



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

August 12, 2020



“Mediums” and the Catholic Faith A Letter from Bishop John O. Barres

Dear Friends:

The year 2020 has undoubtedly been one of the most difficult years in recent memory. The list of trials and challenges facing so many of us is beyond reckoning, and very few of us have escaped the deep sorrow of losing someone we love. As overwhelming as the numbers in the newspaper can be, it is often only once death strikes close to home that we feel the cost of times like these in a profound way. Everyone who passes away is a mother, a father, a grandparent, a neighbor, or a friend; for every passing there is a group, large or small, of mourners who now find an emptiness in their lives. These times of loss acutely remind us of a fundamental reality that unites us in our humanity: the experience of death, of mortality, of the inevitability of suffering which eventually carries us all from this world.

Just as universal, however, is the refusal of the human spirit to accept the finality of death. Across time and around the globe, nearly every culture has a foundational belief that there is “something more.” The Egyptians built pyramids filled with essentials for the afterlife; the Chinese Emperors left behind their terra cotta warriors to protect them in eternity; the Vikings longed to die in battle that they might feast forever in the halls of Valhalla; and of course as Christians we believe the soul lives on even after the body dies. Something deep within us rebels against the idea that we could be utterly snuffed out as though we had never existed. We cling to the belief that we and those we love are not subject to eternal nothingness.

But human nature always seeks assurance, and an increasingly popular supposed path to such assurance is recourse to mediums. On television and the internet we see countless mediums who travel far and wide claiming to connect the bereaved with loved ones on the “other side.” Some

have reached a celebrity status, with waitlists extending out years and drawing thousands of people to their live shows. Knowing things they seemingly should not know, they are able to persuade an audience member that they are speaking to the departed, sharing messages of comfort, forgiveness, and encouragement. At times, they even announce that they are practicing Catholics and, understandably, this strikes many as a beautiful work of faith, bringing solace to the sorrowful.

And yet, what do we find in the Scriptures?

Let there not be found among you anyone who causes their son or daughter to pass through the fire, or practices divination, or is a soothsayer, augur, or sorcerer, or who casts spells, 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 dispossessing them before you.¹

Just as firm we find that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

“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, interpretation 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.”²

These lists may be a bit of a shock, beyond just the inclusion of mediums. Horoscopes are in the daily papers and psychics are everywhere. Ouija boards, marketed for children eight and older, purportedly reach out to the dead, blithely suggesting, “You’ve got questions and the spirit world has answers.” No one is looking to offend God or to call on demons in these practices; it is just a matter of looking for answers, of trying to understand loss and find resolution. Why then is our faith so forceful in its prohibition?

Perhaps, first and foremost, because the dangers of these practices are not obvious, making them all the more perilous. While the desire to connect with the dead and find hope in loss may seem perfectly Christian, the practices condemned by our faith actually corrupt those good desires and lead us further away from God. How? We can speak of two hidden dangers associated with any form of divination, but especially with consulting mediums: first, the practices attempt to circumvent God; second, to put it plainly, if frighteningly, in doing so they open one to demonic influence.

¹ Deuteronomy 18:10-12

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 2116

Let us consider the first danger. It can appear that consulting a medium need not stem from a desire to circumvent God, because belief in the afterlife inherently presumes a belief in God. Yet upon reflection, is not exactly the opposite true? When we visit a medium, we are implicitly showing that belief in God is not enough; we need to know for ourselves. When someone passes from this world, as people of faith we commend them to God, “The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment shall touch them.”³ To believe in a loving God is to trust that we need not fear for the souls of the departed, as they are in His mercy. Our desire to find out more on our own terms, however, is symptomatic of a common mindset in our world, perhaps best summarized by the line, “I am spiritual, not religious.” Our world wants to hold on to belief in the spiritual and the eternal without the constraints of faith in God. We find far more comfort, if a false comfort, in hearing that everyone is at peace in eternal life, than in thinking of an eternal judge whom we will face upon our passing. These desires for heaven without God, for a power over the eternal apart from Him, ultimately “contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.” In fact, such practices and attitudes directly violate the first of the Ten Commandments (“You shall not have other gods beside me.”)⁴ by trying to “get around God”, by demonstrating a lack of faith in Him, or by attempting to exercise our own control over spiritual realities which belong to Him.

The second objection to mediums, that they are connected with the demonic, may come as an alarming surprise. Very few would claim that they are purposely seeking out the demonic in a medium, and most mediums themselves would heartily deny an association with the demonic. And yet, when we look at the history of our faith, it is only in exceptional circumstances that God allows the dead to speak to the living, and then it is generally not because the living sought them out. As we hear in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, when the rich man asks for Lazarus to warn his brothers, Abraham replies, “They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.”⁵

So, who are mediums speaking to? We know that there are two powers at work in the invisible world: good and evil. While God and His angels are protecting us and trying to bring us to heaven, Satan and the other fallen angels are seeking to do the opposite. We are caught up in an eternal battle and, while Christ has already won the victory in His Cross and Resurrection, the devil can still win souls, as we all still have the freedom to choose our eternal destiny. There are powers then, so far beyond us, waiting for us to freely invite them into our lives, and we do exactly that by reaching out blindly into the supernatural. Moreover, in using methods that attempt to circumvent God and His Church, we make it all the more likely that we will find only insidious forces. Put simply, when we get involved with spirits apart from the Holy Spirit, we get ourselves into trouble. Countless exorcists, well acquainted with the work of the demonic, warn that mediums, Ouija boards, and the like are an open invitation to demonic influences and a primary

³ Wisdom 3:1

⁴ Exodus 20:3

⁵ Luke 16:29

means through which they enter the world. Having a God who comes to us so openly and lovingly in the light, why would we turn to methods opening us to evil lurking in the dark?

