

Witches, Ghosts and Magic

What Catholics Believe *by Page Zyromski*

Matt called one of those psychic hotline numbers advertised on television. His parents didn't find out until they saw the whopping charge on their phone bill.

I asked Matt why he did it and he says he was just curious. He's still delivering pizzas to pay off his debt.

Jessica had some friends who were experimenting with witchcraft. She was curious too. It was just something to do, she says.

Tony went to a meeting of a satanic group. He got out of there as quickly as possible. He tells me he knew he wasn't supposed to do it, but "wanted to see what it was all about."

What's happening here? What does the Church believe about these things?

Honest Questions

It's natural to explore the supernatural, especially during your teen years. After all, you have a spiritual soul as well as a body. Now is the normal time to ask honest questions about God and the spiritual world, and about life after death. The Church wants you to ask these questions so you can grow in your knowledge of God and set priorities in your life.

But like everything else, there's a right way and a wrong way to explore. When you were two years old, you were curious about electrical outlets and probably wanted to poke your finger into one. When you were 10, you were curious about firecrackers and cherry bombs. When you're 16, you might be curious to see just how fast your car will go if you "open it up."

At each of these stages someone guides you and teaches you about these unseen forces so you don't harm yourself. If they do a good job, you grow up without exaggerated fear of electricity or fireworks or cars. But you also learn not to mess around!

In a similar way, the Church wants you to grow up with neither an exaggerated fear of the supernatural nor an unhealthy curiosity about it. The temptation to mess with the occult (o-CULT) has been around for centuries, which is why clear teachings have been set up to help you. In general, the occult is anything that claims to have secret knowledge from supernatural sources.

Is the Devil Real?

Yes, the Church says, the devil exists. But the first thing to remember is that the devil is not the equal and opposite of God. There is no equal and opposite of God. If the devil is the equal and opposite of anyone, it would be Michael the Archangel. But even

so, Michael has the power of Almighty God behind him and the devil does not. No contest.

The Church teaches that the devil is a fallen angel called Satan and "the father of lies." There should be no exaggerated belief in the power of the devil. With Jesus' death and resurrection "the ruler of this world" was cast out.

No baptized Christian needs to fear the devil and the lesser demons sometimes called goblins, because by our Baptism we share in Jesus' death and resurrection. Your Baptism is more important than you think!

The Church doesn't want you to fool around with the occult, but neither does it want you to be afraid that the devil lurks behind every bush. It's true that satanic cults exist. You may have heard of groups in your area by word of mouth, the way Tony did. Maybe you've seen classmates drawing upside-down stars (pentagrams) on their notebooks. Don't worry that they're satanists. Maybe they're just doodling!

But if these same friends become withdrawn, if their grades drop, if they say things that are truly bizarre, then you should probably mention it to your guidance counselor or to your pastor. Most likely, the local police and your pastor already know about any active cults in your area.

What about exorcisms? Do they exist? Videos and song lyrics sometimes provoke a fear of demonic possession. Yes, the Church provides for exorcisms. Exorcism is the formal expelling of the devil, performed only by a priest with permission of the bishop. It is not taken lightly. Evil is not trivial.

In September 2000, the pope performed an exorcism on a teenage girl right in St. Peter's Square. It was definitely not as sensational as the movie *The Exorcist*. He simply prayed with authority over her, commanding the demon to leave. Most people at the weekly audience didn't even know it happened.

Besides exorcism, the Church provides other ways that are so ordinary you may not have noticed. Some of these are noted in a box on the last page of this *Youth Update*. Others include the "deliver us from evil" phrase in the Our Father and the Sign of the Cross with holy water when you enter and leave the church, another reminder of your Baptism.

No New Temptation

Whether you think the devil is a real person or just a symbol, his temptation is the oldest one in the world: power and control. "You will be like God" were the serpent's words to Eve (Genesis 3:5). The ultimate power is "to be like God."

God alone has power over the future. God alone knows what's in store for us. How tempting it is to want to know the future and try to control it! Who *wouldn't* want this, at least to some degree? Especially in this millennium when technology is moving so fast nobody can keep up with it. Especially since traditional values have been thrown out the window. Especially for young people who feel powerless in the face of it all.

It's hard to put ourselves completely in God's hands. No wonder fortune-telling has become a multimillion-dollar business! The psychic hotline charged \$4.99 a minute to Matt's phone bill. His so-called psychic was trained to keep him on the phone as long as possible, to draw him out. She was paid according to how long she could keep him talking. Matt talked for an hour, even though he knew she was fake. You do the math!

You've seen advertisements for palm readers, crystal-ball readers and astrologers, who tell your future from your sign of the zodiac. You've heard about "white" witches who practice "wicca" to influence the future as Jessica's friends were trying to do. You may have seen a ouija (wee-jee) board which has a marker moving across letters. You know that "channeling" doesn't mean surfing with a remote.

All this stuff flirts with wanting to control the future. The Church tells us flatly to reject it as a sin against the First Commandment. These things "conceal a desire for power over time, history and other human beings" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2116). They feed into the temptation to be like God.

What About ESP?

Does the Church think there are ever people who can see the future for real? Yes, says the Church. Our tradition is full of prophets and saints who have seen the future. This didn't stop when the last ink dried on the Bible.

