

Review

# Confession Using Audio Visual, Distance Technologies

Carlos M. Del Rio

College of Arts and Sciences, Bellevue University, Bellevue, NE 68005, USA; cdelrio@bellevue.edu

**Abstract:** Celebrating the sacrament of penance or confession restores a state of grace in a person's soul. This is vital for a life of faith to which all human persons are called, but only Roman Catholic believers can experience. Celebrating this sacrament requires a private and confidential conversation between an ordained priest and a baptized person. By reviewing sensory perceptions, we conclude that being in the "same location" is not necessary for two persons to celebrate penance. As the world adjusted to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, using distance technologies facilitated meaningful communications, including therapeutic conversations around mental health. We believe that using visual technologies can also help celebrate the sacrament of penance or confession. We suggest a pastoral adaptation may help bring absolution to persons from various locations seeking forgiveness. We believe our suggestions are ontologically probable and canonically adaptable.

**Keywords:** confession; forgiveness; distance visual technologies; life of grace; private confidential conversations

## 1. Authority to Forgive Sins

Forgiveness is a powerful gift, but it presumes only the wronged have the "power" to grant it. The sacrament of reconciliation is also known as the sacrament of penance or the sacrament of confession. It is a private and confidential encounter between a contrite person and God through the instrumental "hearing" of the confession of sins<sup>1</sup> by an ordained priest in the Catholic Church in both Roman and Easter Rites (Daly 2013), and is a powerful grace-giving action. Priests do not forgive of their own authority, but only serve as instruments of spoken forgiveness using God's authority in God's name (Daly 2013; Kandler 2017; John 20: 23; The Jerusalem Bible [1966] 2000). But who forgives? Answering this question, along with considerations of instrumentality that encompass the use of technology, can lead to making forgiveness available to contrite persons regardless of their location. Hence, our focus is to advance the possible celebration of confession using distance technologies. This sacramental focus positions us within the Roman Catholic context, and we recognize that additional sacraments and other Christian rituals lie outside the scope of this work.

### 1.1. Theology of the Sacrament of Confession

The authors of the synoptic gospels reported that the only one who can forgive sins is God (i.e., Matthew 9: 5, Mark 2: 9, Luke 5: 23). Jesus took ownership of this function when he forgave the paralytic man, and to emphasize his divine authority and power, he also healed the man. The physical healing Jesus performed was sensible and beyond comprehension to those who witnessed it, but they would forever remember the main point: that Jesus "forgave the sins" of this man. There are other contextual implications to Jesus's healing because it happened on a day of rest and, therefore, was considered unlawful and perhaps punishable. Addressing this, Jesus explained in another scenario that the human being is more important than days of rest, and days of rest were created for humanity (see the brief teleological explanation of humanity in Note 1), not humanity for following blindly the precepts of the law (Matthew 12, John 5, 9).

Taken together, Jesus's actions were not only countercultural (Luke 7: 33–34) to the religious ethos but also radically opposed to its canonicity<sup>2</sup>. Anger toward this set of



**Citation:** Del Rio, Carlos M. 2024. Confession Using Audio Visual, Distance Technologies. *Religions* 15: 214. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020214>

Academic Editors: Stefan Bratosin, Mihaela-Alexandra Tudor and John P. Bartkowski

Received: 2 November 2023

Revised: 24 January 2024

Accepted: 1 February 2024

Published: 13 February 2024



**Copyright:** © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

actions and the personal claim of divinity with the intrinsic authority to forgive sins is what inspired contemporaneous leaders to eventually kill Jesus with Roman assistance. Yet, when Jesus returned from his horrid and murderous death, the first thing he expressed as he opened his lips was “peace” and forgiveness (Luke 24: 36, John 20: 19–26). Breathing on to his disciples, he sensibly wished to convey his Spirit, blowing air on all of them who were present, thus indicating very sensibly that he was giving them the instrumental power to forgive sins in his stead (John 20: 22).

### 1.2. Elements of the Sacrament of Confession

Proximity, intentionality, and spoken words to the people who were present at that time and place were the “sensible” words and actions Jesus used to establish the sacrament of forgiveness. In the Aristotelian sense, the four causes are useful here. The reason for which it happened was so that sins may be forgiven, its final cause. Its efficient cause was the undeniable agency of the resurrected Jesus. For the recipients, receiving forgiveness and the grace to forgive others was the material cause, and the words that unequivocally expressed the formula to forgive was the formal cause.

### 1.3. Peace and Forgiveness

The first fruit of the resurrection of Jesus was “peace” (not rancor, nor judgement for being murdered or for being abandoned to his executioners), together with the gift of an instrumentality to forgive sins through his Spirit. He made his followers his instruments to bring this forgiveness to whoever asked for it. Peace is at the heart of forgiveness. There cannot be true peace without justice that restores fairness and retribution to the human condition, and Jesus’s death was the atonement *par excellence* for restoring universal justice to the human condition. Therefore, it is proper that peace be now offered as essential to the personal forgiveness of persons.

