

The Ouija Board: A Game or a Gamble?

by Fr. Robert Allgaier

One day, after speaking to a group of High School students about the dangers of dabbling with occultic activities, such as Ouija boards, I asked if they had any questions or comments. In a subdued voice – and without a hint of sarcasm or levity – one boy raised his hand and said, "I had something...happen...to my friend and me when we used a Ouija board." The room of teenagers was hushed as he explained what happened. They had used the board "just for fun" and didn't expect anything to happen. They were wrong.

The planchette, seemingly under its own power, zigged and zagged slowly across the board, moving from one letter to another, spelling out the word "B-E-E-L-Z-E-B-U-L." Not recognizing this word, the boys wrote it down on a piece of paper and went immediately to another room to show it to the first boy's older sister. As she stared at the paper, the color drained out of her face. She asked, "What are you doing?" He replied, "My friend and I were playing with a Ouija Board." She implored him, "Put it away and don't ever use it again." This girl recognized the name and feared for her brother's safety. Three of the four gospels relate the story of the scribes who accused Jesus of invoking this arch demon from hell in order to perform His miracles. Many Scripture scholars believe it to be one of the names attributed to Satan himself.

Unsettling though these accounts are, skeptics would caution us not to believe them too quickly. "Isn't it possible," the skeptic would argue, "that the boy simply made up the story to impress his friends?" Yes, it's possible, but not all that likely. Years ago, before I began exploring Ouija Boards and the spiritual world more closely, I might have been inclined to agree. Once I began to see how powerfully the spiritual world influences our material world, however, and began to hear more such stories, I became convinced that there's more to Ouija Boards and other forms of divination than meets the eye.

If this were an isolated incident, it might be tempting to seek natural explanations for the boys' experience. Unfortunately, stories like this are far too common among those who experiment with Ouija Boards and other such "games." Many young people realize this only after they've placed themselves and others in danger -- spiritually, psychologically, and even physically. Allow me to explain what the Lord has to say about such activities, expose the dangers of divination and outline what steps to take if you know someone who has begun a journey down this dangerous path.

Divination?

Divination is any activity that seeks to obtain hidden knowledge or information from sources outside the material world: sources such as angels, demons, and deceased humans (The word "occult" means hidden or secret). Divination differs from prayer in that it goes outside the natural ways God reveals His will to us. It seeks to take short cuts around God's plan and obtain answers to our questions without going first to God or to the angels and saints who intercede for us.

The practice of divination began in ancient times, but there are many popular methods still in use today. Some of the more prevalent forms include Ouija Boards, spiritistic séances, palm reading, numerology, tarot card reading, fortune telling, psychic hotlines, tea leaf reading, crystal gazing, certain forms of witchcraft, magical incantations, sorcery and astrological horoscopes. Each of these activities seeks to acquire either information about the future, knowledge beyond a person's natural abilities (clairvoyance) or power outside God's providence.

God has already revealed everything we need to know about our present and our future through Divine Revelation and the Church; anything else He wants to tell us comes to us via prayer and spiritual discernment. In other words, God has already established safe channels for us to pursue when we seek answers to life's questions. Divination, even if done in ignorance or for fun, is a way of stepping outside God's plan for us. If this is done deliberately, with full knowledge and consent of the will, then the offender is guilty of grave sin.

There are many passages in the Bible that specifically condemn or warn against engaging in divination. Although some of the particular forms of divination noted in Sacred Scripture are not as popular today as they were in ancient times, the principles behind God's condemnation remain the same today as they did the day God spoke

them. Repeatedly, the Lord warns His people not to imitate their pagan neighbors by divining. It can lead to the worship of nature and even demonic powers, and expose people to other grave dangers.

Taking its cue from Sacred Scripture and the constant tradition of the Church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states the matter well: "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" (CCC 2116).

Divination attacks the relationship of trust God wants to have with us. By divining we place our trust not in Him, the Creator, but rather in created things that have no life or even existence apart from Him. One of the most consistent messages that runs the length of salvation history, and resounds throughout the Bible, is that God deeply loves humanity; and we find comfort, fulfillment and peace in him alone (e.g., Psalm 62, Matt. 6:25-34).

People show a profound lack of trust in God by turning to the occult for answers to their most basic needs and deepest desires. This is precisely why divination is sinful. Sin is deliberately choosing something we know will harm our friendship with God. This means above all that God is first in our lives and that we trust Him especially in difficult situations and in important areas of our lives. Jesus instructs us not to worry about our future but to place ourselves in His care when He says, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36). The temptation to turn to the occult for answers by consulting Ouija Boards or other forms of divination should sound a spiritual alarm in us about where we are in our relationship with God and the place He has in our lives. God also forbids His beloved children to divine because He made us and knows well how dangerous it is for humans to enter the spiritual world apart from Him. Contacting spirits through methods other than prayer to God, the angels or the saints removes us from God's protection and opens us up to the malicious influences of evil spirits. Without God, we are left completely unprepared for what can happen to us.

