

“But Father, why can’t I confess online?” asked me a teenager after a session of online spiritual-direction. This digital-native couldn’t fathom why Catholics still differentiate between the physical and the digital, especially given that COVID transformed the digital to our new homeland.

The paper shall cover four aspects. After condensing the theology of the sacrament and the priestly sacramental role, I shall contrast and compare anomalies in the canonical understanding of ‘proper place’ where I shall question the definition of ‘place’ in the digital-sphere. Thirdly, I shall discuss counselling and spiritual-direction as two use-cases which at face-value might be similar to the sacrament. Finally, I shall be analysing digital presence, and whether conveying our presence in substance is enough to fulfil the canonical obligation.

A Catholic Understanding of the Sacrament

That Christ is the primordial sacrament as Aquinas theologised, is no new theology. Schillebeeckx describes Christ as the sacrament of encounter with God insofar as the inbreaking of grace from above. The Church’s role, as the ‘fundamental sacrament,’¹ is a useful instrument in continuing the presence of Jesus, thus making His presence *actually present* by extending His glorified body in the Church. By ‘actually present’ it is understood prolonging and mediating Christ in history. Given this background, the ‘I’ in the absolution formula ‘I absolve you’ is highlighted.

The sacrament of reconciliation

The sacramental role of the priest

Normative Catholic understanding views the priest as acting *in persona Christi Capitis* since it is Christ himself, as the High priest, who acts in the priest, for the latter “lends his tongue to Christ, he offers Him his hands,”² as John Chrysostom chimes. Hence, the priest allows the non-physically present God to continue ministering to the world.³

*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*⁴ notes that the role of the confessor is summarised by the same three themes one finds in the absolution. The priest listens to the weaknesses of the

¹ Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 36.

² Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras 1548–9.

³ Bartunek, ‘What Is the Difference between Confession and Spiritual Direction?’

⁴ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, para. 29.

confessee and provides healing – the liberating dimension; imparts God’s forgiveness on God’s behalf – the Trinitarian dimension; and reinstates in the ecclesial community – the ecclesial dimension. Thus, embodiment and mediation are paramount in this understanding.

The canonical voice

The canonical ban on digital confessions lies principally in Canon 964, and 967, both of which will be engaged in order to provoke questions. Paragraph 1 regulates that the “proper place to hear sacramental confessions is a church.” However, acclaimed canonist John Beal interprets this as saying that this ecclesial sacrament is to be appropriately celebrated, and thus replaces the emphasis on the ‘proper place’ to ‘appropriate place’, thereby weakening the article.⁵

Moreover, the US Bishops Committee on the Liturgy extends the second article by highlighting the need to offer a choice between “face-to-face encounter or the anonymity provided by a screen,”⁶ rather than using the official word ‘grate.’ Can one understand a digital screen as the screen referred here by the Committee? Article 3 does not speak of “necessity” but only of a “just cause,” a fact which most priests around the world would attest against from their personal experience.⁷

If one looks at Canon 736 of the Eastern code, which echoes 964, one notes that 736 has a more positive outlook towards the celebration of the sacrament outside the confessional. Whereas 964 speaks of ‘without a just cause,’ 736 highlights that it can be celebrated outside due “to infirmity or another just cause.” Hence, can the digital space be seen as a just cause?

If a priest will be hearing confessions on a habitual basis in another diocese, Canon 967.2 states that he needs permission from the domiciling ordinary. While the faculty is not limited to the territory of parish or diocese,⁸ priests still need to be granted faculty by their local ordinary. This creates a lacuna in discussing digital confessions, since which diocese would be responsible to grant permission for the priest to hear the confession? Is it where he currently is? Where the respondent is? Where the servers of the service used are? Similar questions are being asked in the online counselling field by Caspar and Berger.⁹

A sacrament of healing

⁵ Beal, *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, 5:1149.

⁶ Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship*, para. 81.

⁷ Huels, *The Pastoral Companion : A Canon Law Handbook for Catholic Ministry*, 124.

⁸ Coriden, *An Introduction to Canon Law*, 132.

⁹ Caspar and Berger, ‘The Future Is Bright’.

While the canonical overture is afforded on the sin and its remission, the sacrament should direct the attention to God's forgiveness. Being a healing sacrament, it is not about merely wiping out sin but involves acknowledging wounds and patiently attending to them.¹⁰ Thus, the sacrament restores humankind to wholeness.

Speaking from a Mediterranean perspective, confessions often take the function of a counselling session.¹¹ Although the similarity between psychotherapy and confessions is strong, essential differences remain.

While for psychology unhappiness is caused by an involuntary process contrary to the individual's will, theologically, sin, being a weak human act that lacks ultimate goodness, is *itself* the cause of unhappiness. This puts the onus on the priest who is to act as a judge – merciful yet a judge nonetheless – of subjective moral rightness or wrongness, while the psychotherapist is often only concerned with the causes of a problem.

