "Murder Mystery Meets Sacred Mystery: The Catholic Sacramental in Hitchcock's *I Confess*" in *Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film: Essays on Belief, Spectacle, Ritual and Imagery*, ed. Regina Hansen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

²⁷ F. X. Schoupe, *Hell: The Dogma of Hell* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 1991), xxi-xxiii.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), I-II, q. 24, a. 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 41, a. 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 42, a. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 42, a. 2.

they can evade corruption and pain.³² Aquinas states, fear only “hinders action” if it interferes with the functioning of one’s ability to clearly reason.³³

Twentieth-century German Catholic theologian Josef Pieper explains how fear can actually strengthen the health of one’s soul. Gesturing to natural law, Pieper notes that the “correspondence to reality is the principle of both health and goodness.”³⁴ He further explains that since fear is a natural part of reality, then it can help facilitate health and goodness. He also mentions that in modern culture, we often try to reassure ourselves to the point of attempting to eliminate fear completely from our lives.³⁵ Pieper clarifies that fear can play an important guiding role in our lives. After all, he states, “nothing is so fearful that the strong cannot bear and endure it with dignity.”³⁶

As noted by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and restated by Pieper: courage, as a cardinal virtue, is not the same as fearlessness, nor can courage be defined as being too overwhelmed by fear—as that will lead to cowardice. Rather, courage requires a moderate amount of natural fear. Pieper asserts that the “Christian rule of life will never teach that we should not or must not be afraid of the fear-inducing.”³⁷ He states that Catholic theology supports this claim.

Specifically, he explains that courage keeps human beings loving their lives in such ways as to not give up living. Similarly, a Catholic’s fear of God can be seen as the fear of losing eternal life. He claims that this is the “foundation of all Christian courage.”³⁸ Therefore, according to Pieper, fear is required to be courageous, and courage keeps Catholics living ethically and healthily in correspondence with God and the eternal law. Ultimately, Catholic Horror fiction can provide an imaginative venue to experience fear and thus ponder what it means to be courageous in one’s Earthly life and one’s spiritual life. Fear serves a role within Roman Catholicism and therefore it can be purposed to help Catholic and non-Catholic readers and viewers of fear-evoking art become more courageous in their daily lives or in spiritual matters.

Shock Appeal

Some critics may view horror fiction as too shocking for Catholic audiences. According to these counterarguments, the abrasive quality of horror fiction seems to disrupt the peaceful harmony of a well-ordered soul. However, these critics may forget that Christianity has repeatedly used exaggeration and shock-appeal as acceptable rhetorical devices. This approach can be seen in the Gospels. Jesus did not shy away from calling himself the “Son of God” when speaking to skeptics. He shocked the disbelievers and offended devout Jews with these statements.

³² Ibid., I-II, q. 44, a. 4.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Josef Pieper, “Courage Does Not Exclude Fear” in *Josef Pieper: An Anthology*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 72.

³⁵ Ibid., 68.

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Ibid., 71.

As a result, Jesus shocked audiences into listening to Him. In addition, some parables like the “Parable of the Marriage Feast” found in the Gospel of Matthew (22:1-14) use violent imagery to shock the audiences into understanding the primary message. In the parable, a king sends his armies to go kill and burn the cities of those people who did not accept his invitation to the marriage feast of his son. When the king finally gathered guests for his wedding feast, one particular man was not dressed appropriately for the feast. The king bound up the man, sent him into the “exterior darkness” where there was “weeping and grinding of teeth.”

The shocking content and aggressive tone of Jesus’s parable serves a rhetorical function. In the context of the parable, the king’s use of death and violence figuratively emphasize severity of dismissing an “invitation” to share in the divine life of God.³⁹ In more contemporary literature, the successful 20th century American Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor also used shocking plot points and characters in her fiction to escort her audiences toward an understand about salvation and grace. As a writer of dark fiction, she often illustrates violence to communicate Catholic themes.⁴⁰ For example, in her short story “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the grandmother’s final epiphany is communicated from the barrel of a convict’s gun. He shoots her three times, symbolizing the grandmother’s need for God’s grace, something outside of herself.

