

**A ZENIT DAILY DISPATCH****Interrupting a Mass for Confessions****Deemed an abuse by the Holy See**

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Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy and dean of theology at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q: I have two questions about the sacrament of penance: 1) Is it allowed to have the sacrament of penance during Mass? I often see some priests, after reading the Gospel, instead of preaching, they leave the altar, sit in the confession box and begin hearing confessions. After confession, they return to the altar and resume Mass. 2) Is it OK for the priest to hear confessions while sisters or brothers sit with him in the same place giving counsel? I have witnessed the situation where during confessions brothers and sisters also put on the cassocks and sit near the priest to give counseling to the penitents. — D.M., Lyon, France

A: With respect to the first question I think we need to distinguish two aspects.

First, is it possible to offer the sacrament of reconciliation during Mass? To this, we can answer with a simple yes. We dealt with this specific point in answers of June 3 and 17, 2008.

Another case is that of the celebrating priest interrupting the celebration to hear confession. This topic is dealt with and deemed an abuse in the instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*:

“76. Furthermore, according to a most ancient tradition of the Roman Church, it is not permissible to unite the Sacrament of Penance to the Mass in such a way that they become a single liturgical celebration. This does not exclude, however, that Priests other than those celebrating or concelebrating the Mass might hear the confessions of the faithful who so desire, even in the same place where Mass is being celebrated, in order to meet the needs of those faithful. This should nevertheless be done in an appropriate manner.”

This document, therefore, requires that any priest hearing confessions during a Mass *not* be a celebrant or concelebrant.

This should be obvious to a priest: The Mass is the highest and most sublime act that the Church possesses and should command the minister's undivided attention.

I have never witnessed the second situation and am not quite sure what to make of it.

If it were a case of offering an option, for example, during an open retreat with people of mixed faiths and levels of religious formation, it might be a possibility.

Thus, for example, at a set time during the activity, the priest offers reconciliation for Catholics who desire it.

At the same time others, supposedly with the necessary professional experience, offer counseling sessions to those who wish to avail themselves of the opportunity.

Even in such cases, however, I would be wary of holding the two activities in the same venue. The normal and habitual place for hearing confessions is a sacred place that underscores the liturgical and sacramental dimension of the rite.

The sacrament of reconciliation should not be placed on the same plane as a counseling session, although the latter might also be a worthy service to the soul.

Even if counseling resembles spiritual direction, it is simply not the same thing as sacramental reconciliation. They operate in different, albeit interrelated, spheres.

Although the question is not totally clear, I am supposing that what our reader describes does not involve the same subject matter and that the so-called counselor is not so close as to hear the confession and hence offer advice to the penitent regarding his or her sins.

This would be a grave violation of the sacramental seal as well as depriving the penitent of the right of anonymity.

For someone other than the confessor to deliberately listen to a person's confession is totally forbidden in Church law. A priest should never place himself in a situation where this might be possible and much less allow it.

An exception to this rule would be the role of interpreters during confession. They limit themselves to the role of an interpreter, are bound to secrecy, and do not offer counsel.

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