A digital culture

Samuel Baker's reflection introduces us to approach digital culture from a McLuhanist perspective. As we use technology, we are changed both in our identity as individuals and as society. Through developing of common worldviews, the digital becomes 'home.'¹²

As technology permeates all aspects of our culture, our families become what Baker describes as 'post-familial'¹³ and thus, move beyond traditional interpersonal family interaction, accommodating instead self-generated types of mediated presence through digital forms. John Dyer furthers that technology is given by God the *Techne*-ologist so we self-transform,¹⁴ but the question remains what impact does technology have on our theology?

This digital shaping is observed in psychology where online therapy is on the increase especially during the pandemic. Moreover, according to Meier, persons with particular stigmas prefer online services and would be more willing to disclose highly sensitive information.¹⁵

Digital counselling

¹⁰ Miller, 'The Healing of the Sacrament of Reconciliation'.

¹¹ From a personal perspective, I note a difference to how Anglo-Saxons confess and Mediterranean. Anglo-Saxons tend to be more sin focused, and mathematically oriented, whereas Mediterraneans tend to be more descriptive and allows the priest to have a voice.

¹² Yust, 'Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children's Spirituality'.

¹³ Baker, 'Who's Shaping Whom? Digital Disruption in the Spiritual Lives of Post-Familial Emerging Adults', 21 November 2017.

¹⁴ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*.

¹⁵ Finfgeld, 'Psychotherapy in Cyberspace'.

Considering the similarity between counselling and confession, I have to root my argumentation on the foremost. In their literature review, Kauer and colleagues confirm that 65% of those sampled have experienced a very helpful online counselling session, and over 90% were very satisfied. Similar results are quoted in Karen-Marie Yust's research which shows that youths feel 29% less shy and 20% more confident online.¹⁶ Moreover, as studied at length by John Suler, online, most feel more disinhibition.¹⁷

Another pressing issue is anonymity, strongly defended in the Canon Law. The Church has long recognised the need to provide a screen for anonymity in physical confessions, so can we posit that the monitor is the new screen, and possibly allows for deeper disclosure?

Digital sacraments

Having discussed digital-culture, let us now discuss sacraments in such culture. As a hermeneutic, I shall borrow from Borgmann's culture of the table, who reflects that the main meal of the day is not a mere consumption of food, but is a *focal point* of our lives. In this understanding, the sacrament, becomes a focal point in our lives which requires us to be present, irrespective if we are present in the flesh or not, as long as we are present: psychologically, socially, culturally, historically and spiritually, as theologian Paul Tillich affirms.¹⁸

Moreover, and here I rely on Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, I believe that we should see liturgy as an icon not an idol. Icons promote transcendence and does not encapsulate reality as idols do.¹⁹ Agreeingly, the standard face-to-face encounter is the fullest expression of Church, but emphatically technologically-mediated presence is presence nonetheless, a theme which has been developed at length by Peter Phillips during the last months. Furthermore, God's kenosis teaches us that presence is a relational category, and thus, any presence is always: incomplete, open, includes an aspect of Christ's absence, and invites us towards the more. Thus, I argue that being present is not tightly knit to being physical.

Conclusion

¹⁶ Yust, 'Digital Power: Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Children's Spirituality'.

¹⁷ Suler, 'The Online Disinhibition Effect'.

¹⁸ Kelsey, 'Spiritual Machines, Personal Bodies, and God: Theological Education and Theological Anthropology'.

¹⁹ Zsupan-Jerome, 'Virtual Presence as Real Presence? Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue'.

Antonio Spadaro highlights that there “are no sacraments on the internet.”²⁰ He basis this conclusion on the fact that the Church “insists that it is impossible and anthropologically erroneous to consider virtual reality to be able to substitute for the real, tangible, and concrete experience of the Christian community.”²¹ Furthermore, he highlights that from the Church and Internet document,²² one can conclude that even though grace can be mediated through digital channels, sacraments cannot be separated from the interaction with the physical world.

However, since it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold on to the notion that we are less present if not present physically, I believe Spadaro’s assertion is too myopic. Byers reminds us of our “media vocation, that of imagining God in the world.”²³ Considering we are God the *Techne*-logist’s reflection to the world, and that technology was envisaged as a positive,²⁴ we are to participate in Christ’s Paschal sacrifice through our technology: by aiding in the restoration of creation through discerning technology as an integral part of God’s healing plan.

In pronouncing the words ‘I absolve you’ the form of the sacrament is fulfilled, and we can speak of a valid sacrament. Considering this is a sacrament of healing, and not merely remission of sins, I propose that the emphasis should be on the actual healing, and thus, if online promotes healing in a digital culture, then, we should seriously consider it.

²⁰ Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Pontifical Council for Social Communications, ‘The Church and Internet’.

²³ Byers, ‘The Embodiment of God and the Disembodied Age: How the Incarnation Informs Our Twenty-First-Century Media Practices’.

²⁴ Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*.