

Occult Practices and the Catholic Faith

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Here in the United States, but also around the world, interest in the occult has steadily increased over the last 50 years. During the last two decades especially this trend has increased dramatically. Such occult practices as necromancy, séances, divination, channeling, recourse to “spirit guides,” various forms of witchcraft and many other related practices have become common place in our culture. Some of these things can even be encountered in some Catholic contexts.

This rapid growth in the popularity and practice of the occult in our day has been paralleled by some confusion and uncertainty among Catholics about how these things relate to the Catholic Faith. Our purpose is to highlight what Scripture and the Catholic Church teach about occult practices.

Scripture, the Catechism and Occult Practices

Any evaluation of occult practices must be done in light of the Ten Commandments, which were given to the Israelites through Moses. The nations surrounding the ancient Israelites were polytheistic --- meaning they worshipped many gods. In stark contrast to this, God revealed to the Israelites his true nature as the one almighty and transcendent creator of all that exists.

In the First Commandment God proclaimed *“I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery. You shall not have other gods besides me”* (Exodus 20:2). Worship was to be directed *only* to the true God and Creator.

To direct worship or religious practices of any kind to any other gods --- whether hand made idols or other spirit beings --- was to engage in idolatry and false worship.

Scripture mentions some specific occult practices that violate the First Commandment. Such practices were pervasive among the nations surrounding the Israelites. This is why God was warning his people to avoid being polluted by those cultures --- which is a key lesson for us today:

“When you come into the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abominations of the peoples there. Let there not be found among you... a fortune-teller, soothsayer, charmer, diviner, or caster of spells, nor one who consults ghosts and spirits or seeks oracles from the dead. Anyone who does such things is an abomination to the Lord, and because of such abominations the Lord, your God, is driving these nations out of your way.” (Deuteronomy 18:9-12)

Based firmly on the teaching of Scripture and Catholic Tradition, the Catechism of the Catholic Church likewise rejects all forms of the occult:

All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to “unveil” the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading interpretations of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone... All practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others—even if this were for the sake of restoring their health—are gravely contrary

to the virtue of religion... (CCC #2116-2117)

Go Deeper into Catholic Tradition

Rather than having recourse to occult means, the Lord wills that we seek him in prayer, by consulting his Word in Sacred Scripture, and by having recourse to everything he has provided for our salvation, spiritual protection and Christian living in his Church.

The current fixation on occult practices by many in our culture reveals a deep estrangement from the Judeo-Christian aspects of our heritage. A vital part of the solution within Catholic contexts will include an emphasis on coming to know the true Christ of the Gospels as interpreted by the Church, and formation in the Catholic spiritual and mystical tradition witnessed to by the saints and doctors of the Church. It is likewise important to gently and gradually develop in Christians a holy aversion to that which glorifies the occult and idolatry, and that spins such practices as appealing and cool.

Miracles are Part of our History

A key aspect of our Catholic history is that it's loaded with reminders and manifestations of the supernatural: the miracles of God recorded in the Old Testament; the miracles of Jesus and his apostles in the New Testament; the miraculous deeds of the saints (such as St. Francis of Assisi or St. Pio of Pietrelcina); the approved apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary (such as Fatima and Lourdes). Miracles and supernatural phenomena are a treasured part of our Catholic heritage. They provide a glimpse into the glory of God's eternal kingdom.

The modern age has witnessed an explosion of claims throughout the world of alleged apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary,

visitations of angels, appearances of saints, and various other supernatural phenomena. The Catholic Church readily acknowledges that God can, and on occasion does, intervene in supernatural ways in our world to assist souls in their struggle toward the kingdom of God.

Likewise, Scripture and the Church teach that the Holy Spirit bestows on Christians various spiritual gifts or charisms to be used for the building up of the Church. Some of these can be dramatic, like the gift of healing whereby the Holy Spirit empowers a person to work healing miracles similar to the kinds performed by Jesus and his disciples (Acts 5:12-16; 1 Corinthians 12:27-31; CCC 799-801).

We Have Enemies

But Scripture and the Church also emphasize the need for caution (1 Peter 5:8-9). We have spiritual enemies --- and they are not merely symbols or the products of unenlightened or fearful imaginations. Belief in the existence of the devil as a real, personal and evil angelic being, as well as the other fallen angels, is not optional for a Catholic.

Rather, the reality of the demonic realm is a truth of divine revelation attested to in many passages of Scripture and also in the doctrine and living Tradition of the Church (CCC 391-421; 538-540; 550; 566; 1673; 1707; 2850-2854). In fact, Scripture teaches that destroying the works of the devil was central to the mission of Jesus (1 John 3:8).

Some people who claim that the spell they cast really "worked," or who claim to communicate with the spirits of the dead, or who claim to channel messages from "spirit guides" may in fact be charlatans or just mistaken about what they are experiencing.

However, other people engaging in such practices may be experiencing *real* supernatural phenomena. The problem is

that when such supernatural phenomena occur in an occult context they are by the enemy's power and are not from God. When God communicates with us, or intervenes in our world, he does not use methods that he has forbidden.

The truth about the world around us is that, when it comes to discerning the *primary* source of an alleged supernatural phenomenon or experience, there are ultimately only three possible explanations: natural explanation (of merely human or natural origin); supernatural and from God; or supernatural, but from the enemy.

Great caution is needed when discerning the source of a religious teaching, or alleged supernatural phenomenon or message. The devil's primary tactic for drawing people away from the true God is deception. Our primary protection is the truth. Especially the truths of God as articulated in Scripture and the doctrine of the Church.

Some Basic Discernment Criteria

Does the teaching, alleged experience or message have any connection to the occult? The presence of occult practices would disqualify the message or experience as being from God.

Of course, it's possible that God might *intervene* in a person's life in order to bring him or her *out of the practice of the occult* and draw the person to Christ. But any recourse to occult practices must be rejected --- for example: channeling, mediumship, necromancy, séances, use of the Ouija board, all forms of divination, psychic and clairvoyant practices, all forms of witchcraft, recourse to "spirit guides," etc.

Is the content of the alleged message or teaching consistent with Catholic doctrine and moral teaching? Or rather, would it lead to a "christ" that is different than the one proclaimed by Scripture and the Church? (1 John 1-3; 2 Corinthians 11:14; Galatians

1:8-9) We must also be on guard for the use of biblical and Christian terms or concepts, but with skewed meanings. The enemy uses half-truths and even the Scriptures themselves (but in a twisted way) in order to deceive (Luke 4:1-13).

3) Finally, what is the overall fruit? Would the experience or teaching lead one to deeper repentance from sin and a deeper conversion to Jesus Christ? Would it strengthen one's resolve to obey the Lord's commandments? Would it lead to a deeper love of God and neighbor?

For suggested resources for further study on the occult, visit the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis section of the diocesan website: www.toledodiocese.org