In the 500s, St. Benedict had an ESP experience when his twin sister died. He "saw" her soul rising to heaven in the form of a dove. He was so sure of his vision that he sent some monks to bring her body back to be buried at his monastery.

In the 1800s, St. John Bosco had so many ESP dreams that the pope ordered him to write them down. He dreamt not only about people's deaths and the future of his Salesian Order, but also about geography, of all things. He described valleys and mountains in the Andes that weren't even guessed at in his day. (He had missionaries in South America.) Experiences like Benedict's and John Bosco's were special graces and not something they could turn on and off like a spigot.

It's not uncommon to hear an ESP story about the death of a loved one. Love is stronger than death, the Bible tells us. My son, for example, knew exactly when his grandfather died even though he was 500 miles away. It's important not to stretch the truth if this happens to you. Pray for your loved one and don't be afraid.

What about ghosts? Does the Church believe in ghosts? If you're thinking about creatures with sheets over their heads, of course not. If you're asking whether spiritual souls live on after the body dies, though, the answer is a definite yes.

These are not the same as angels but the souls of human beings like you and me which will live forever. At the end of the ages we'll get our glorified bodies back again in the resurrection of the body, but nobody claims to know how that's going to work. We all just hope that our glorified bodies will be better looking than the ones we have now!

The communion of saints is one of the most fascinating teachings of the Church. All of us—living and dead, official saints and ordinary sinners—are united in the Body of

Christ. Jesus' love unites us in a love so strong that death has no power over it. We don't communicate with the dead like in a séance.

We don't worship them. But we do pray for each other. We offer prayers for those who have died. We ask those who have died to intercede for us while we're still here on earth. The love that flows back and forth goes beyond space and time.

Heads-up on Halloween Symbols

Around Halloween it's important to get your head straight about these things. Halloween (the "e'en" or evening before "All Hallow's," or all the "Holy Ones," the saints) is the vigil of two feast days. All Saints Day is November 1, and All Souls Day is November 2.

On All Saints we celebrate the lives of the saints, especially those in heaven. On All Souls Day we remember those who have died, especially in our immediate family.

Stories of ghosts first became associated with Halloween in Ireland. It was said that if someone had died the previous year and you were still holding a grudge against that person, he or she would appear to you on the evening before All Saints. You'd be so startled you'd run to do whatever would make your forgiveness complete. Not a bad reminder any time of the year!

Skeletons and skulls are naturally symbols at Halloween because of All Souls Day, "the Day of the Dead," as some countries call it. It doesn't hurt us to think about death once a year. We're all going to die someday. Skeletons and skulls remind us of this. Figures of devils and witches can also remind us of the ever-present temptation to be like God.

Halloween is not "of the devil," as some fundamentalists say. Many denominations don't teach about the communion of saints, so naturally they don't celebrate All Saints Day or All Souls Day. All they have left of Halloween is pre-Christian superstition about the dead.

All the same, if I had to pick decorations for a Halloween party, I'd go with skeletons and skulls rather than devils, just to separate the symbols. Since the holiday sometimes brings out warped people who commit copycat crimes, I'd stick with friends and places I know. It's always good to choose carefully how you have your fun.

Magic in Media

Four Harry Potter books are on the best-seller list. J.K. Rowling has given the world a character who received an invitation to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry on his 11th birthday. Each book tells of one more year in Harry's education.

Are these books evil because they use wizardry as a background? Let me answer a question with a question. After you finish a Harry Potter book are you tempted to dig into the occult so you can be like God, or do you admire Harry's truth, courage and loyalty to his friends? Do you want to change a teacup into a mouse or do you want to change your habits so you won't be like Harry's rich and bratty enemy, Draco Malfoy?

You could ask the same question about other fictional creations such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Buffy protects her friends and "saves the world—a lot" in a universe threatened by evil and ghoulish creatures. Do you admire Buffy's commitment and self-sacrifice, or do you wish you could turn yourself into a ghoul?

A lot of people get nervous about fiction that involves the forces of evil. You've already learned in English class that there are different categories of fiction, like mysteries, fantasy, westerns, science fiction, Stephen King-type horror. Fantasy almost always includes magic and wizards the same way that westerns include cowboys. Whatever the category, the best works of fiction will lift the human spirit.

But if anything gives you nightmares, stay away from it. If a TV program or a book or a song lyric gives you weird ideas, switch the channel, close the book and turn off the song. You're the only one who knows what's getting stirred up inside. Trust your gut. If it's good for you it'll inspire you to be a better person and to love God more.

Up or Down?

When you are weighing your choices and the value of your activities, I'd like to suggest the "upward and outward" or "downward and inward" rule. In other words, do songs, books and games lift your heart up (to appreciate God's love and care for you) and out (to widen your compassion and understanding of other people)? Or do they pull you downward (diminish your trust in God's care, make you depressed) and inward (make you more self-focused and even morbid)?

See the difference? You're old enough to notice such things about yourself and to quit taking in the garbage.

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Holly Brown (18), Beth Burke (16), Shawn Heilers (18) and Stacy Lunz (17) met at the Heilerses' home in Glynnwood, Ohio, to discuss this issue. Shawn's mother, Irene Heilers, is director of religious education for St. Patrick Parish in Glynnwood, where these teenagers are quite active.