### 1.4. The Fruits of the Sacrament

Forgiveness makes a person wholesome and welcomed into the friendship of God<sup>3</sup>. This is the primary end of the sacrament of confession. It is almost a reset button where all choices and actions that failed to bring about the proper end of one’s humanity no longer exist. Their juridical penalty is forgiven. They are in the past. But new intentional behaviors must replace these actions for change to be effective. At times, for example, the penance of this sacrament asks the person to restore what she took, to reimburse what she misspent, to reach out to the person she ghosted, or to share a meal with the person she ignored. This new life takes as much willful engagement as missing the mark once did.

### 1.5. The Originally Forgiven

The psychological impact of peace as forgiveness, coming from its rightful source, must have been salubrious indeed for Jesus’s followers as he appeared in their midst after his death. The healing and restoration of mental health undoubtedly involved taking away the guilt and the shame that accompanied the traumatic event of witnessing Jesus’s bloody execution. The apostles must have felt powerless, useless, cowardly, shameful, guilty, and outraged at the murder of their friend. They also feared for their own lives. Worse still, their hopes for the kingdom of God would have been suddenly stopped, upending everything they had been learning through the prophets and the miraculous actions of Jesus evincing his divinity and an entirely a new age<sup>4</sup>. Confusion must have set in, in their minds, and the guilt and the shame of abandoning their master to procure their own survival; all these choices were vividly replaying in their minds. But the shocking presence of their friend, who was buried just a couple of days before, whose tomb was sealed and policed, and his presence in their midst—all these contradictory and tragic events—shattered their understanding of the quotidian and once again brought them evidence of the divine power residing in Jesus.

He did not blame them. By clearly articulating “peace” to you, Ειρήνη ὑμῖν) he prevented them from judging one another and gave them a new task: he offered them peace a second time and told them to go forth and forgive others, just as they were being forgiven, and they were made whole again. It must have been cognitively dichotomous to experience so many emotions, among which joy and happiness enlivened each of them. Seeing Jesus alive was all the disciples truly needed. But to prevent a localized gain, Jesus emphasized the point of the new gift, which could not be left in that room but needed to be brought to light and shared with every person they ever ministered. Indeed, the consecration of the eucharist and forgiveness of sins are the two primary ends of the ministerial priesthood, which Jesus established on the feast of unleavened bread. Therefore, the replicability of this salubrious encounter is what helps every penitent to heal when she or he can speak with an ordained priest.

## 2. Sacraments

Sacraments are perceptible spoken words and behaviors through which Jesus shared his grace (the cleansing power of forgiveness) with humanity. These sensible actions operate because of the grace that originates in God and enlivens humanity, not because of the celebrant’s own volition or the recipient’s worthiness or unworthiness. But for sacraments to be effectively celebrated, certain elements must be present: (a) the formula or the uttered words that invoke God’s power, (b) the celebrant or the ordained minister, (c) the matter or the perceptible actions, as well as the recipient to whom the grace is granted, and (d) the proper intent to convey this grace, which originates in God self (see Table 1, originally published in [Del Rio 2015](#)). Forgiveness not only restores the soul to a state of grace, but it also heals the wounds that sin created, providing the absolved penitent with psychological healing similar to the effects of therapy on a personal path to healing and self-actualization ([Devassia and Madsen Gubi 2022](#); [Macaraan 2021](#)).

Juridically, the sacrament of penance (self-punishment) or of reconciliation (appeasement) presumes the confession of wrong moral actions (actions that have missed the proper end of human nature, see Notes 1 and 2) of which the penitent or confessant person has become aware. This awareness further presumes a self-reflective insight which is consonant with the prodigal son’s inner dialogue (Luke 15: 17–21). More specifically, culpa (guilt, shame, and responsibility) and penance (fairness and retribution) in this regard requires an examination of one’s conscience which enables a person to: (a) experience contrition or repentance for doing moral wrongs, and (b) embrace a conviction of reparation for these actions.

By contrast, habitually wrong moral actions may define a person’s character, as humans become what they do repeatedly (see for example, Nicomachean Ethics 2:1 or 1103a15–b25, in [Ross 1999](#)). Sins are essentially morally wrong actions that have the capacity to damage a person’s character (because they are not bringing about the person’s full nature or the proper end of her humanity, see Notes 1 and 2). If they are grave enough, sins have the power to separate the person from an intimate and sincere relationship with God forever. If persistent enough to create a habitual mindset ([Bernacer and Murillo 2014](#)), sins may separate the soul from communion with God in eternal terms. This is hell—an eternal, self-chosen, habitual “separation” from God (for a useful depiction, see for example, [Lewis’ \(\[1946\] 2001\) The Great Divorce](#), where a bishop is so enraptured in giving a lecture that he misses an opportunity to go home).

In the rite of penance, the celebrant or the ordained priest says the words of forgiveness according to the liturgy of the church and has the intention to serve as God’s instrument to forgive the repentant person inasmuch as the person is truly contrite. Usually, the priest issues a penance or atonement that may help repair what the person damaged or to retribute what the person destroyed or stole. But forgiveness is much more than settling a debt. In “the prodigal son” parable, the son’s conscience informing him about what he did, and his following through with seeking forgiveness, is a sine qua non requisite for the story to be successful. It is within the human conscience that true repentance and transformation take place. When the son arrives home, a celebration emphasizes his father’s forgiveness, which

washes away the guilt and the pain the son experienced. Similarly, forgiveness cleanses and repairs the soul to a state of joyful grace and celebration, for what was lost has been found: the love of the Father (Luke, 15: 11–32).

**Table 1.** Sacraments’ Forms and Matters.

Sacrament	Form	Necessary Matter	Agent	Purpose	Efficient Cause	Material Cause	Formal Cause	Final Cause
<b>Baptism</b>	Trinitarian formula	Liquid substance (including saliva)	Any Human Person—theistic	Re-generation into the life of grace	God in the person of Jesus	Sensible Sign	Sanctification though spoken prayer	Communion with God
<b>Confirmation</b>	Consecratory Prayer	Consecrated Olive Oil (Holy Chrism)	Bishop or delegate	Re-affirmation of life of grace and conferral of spiritual gifts	God in the person of Jesus	Sensible Sign	Sanctification though spoken prayer	Communion with God
<b>Eucharist</b>	Anaphorae—Words of Institution—for all, not the many	Unleavened Bread and Red Grape Wine	Bishops and priests	Sharing in the paschal meal and renewed purpose in life’s journey	God in the person of Jesus	Sensible Sign	Sanctification though spoken prayer	Communion with God
<b>Priesthood</b>	Laying on of hands	Human person regardless of gender—in a state of grace	Validly Ordained Bishop	Sharing into ministerial priesthood and vocational satisfaction	God in the person of Jesus	Sensible Sign	Sanctification though spoken prayer	Communion with God
<b>Marriage</b>	Spoken Vows	Public/private commitment—with open intent to procreation and loyalty to spouse—generativity, paternity, and monogamy	Human Couple	Establishing a sacred covenant and vocational satisfaction; loyalty, intimacy, sexuality	God in the person of Jesus	Sensible Sign	Sanctification though spoken prayer	Communion with God
<b>Confession or Penance</b>	Prayer of Absolution	Contrition for moral crimes	Validly ordained Priest and baptized penitent	Forgiveness of sins and psychological healing	God in the person of Jesus	Sensible Sign	Sanctification though spoken prayer	Communion with God
<b>Extreme Unction</b>	Prayer for the sick	Consecrated Olive Oil (Oil for the sick)	Priest or delegate	Forgiveness of sins and physiological healing	God in the person of Jesus	Sensible Sign	Sanctification though spoken prayer	Communion with God

*Note:* “Form” means the spoken words or consecratory prayers, “matter” means the quiddity of the sacrament.

### 3. Technology and Sensory Perception

Technology has evolved, and what was once a dial-tone telephone, for example, has now been replaced by smart devices or cell phones. The ubiquitous nature of cell phones has facilitated human communication, connecting people from different locations and time zones. Some of these phones allow video communications, bringing together people from various locations and time zones as well. Time differences and distances no longer seem to be an obstacle to bringing people together on a single screen at one point in time, relative to each person’s location. Texting also brings people together almost synchronously. The academic literature reveals these communications have therapeutic or healing effects on people.

Whether by making calls or by texting, people now communicate at any time of day and from any location where there is network receptivity. These options for speaking and

being heard clearly between at least two people bring human encounters just as close as being in a single room, where two people can be together at once. Thus, some important questions arise: can this synchronous environment bring people together for the confession of sins by phone during or after a pandemic? Outside of a pandemic, can this work for people who cannot travel to see a priest? Can a person confess her moral wrongs to an identifiable priest who is able to hear and corroborate the contrition the person expresses, to pray together, and to grant absolution? Is absolution, as an act of faith and grace, location bound? Can a device-enabled confession be sufficient for absolution to be granted regardless of geographical locations and time zone differences, despite current canonical restrictions on location?

Among the senses, and in reference to one another, Aristotle taught that vision is first, followed by hearing, smell, touch, and taste (Beare and Beare 1985). The more intimate in terms of perception the more important a sense seems to be. Vision remains the first perception capability among humans (Gregoric and Fink 2023; MacPherson 2011), followed by hearing, which receives speech—the intelligible uttering of one’s voice to convey and share meaning with another person using a common, intelligible language.

The theology of the sacrament of penance (i.e., reconciliation or confession) teaches that through this sensible (perceptible via senses) sign (sacrament), believers who are baptized can seek God’s forgiveness with the assistance of a validly ordained priest who “listens” to their sins and grants forgiveness to them by speaking the “formula” of the sacrament using the latest text for the rite of penance (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments 2015/2; International Commission of English in the Liturgy 1975; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2022; Sacra Congregation pro Cultu Divino 1974):

“God, the Father of mercies,  
 through the Death and Resurrection of his Son  
 has reconciled the world to himself  
 and poured out the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins;  
 through the ministry of the Church  
 may God grant you pardon and peace.  
 and I absolve you from your sins  
 in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
 Amen.”

The matter, or specific whatness of the sacrament, includes: (a) the person (who confesses sins), (b) the sins themselves (whether venial or mortal), (c) the attitude of repentance, contrition, or sorrow for the sins committed, and (d) a genuine desire to do better and to atone.

Can these aspects of confession be shared from different locations and time zones via a phone? By virtue of sight, people can identify one another using video calls. In these environments, people can hear one another and communicate intelligibly using the same language. This language serves as a means to articulate not only contrition for one’s sins, but also an elucidation of these sins. By the same token, by using video calls a priest can “hear” the confession of a contrite individual, perceive visually the person’s facial expressions that corroborate their repentance, and may grant absolution and issue a penance in a way that is audible and visible to the penitent. Is it necessary for both individuals to be physically in the same room? Is it necessary for the priest to touch the penitent? The answer is no in both instances.

Is physical proximity a necessary condition for absolution to be effective? Physical proximity and touch are not a necessary part of the sacrament of penance. The senses that seem to be necessary for the communication to be effective are hearing and vision, and video calls can facilitate their interaction.

Let us consider different possibilities. We presume a person without sensory limitations can see, hear, and speak, and in this way interact with another. Their communication is the effective vehicle of their faith for the confessing and absolving of sins. The main vehicle of grace seems to be the intelligible communication between two persons using the same language, or between persons who can translate and understand what the other person shares. Here, spoken words convey the penitent's sins, regret, guilt, shame, contrition, and a genuine desire to do better, as well as the absolving priest's spoken absolution formula prayer, the imposed penitence, the healing counsel that reminds us of the "prodigal" love of God who is Father. *Hence, it seems the only two senses that seem to be sufficient for celebrating the sacrament of penance are vision and hearing; during this sacrament no artifacts are exchanged or needed, no touch is necessary, and the use of taste and smell are also not needed.*

But let us go further and consider how vision, hearing, and touch may be applicable whether the priest and penitent share the same location or not. First, a fully abled embodied person can see, hear, and touch, and thus communicate effectively with another person. Second, what happens if the penitent is blind?<sup>5</sup> In these cases, hearing suffices inasmuch as the persons can speak verbally and hear what is spoken. Third, what happens if one person has a speech disability, but is not blind? In these cases, sign language that is visible suffices. Fourth, what happens if one person is deaf? In these cases, also, sign language that is visible suffices (Peters 2013). Fifth, what happens if one person is blind, has a speech disability, and is deaf? In these cases, vibrations or tapping may be sufficient for communication. In all these cases, confession or penance is possible to the extent that the priest and the penitent are able to communicate and may share proximity, including cases where deaf priests may still be able to minister to others who may be able to communicate using sign language (Peters 2013).

In cases where the penitent and the priest may be in different rooms or locations, technology may be helpful. For each of the senses, video (for vision), audio (for sound), and augmented reality (for vibrations perceptible to touch) may be useful. *At this level of interaction, we reasonably suggest sharing the same location and proximity is not necessary for celebrating confession or penance.* We witnessed this during the pandemic, when priests offered "drive-through confessions" in open and ventilated parking lots. So long as an effective communication allowed priest and penitent to communicate, sins could be forgiven from a "safe" distance (see relevant discussion in Peters 2013, pp. 522–23).

Conclusively, intelligible communication that is preferably private is the effective means for the celebration of confession, and distance technologies may be sufficiently adjuvant. Asking how far apart a priest and a penitent can be to celebrate confession may not be as theologically meaningful as asking: can they effectively communicate to celebrate this sacrament? From this perspective, physical distance is not an impediment, and therefore using technology may bring absolution and healing to the souls of people in different locations (nursing home, hospital room, palliative care unit, prison cell, and parish, for example), perhaps including across continents. *Based on empirical evidence, we argue that technology can help bring together two human souls engaged in the sacrament of penance, regardless of location or time zone, inasmuch as they can clearly communicate to celebrate this sacrament.*

#### 4. Adapting to the Signs of the Times

As we cope with the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic, sacramental life remains vital for the church of God (Macaraan 2021). During lockdowns, people adapted (some more painfully than others) to missing the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. In the early stages of the pandemic, priests made themselves available by the side of parking lots to hear the confessions of drivers whose cars came close enough for the priest to hear what they confessed. No touch was needed, and in many instances the priest did not need to "see" the person to "hear" sins and grant absolution. This is particularly true using contemporary confessional rooms that give privacy to each penitent.

Perhaps, as vehicles in parking lots helped people come to confession, phones can continue to be effectively used to bring forgiveness to people who remain at home or incarcerated, for example. It seems that making the grandeur of this sacrament available to penitents is much more important than an emphasis on ritualistic proximity for its celebration. Perhaps it is prudent, within the Church's pastoral emphasis, to adapt to these evolving times and make use of technology for the provision of sacramental life to those who need it and whose faith may lead them to call the priest on the phone and ask to be heard in confession (Peters 2013).

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, mental health services also adapted to meet the clinical needs of people. As with confession, human senses and intelligible communication were consistently facilitated using distance technologies, particularly through video calls using Zoom, for example. Other pastoral adjustments included the broadcast of the Eucharist using video linked to parochial Facebook posts, for example. But, unlike the requisite for the physical commulgation, as in the case of the Eucharist, confession can be facilitated using distance technologies, inasmuch as intelligible, private communication between priest and patient can be achieved.

The Spirit of God moves in mysterious ways, and it encourages people to reach out to priests, perhaps seeking confession, perhaps in instances where distance must not matter. In these instances, technology can help. The prodigal son story is successful inasmuch as the son becomes introspective and listens to his conscience, where the Spirit of God speaks to each of us. As the prodigal son nears home, resolved to confess his transgressions, forgiveness reaches him before he even arrives and welcomes him home. By and large, let the development of technology help the Church minister to the needs of people, regardless of location, through the synchronous instrumentality of smart phones.

## 5. Recommendations

We primarily encourage further academic dialogue and investigations that may cover other sacraments and the advancement of technology, encompassing an integration of philosophy to inform theological discoveries with probable canonical and pastoral implications. The COVID-19 pandemic played a pivotal role in increased, synchronous online communications using video technologies, with more than 300 million daily encounters using video tools (Evans 2020; Peters 2020; Thorp-Lancaster 2020). Similarly, work meetings using some of these ancillary technologies also grew exponentially (Karl et al. 2022). In this rapidly moving context, the mental health paradigm adapted rapidly, as did higher education institutions and other professional services. We suggest the Church perhaps ought to adapt as well, and authorize priests to "hear" confessions of people who seek forgiveness, particularly when they cannot meet face to face. Other professional services where people cannot meet face to face began using distance technologies to maintain the benefits people received from them. It is only reasonable to revisit the theology of the sacrament of confession and grant modifications so people who cannot travel to see a priest may still be able to celebrate this sacrament. There are currently over 50 million people over 50 years of age in the United States of America. Many of these people may not be able to travel to see a priest during scheduled office hours.

Just as the human person is entitled to seek help for their mental health, for example, and its delivery has included distance technologies to benefit persons who cannot be in the same physical space as their providers, we reason that a penitent can also receive the forgiveness of her or his sins using distance technologies. Currently, the only limitation is the canonical expectation of regionality, where ordained priests may minister only to people in their localities. But there is nothing pernicious or theologically inchoate about suggesting the use of distance technologies to meet a larger pastoral charity desideratum, to bring forgiveness to those who cannot travel to see their priests for reasons of privations, including lack of transportation, hospitalization, hospice care, poverty, incarceration, war, declining physical health, advanced age, and so on.

Every human person is called to a life of grace (see Notes 1 and 2), and this is more probable for practicing Roman Catholic believers (from Eastern and Western Rites) because they have access to sacraments. Nevertheless, forgiveness must be made available to all who seek it. Furthermore, adjusting to advances in technology, priests can learn the technical skills needed for using distance technologies for procuring the welfare of penitents who seek for, or need, absolution, but who may not be able to meet face to face, as illustrated above. Doing so is perhaps a feasible pastoral reality for the present and the near future. For example, in comparing the effectiveness of online and in-person therapy, being able to form a “working together” alliance is consistently the best predictor of therapeutic change (Allredge et al. 2021; Horvath and Symonds 1991; Flückiger et al. 2018; Martin et al. 2000). What matters here is that regardless of location, we have empirical evidence to show how coming together is crucial for people to find healing, and this is becoming a reality due to the use of distance technologies. Similarly, we posit that forgiveness through absolution cannot be limited to being in the same location. Instead, distance technologies can be helpful in making this salvific act a reality for people who do not share a location with an ordained priest but wish to “confess” their moral mistakes. *In fact, we must recognize the internal motion of the human conscience that seeks for forgiveness. Its source is the Holy Spirit. We must recognize this disposition and remove canonical barriers to allow for the possibility of “distance forgiveness”, for, as we know, Jesus did not touch those unto whom he breathed his Spirit and instructed them to use it to forgive others (John 20: 23), particularly when these people seek contritely a change in their lives, which is itself the motion the Spirit has initiated in them.*

## 6. Limitations

Some limitations accompany this paper. The exploration of confession in non-Roman Catholic ritual is outside the scope of this paper. Arguably, we do not explore religious systems or other experiences of the sacred through technology. Our focus is simple: the pastoral implication of advanced technologies for celebrating confession, where a penitent may express contrition and sins to an ordained priest, who may grant penance and absolution. Other considerations lie outside our scope.

