

Your Questions: Do souls wander the earth, haunt people?

I read your answer regarding reincarnation in the WCR (Oct. 4). If we are judged right after death and sent to either heaven or hell, what happened to Lazarus' soul while he was dead for four days before being brought back to life by Jesus? And how are we to explain the wandering on earth of souls after death who harass people in their homes to the point where priests have been called upon to do exorcisms?

John's Gospel (ch. 11) gives us the story of Lazarus resurrected by Christ. When we express our beliefs through the Apostles' Creed we say that Christ descended to the dead or to hell. This is not the hell of fire but rather the underworld or Sheol, the abode of the dead.

Lazarus was in Sheol, meaning he was dead. For the Israelites, Sheol was a place of total destitution (Psalm 88.66) where the dead could no longer praise God (Psalm 6.6) nor hope in God's justice (Psalm 88.11ff) or fidelity (Psalm 30.10).

There seem to be only slight glimmers of belief in the after-life in the Jewish tradition before the second century BC. Christians believe that Christ's death and resurrection overcame death and evil. Those who had died prior to Christ's coming waited for Christ to open the gates of heaven and bring eternal life to all as he brought life to the dead Lazarus.

The Church believes that after death, souls are judged and sent to the appropriate place in what is called the particular judgment. Hebrews 9.27 confirms "man is destined to die once and then to face judgment." It is heaven for the followers of Christ (2 Corinthians 5.6-8) and hell for those who do not receive Christ as saviour (Matthew 25.46; Luke 16.22-24).

Therefore, souls of the dead are obviously not roaming the earth and when houses are haunted it is not the souls of the dead. Who then?

GOOD AND EVIL SPIRITS

The Bible clearly teaches that there are good and evil spirits or demons who are active among humanity. Possession by evil spirits is evident in New Testament times and Jesus overcame their power by expelling them from the possessed.

Sickness often was attributed to the devil, but the message is Christ healed people of spiritual and physical illness.

The Church has affirmed the existence of evil and evil spirits and acknowledged their negative effects. We are called to work with God to struggle against evil in whatever form it takes, whether it be social injustice, poverty, sickness, dishonesty, etc.

Vatican II tells us: "Humanity is obliged to wrestle constantly if it is to cling to what is good" (Church in the Modern World, n. 37). The Church insists that all of creation is under God's domain and evil cannot suppress our freedom and responsibility. God sent Jesus to save us from the power of evil and he overcame evil by his death and resurrection.

There is much more than this brief statement can say about evil spirits in the world. We cannot blame everything on them. We can't always say, "The devil made me do it."

Spirits who roam the earth and haunt houses often torment the living but sometimes they seem to act in good ways. According to Paul: "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11.14).

When the Pharisees accuse Jesus of being possessed in John's Gospel, Jesus retorts that the devil is "a murderer from the beginning. . . . There is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his nature, for he is a liar and a father of lies" (8.44).

USE OF EXORCISM

Since the goal of evil spirits is to deceive, there is no reason not to believe they can possess living human beings or impersonate deceased persons and haunt dwellings. That is why the Church continues to use exorcism.

In the final analysis, what can be said is that whatever or whoever haunts earthly dwellings and whatever we hear in the media, it is not the souls of human beings that remain on earth after their physical death. There is no evidence in Scripture that souls of the dead can remain on earth to haunt.

However, there are many references in Sacred Scripture to the evil spirit, the devil roaming the earth.

(Other questions? Email: zdunich@telus.net)