

# Confession app may be good for the soul

Three young men in Indiana – with the help of two priests – developed a Confession “app” for the iPhone and iPad that will help Catholics prepare better for the sacrament of reconciliation. With a little input from the user, such as age, gender and date of last confession, the app assists with a customized examination of conscience.

Not surprisingly, many secular media have misreported the purpose of the app, implying that users can now go to confession over the phone. It doesn’t work that way, of course; this is not a video game, in which working through a certain number of levels or racking up points for vanquishing villains earns the prize: absolution!

The sacrament of reconciliation is a unique chance for healing. It requires the priest – in persona Christi (in the person of Christ) – to bring the divine healer’s presence to the penitent. But it also requires the human connection. We must be present to each other for the sacramental graces to flow. Some confessionals still have a physical screen between the confessor and penitent, but an iPad display isn’t the same kind of “screen.”

“It’s essential to understand that the sacrament of penance requires a personal dialogue between the penitent and the confessor, and absolution by the confessor who is present,” Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, told reporters. “This is something that cannot be replaced by any application.”

St. John Vianney, the parish priest of Ars, a small village near Lyon, France, is the patron saint of parish priests. He is known for his devotion to the Eucharist and for his near-fanatical availability for the sacrament of penance. He often spent 16 hours a day in a small confessional, saving souls through reconciliation with God. Many priests say that the ability to forgive sins on behalf of Christ is one of the greatest joys of their ministry, and they will often grasp the chance to bring someone back to God if asked to hear a confession.

Most Catholics use the sacrament of reconciliation less frequently than they used to. Penance services with the availability of several priests for individual confession – especially during Lent and Advent and at major events such as the youth rally and march each spring in downtown Baltimore – provide an opportunity to wipe the slate clean.

Unfortunately, some people – especially those who have been away from the sacrament for a while – are not well prepared to examine their conscience, or follow the format for a good confession or pray the act of contrition. In the past, parishes have offered printed guides for those who need them. If a digital application such as the Confession App can help the penitent examine his or her conscience and bring a sinner closer to reconciliation, that’s an effective way the church can embrace new technologies.

In his message for World Communications Day 2009, Pope Benedict said, “The new digital technologies are, indeed, bringing about fundamental shifts in patterns of communication and human relationships.” Technology is a tool that can be used for good or ill, but which can create a great shift in behavior. This new app, used well, can help bring people back to God – but only if they are already willing to open their heart.

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