



DIOCESE of LA CROSSE

MEMORANDUM—August 22, 2003

TO: Priests, Permanent Deacons, Pastoral Associates, and Administrators
of Catholic institutions in the Diocese of La Crosse

FROM: The Most Reverend Raymond L. Burke +RLB

REF: Advisory of the Dangers of New Age and Occult Spirituality

Last February, the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue released the Instruction, *Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life*, concerning the dangers of New Age spirituality. The document warns of the increasing appeal of forms of spirituality that act as an alternative to the Christian faith. The study of the document is the occasion for us to examine our consciences, especially those of us who have the care of souls, with regard to our fidelity to the virtue of religion, which gives God the honor that is due to Him alone and, correspondingly, guards us from giving attention to other spiritual powers who work against Him.

In applying the directives of *Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life* to the Diocese of La Crosse, it is my solemn duty to warn the faithful against the presentations of the occult, which often are considered a form of entertainment or amusement, but in fact pose a great danger to the salvation of souls.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly condemns all involvement with occult practices: "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 (Cf. *Deut.*, 18:10, *Jer.* 29:8). 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" (CCC, no. 2216).

Many excuse the use of such devices as horoscopes and the *ouija* board on the grounds that their use is merely a diversion. Such forms of entertainment, however, prevent us from understanding the real dangers that are present in all forms of the occult. These dangers very frequently are discovered only when it is too late. Furthermore, there is the question of scandal, especially to the young, when such practices are promoted as harmless games.

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The faithful, especially parents and those who care for the young, must exercise special vigilance over books, movies and other forms of entertainment which present occult practices in an attractive manner. More and more, Christianity and Christian spirituality are completely absent from the media. The spiritual forces which our children are likely to learn about in current literature or in the theater are associated with the New Age or the occult.

In light of the above, I raise a particular concern regarding the popularity of the “Harry Potter” books and movies, the popularity of which has been further increased by the publication of the fifth book in the series. While the media has given significant coverage to the statement of one of the writers of *Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life*, who approved of the Harry Potter books, the media gave muted coverage to the warnings of Father Gabriele Amorth, official exorcist for the Diocese of Rome, who criticized the spiritual and moral content of the books. Father Amorth’s decades of experience in directly combating spiritual evil gives him a privileged position to make such a criticism.

Many defend books such as the “Harry Potter” series, stating that magic is natural to children’s stories, appealing as it does to the imagination. It is one thing, however, to tell stories that include magical elements, as fairy tales do. It is quite another to tell stories in which human beings obtain magical powers, which they use for control of the world around them. The latter has always been associated with witchcraft. And in the Christian literary tradition, from Shakespeare’s *MacBeth* to C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*, witchcraft has always been regarded as evil.

In *Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life*, we read that “*magic*, or the occult . . . is a means of obtaining power. . . . At the centre of occultism is a will to power based on the dream of becoming divine” (*JCBWL*, no. 2.3.4.1). The *Catechism* articulates this well, saying: “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” (no. 2117). Any form of entertainment, appealing to the curiosity of the young, that would make witchcraft interesting and attractive, cannot be regarded without grave concern.

I would remind those, who are deeply attached to forms of entertainment or recreation that focus on New Age or occult forms of spirituality, of the larger cultural context, that is, of the deepening erosion of the Christian faith in a world which often lives “as if God does not exist.” We must ask ourselves: Do our children know God’s miracles worked in the lives of the saints, or do they know only the magical deeds of imaginary heroes? Do our young people know the richness of our traditional devotional life, or do they experiment with New Age forms of mysticism to satisfy their spiritual needs? Do we ourselves toy with New Age or the occult, without recognizing the inherent spiritual harm in these forms of entertainment?