

Correspondence

General absolution via livestream? The Catholic Church's position amidst COVID-19 contagion

To the editor,

In a recent article published in this journal, the author explores the sacrament of Confession that has adopted new ways to deal with a strong restriction against in-person meetings and gatherings. In addition, the author expounds that this particular sacrament provides a venue for people to seek healing and counseling.¹ In this paper, I would like to add to this discussion, especially regarding general absolution, which can be given online. Canon Law 960 defines individual and integral confession and absolution as one that 'constitute the only ordinary means by which a member of the faithful conscious of grave sin is reconciled with God and the Church'.²

Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Parish in Quezon City, the Philippines had planned and advertised an 'online general absolution', which would be available via Livestream and was set to take place on 3 April 2020.³ However, even before the event could happen, the parish issued a retraction and an apology correcting that 'general absolution cannot be given via online'. The same statement clarified that it is important that the 'penitent must be physically present—meaning, the priest who absolves and the penitent who receives the absolution must be in the same place'.⁴ This kind of practice is supported by the teaching inscribed in Canon Law 961, paragraph 1, that 'absolution cannot be imparted in a general manner to many penitents at once without previous individual confession'.²

Amid the outbreak of the coronavirus where parishes and dioceses suspending Masses and Confession, a person-to-person contact is a far cry. Is the need to be physically present or the need to hear the priest's voice logically sound knowing that the virus can easily spread through personal encounters? Sacraments must indeed be an encounter between the priest and the person receiving the sacrament and online absolution removes the unity between the priest and the penitents, but is this teaching written on a stone without consideration

that we are in a state of the global pandemic? Now, the Pope speaks, 'addressing the difficulty Catholic priests globally are having in hearing confessions of individual persons affected by the highly contagious coronavirus, the Vatican made clear 20 March 2020 that it is acceptable for bishops to offer general absolution to groups of people as deemed necessary'.⁵

References

- 1 Macaraan WE. The sacrament of confession during COVID-19 pandemic. *J Public Health* 2021. 10.1093/pubmed/fdab193.
- 2 Code of Canon Law, *The Sacrament of Penance (Cann. 959-997)*. https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_li_b4-cann959-997_en.html (5 June 2021, date last accessed).
- 3 Catholic News Agency, *Philippines Parish Cancels 'Online General Absolution.'* <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/44074/philippines-parish-cancels-planned-online-general-absolution> (5 June 2021, date last accessed).
- 4 The Catholic World Report, *Philippines Parish Cancels Planned 'Online General Absolution.'* <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/04/02/philippines-parish-cancels-planned-online-general-absolution/> (5 June 2021, date last accessed).
- 5 National Catholic Reporter, *Vatican Makes Clear: General Absolution Allowed During Coronavirus Contagion.* <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-makes-clear-general-absolution-allowed-during-coronavirus-contagion> (5 June 2021, date last accessed).

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