

**Homily for Mass for the Seminarian Gathering with their parents and siblings
Villa Maria Retreat Center
Springfield, Illinois**

July 28, 2025

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My dear priests, brothers in Christ:

As your Bishop, it is good to be with you for this annual Mass for our Seminarian Gathering with their parents and siblings.

Last week I attended the Napa Institute Summer Conference in Napa, California. The theme of this year's conference was, "Doers of the Word: Faith, Hope, and Charity in the Work of Personal Conversion and Renewal of the World." I have been attending the Napa summer conferences for several years now, and it is always a wonderful occasion to listen to inspiring speakers with keen insights into our Catholic faith, reconnect with long-time friends, and meet new people who are energized and enthusiastic to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

On the flight to San Francisco on my way to this year's conference, the plane had a television screen on the back of every seat, so I could not help but notice that almost everyone around me was watching a movie. That in

itself was noteworthy, since almost nobody was reading, but most were just passively absorbing whatever the entertainment world was feeding them.

Not only were most people watching movies and videos, but what they were watching was also telling. The person next to me was watching the movie “Wicked,” featuring a green-skinned woman in the role of the Wicked Witch of the West. A person across the aisle was watching a Dracula movie. Another person was watching a movie in which a woman was visiting a fortune teller who was saying, according to the closed-caption on the bottom of the screen, “I see a great danger in your future.”

Witches, vampires, and fortune tellers. That says a lot about our culture. Lest we think that such characters only inhabit the world of fiction, an article that appeared in the July 16, 2025, print edition of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL reported that a “college sophomore in Queens, N.Y., did what many around her do when a situation doesn’t go their way: She paid a witch on Etsy to cast a spell. ... Witchcraft and spellwork have become an online cottage industry. Faced with economic uncertainty and vapid dating apps, some people are putting their beliefs – and disposable income – into love spells, career charms and spirit cleansers. Etsy, an online marketplace

for crafts and vintage, has long been home to psychics and mystics, but the platform has enjoyed new callouts from TikTokers as a destination for witchcraft.”

This is nothing new. People have been looking for mystical help in the wrong places for centuries. Today’s first reading from the Book of Exodus (Ex 32:15-24, 30-34) tells us that Moses and Aaron were leading the Hebrews who had been freed from slavery in Egypt by the power of God. While Moses went up the mountain to pray, Aaron was left in charge but failed to keep the people faithful to God in Moses’ absence as they succumbed to the temptation to idolatry by molding a golden calf that they worshiped as a god. The first sentence of this reading tells us that Moses sees this scene as he “came down the mountain with the two tablets of the commandments in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, front and back; tablets that were made by God, having inscriptions on them that were engraved by God himself.” As Moses is coming down the mountain, he sees the people violating the very first of the Ten Commandments given by God Himself, which says, “I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me.”

People in our own time need to be reminded that superstitious practices such as witchcraft and fortune tellers are contrary to the First Commandment of the Decalogue. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines superstition as “the deviation of religious feeling and of the practices this feeling imposes. It can even affect the worship we offer the true God” (CCC, n. 2111).

Closely related to superstition are idolatry and divination. “Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc.” (CCC, n. 2113).

The *Catechism* then gives some explicit examples of divination and clearly warns against using them, saying, “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" (CCC, nn. 2116-2117).

Dear seminarians and family members, we need to be aware that superstition, idolatry, and divination are very much still present in our world. We need to guard against these practices in our own lives but also confront them as Moses did when we see people falling into idolatry. They may not literally be molding golden calves, but there are plenty of false gods that people are putting into the rightful place that belongs to the one true God, whether that be personal pleasure, possessions, power, or pride.

According to a quote often said to paraphrase the thought of G. K. Chesterton, "He who does not believe in God will believe in anything." In an age when many people say that they do not believe in God or belong to any religion, it is not surprising that they put their faith and trust in false gods. There is great wisdom in the First Commandment's admonition to avoid "strange gods." There is only the one true God whom we should worship and adore, and who comes to us now in this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.