

SIGNIS STATEMENT: REQUIEM (Directed by Hans-Joachim Schmid)

23rd February 2006

During 2005, a surprise box-office success around the world was Scott Derrickson's *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, around \$80,000,000 in the US alone.

There was a SIGNIS statement sent out in October 2005 about the film and its treatment of demonic possession and exorcism, giving the background to the film, events which occurred in Bavaria in the mid-1970s. The screenplay for *Emily Rose* adapted some of these events and characters to the United States and fictionalised them.

At the 2006 Berlinale, a new German film, *Requiem*, was screened in the main Competition, winning a Silver Bear for the performance of Sandra Hueller as well as the award from the international federation of film critics (FIPRESCI). Critics at the festival tended to praise *Requiem* at the expense of *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, sometimes indulging in the perennial critical pastime, the putdown of the Hollywood movie. They praised *Requiem* for its more direct storytelling and more straightforward in dealing with the psychological and religious issues of possession.

However, it needs to be said that *Emily Rose* is an American genre film, a psychological and religious thriller, and needs to be critiqued accordingly, appreciating the conventions it relies on and uses. *Requiem* is not a genre film. Rather, it is a serious-minded European-style drama.

Since the original events took place in Germany, with Catholic characters and raising Catholic issues, it is appropriate to offer comments made by Dr Peter Hasenberg from the German Catholic Bishops Conference to give a German response. Some comments on the issues will follow.

Hans-Christian Schmid, who has been called 'the most serious among German directors', has approached the theme of demonic obsession from a point of view diametrically opposed to that of Scott Derrickson in 'The Exorcism of Emily Rose'.

The title of the film indicates that it is not a thriller about exorcism, but rather a film about a tragic death brought about by complex influences. Set in a small town in Germany in the 1970s, the film tells the story of a young woman who seems to be at the brink of a new life when she goes to the university in Tübingen to become a teacher. She is disturbed by the fact that her already well-known malady – she has suffered from epilepsy since childhood – is coming back. She regards this as God's punishment and begins to see visions of demons.

She turns for help to her parish priest who refuses to accept the interpretation that she may be possessed by demons but draws in a younger colleague who is more willing to accept the possibility of a demonic possession.

There is not the slightest trace of sensationalism in the film. The director's aim is not to accuse but to understand. The documentary style reminds us that Schmid studied documentary film-making and that he is interested in the truth behind a well-known case. He depicts this tragedy of a young woman with a very sensitive approach to all the characters involved. Even though some of them may be guilty to some extent – e.g. the stern mother or the young priest – they are not depicted as evil influences. The tragedy lies in the fact that all the people involved are basically good-willed and would like to help but are unable to reach the young woman who cannot resolve the conflicts inside herself except by embracing her suffering as sent from God and accepting her death as a martyr suffering for a higher good.

The director and screenwriter have both stated that they do not believe in demonic possession. They see the experience of the central character, here called Michaela, as a physical and mental health condition. It is shown that Michaela has suffered from epilepsy since childhood. However, they wanted to present the possession of Michaela in as detached a way as they could. They respect the beliefs of Michaela and her family and want to tell the story so that audiences will be able to assess the different opinions on possession. They want to present the story without bias. They have.

One of the difficulties for audiences watching films like *Emily Rose* and *Requiem* is that they have largely been pre-conditioned to expect rather sensational visualisations of possession as well as reactions to exorcism. William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) has set a benchmark: physical contortions, bile spewing, levitation, gross language and abuse. Sequels and prequels and imitations over the decades have reinforced this. *Emily Rose* is quite restrained in its presentation of possession phenomena, relying on performance rather than special effects. This is even truer of *Requiem*. The possession does affect Michaela's physical condition but not so grotesquely. There are some manifestations of loss of control (spitting at her mother) and some abusive language. There is only one exorcism sequence and, unlike the other films, where this always happens at night, it takes place in daylight.

