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Exorcist deaths of wife and sons shine a spotlight on Italian cults

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The torture and murder of two boys and their mother in Sicily during an exorcism rite has caused alarm about the increasing number of religious cults.

Giovanni Barreca, 54, a bricklayer, has confessed to tying up his wife, Antonella, and their sons aged 5 and 16 and torturing them with hot irons. He told the police he killed them, with the help of two accomplices, because they were possessed by demons.

The police arrested Barreca and the couple, a herbal tea vendor and a lifestyle coach, who they suspect were part of a cult with up to ten members.

"There is a frightening growth in Italy of these cults, with professionals like lawyers and academics signing up," said David Murgia, who runs the Rome section of Gris, a Catholic research group that tracks cults.

Murgia said calls to its hotline alerting them to groups, which can range

from satanists invoking the devil to amateur exorcists trying to cast out the devil, had doubled in the past two years.

"There are about 250 cults in Italy and growing. Covid gave them a boost because people were at home, went online and found them," said Tullio Di Fiore, head of Gris's Palermo office, which has had 1,000 calls since it set up a hotline five months ago. "And now these murders in Sicily have increased the number of calls we get."

Barreca, from Altavilla Milicia near Palermo, called the police on the night of February 11, and said: "Come and get me, I have killed my family."

He was arrested after police found the burnt body of his wife buried in the garden, and the tortured corpses of Emmanuel, 5, and Kevin, 16, inside.

His 17-year-old daughter survived and told the police that a man and woman her father had met through Facebook had convinced him that his family was possessed by the devil and

helped him torture his wife for a week, burning her with a hot iron and a hair dryer, then killing her, burning her body and burying her in the garden with her possessions.

They then murdered Emmanuel, who was found with cloth stuffed in his mouth. The daughter, who has not been named, at first claimed to be an innocent bystander but then said that she also took part in the torture.

Kevin was meanwhile texting a school friend to explain why he was absent from school.

"They are freeing my mother and brother from really evil demons in them," he said, claiming that his younger brother had admitted that the demon inside him had "entered the family to destroy and kill us one by one".

He added: "It's hard to believe but soon I will explain it better, as long as you don't call me mad."

But after his brother was killed, his father and his accomplices allegedly

turned on Kevin. "Even he was possessed by the devil," his sister said.

As a Catholic organisation, Gris is not opposed to exorcisms if they are carried out by the church. François Dermine, 75, the organisation's national head, is himself a priest and an exorcist.

"When a priest carries out an exorcism he has the church behind him. We try to understand the person, do they have a psychological problem? We often say no to carrying it out," said Dermine, who lectures on exorcism at the Sacerdos Institute, part of the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical University in Rome.

"These people are instead creating their own religion, although it is possible the man in Sicily used the Catholic exorcism ritual. It is easy to find it in bookshops. I once tried to find a copy and discovered it was sold out. The people buying it will not be Catholic priests," he said.