

# **A Review on the Validity of ‘Confession as a Sacrament’ During the Covid-19 Quarantine**

*Revenendo R. Vargas*

There have been discussions whether the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confessions can be heard during the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). Following the Philippine government’s declaration of Public Health Emergency due to the first confirmed case of Covid-19 (Proclamation No. 922, 2020), the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) concurrently issued statements calling all Bishops and Diocesan Administrators to cooperate and support all precautionary measures that health officials and government leaders offer for peoples’ health and safety (Valles, 2020). Explicit in those statements were guidelines heeding best practices such as hygiene protocol, maintaining a clean liturgical space and fully enforcing “social distancing” measures. Likewise, large gatherings such as sacraments and liturgical assemblies are temporarily prohibited.

Due to the ECQ, the highly anticipated Easter religious experience have been hampered. Church leaders are even calling to consider or lift ban of religious gatherings in some areas (CNN Philippines, 2020). There are reports of a catholic priest who offers “door to door” confession during the ECQ (Lucenio, 2020). A youtube video from the US shows a confession in the parking lot (Associated Press, 2020), while another report reveals a Texas governor issuing an executive order, who deemed churches as “essential services”, prompting the bishop of Texas to reverse its previous banning of priests to hear confessions (Cervantes, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic had brought uncertainties in the lives of the people. It becomes a moment to grapple with signs of hope. Aside from anxieties, however, there were also opportunities to contemplate for signs of God’s presence.

“Signs” are too essential in this time of pandemic. Both secular and religious routines have been destabilized by the lockdown. The yearning for government leaders’ attention has been paralleled by everyone’s desire for the sacramental experiences. While some of the so-called “sacraments of necessity” such as Baptism and Confirmation can be deferred, Eucharist and Confession remain essential in this crisis. This is supported by CBCP’s statement allowing online celebration of the Eucharist, as it reiterates that such measures do not change traditions of the Church but rather temporary precautions during the time of crisis (Valles, 2020). On the other hand, CBCP was explicit in its guideline that Confessions can be heard through the traditional confessional boxes that are still maintained in most churches, where protective cloth shall be installed at the grill where penitent and confessors conduct the confessions (Valles, 2020).

The Catechism for Filipino Catholics (CFC) defines Sacraments as sensible signs (1520), instituted by Christ (1524), to give grace (1527). As a sensible sign, the works performed during Confession confer grace (*ex opere operato*). This grace is derived from the very act itself performed in the sacrament. The very grace produced in the sacraments was originated by Christ, who Himself is the Primordial Sacrament. This means, Christ is the *Source, Primary Agent, and Goal* of the sacramental activity (CFC, 1526). Celebrating the sacraments is an external activity and physical objects are essential for its validity. Every Sacrament consists of two things, *matter*, which is called the element (material or gesture), and *form*, which is commonly called the word (mycatholicsource, 2018; Godfryd, 2016). To distinguish further:

The *matter* and *form* make up the external rite, which has its special significance and efficacy from the institution of Christ. The words are the more important element in the composition, because men express their thoughts and intentions principally by words. "*Verba inter homines obtinuerunt principatum significandi*" (St. Augustine, *Christian Doctrine* II.3; *Summa Theologiae* III.60.6). It must not be supposed that the things used for the acts performed, for they are included in the *res*, remarks St. Thomas (*Summa Theologiae* III.60.6 ad 2) have no significance. They too may be symbolical; but their significance is clearly determined by the words. "In all the compounds of *matter* and *form*, the determining element is the *form* (*Summa Theologiae* III.60.7). (Knight, 2020).

Thus, *form* cannot be altered. These are the exact words expressed and instituted by Christ prior to His ascension. The *matter* on the other hand, offers several and creative approaches or symbols which may be culturally relevant. The *matter* in the sacraments can be modified overtime in accordance with circumstances which may prove validity by the immediate determination of the magisterium. Pope Francis said, "If you cannot find a priest to confess to, speak directly with God, your father, and tell him the truth. Say, 'Lord, I did this, this, this. Forgive me,' and ask for pardon with all your heart." (Willey, 2020). Sins uttered or confessed during the Sacrament of Reconciliation, although words expressed, is not a *form* but a *matter*, a gesture or act of telling sins. From a different perspective, the Pope also stressed the necessity of a confessor as condition for Confession. Priests are signs and their physical presence during Confession proves validity and confers grace.