Whereas the gospels relate several instances where Jesus forgave sins, some of which we mentioned above, it was only after he resurrected that Jesus conveyed his wishes and authority to forgive sins. In no other instances was Jesus recorded to have said “. . . receive the Holy Spirit, . . .” (John 20: 22–25) for the ritual forgiveness of sins. The church (both Catholic and Orthodox communities) preserved this authority through the rite of ordination of priests and bishops, who succeeded the original apostles. No other branch or sect of Christianity can claim this historical and sacramental lineage, and thus this paper is limited by this historical fact. This does not imply other communities do not celebrate a similar sacramental, but the presentation of a detailed canonical historicity is outside our scope.

Whereas written confessions per se are not permissible, and perhaps possible only if the penitent reads these sins to a priest, it seems the outward manifestation of contrition and the spoken formula of absolution are necessary for the sacramental celebration of reconciliation. Distance confessions may also be possible, for example using radio in warfare situations (de Arza 2020). Yet, we have explained how this distance communication among two moral agents or persons is possible using current technologies, inasmuch as they allow penitents to express their sins to an ordained minister. Our argument is that regardless of location, a penitent and a priest ought to be able to communicate and celebrate a rite of reconciliation as distance technologies continue to evolve and make this pastoral opportunity possible. After all, the Shepherd leaves his 99 sheep and “goes after the one that is lost” (Matthew 18: 10–14). Many people come to mind as being in need of absolution: people who are homebound, in nursing homes, homeless, in war zones, in prison, in psychiatric wards, ill at home, or simply facing busy life schedules (business people who are constantly traveling but desire to seek for forgiveness, parents in two-earner homes with young children, surgeons who spend over 10 h on their feet operating on someone, ER



physicians who are constantly striving to preserve lives, substance use clinicians who work with people back to back daily); all these people ought to be able to schedule a distance confession to seek for the restoration of grace in their souls.

This paper is not a comprehensive exegesis or an exercise in systematic theology, nor a canonical analysis of sin, fairness, and retribution. Instead, this brief essay is only a two-fold contribution: (a) a reflection on how, as a species, we have adapted through technology, and (b) a pastoral recommendation to use technology for bringing forgiveness of sins to people who may be in different locations from ordained priests. This proposition presumes that ordained ministers receive training in the use of technology and its impact on the pastoral care of people, including its usefulness for sacramental confession. Points of consideration for this training include, if using a computer system, securing a private server, individual user credentials or passcodes, privacy of information and private environments to instantiate the seal of confession, strong internet connectivity and ample bandwidth for video and audio, and the expression of clear intent to use a device for confession. Doubtless, as technology advances into augmented reality and 3D environments and opportunities for encountering and celebrating the transcendent attributes of God become more plausible, other aspects of education and competency must be discussed.

## 7. Pastoral Implications

Celebrating the sacrament of confession or penance restores a state of grace in a person's soul. This Church teaching is vital for a life of faith to which all human persons are called, but only Roman Rite Catholic believers can experience this gift through a duly ordained priest, including Roman-Eastern Rite Church members, and Orthodox communities. Receiving grace is *de facto* a gift from God, and this further presumes a human openness to divine revelation which is manifested in the Word of God. Factually, the "spoken" Word of God brought about reality as we know it, and as we have yet to know it. The Father's creation and redemption is complete in the person of Jesus, his spoken words, and his behaviors. By speaking, God brought about all creation, and by taking human flesh, God brought about redemption by the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism.

It follows that the verbal expressions and behaviors of the Word-made-flesh contain substantive revelation from, and of, the Father. In the case of forgiveness through absolution, Jesus sensibly breathed on his disciples and said "receive the Holy Spirit, to whomever you forgive their offenses, they are forgiven . . ." (John 20: 23). We know that apostolic preservation of orders makes this gift of reconciliation readily available to contrite persons through ordained presbyters and their bishops, the heirs of the apostles, who followed Jesus faithfully.