Four Options

What exactly can happen? We can begin answering that by looking at the four types of pure spirit beings who we know inhabit the spiritual world: God, angels, disembodied human souls and demons (Mortal human beings are also, by nature, "Spiritual beings" who have physical bodies, but we're speaking here just about those who are pure spirits). Let's consider each of these categories.

God: Since God has forbidden us to divine, and commands us to seek Him through means He has established for this purpose (e.g., Divine Revelation, His Church, prayer, the beauty of nature, etc.), He would not contradict His own moral law by using divination to communicate with us.

Angels: The only desire a holy angel ever has is to serve and obey God. Although angels are able to communicate with humans by means of divination, the holy angels would never disobey God's will by doing so. God has forbidden humans to divine. Therefore, holy angels would never communicate with us that way. If the angels ever do speak directly to humans, it is always at God's command and for a specific purpose (cf. Luke 1:26-38).

Deceased humans: Couldn't a departed human soul use divination in an attempt to contact the living? No. Our faith teaches us that this cannot be. Once a soul leaves its body, it experiences its particular judgment then goes to one of three places: heaven, hell or purgatory. Part of being a physical and spiritual creature means that we use our physical bodies to communicate with other physical creatures on earth. Humans have no natural power, either in this life or in the next, to communicate with the material world apart from their bodies. Any such ability would have to come from either a preternatural source (an angel or a demon) or a supernatural source (God Himself). Neither God nor the angels would use their powers in the context of divination for reasons explained above. Evil spirits have no control over souls in heaven or purgatory, and souls in hell are cut off from the material world by merit of their eternal separation from God. In other words, since a soul remains in hell forever, it cannot leave, even spiritually, once it has entered. Therefore, our only conclusion can be that if a deceased soul ever should appear to a living person on earth (this seems to have happened to some of the saints), then it is at God's initiative and for a specific purpose (a request for prayers, for instance). No type of divination fits this scenario.

Demons: These creatures have both the power and the motive to answer human attempts to communicate with the spiritual world through divination. Demons are spiritual creatures (angels) who maliciously rejected God's loving offer of eternal life and now dwell in eternal separation from him in hell. The demons hatred of God is so intense that it is unlikely the human mind can even conceive of it. Demons were once beautiful and brilliant angels made by God to know Him, love Him and serve Him eternally in heaven. Does this sound familiar? It should, because God made us for the same purpose. Since they have rejected God's loving offer and have completely separated themselves from God -- the only source of true love -- demons are incapable of either receiving or giving love. Demons burn with a cold and intense hatred of God and everything that reflects His love and presence. Since humans are made in God's very image and likeness, there are no other creatures in the material universe that remind demons more vividly of God. Hence, next to God and the holy angels, humans are the beings most hated by demons.

Once we realize this, it becomes much easier to see why evil spirits want to communicate with humans through divination and encourage its use. One particularly clever way of doing so is to market Ouija Boards and other forms of divination as harmless games to be used for entertainment and enjoyment. Evil spirits stand to benefit greatly when humans divine. They know that when a person begins to divine, a spiritual door or portal opens between the material world and the spiritual world. (When talking about spiritual, intangible realities, it is useful oftentimes to employ images or analogies. The "portal" is used here analogously; cf. Eph. 6:10-17.) Without divination, demons must normally content themselves to work in the world indirectly, mostly by enticing humans to sin. The more humans sin, the more evil that is brought into the world, the more influence evil spirits have.

But even in a world totally obsessed with sin, demons must still work indirectly. That all changes when the portal between the material world and the spiritual world is opened. The most common way this happens is through divination. Once that door is opened and a demon "gets a foot (cloven hoof) inside," resealing that portal can be remarkably difficult. In addition, the more often a person divines, the more times the door is opened. This increases opportunities for demons to work directly and can also increase the frequency and intensity of a demon's activity.

Who Wants to Divine?

People divine for a number of reasons. The first type of person uses divination to contact what he or she believes to be spirits of deceased people or other types of spiritual beings. Rarely do these people believe they are in danger of contacting evil spirits, but some experienced diviners acknowledge certain risks.

Remember "*The Exorcist*"? It's a highly sensationalized and less than accurate movie portrayal of an exorcism that occurred in the 1940's. There is, however, an important part of the story that is related correctly. In the actual case, a twelve-year-old boy was introduced to the Ouija Board by his aunt, who was a witch. Some time after teaching her nephew how to use the board, she died, and the boy tried to contact her spirit via the Ouija board. Instead of contacting his dead aunt, he unwittingly contacted demons who disguised themselves as friendly spirits. St. Paul warns us that "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). In another place, Jesus tells us that the devil "has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Believing that these beings were his friends, the boy continued to contact them by using the Ouija Board. Eventually, he became possessed by multiple demons. A formal exorcism finally freed him of what must be the most spiritually terrifying experience a human being can endure on earth.