In addition, O’Connor spotlights grotesque characters throughout her stories, such as the mother with the face like a “cabbage” in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” or Hulga/Joy with the missing leg in “Good Country People.” In choosing grotesque characters, O’Connor highlights characters’ ignorance or misinterpretation of sin or the spiritual world.⁴¹

Ultimately, O’Connor wrote explicitly about her rhetorical use of shock in her fiction. In 1969, she claimed, “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.”⁴² With this quotation, she summarizes how and why horror—a genre that uses violence and the grotesque—can work as a rhetoric vis-à-vis resistant audiences. Shock startles audiences, specifically resistant secular audiences, into listening or reading about religious themes.

As an imaginative genre where shock is expected as a genre convention, horror fiction provides an appropriate rhetorical vehicle for artists to awaken audiences into understanding Catholic reality. The shock holds rhetorical

³⁹ Robert Barron, “The Parable of the Wedding” (Podcast), Oct. 15, 2017, <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/the-parable-of-the-wedding-banquet/4513/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Thelma J. Shinn, “Flannery O’Connor and the Violence of Grace,” *Contemporary Literature* 9, no. 1 (1968): 62.

⁴² Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 34.

value: it helps jolt audiences into understand the faith and, by extension, grow in grace. This approach differs from that of more extreme horror — such as grindhouse horror films and splatter-punk horror novels — that use shock appeal merely as an end, not as a means. Instead, shock appeal acts as the means to carry readers and viewers toward a specific Catholic perspective.

Spiritual Warfare

Another common objection concerns evil imagery and satanic characters. Skeptics can specifically accuse horror films as being too severe especially in respect to the explicit depiction of evil, demons, and the Devil. Often, they appeal to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in such counter-argumentation. Specifically, they refer to Article 1868 about the “proliferation of sin”: “we have a responsibility of the sins committed by others when *we cooperate in them* [...] by participating directly and voluntarily in them.”⁴³

Therefore, skeptics posit that Catholics should avoid the risk of participating in obscene horror, especially extreme violent “torture-porn” horror (such as *Hostel* and the *Saw* film franchises) where the text itself draws viewers into sin, normalizing promiscuous sex, violence, and exposure to evil. Certainly, it makes sense for Catholics to avoid this type of hyper-gratuitous horror fiction. However, unlike this type of gratuitous horror, Catholic horror media can resist violence as an end itself and recognize violence as a by-product of spiritual warfare; these narratives can portray violence as terrifyingly evil and thusly should be avoided. In short, not all violent horror narratives or horror narratives that portray evil are categorically inconsistent with the Catholic mission. Many of popular horror narratives are indeed inconsistent with the Catholic mission — but the inconsistency unfolds from the intent of the artist and the text itself, not from the separate narrative ingredients.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics sometimes gloss over the existence of diabolic activity. Contemporary Catholics can resist what they consider “unenlightened” discussions about Hell, the devil, or demons. However, 21st century Catholic clergy, cardinals, and popes remain steadfast in their discussions about Hell, demons, and the devil and argue that they still act as crucial Roman Catholic dogma. For example, in his 2015 book, *God or Nothing*, Cardinal Robert Sarah emphasizes the referential dimension of spiritual warfare in Catholicism and curtly proclaims, “Hell is a reality, not an idea.”⁴⁴ Cardinal Sarah lauds Pope Francis’s repeated discussion of the devil, especially Pope Francis’s homily of his first Mass as Pope, where the pontiff took a hardline stance proclaiming, “Anyone who does not pray to the Lord, prays to the devil.”⁴⁵ Both Cardinal Sarah and Pope Francis assert claims about hell as part of the Catholic spiritual reality.

Horror narratives that involve demonic possession and spiritual warfare invigorate a similar type of spiritual discourse. By forwarding referential claims about spiritual warfare, these horror narratives can offer similar

⁴³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 1868.