What follows from this spoken authority that Jesus passed on to his disciples? We summarily posit: primarily, an intelligible communication must happen among persons. From the penitent, a clear expression of sorrow, and a resolution to do better and to restore what was affected through sinful behavior, is sufficient and necessary. From the minister, the formula of the sacrament, the spoken words through which forgiveness is conveyed, is also sufficient and necessary. *Sharing the same location is not necessary, as we have elaborated.* A private and confidential conversation, communication, or confession (speaking in faith) is the sensible act that substantiates the sacrament of confession or penance: ". . . to whomever you forgive their offenses, they are forgiven . . ." This expression is complete. The "spoken words" convey the offenses and the contrition that moves the human heart to communicate with sorrow and to ask for forgiveness; the priest's response of penance and absolution complete the transaction. This constitutes the necessary exchange between penitent and priest, and can be achieved using distance technologies for people who do not share the same location. The absolved soul carries a renewed conversation with God in the privacy of his or her conscience in the intelligent, silent grasp of his or her mind of this state of grace, and in the prayerful life that increases faith and increases hope and charity.

Jesus's spoken words also denote the opportunity for penitents to seek for, and to obtain, forgiveness (Matthew 15: 26–28). The presumption is that persons would come

seeking forgiveness at the prompting of the Spirit; as Jesus stated elsewhere “. . . No one comes to me unless the Father who sent me draws him . . .” (John 6: 44). Therefore, a validly ordained (minister) priest must grant spoken absolution, the essence of the sacrament, as Jesus instructed his disciples to embrace generosity: “. . . proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven is near . . . you received without payment; give in the same way” (Matthew 10: 7–8). Absolution does not belong to the priest or to the Church’s magisterium. Instead, it is a gift entrusted to be “freely” dispensed to those who seek it, as the presumption in Jesus’s expression points prophetically to the probability that persons throughout the centuries would ask for this forgiveness.

The presumption of people coming to seek for forgiveness, moved by contrite hearts, is well depicted in the parable of the prodigal son. But the father’s response in this story is also prodigal about forgiveness and welcoming, just as Jesus’s own prodigal forgiveness immediately following his outrageous murder; he appeared to them in their midst and said “. . . peace to you! . . .” (John 20: 19–21; Luke 24: 36–43). We believe this gift of peace is made complete in the life of sacraments and penance, and remains instrumental for completing the economy of salvation. Using distance technologies may be a pastoral and canonical action that follows reasonably from Jesus’s breathe and the delegation of authority to his disciples and, in turn, to current presbyters and their bishops in this information age.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In an Aristotelian sense, every human action is aimed toward a good. Humans as moral agents act freely and with responsibility, yet always acting toward a goal—the fulfillment of their humanity—in the contemplation of God, also termed the Beatific Vision, as Augustine and Aquinas have argued. In a Christian sense, the aim of a human will is always the good or the satisfaction of its nature, which is ultimately intimacy with God (McKirland 2023), or the beatific vision. Missing the purpose of one’s nature is the notion of sin, like aiming for a desired target but missing the mark because of distracting choices along the way. In this sense, sins are morally wrong actions because they miss the proper end of human nature. These may be venial or mortal, both of which can be forgiven through confession and absolution. Also, in the Paleo-Christian period, confessions were public. A move toward private confessions emphasized the one-on-one encounter between the contrite person and God, whose witness and instrument is the validly ordained priest.
- <sup>2</sup> Here, we must differentiate political actions of the human person used in the collective sense for the establishment and preservation of a common good as outside the theological interest of Jesus. Jesus did not address vicissitudes that originated from these humanly created structures like poverty, enslavement, gender imbalances, loneliness, etc. By contrast, as the canonical and doctrinal structures of this time had become connoted with double standards, prejudice, and injustice, Jesus openly denounced a lack of conscience and prayer. It is in this reflective stage that people learn what choices to make and to avoid to preserve what is enhancing of human nature. Jesus emphasized the perennial importance of human nature and its proper end: eudaimonia. Relatedly, Jesus did not judge the powerless, the sick, women, and all who, by virtue of collective human actions, were already suffering. Jesus only asks these individuals to live a good life by sinning no more after each healing.
- <sup>3</sup> As in the prodigal son, the person has become aware of her condition and wishes to restore her standing with her father. We also know the father is only happy to welcome his child.
- <sup>4</sup> Jesus did not oppose the common good, the political structures, and the civil laws. (These are all intrinsically human choices, as Aristotle taught). In fact, Jesus encouraged people to pay their taxes. He instead wanted everyone to recognize how important are all persons, particularly the minusvalid, the sick, the ones who struggle to become better every day. He did not care to judge sexuality, but to model generosity in welcoming people as humans who share in the same natural disposition to live a good human life, leading to the Beatific Vision as the highest good that can truly provide eudaimonia to each human person.
- <sup>5</sup> Only men who are not disabled are ordained to the ministerial priesthood. There is no instance where men who look and act like men have been ordained if their senses are not fully operative, or if they are missing a digit, for example. Yet, anecdotally, I had a classmate in seminary who missed a thumb through a farming accident. He was ordained in late 20th century. One can only imagine accommodations ought to be made to include other persons who may otherwise have physical impairments to serve as ordained ministers.