There are people, however, who really do see Ouija Boards and other forms of divination as mere "games." Some tell me, "I used a Ouija Board and nothing happened to me!" Whenever someone says this I ask them a simple question: "How do you know?" We've already stated that these spirits are liars, and we know that they are vastly more intelligent than even the most brilliant humans. We know they are invisible and can be directly revealed to us only through some supernatural revelation by God. Under the right circumstances, they could choose to reveal themselves, but would only do so if they determined that would do more harm and damage than keeping themselves invisible -- and to the untrained, undetectable say this not to frighten people who have innocently divined in the past. Rather, it is a warning to those who might be tempted to treat divination as a game. Just because the diviner has not seen sensational signs of demonic involvement does not mean that all is well.

Friends Don't Let Friends Dabble in the Occult

If you or someone you know has been involved in divination, or has been in contact with an evil spirit, what should you do? People are often scared that they may have allowed unwelcome demonic visitors into their lives by dabbling with practices outlined above. What should people do if they have either innocently or intentionally contacted demons by divining? What if no contact has been indicated even though divination has occurred?

If you have never engaged in any of these kinds of activities, thank God. Do not experiment with them, even for fun or out of curiosity – not even once. Remember that you do not have to believe in evil spirits for them to seriously harm you. If a child touches a hot stove the pain is surely felt, regardless of what the child knew or believed beforehand.

What Next?

When I talk to teens about Ouija Boards and other kinds of divination, I often find a fair number who have tried it at least once. Among these I also find those who have dabbled in these practices more often. "What should I do?" they ask. Here are several practical suggestions:

(1) Don't assume that you haven't contacted the spiritual world just because there's no tangible evidence of activity. Demons will work quietly as long as it's to their advantage. If people aren't aware of a demon's presence, it can work much more easily.

(2) Stop all divination immediately and get any partners or friends with whom you've done these things to stop too. The sooner the divination ceases, the less potential for harm to all involved and the sooner any damage that has occurred can be repaired.

(3) If you knew that such activity was forbidden by the Church but you did it anyway, go to the sacrament of Penance very soon. Make a good confession, telling Jesus through the priest what you did and resolving with the help of His grace never to do it again.

(4) Receive the Eucharist. Holy Communion is the sacramental presence of Jesus -- His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. After going to Confession, receive the Eucharist reverently. Satan both hates and is terrified of Christ, especially in the Eucharist.

Stay Close to Christ, He Will Protect You

Once someone chooses to cooperate with God's grace and stops divining, Satan will be furious and may counterattack in several ways. He'll probably tempt the person to start divining again. He may use the imagination and play on fears, or he may use one's peers and associates to exert subtle pressure to take up the bad habit again. Another tactic he may use is discouragement. The person may for a time find himself unusually discouraged and perhaps even depressed for no identifiable reason. Plans may suddenly fall through without adequate explanations. Things and activities he once enjoyed are no longer exciting, and things he knows are bad and harmful may begin to appear more attractive. He may experience an unusual sense of confusion and doubt about issues in his life, often associated with worries about whether he should have stopped divining.

Forewarned is Forearmed

A demon may attempt to use any method available to him to entice or scare a former dabbler into resuming divining activities. And in a manner worthy of diabolical genius, opposite tactics may be used at different times, depending on the circumstances in one's life. Beware of what may happen, because forewarned is forearmed. The most important thing to remember, however, is that once you turn to the Lord in sincerity, it becomes His battle. If you arm yourself properly, you have absolutely nothing to fear! If you've experienced preternatural events, call a priest immediately and thoroughly explain the phenomena. He will be in the best position to assess the situation and offer you advice and resources in your area. It would also be helpful to enlist the corroboration of any witnesses to these events. Depending on the circumstances, a prayer for deliverance may be warranted.

Some people are involved with divination for a long time before they recognize the dangers. As long as a person is alive, it's never too late. Christ is always ready to redeem us from our sins and the darkness with which we envelop ourselves through our choices. His power working in His Church can do immeasurably more than we can ask or

imagine (cf. Eph. 3:21). Through centuries of spiritual warfare, the Church has gained a great deal of experience in dealing with evil. These suggestions come from the rich treasury of the Church's wisdom.

One of the great treasures we have as Catholics is a visible Church that continues Jesus' mission of teaching, preaching, healing and sanctifying His people. We benefit not only from the Church's two thousand years of experience in proclaiming the gospel and fighting evil; we benefit as well from the power that Christ entrusted to His Church. To the extent that we are in communion with the Church, we gain access to the tools and weapons Christ desires to give us as we battle evil in our communities and in ourselves.

Prayerfully reflecting on God's warnings both in Scripture and through His Church, we can see that all forms of divination not only are seriously sinful, but also seriously dangerous. (Scriptural passages that specifically condemn or denigrate divination and related occultic activities include Lev. 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27; 1 Sam. 15:23; 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6; 2 Chron. 33:6; Is. 8:19-20; Jer. 14:14; 27:9-10; 29:8-9; Ezek. 12:24; and Gal. 5:19-21. Cf. Deut. 18:10; Jer. 29:8.)

Our loving Father in heaven warns us of these dangers for our protection and well-being, both spiritual and physical. Let us pray that those who, unaware of the dangers, are involved with divination will soon realize that this "mere game" can be the gravest risk and the greatest gamble of their lives.

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