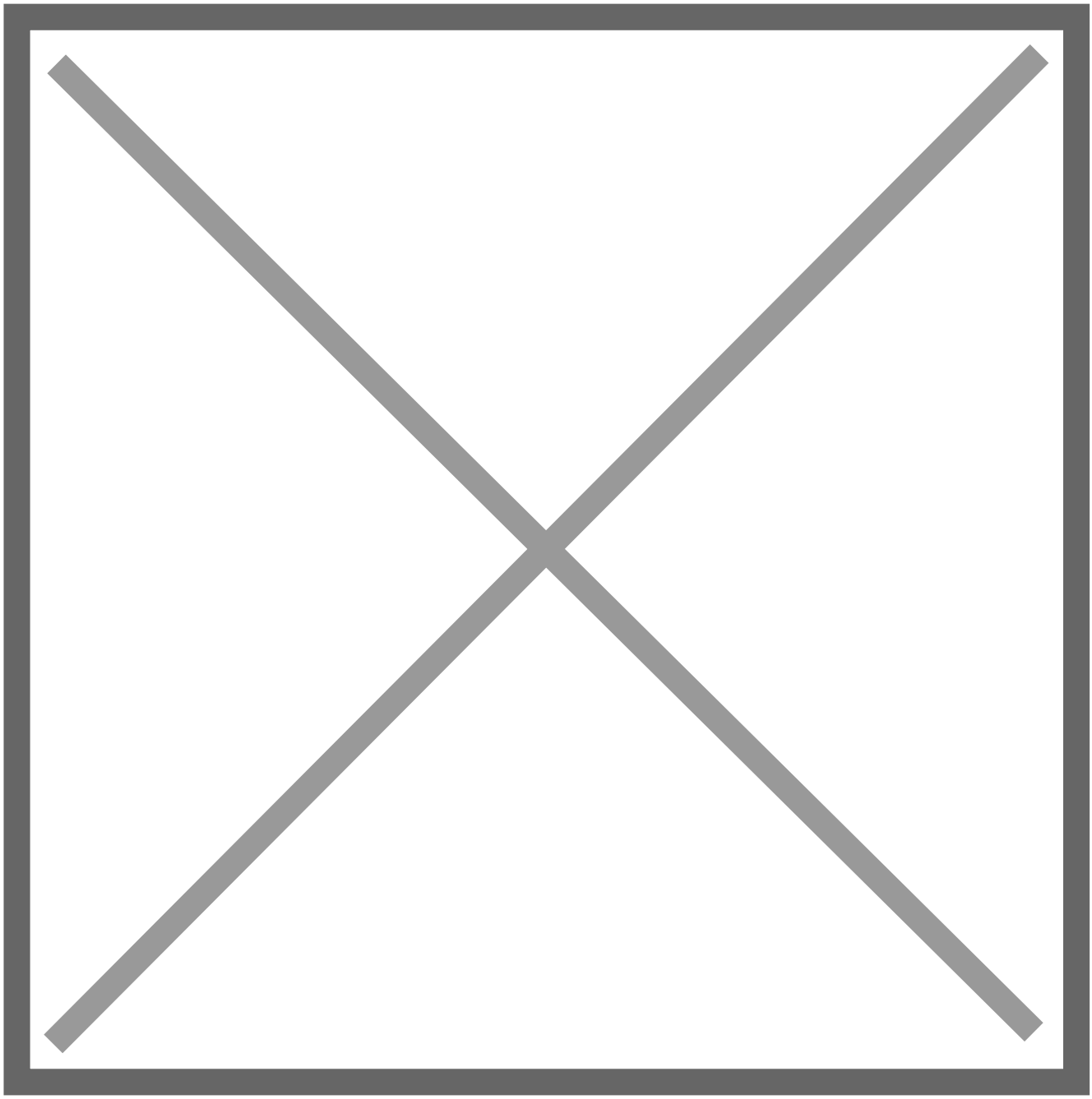
Spirituality
Vatican



Young people wait as a woman goes to confession at a window outside St. Anthony's Catholic Church in North Beach, Md., April 1, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. In an interview Dec. 5 with the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, said confession by phone is still most likely invalid. (CNS/Bob Roller)

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Even though the world is facing a pandemic that may limit many people's ability to celebrate the sacraments, particularly those people who are in isolation, quarantining or hospitalized with COVID-19, confession by phone is still most likely invalid, said Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, head of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

In an interview Dec. 5 with the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, the cardinal was asked whether a phone or other electronic means of communication could be used for confession.

