

## Correspondence

# The sacrament of confession during Covid-19 pandemic

### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has drastically changed the way of life where measures and strategies to adapt and adopt have become normative. In a recent correspondence, the author explores the adaptation of the Last Rites within the pandemic. On this note, the paper explores another sacrament that has also adapted and has adopted new ways to deal with a strong restriction against in-person meetups and gatherings. The sacrament of Confession provides a venue for people to seek healing and counseling. While face-to-face and confessional confessions are still disallowed, the Church has found ways to adapt the sacrament within the context of the pandemic.

**Keywords** counseling, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation

### To the Editor:

The Covid-19 pandemic has essentially changed the way people think, behave and act. In all aspects of human life, people have to learn how to adjust; learn new habits while unlearning some old ones. ‘The lifestyle with which we were familiar with may become only a memory’.<sup>1</sup> The post-pandemic scenario does not promise a return to the way things were but an acceptance of the so-called ‘new normal’.<sup>2</sup> While change is constant in human life with or without pandemics, certainly, the Covid-19 crisis has hastened this need to change, not gradually, but drastically. People have to learn how to wear face masks, observe social distancing and wash hands and sanitize constantly. They have to rearrange their homes to workplaces; their daily home-to-office-work routines to home-to-work-from-home set-up.

As the global pandemic requires everyone to change, adapt and adopt new strategies of coping and thriving, religious performances, rituals, and celebrations are no exception. A recent correspondence published in this journal stresses the way ecclesial authorities have adapted the Last Rites within the Covid-19 situation where healthy priests find ways to reach out to Covid-19 patients while observing strict health safety protocols.<sup>3</sup> While the Last Rites is specifically catered to sick individuals, usually the dying and gravely ill, in hope of recovery, healing or spiritual nourishment, the Sacrament of Confession provides healthy individuals a venue for spiritual healing or counseling. But just like any sacramental rite, the

pandemic has also challenged the way this sacrament must be administered and carried out.

The sacrament of confession is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church in which the penitent is absolved from his/her sins after baptism and is reconciled with the community. Canonically, only the priest can administer the sacrament.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally held within a confessional, the Vatican II council has since allowed the option of sitting facing the priest. With face-to-face confession, it allows a more intimate and interpersonal pastoral exchange between the priest and the penitent, but for those who want to preserve anonymity and confidentiality, the option for confession behind a fixed screen is still available.<sup>5</sup> But, the pandemic has made both of these options unavailable. The Church has to find new ways and provide other options for people who want to avail the sacrament of confession.

In his homily, Pope Francis urged the faithful amid pandemic, a personal contrite confession directly to God may suffice despite not seeing a priest. ‘Enumerate your sins, ask the Lord for forgiveness with all your heart, and make an act of contrition . . . Promise him: ‘Later I will confess, but forgive me now.’ And immediately you will return to the grace of God.’<sup>6</sup> In a bulletin, the Church reiterates that the sacrament may still be administered in certain areas depending on the gravity of contagion and within the prudence of the diocesan bishops.<sup>7</sup> Some of the proposed suggestions include having it administered in well-ventilated spaces outside the

confessional, adopting suitable distance and using protective masks while committed to safeguarding the sacramental seal of confession.

In many parishes, drive-thru confessions have become a hit among many faithful. In parish parking lots and open areas, the priests sit on a chair while cars are passing through him. Through an open car window, the priest would hear the confession while maintaining a physical distance. Cars are on queue and are far enough apart to maintain confidentiality and avoid eavesdropping. If there are other persons in the car, everyone else except the penitent is asked to exit the car and sit on a nearby bench.<sup>8</sup> If the penitent desires an anonymous confession, he/she must notify it earlier and the priest will put an eye mask to act as a 'screen' while on confession.<sup>9</sup>

The sacrament of confession is a powerful rite for healing and counseling. It reconnects the person back to one's community through the forgiveness of sins and assures the person of the constant guide of God through the counsel of the priest. Whether personal contrite confession directly to God or through a priest on a drive-up confession, the forgiveness and healing gift of the sacrament is never lost; it is always there although through novel means.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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