

What's wrong with consulting psychics, Ouija boards and astrology?



Dear Father Kerper: When I was younger I became interested in astrology and went to fortune tellers a few times. Someone recently told me I had committed a mortal sin. I never heard of such a prohibition among the Ten Commandments. In fact, I know good Catholics who believe in these things. I don't see anything evil in using God's creation — stars and planets — and the special gifts of fortune tellers to see the future. Where's the sin?

A narrow reading of the Ten Commandments can lead people to a very dangerous conclusion, namely: "If something like astrology isn't directly condemned, then it must be permitted." This attitude misses the connection between the *broad* commandment and *specific* acts. Astrology and fortune telling violate the First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods besides me." (Ex 20:2-3) Here the term "other gods" refers to all sorts of idols, but also includes anyone or anything claiming divine powers that belong to God alone.

Let's consider how astrology works. Early on primitive people became keen observers of the sky. They believed in

multiple gods and soon identified their gods with specific planets, stars and locations. Recall that planets in our solar system all bear divine names like Jupiter, Mars and Neptune. People believed that these celestial planet-gods powerfully influenced human actions. Hence, careful observation of the sky could produce knowledge of the future.

Astrology did two bad things. First, it strongly asserted the actual existence of multiple gods who behaved very much like "super-humans." These gods married, had affairs with one another and meddled in worldly events, usually to the detriment of humans. Second, ancient astrology undermined human free will by promoting fatalistic determinism. This "theological system" presented the gods as extremely powerful beings — though not omnipotent — and human beings as helpless slaves subject to divine whims.

From earliest times, the Church fathers — Latin and Greek — taught that astrology and its associated "arts" were dangerous, even demonic. Despite these fervent warnings, astrology's influence — and that of fortune tellers — actually spread among believing Christians, especially during the Renaissance. Many important Christian rulers, including some popes such as Leo X, regularly consulted astrologers. Even well-known mathematicians, astronomers and other scientists took astrology seriously.

Despite some confusion in the past, Church teaching today has great clarity. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states bluntly that using horoscopes and astrologists "contradicts the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone." (CCC 2116)

Now let's examine fortune telling, a practice more dangerous than astrology. Whereas astrology entangles us with abstract theories, fortune telling entangles us with living human beings.

God speaks directly against fortune telling, also called *divination*, in both testaments.

Deuteronomy 18:10-12 gives the clearest warning: "There must never be anyone among you... who practices divination, who is a soothsayer, augur or sorcerer... For the man who does these things is detestable to God."

Revelation, the last book of the Bible, has a similar text: "These others must stay outside [the New Jerusalem, heaven]: dogs, fortune tellers, and fornicators, and murderers, and idolaters, and everyone of false speech and false life." (Rv 22:15)

Moreover, sacred Scripture contains vivid "case studies" of people who connected with practitioners of "occult arts."

First, we have King Saul's disastrous encounter with the "witch" of Endor. Recall that God had removed Saul

from his royal office because of blatant disobedience. Saul then compounded his first grave sin by committing yet another: employing the "witch" to conjure up the ghost of Samuel the prophet. Saul did this with the hope of receiving military advice from the ghost. The ghost, greatly annoyed by Saul's sinful use of the "witch," did indeed foretell the future: "And tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me [i.e. dead!]; the Lord will give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines." (1 Sm 28:19)

Many commentators view Saul's dabbling with the occult as yet another example of his depravity. Indeed, it demonstrates the essential difference between Saul and King David, who succeeded Saul. Though David committed many grave sins, notably murder and adultery, he remained absolutely faithful to God. By contrast, Saul's desperate pursuit of future knowledge through a medium meant that he had turned away from God and placed his trust in a "false god," namely the "witch" and her "powers."

Second, in Acts 16:16-20, St. Luke affirms the plausible connection between fortune-telling and demonic power. He tells the story of a very young slave girl who "had a spirit of divination." Her owners charged people to access her fortune telling abilities. On her own, however, the girl began publicly proclaiming Paul and Silas as "servants of the Most High God." Eventually, Paul expelled the demon, the true source of the girl's knowledge. This, of course, ended the girl's career, rendering her worthless to her owners. They had Paul arrested for wrecking their lucrative business.

This intriguing story affirms three points: first, accurate fortune telling really happens; second, it has possible links with the demonic; and third, it usually has a commercial side.

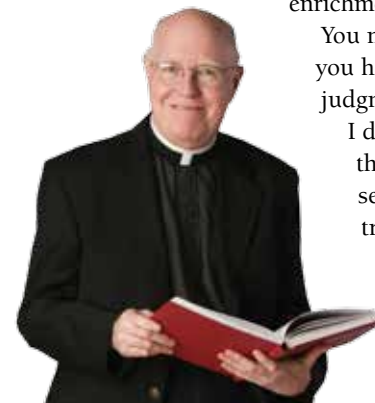
If we take these points seriously, then prudence requires us to avoid toying with the occult. Even "playing" with an Ouija board, attending a séance "just for fun," or following the advice of a fortune teller at a carnival may open the door to dangerous forces. Such activities, even when treated as jokes, accustom us to turn away from God and to place our trust in very unfriendly forces. Sad to say, many can attest to the reality of these dangers.

I hasten to add that sacred Scripture and Catholic tradition acknowledge genuine prophecy, which may include future knowledge. Holy people endowed with this gift differ from fortune tellers in that they discreetly use their God-given gifts for God's purposes alone, not for their own enrichment or the manipulation of others.

You mentioned that someone said you had committed a mortal sin. That judgment strikes me as premature.

I don't know you; but based on the tone of your question, I sense your sincere openness to truth. What you did years ago was done without mature understanding. Now, however, I trust you will see these things more clearly in the brighter light of Catholic faith.

Thanks for asking! ■



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