## References

- Allredge, Cameron T., Gary M. Burlingame, Chongming Yang, and Jenny Rosendahl. 2021. Alliance in group therapy: A meta-analysis. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 25: 13–28. [CrossRef]
- Beare, J. I., and J. I. Beare. 1985. Sense and sensibilia. In *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1: The Revised Oxford Translation*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 693–713. [CrossRef]
- Bernacer, Javier, and JoseIgnacio Murillo. 2014. The Aristotelian conception of habit and its contribution to human neuroscience. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8: 883. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. 2015/2. "Notitiae", *Rediscovering the "Rite of Penance"*. Vatican City: Roman Curia, Congregations.
- Daly, Brendan. 2013. Seal of Confession: A strict obligation for priests. *The Australasian Catholic Record* 90: 2–31. Available online: <https://philpapers.org/rec/DALSOC> (accessed on 23 January 2024).
- de Arza, Jon M. 2020. Long Distance Confession. *Catholic Q & A*. Available online: <https://catholicqa.org/long-distance-confession/> (accessed on 5 January 2024).
- Del Rio, Carlos M. 2015. Catholic priesthood's proper matter: A female presbyterate? *Advances in Social. Sciences Research Journal* 2: 203–24. [CrossRef]
- Devassia, Jinson, and Peter Madsen Gubi. 2022. An exploration of the differences and similarities between counselling and confession, as experienced by counsellors who are, or have been, Catholic priests. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 25: 263–75. [CrossRef]
- Evans, Bob. 2020. The Zoom Revolution: 10 Eye-Popping Stats from Tech's New Superstar. *Cloud Wars*. Available online: <https://cloudwars.co/covid-19/zoom-quarter-10-eye-popping-stats-from-techs-new-superstar/> (accessed on 9 September 2023).
- Flückiger, Christoph, A. C. Del Re, Bruce E. Wampold, and Adam O. Horvath. 2018. The alliance in adult psychotherapy: A meta-analytic synthesis. *Psychotherapy* 55: 316–40. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Gregoric, Pavel, and Jakob Leth Fink. 2023. Introduction: Sense perception in Aristotle and Aristotelian tradition. In *Forms of Representation in the Aristotelian Tradition*. Edited by Juhana Toivanen. Sense Perception. Series Philosophia Antiqua, 161. Leiden: Brill, vol. 1, pp. 15–39. [CrossRef]
- Horvath, Adam O., and B. Dianne Symonds. 1991. Relation between working alliance and outcome in psychotherapy: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 38: 139–49. [CrossRef]
- International Commission of English in the Liturgy. 1975. *The Rite of Penance*. Totowa: Catholic Book Publishing, Inc.
- Kandler, Karl-Hermann. 2017. Luther and Lutherans on confession, "the Forgotten Sacrament". *Lutheran Quarterly* 31: 50–63. [CrossRef]
- Karl, Kathernie A., Joy V. Peluchette, and Navid Aghakhani. 2022. Virtual work meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic: The good, bad, and ugly. *Small Group Research* 53: 343–65. [CrossRef]
- Lewis, Clive Staples. 2001. *The Great Divorce*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. First published 1946.
- Macaraan, Willard Enrique R. 2021. The sacrament of confession during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Public Health* 43: e531–e532. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- MacPherson, Fiona. 2011. Taxonomizing the senses. *Philosophical Studies* 153: 123–42. [CrossRef]
- Martin, Daniel J., John P. Garske, and M. Katherine Davis. 2000. Relation of the therapeutic alliance with outcome and other variables: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68: 438–50. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- McKirland, Christina L. 2023. Jesus, agency, and the life lived well. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36: 762–82. [CrossRef]
- Peters, Edward N. 2013. Video communications technology and the sacramental confessions of deaf Catholics. *The Jurist: Studies in Church Law and Ministry* 73: 513–37. [CrossRef]
- Peters, Jay. 2020. Google's Meet Teleconferencing Service Now Adding about 3 Million Users per Day. *The Verge*. Available online: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/28/21240434/google-meet-three-million-users-per-day-pichai-earnings> (accessed on 9 September 2023).
- Ross, W. D. 1999. *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. Kitchener: Batoche Books.
- Sacra Congregation pro Cultu Divino. 1974. *Ordo Penitentiae*. Vatican City: Sacra Congregation pro Cultu Divino.
- The Jerusalem Bible. 2000. *The Jerusalem Bible*. New York: Penguin Random House. First published 1966.
- Thorp-Lancaster, Dan. 2020. Microsoft Teams Hits 75 million Daily Active Users, up from 44 Million in March. *Windows Central*. Available online: <https://www.windowscentral.com/microsoft-teams-hits-75-million-daily-active-users> (accessed on 9 September 2023).
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2022. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments *Confirms Order of Penance for the United States*. Newsletter, LVII. Committee on Divine Worship. Available online: <https://www.usccb.org/resources/newsletter-2022-04.pdf> (accessed on 9 September 2023).

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.