The parish priest in *Emily Rose* is accused of negligent homicide because he supported *Emily Rose* in her decision to stop taking her medication. Most of the film takes place in the court. There are two priests in *Requiem*. The elderly parish priest who has known Michaela for a long time is wary of too supernatural an explanation. He asks a younger, more educated priest to help. This priest is more inclined to believe Michaela and is in favour of prayer to confront the demons. Both priests perform the exorcism in a rather low-key manner. (A postscript to the film informs audiences that Michaela experienced several more exorcisms and finally weakened and died.)

Most viewers, including Christians, will be more prone to accept the psychological explanation. This is certainly the 'secular' opinion. The screenplay of *Emily Rose*, however, reminds us that anthropological information gives evidence of demonic possession in many cultures other than Christian. That needs to be seriously considered.

However, there are two Catholic comments that can be made and they apply both to *Emily Rose* and to *Requiem*. Theologically speaking, the two films take similar stances. The two films can be seen as complementary.

The first point is that there is a long Christian tradition that chosen individuals, men and women, seem to have been singled out, with a 'vocation', to be tempted and tested, to suffer, to experience personal physical and mental torment. They witness to evil in the world. They witness to the need for repentance, reconciliation, reparation and atonement. Paul himself writes to the Romans about the torment of doing what he does not want to do and not being able to do what he wants. Stories, sometimes of rather lurid temptations, are ascribed to the early desert hermits and fathers and this tradition of victim saints has continued over the centuries. More recent saints who have had such experiences include St John Vianney of Ars and the Italian St Gemma Galgani. In *Requiem*, towards the beginning of the film, Michaela goes on a parish pilgrimage to an Italian shrine of St Katharine, a recluse who suffered great pain and died at the age of 33. Michaela is impressed by this saint and begins to understand her life and death as a parallel.

This is not a comfortable spirituality and the immediate reaction of most people is to reject it or even ridicule it. This was part of a reaction to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. However, it is one of the key points of Kaszantsakis's novel and Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Giving up on one's vocation is the last temptation. Jesus himself experienced all human temptation, as the letter to the Hebrews states, but in no way turned away from God. It is very clearly this spirituality that Michaela accepts, seeing herself as a suffering witness for God, a martyr.

The second point concerns what seems to be a clash between religion and science. Developments in the theology of miracles throw light on this issue. In the earlier centuries of the church, events which were proclaimed as miracles could well have been explained by natural causes, or were the product of suggestion or superstition. In the 18th century, in the Age of Enlightenment, Pope Benedict XIV drew up stringent

criteria for assessing the truth of miracles of healing. To move away from piety and from superstition, it was decreed that miracles were cures beyond what was naturally possible. For the next centuries, there was rigorous examination of miracles (as in Lourdes) or those accepted for the processes of beatification and canonization of saints.

This, however, can relegate the context of faith to a lesser consideration. The important aspect of miracles (as in the Gospel narratives) is that the healing takes place in a context of prayer and belief. In that sense, the physical possibility of healing or self-healing is less important and can be acknowledged. It is the faith context which is all important.

A parallel can be used for possession and exorcism. While there may be medical, psychological and physical explanations for the condition and for the cure, the exorcism, it is the context of faith that is most important. There should not be any logical dichotomy between faith and science.

Emily Rose raises these issues of faith and science, prayer and psychology for the wide, multiplex, audiences so that they can reflect on the popular film they have seen. *Requiem* is a mainstream drama for many audiences, especially Europeans, but less likely to be popular in the movie complexes. But, it also raises many questions of faith. While the film-makers of *Requiem* do not profess faith, they have shown respect for faith and for those who believe. There is a key scene and line in *Requiem* when Michaela first arrives for lectures and is late. The professor asks her what she believes in. She simply says, 'in God'. There is some general laughter in disbelief and mockery among the students. The professor remarks that that is where the trouble is. In scepticism.