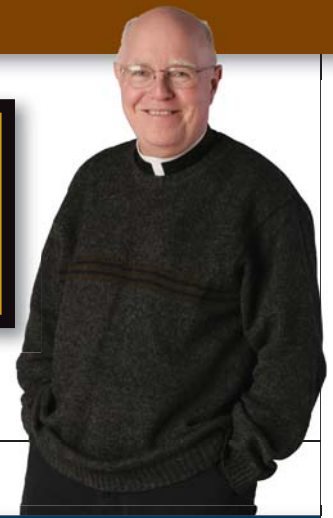


Dear Fr. Kerper

Do ghosts really exist?



►► **Dear Father Kerper:** It seems like there is a lot of evidence that there are ghosts that haunt people's homes. Do ghosts really exist?

Thanks very much for your question about the reality of ghosts. Some people, of course, would brush it off as a silly thing to ask, but it actually leads us to consider anew two key Christian beliefs: first, that every human person is a *communion* of body (matter) and soul (spirit); and second, that human life continues forever after bodily death, first as a bodiless soul, and eventually as a resurrected human being with body and soul reunited. To put your question differently: can these bodiless souls – ghosts – appear and intervene in our lives?

We have to clarify the term “ghost.” I am not speaking here about menacing spirits that terrorize movie characters. This English word “ghost” comes from the German word “geist,” which broadly means “spirit,” including non-personal things like the “spirit of the age” and so on. In English, “ghost” specifically means the soul of a dead person that becomes discernible through our eyes, ears, nose (some ghosts smell!) or skin.

In theory, billions of ghosts potentially exist because billions of human beings have “lost” their bodies through death. Strictly speaking, these disembodied souls are not ghosts because they have never become discernible to any living people. Only those few souls whose presence is seen or felt by others are truly ghosts. And their existence is plausible. But here we must proceed with great caution.

Let's look at Sacred Scripture. The Book of Deuteronomy condemns anyone “who consults ghosts and spirits or seeks oracles from the dead” (cf. Deuteronomy 18:11). And two passages in the Book of Leviticus warn against using “mediums” to contact the souls of the dead (cf. Leviticus 19:31 and 20:6, 27). These legal prohibitions demonstrate that at least some people believed in ghosts. If they didn't, why prohibit attempted contacts?

The Old Testament also has a few ghost stories. The most famous one is in I Samuel 28:8-20. Here the inspired writer tells how King Saul met with the ghost of the prophet Samuel. In 2 Maccabees 15:1:16, you can read about the encounter between Judas Maccabeus, the great Jewish patriot, and the ghost of Onias, the dead high priest.

These Old Testament laws and stories affirm that the people of Israel believed that human souls survive after death and can have contact with the living, at least occasionally.

Now, let's see what theology contributes to the matter. To be frank, theologians haven't written much about ghosts. But some have, notably St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas.

If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail dearfrkerper@parablemag.com.

According to St. Thomas, the souls of the dead, *who are in heaven*, can indeed manifest themselves to the living on their own initiative. Such appearances, however, are not “hauntings” meant to terrify or tease people. Rather, these saintly apparitions occur only to bring comfort and encouragement, never fear. And remember “saint” means anyone who dwells with God, not just those officially declared “saints” by the Church. In light of this, it is theoretically possible for loved ones, like deceased grandparents or children (even babies), to become sensibly discernible to us. While such occurrences may be rare, there is no reason to rule them out. In a sense, these spirits are “ghosts” but they are benign, even loving.

Now, we move to the matter of malicious ghosts, the nasty type which pop up in horror movies and novels. St. Thomas clearly states that the souls of the dead, who are not in heaven, can never appear to the living *without* God's consent. But why would God ever allow ghosts to “haunt” people?

St. Thomas gives two reasons: first, as a warning; and second, to seek spiritual assistance from the living in the form of prayer or good deeds to advance the dead person toward fulfillment in God. The ghosts or “non-saints” may annoy people but they can never harm them.

Of course, one can read somewhat credible stories about destructive “hauntings,” but St. Thomas always insisted that these “ghosts” were definitely *not* the souls of dead people, but something else, most likely demons masquerading as ghosts.

This brief exploration about ghosts leads us to a very positive point: The spiritual bonds between the living and dead, especially those who love one another, are deep, unbreakable, and mysterious because they are rooted in the Body of Christ, which embraces the living and dead. We have nothing to fear, for God governs all things – including “ghosts” – with wisdom and love.

– Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth