

# Séances and Psychics Increasing, Experts Warn

by Una McManus

BALTIMORE – Séances, the practice of trying to contact the dead, can be found almost everywhere in the media these days. The March 5 issue of *Time magazine* profiled John Edward, a former ballroom-dancing instructor whose nightly TV show "Crossing Over with John Edward" is the highest-rated program on the Sci Fi Network. And the recent hit movie *The Sixth Sense* featured a boy medium who transmitted messages to the living from the other side. Popular American mediums Sylvia Browne, John Edward and George Anderson frequent TV talk shows, and each has written a New York Times bestseller. In fact, a whole publishing empire is flourishing around "channeling" and "spiritism."

But, Catholic experts on the occult warn, this widespread dabbling in the world of séances and psychics is anything but a harmless diversion. "Exact statistics are impossible to come by," said Father Lawrence Gesy, consultant on the occult for the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the author of *Today's Destructive Cults and Movements*. "But, as Jesus said, look around and see the signs of the times. Turn on the TV and see the ads for psychic advisors, tarot card reading, psychic hotlines, books 'channeled' through mediums Séances and every other type of occult activity are increasing. While the exact number of séances performed in America isn't available, a 1996 Gallup poll found that 20% of respondents think that such a thing might be possible.

Another American expert on the occult, Jesuit Father Mitchell Pacwa, said that the "old style" séances of the 19th century – gloomy parlors, levitating tables and so-called "spirit" rappings – have largely been replaced. "The old-style séances made popular by the Fox sisters in 1849 have given way to New Age 'channeling,'" he said. "In the old séances, the spirits would, supposedly, rap or tap out messages. These days, the medium goes into a trance and invites the spirit of the departed or the spirit of an advanced spiritual master or even the angels to speak through him or her."

## Credit Card Mediums

Mediums are as close as your telephone or computer, and most take credit cards. Father Pacwa said prices commonly range from \$180 to \$240 an hour. Megastar medium Sylvia Browne charges \$700 for a 30-minute telephone session, according to her telephone announcement. Browne did not respond to the Register's requests for an interview, but her Web site reveals that this "cradle Catholic" believes mediumship is her God-given mission. "To help Sylvia with the mission, God gave her a psychic ability that is unmatched by anyone, which is evident to all who have seen her work on television shows," the Web site claims. "Many times she has appeared on the Montel Williams Show, Leeza, Unsolved Mysteries, etc; where her astonishing insights and communications with the dead are nothing short of miraculous."

George Anderson, also born Catholic and who claims in his own promotional literature to be "recognized by many people in religious orders," has allegedly been communicating with the dead for over 40 years. For 25 years, Anderson has worked with bereaved families to facilitate contact with their deceased loved ones, a practice that he says brings healing and comfort. He also claims to have "channeled" various Catholic saints, including St. Therese, St. Rita and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Anderson's Web site describes his work as "helping those who hurt learn to cope through mediumship, understanding and hope."

This contention – that mediums provide solace and guidance to the living by contacting their dead friends and relatives – is a standard justification of mediums. But while many mediums claim to be helping people and some use Christian and Catholic language, the Catholic Church strictly warns the faithful against séances and consulting mediums. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "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 readings, 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" (No.2116),

But when the occult is so prevalently marketed as entertainment and as comfort for the bereaved, many contemporary Americans may wonder why the Church is so adamant in its teaching. In his *Modern Catholic Dictionary* the late Jesuit Father John Hardon explained that "behind the Church's attitude toward Spiritualism is the concern that a Catholic would expose himself to the risk of actually dealing with the evil spirit. The assumption is that if fraud or deception are excluded, and manifestations occur that are beyond natural explanation, the active agent in these cases is neither God nor any one of the good spirits (whether angelic or human) but demonic forces that are sure to mislead the Catholic and endanger the integrity of his faith."

Father Gesy, who has helped thousands of disillusioned occultists and New Agers during the last twenty-three years, warns, "The [bereaved] person may be comforted at first, but those feelings fade. He may go back to the medium or perhaps become more deeply involved with the occult. We now that these spirits are not of God. God is not channeled. Nor are the saints, angels or souls of the deceased. For people who dabble in the occult, the end result is darkness, confusion and, often despair."

The correct way for Catholics to address the loss of loved ones is straightforward, Father Gesy explained. "We pray for our dead, that their souls may be at rest," he said. "But we certainly don't make attempts to contact them or use a medium to relay messages from that person. We may ask the deceased to help us or invoke the intercession of the saints – but that's a completely different thing."

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Una McManus writes from Columbia, Maryland

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