Upon turning to mediums or other occult practices⁶, therefore, we truly attempt to “divinize” ourselves, taking into our hands that which belongs to God alone, and just as troubling we place ourselves in grave danger. While we may begin with wholesome intentions, we stray from the light and nevertheless sin against God in both of these ways. Our first instinct then should be to make amends for these sins against Faith, which the Church calls us to do primarily through the Sacrament of Confession. Through this beautiful sacrament, Catholics experience God’s mercy and forgiveness and are filled with peace. All are encouraged to make frequent use of this Sacrament of the Divine Mercy.

But, just as importantly, to prevent the spread of these evils, we should pose two timely questions: why do so many turn to mediums rather than the Faith, and how can we better share the hope of our faith to make recourse to such practices less attractive?

Many turn to mediums, particularly in our own times, because faith has grown cold. Twenty percent of Americans classify as “nones,” having no religious affiliation, and thirteen percent of American adults are former Catholics. Further, today’s technological advances and moral relativism have numbed many to our need for God in this age of radical independence and self-determination. In spite of this, in moments of suffering and loss, the illusion of that independence and control disappear and the hidden human fragility manifests itself. Rather than return to the Faith and all that it requires, however, a visit to a medium allows us to maintain a false sense of control. With nothing more demanded of us than the price of admission, the mystery of death is bridged and we receive immediate assurance that the soul lives on and our loved ones are waiting for us. The same can be said for consulting psychics or horoscopes regarding the future; we gain peace of mind with a knowledge and control over the mysterious future, without having to trust in God’s providence and love for us.

But this peace of mind hinges on the illusion of control, which will inevitably dissipate the next time we encounter loss or uncertainty. Our faith in God, on the other hand, relies on a surrender—and this surrender can provide us with a far different, lasting peace. We are not called to make sense of ineffable mysteries such as death; instead we are called to trust God who is pure love. It is not easy to give up our desire for answers, but we will ultimately find far more comfort in

⁶ In addition to psychics and mediums, our Catholic Faith considers many “New Age” and occult practices to be incompatible with and even harmful to our Faith. Some examples include Reiki, Yoga (when it includes spiritual components, as opposed to exercises strictly meant for physical fitness), transcendental meditation, Wicca, witchcraft, sorcery, and of course, Satanism. For further reading on this subject, please see the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue’s joint Document on New Age spirituality entitled “Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age” (2003).

entrusting ourselves to the merciful and loving God who died for us and gives us all that we need to find joy with Him in heaven.

We do not need to go to a medium to speak with the dead, because we can pray. And although a medium may lead us to complacency, we know that the greatest service we can offer the dead are our prayers; they need our prayers and we should never stop praying for them. Our faith gives us the confidence to know that we can speak with God, that through Him our prayers lift up those we love, and that through Him their prayers for us help us on our own journey. As we pray in the vigil service for the dead, “We believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death.”⁷ We do not need a third party to connect us with the dead, we are already connected.

As Catholics, through the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, we believe in friendship that goes beyond the chasm of death. We are never closer to the dead than at the Catholic Mass where we pray for the souls of the dead and receive the consolation and strength of that prayer. Saint Monica, the mother of one of the greatest theologians of our Faith, Saint Augustine, told her sons, “Bury my body wherever you will; let not care of it cause you any concern. One thing only I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be.” Reflecting the same deep faith, at the end of her life, a mother told her family, “When I am gone, look for me on the altar during the Mass, because that is where Jesus is. Where Jesus is, that is where you will find me.”

In this time when so many are experiencing loss, we come together confronting the veil that separates us from eternity and we face the question, “To whom shall we go?”⁸ We may seek comfort in mediums and other occult practices, but then we are relying merely on our own broken humanity, or worse, putting our trust in the evil prowling about behind that veil, an evil ready to manipulate us to diminish our faith in God. Or we can put our trust in Jesus Christ, the one who suffered the darkness of death and returned to reassure us of what lies beyond. As He says to us in John’s Gospel:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.⁹

We trust in Christ’s promise that only by His great love for us and His death on the cross do we and our loved ones have hope of coming to the Father. May we continue to pray for all the dearly

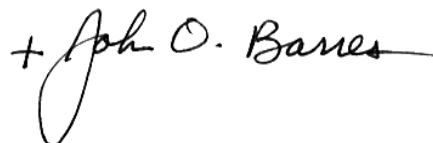
⁷ *Order of Christian Funerals* (Totowa, NJ: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1997), X.

⁸ John 6:68

⁹ John 14:1-3

departed, that they may know of our love and that we may be assured that they are in the hands of their loving and merciful Father. May we all remain in His hands, knowing that we need not fear and our hearts need not be troubled. Rather, if we remain close to Him, we will someday be united with Him and reunited with those we love for all eternity.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ John O. Barres". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre