

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Lectionary: 115

Reading 1 - 1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a

At the mountain of God, Horeb, Elijah came to a cave where he took shelter. Then the LORD said to him, "Go outside and stand on the mountain before the LORD; the LORD will be passing by." A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD—but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was fire—but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound. When he heard this, Elijah hid his face in his cloak and went and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Responsorial Psalm - Psalm 85:9, 10, 11-12, 13-14 R. (8) Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

Reading 2 - Romans 9:1-5

Brothers and sisters: I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Gospel - Matthew 14:22-33

After he had fed the people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. At once Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught Peter, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" After they got into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Summary

This week's homily focuses on the theological, historical, and scriptural insights regarding the Catholic Church's stance on "the invisible world," specifically addressing the concept of 'ghosts' as presented in the Gospel of Matthew and the Nicene Creed. Central to this teaching is the rejection of dualism—the false belief that the material world is evil and the spiritual world is good—and the affirmation that God is the creator of "all things visible and invisible." While the Church acknowledges the reality of the spiritual realm (including angels, demons, and the potential for extraordinary manifestations of deceased souls), it maintains a strict protocol of caution. Modern Catholic orthodoxy distinguishes between the permissible belief in the "communion of saints" and the forbidden pursuit of the occult, divination, and spiritism. The Church prioritizes natural explanations for supernatural claims and warns against an "unhealthy fascination" with dark spiritual forces, emphasizing that all extraordinary manifestations occur only by divine permission and should never be sought through human means.

The Catholic faith is inherently mystical, acknowledging a world that is largely invisible. However, this mysticism is bounded by a reliance on God's sovereignty. Interaction with the invisible world is seen as a gift of divine providence rather than a field for human curiosity or control. The ultimate goal of the Christian life is not the seeking of apparitions, but the recognition of Christ's presence in the world, leading to the confession: "Truly, you are the Son of God."

Today in the Gospel, we have a continuation of last week's story about Jesus feeding thousands of people. Immediately after Jesus *made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.*

The Meaning of 'Pneuma'

The Greek word for the "ghost" disciples saw refers to a spiritual apparition.

Visible and Invisible

A Catholic Guide to Ghosts and the Supernatural

The Gospel Encounter & Historical Context



Jesus Validated Their Reality
Jesus corrected their theological conclusion, not their belief that spirits exist.

A Culture of Spirits
First-century Jews, Greeks, and Romans all held diverse beliefs about the dead.

Catholic Doctrine & Spiritual Boundaries

The Creed Affirms the Invisible
The Greek word for the "ghost" disciples saw refers to a spiritual apparition.

Catholics profess belief in a created realm beyond ordinary human perception.

Exceptional Divine Permission
God may permit deceased souls to appear for specific, wise spiritual reasons.

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God may permit deceased souls to appear for specific, wise spiritual reasons.

Rejection of the Occult
Practices like divination, mediums, and horoscopes contradict trust and reliance on God.



The disciples, during the 4th watch of the night¹, are far out on the lake fighting a strong headwind and battling a heavy sea. They literally tormented in their efforts to row the boat across the waters. Then they see Jesus approaching them walking on the lake. They become more terrified, thinking him a ghost. *Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.* Characteristically, Peter responds first: *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.* “Come”, says Jesus, inviting him to leave the shelter of his boat and go to where the wind and waves are. Peter starts to make his way to the Lord, who is in the wind and the waves, but his fear is too much and he begins to sink. Peter cries: *Lord, save me!* Jesus and Peter step into the boat and the wind drops. Peace and calm return. They understand and believe. *Truly, you are the Son of God.*

A ghost? Really?

When we proclaim our faith together in the Creed, we begin by saying that “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, **of all things visible and invisible.**” In so saying, we are making a comprehensive theological claim about the scope of divine creation that emerged specifically to combat ancient heresies. This formulation was essential because it rejected dualism, the false notion that some realities exist beyond God’s creative power or that matter itself is inherently evil. The ‘invisible’ realm refers to the supernatural order, what lies beyond ordinary perception. The invisible dimension, therefore, includes the world which we can’t see, encompassing spiritual realities like angels, demons, heaven, hell, and purgatory... and ‘ghosts’. With this in mind, let’s have a closer look at the experience of the disciples in today’s Gospel reading.

The term ‘Ghost’ is an umbrella term that unfortunately hides important differences that existed in the various cultures of the 1st Century. Those few words in the Creed capture how we ought to understand the reality of the world in which we live. ‘Ghosts’ are real. *“When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. “It is a ghost,” they said, and they cried out in fear.”* The Greek word underlying this account is *pneuma* (spirit) and appears consistently across the walking-on-water episodes and the post-resurrection appearance. The disciples’ initial confusion wasn’t irrational; they witnessed something that violated natural law and required explanation. Yet in both instances, Jesus doesn’t correct their vocabulary but their theological conclusion. He wasn’t denying the existence of spiritual apparitions / manifestations, he was insisting on his own embodied reality and identity.

Their reaction shouldn’t be surprising since the Jews, Greeks, and Romans all had beliefs about spirits, apparitions, and the continued existence of the dead. Judaic popular and apocalyptic beliefs during the Second Temple period² envisioned the unseen world filled with active spiritual forces, angels, and demons. So, it’s no surprise that first-century Jews widely believed in the reality of disembodied spirits, demons (shedim), and the lingering presence of the dead. Beliefs which were also heavily influenced by surrounding Hellenistic culture. Although, these beliefs weren’t uniform, the Gospels and contemporary writings from the period do show that people easily mistook physical beings for spirits, confirming that spectral concepts were a normal part of folk belief at the time.

The Pharisees affirmed the existence of angels and spirits and the resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees rejected the existence of spirits or an afterlife altogether. The Torah, for its part, explicitly outlawed inquiring of the dead or practicing sorcery, creating a tension where spirits were assumed to exist. Interacting with them was viewed as a grave religious transgression. The primary scriptural narrative

¹ During the fourth watch of the night (3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.) in high wind conditions on the Sea of Galilee, horizontal visibility is limited to a few hundred yards to a couple of miles at most, because of the wind-stirred spray; as well as the astronomical night and pre-dawn hours which provide zero ambient light; and the steep hills and cliffs surrounding the basin, which sits over 600 feet below sea level, cast deep shadows, blocking out distant shore contours. In addition, water clarity drops to near zero due to heavy sediment churning. The Sea of Galilee is relatively shallow, having a max depth around 200 feet, meaning high winds rapidly agitate the bottom silt and churn the water into a muddy, opaque froth. Finally, the wave action and breaking whitecaps make any potential mirror reflection or light penetration possible, therefore making it impossible to see beneath the surface or track objects in the water.

² The Second Temple period lasted for about 600 years, from 516 BCE to 70 CE. It started when the Second Temple was built in Jerusalem after the return from the Babylonian exile. It ended when the Roman army destroyed the temple in 70 CE

involving a such a transgression was the account of King Saul using the Witch of Endor to raise the ghost of the prophet Samuel.

Greek religion and philosophy included many ideas about the dead: souls in the underworld, spirits connected with tombs, apparitions, dreams, and beings called daimones. Origen, writing about Greek and other peoples, notes that many believed the human soul continued to exist after bodily death and that some associated apparitions with tombs.³ Greek thought was diverse, however. “Demon” did not originally mean exactly what the Christian word demon means today. In Greek usage, a daimōn could refer to a spiritual being, sometimes benevolent or divine, whereas Christian writers increasingly used “demon” for an evil spirit. Lactantius describes this difference when discussing beings whom pagan philosophers and poets sometimes called gods and sometimes demons.

The Romans believed in spirits of the dead and household or ancestral spirits. The Lares, Manes, and Penates could be understood in different ways—as household guardians, ancestral spirits, or divine beings. Arnobius³ reports that the Roman scholar Varro variously identified the Lares with the dead, spirits of the air, or “ghosts” and protective spirits of deceased persons. Roman society also practiced forms of divination and necromancy. Tertullian mentions peoples who visited tombs seeking oracles and describes attempts to represent or summon the dead.

Catholic orthodoxy does not require denying that someone could have an extraordinary encounter that appears to be the presence of a deceased person. Although, the Church emphasizes that deceased persons are not ordinarily wander about among us as ‘ghosts’ and that any perceived encounter ought to be met by us with caution. Catholic teaching distinguishes between:

- The continued existence of the human soul after death, which the Church affirms.
- The resurrection of the body, which is central to Christian faith;
- Apparitions permitted by God, which are possible but not ordinary or under human control;
- Necromancy or spiritism, which the Church rejects.

The Catechism rejects “conjuring up the dead”⁴ and consulting mediums as forms of divination because they attempt to gain hidden knowledge or control apart from God. The Church also distinguishes prayerful invocation of the saints from trying to evoke spirits through magical techniques. Catholic teaching affirms that the human soul survives bodily death. The Church also affirms the communion of saints. We believe that death does not destroy the spiritual bond among the members of Christ, therefore the blessed can intercede for those on earth, and the faithful may pray for the dead. We also believe that it is not metaphysically impossible that God might permit a deceased person to appear or communicate in some extraordinary circumstance, even while the soul itself necessarily remains in heaven, hell, or purgatory. Scripture itself contains unusual appearances of the departed, though such events are exceptional and must not be turned into a general theory about ‘ghosts.’

³ A [Christian apologist](#), flourished during the reign of [Diocletian](#) (284-305). [St. Jerome](#) says, in his [Chronicle](#), that before his [conversion](#) Arnobius was a distinguished rhetorician at Sicca in Proconsular Africa, and owed the [gift](#) of [Christian faith](#) to a [dream](#).