⁴⁴ Cardinal Robert Sarah and Nicolas Diat, *God or Nothing: A Conversation on Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2015), 220-224.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

powerful evangelical rhetorics. For example, Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order and a 16th century Catholic saint, became inspired to more fully practice Catholicism when he embraced a spiritual warfare angle.

When bedridden between the years 1521 to 1522, Ignatius read a 1511 edition of *Flos Sanctorum* (a Spanish translation of *The Golden Legend*, a popular book on the lives of the saints), which included a prologue by Cistercian Gualberto Fabricio Vagad. In this prologue, Vagad describes the saints as “knights for God” who served the “ever victorious banner” of the “eternal prince, Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶ Since Ignatius had worked as a soldier and enjoyed chivalric literature, Vagad’s militaristic rhetoric resonated with Ignatius.⁴⁷ Ultimately, it helped propel Ignatius into a more devout Catholic life and inspired him to found the influential Society of Jesus.

Representations of spiritual warfare can strengthen a reader or viewer’s existing faith. As 16th century Catholic mystic and saint Teresa of Avila advises: “Every time we make the demons the object of our contempt, they lose their strength and the soul acquires a greater superiority over them.”⁴⁸ By witnessing simulated instances of spiritual warfare in a horror book or film, the audience can cultivate this pious contempt for evil and thusly inwardly grow toward holiness. For example, the 20th century Catholic mystic and saint Padre Pio notably used this approach when he grappled with diabolic apparitions.

According to sources, demonic forces would throw Padre Pio from his bed, upend the furniture of his bedroom, and appear as deceitful illusions.⁴⁹ However, after he became more accustomed to the attacks, Padre Pio felt a deep sense of spiritual joy while he combated the evil spirits.⁵⁰ Because he was being tested, he became closer to God. Similarly, faithful audiences can use Catholic horror, specifically horror about spiritual warfare, as a means to inspire and strengthen their faith in a Higher Power against temptations of sin.

Conclusion

Overall, the genre characteristics of Catholic horror can demonstrate that religious discourse may not need to overly censor the genre to accommodate religious ideas. Rather, the individual creator or participant merely needs to understand how the genre’s traits can be deliberately used to maximize the rhetoric of the message. Genre traits can act as opportunities rather than obstacles. Often, critics of the horror genre mistake the genre as the message itself, rather than recognizing that the genre can serve the message.

For instance, a violent horror film need not be advocating violence itself; the film could be demonstrating the undesirable ills of violence. Simply, it

⁴⁶ George E. Ganss, “General Introduction,” in *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Paul Thigpen, *Saints Who Battled Satan* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 2015), 219.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 176-177.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 176.

depends on how the genre element is being rhetorically implemented in the context of the fiction. To read a horror text assuming an author's ill-will can be over-simplistic. Rather, in effective religious horror, these genre traits can serve to the philosophical and theological ideology of the particular religion within the horror narrative itself.

In short, it seems that Catholicism does not need categorically censor such genre conventions. In *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 19th century Catholic thinker John Henry Newman discusses the development of ideas in respect to the nature of truth, stating, "The stronger and more living is an idea, that is, the more powerful hold it exercises on the minds of men, the more able is it to dispense with safeguards, and trust to itself against the danger of corruption."⁵¹ Strong systems of ideas can adapt to a culture and environment and maintain resilience without erecting firewalls that inhibit creativity.

This strength can preserve religious truth within horror fiction. In other words, the genre cannot pervert the truth if the truth drives the genre. Catholics can have confidence in the resilience and vitality of Catholic ideas. As long as the horror genre rhetorically instructs the truth, rather than misrepresent Catholic ideas for mere entertainment, the artist will not be contributing to the "culture of death." Instead, the artist can offer a valuable communicative asset as they seek to expand the understanding of the Catholic faith in the empowering spirit of the Second Vatican Council. As a result, Catholic horror fiction seems to open a rhetoric that inclusively communicates Catholic theology to a range of religious and nonreligious audiences.

⁵¹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, UK: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), 188.