

Sacramental Encounter

The restrictions imposed by social distancing have greatly disrupted the sacramental life of the Church. Due to a local outbreak of the Coronavirus, Masses and other communal celebrations of the sacraments have been suspended. Restrictions also have been placed on other sacraments as well, including Reconciliation (Confession), Anointing of the Sick and Holy Matrimony.

These realities have prompted several persons to ask about the *remote* celebration of the sacraments. Some have asked, "Can I go to Confession using Skype, FaceTime or over the phone?" A few have questioned whether the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick or Confirmation can be done in a similar way using modern means of communication.

The short answer is that we cannot celebrate the sacraments over the phone or online. They are offered by a minister who is physically present to the person who is receiving the grace of the sacrament through tangible signs such as the bread broken and shared at Mass, the oil smeared on the forehead and palms in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, or the words of absolution spoken directly to the penitent by the priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Prayer certainly can be offered at any distance. Blessings are not restricted by proximity. Truly God's grace is without limit. But, as stated above, the grace imparted through a Sacrament requires that both the minister and the recipient be physically, not virtually, present to one another.

God is present everywhere, to be sure. And the grace of God surrounds us all the time. Yes, it is true that prayer can be offered together from any distance. So, for example, we can have a prayer group using something such as Facetime. And a priest can pray with a person over the phone. But sacraments have specific requirements by their very nature. We cannot anoint or confirm someone with oil online. No one can receive the Eucharist through their television set. And, even though we would be able to hear the words of absolution over the phone, we cannot be truly present to the priest who is speaking the words directly into our ears that we are forgiven that are necessary for sacramental forgiveness.

Many people therefore ask: "What can I do?" If someone truly desires to celebrate the sacraments, but is prevented from doing so, through no fault of their own, the Church offers recourse. Where the faithful find themselves in the painful impossibility of receiving sacramental absolution, it should be remembered that perfect contrition is sufficient. This contrition, coming from the love of God, expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness and accompanied by a firm resolution to have recourse, as soon as possible, to sacramental confession, is sufficient. Through this action the faithful obtain forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones.

Similarly the Church provides for those who are not physically able to receive Holy Communion. Anyone who is deprived of the opportunity to receive this sacrament may still grow in union with Christ. In making a spiritual communion the faithful need simply express to the Lord faith in his merciful love and faith in his real presence in the Eucharist.

Regrettably, there are times when we need the presence of God, but a priest is not nearby or available. In such times we pray and God comes to us in a non-sacramental way. Remember that God is not bound by our sacraments. Even though we know that sacramental grace is received from within them, God's grace always finds a way to satisfy our need.