⁴ 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. 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. These practices are even more to be condemned when accompanied by the intention of harming someone, or when they have recourse to the intervention of demons. Wearing charms is also reprehensible. Spiritism often implies divination or magical practices; the Church for her part warns the faithful against it. Recourse to so-called traditional cures does not justify either the invocation of evil powers or the exploitation of another's credulity.

A person may possibly experience an apparition associated with someone who has died, if God permits it; but the Church does not affirm that every such apparition is truly the deceased person. We must distinguish between an apparent 'ghost encounter' and:

- A likely natural explanation such as misperception, dream, grief, memory, sleep-related phenomena, or another psychological or physical cause.
- A genuine apparition permitted by God, possibly connected with a saint or with a soul needing prayer, although such an interpretation requires prudence and evidence.
- A demonic deception: an evil spirit could imitate a deceased person. Catholic tradition teaches that demons are real spiritual creatures and can deceive human beings.
- A fraudulent or fictional report.

The early Church Fathers engaged substantively with the question of whether spirits of the dead could appear to the living, particularly regarding the famous episode of Samuel's ghost. Justin and Origen believed that Samuel's spirit genuinely appeared to Saul when he consulted the Witch of Endor, while Tertullian and Jerome interpreted the supposed appearance as demonic deception rather than a real manifestation of Samuel's soul. This disagreement reflects a fundamental theological tension—whether God permits departed souls to interact with the living, or whether such apparent visitations are actually demonic impostures.

They also developed broader theological frameworks for understanding spiritual apparitions. According to natural law, no soul can leave heaven or hell temporarily or depart purgatory before purification is complete; however, God may permit departed souls to appear on earth for wise reasons—such as enabling saints to help the living, warning them through visions of the lost, or allowing souls in purgatory to obtain prayers. St. Thomas Aquinas even proposed that God may have granted saints a permanent power to appear on earth whenever they choose.⁵ St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Gregory of Nyssa both affirmed that souls of the deceased benefit greatly from the prayers of the living and from liturgical commemoration. Rather than dismissing ghost-belief as superstition, the Fathers integrated it into a comprehensive theology of the afterlife, the communion of saints, and the efficacy of prayer for the departed. This framework preserves divine justice—souls receive their proper judgment and location—while maintaining God's sovereignty to accomplish his purposes. An appearance isn't a violation of the soul's state but an exercise of divine permission operating *within* that state. God's communion with the saints transcends the boundaries between earthly and eternal life.

The Catholic Church teaches that disciples of Christ ought to avoid an unhealthy fascination with the occult, magic, and demonic forces, warning that such obsessions violate the First Commandment and can open individuals to spiritual deception. The Church teaches that seeking hidden knowledge or supernatural power through non-divine means reflects a desire for control that contradicts trust and reliance on God.

We are to lead people to that moment when they can fall to the ground before Jesus present and active in their lives and say with full recognition: *Truly, you are the Son of God.*

⁵ Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on the Sentences*. 1256.

Glossary of Key Terms

• Communion of Saints: The spiritual union of all members of the Christian Church, including the living on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the blessed in heaven.
• Daimon: A Greek term for a spiritual being; in ancient usage, it could be benevolent, but in Christian contexts, it became associated specifically with evil spirits (demons).
• Divination: The practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means, such as horoscopes or mediums; strictly prohibited by Church teaching.
• Dualism: The heretical belief that reality is divided into two opposing forces, typically portraying the material world as evil and the spiritual world as good.
• Fourth Watch: The final period of the night in Roman timekeeping, occurring between 3:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m.
• Lares/Manes: Roman terms for household guardians or the spirits of deceased ancestors.
• Necromancy: The prohibited practice of "conjuring up the dead" to obtain information or influence events.
• Pneuma: The Greek word for "spirit" or "breath," used in the Gospel to describe the disciples' perception of a ghost or apparition.
• Second Temple Period: The era of Jewish history from approximately 516 BCE to 70 CE, during which various beliefs about the afterlife and spiritual forces flourished.
• Spiritism: The attempt to communicate with or evoke the spirits of the dead through magical techniques or mediums.

Mark Allan Powell, ed., "[Ghost](#)," in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), [327–328](#).

Joseph T. Kelley, [101 Questions and Answers on the Four Last Things](#) (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), [16](#).

Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, [Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Chapters 1–25](#) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996–2012), [2:377](#).

William E. Addis and Thomas Arnold, in [A Catholic Dictionary](#) (New York: The Catholic Publication Society Co., 1887), [369–370](#).

Edward Hanna, "[Purgatory](#)," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al. (New York: The Encyclopedia Press; The Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1907–1913). [See [here](#).]

James J. McGovern, ed., in [Catholic Pocket Dictionary and Cyclopedic](#) (Chicago: Extension Press, 1906), [96](#).