Without necessarily including the *form* below due to its recognized consistency and certainty (Knight, 2020), the *matter* of the following Sacraments are figured out to determine whether social distancing measures or other health protocols are enforced:

**Baptism-** *matter* is natural water that is poured on the head of the person.

**Confirmation-** *matter* is the imposition of hands and anointing with chrism.

**Eucharist-** *matter* is wheat bread and natural grape wine. Distribution of the communion is done by hand.

**Anointing of the Sick-** *matter* is anointing with the Oil of the Sick.

**Holy Orders-** *matter* is the imposition of hands.

**Marriage-** *matter* is the free exchange of consent between the bride and groom.

The above Sacraments require the specified *matter* with the *form* for their validity. Each of the *matters* demonstrates human interactions with body contacts. These are either communal celebrations. Confession on the other hand **validly operationalizes each part of the rites** in accordance with the CBCP guideline (No. 5) with no breach of health protocol. The prescribed physical distancing measures do not impede the grace of the confession and the absolution it grants to the penitent.

---

## References:

- Associated Press. (2020, April 7). Retrieved on May 10, 2020, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAmM-yaRWeo>
- Castaldo, C. (2020, April 9). What Did the Pope Really Say About Confession During COVID-19? Retrieved May 10, 2020, from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/pope-coronavirus-francis-confession-take-sorrows-to-god.html>.
- Cervantes, D. (2020, April 5). Cervantes: We need Confession as Covid-19 threatens. Retrieved May 10, 2020, from <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1851473>
- CNN Philippines. (2020, May 5). Church leaders call to lift ban on religious gatherings in GCQ areas. Retrieved May 10, 2020, from <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/5/5/CBCP-church-leaders-lift-ban-masses-religious-gatherings-GCQ.html>
- Dictionary : EX OPERE OPERATO. (n.d.). Retrieved May 10, 2020, from <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=33474>
- Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCCE). (1997). *Catechism for Filipino Catholics (CFC)*. Manila: Word and Life Publications.
- Godfyrd, K. (2016, June 23). Matter and Form. Retrieved May 9, 2020, from <https://www.catholicjournal.us/2016/06/24/matter-form/>
- Knight, K. (n.d.). *Sacraments*. Retrieved on May 10, 2020, from <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295a.htm>
- Lucenio, M. (2020, April 24). Philippine priest offers 'door-to-door' confession, communion amid lockdown: LiCAS.news: Catholic News in Asia: Licas News. Retrieved May 10, 2020, from <https://www.licas.news/2020/04/24/philippine-priest-offers-door-to-door-confession-communion-amid-lockdown/>

- Medialdea, *Proclamation No. 922*. (2020, March 8). Retrieved on May 9, 2020, from <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/02feb/20200308-PROC-922-RRD-1.pdf>
- The Sacraments. (2018). Retrieved May 11, 2020, from [http://www.mycatholicsource.com/mcs/pc/sacraments/catechism\\_of\\_the\\_council\\_of\\_trent\\_the\\_sacraments.htm#\"A Sacrament is a Sign\"](http://www.mycatholicsource.com/mcs/pc/sacraments/catechism_of_the_council_of_trent_the_sacraments.htm#\)
- Valles, R. G. (2020, March 10). *Circular No. 20-10 Re: Public Health Emergency-Covid-19*. Retrieved on May 9, 2020 from <https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/cbcp-circular-on-public-health-emergency-due-to-covid-19/>
- Valles, R. G. (2020, March 13). *Circular No. 2—14 Re: Public Health Emergency, Code Red Sub-Level Two-Covid-19*. Retrieved on May 9, 2020 from <https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/public-health-emergency-code-red-sub-level-two-covid-19/>
- Willey, E. (2020, March 26). Pope Francis tells Catholics to confess directly to God. Retrieved May 10, 2020, from <https://www.rcdea.org.uk/pope-francis-tells-catholics-to-confess-directly-to-god/>

\*\*\*

*Revenendo R. Vargas, Ph.D., is a Faculty Member from the Institute of Religion, University of Santo Tomas, and a Faculty Researcher of the Center for Theology, Religious Studies and Ethics, also of University of Santo Tomas in Manila, Philippines.*

*Email: rrvargas@ust.edu.ph*