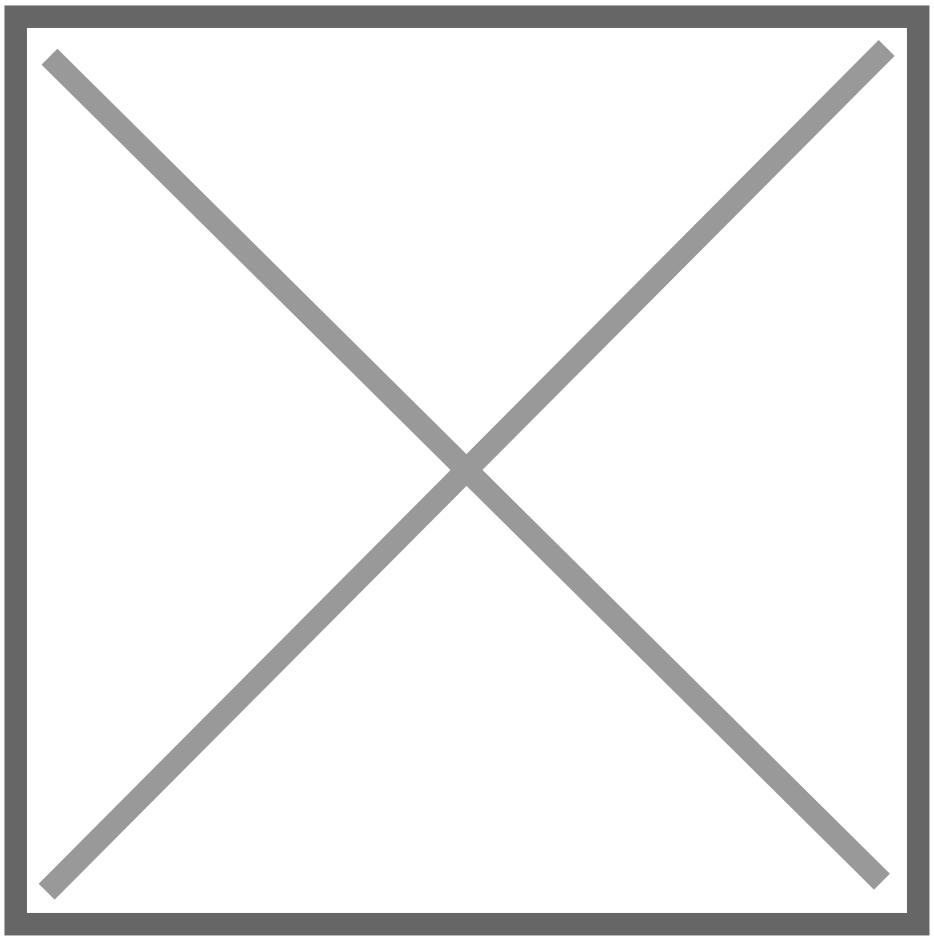
"We can confirm the probable invalidity of the absolution imparted through such means," he said.

"In fact, the real presence of the penitent is lacking, and there is no real conveyance of the words of absolution; there are only electric vibrations that reproduce the human word," he said.

The cardinal said it is up to the local bishop to decide whether he will allow "collective absolution" in cases of serious necessity, "for example, at the entryway of hospital wards where the faithful are infected and in danger of death."

In this case, the priest would have to take the necessary health precautions and should try to "amplify" his voice as much as possible so that the absolution may be heard, he added.

Church law requires, in most cases, that the priest and penitent be physically present to each other. The penitent states his or her sins out loud and expresses contrition for them.



A priest hears confession inside the cathedral in Valencia, Spain, May 19, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Nacho Doce)

Recognizing the difficulties priests are facing regarding respecting health measures and mandates while being able to offer the sacrament, the cardinal said it is up to every bishop to indicate to their priests and the faithful "the cautious attentiveness that should be adopted" in the individual celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation in ways that maintain the physical presence of priest and penitent. Such guidance should be based on the local situation concerning the spread and risk

of contagion, he added.

For example, the cardinal said, the place indicated for confession should be well-ventilated and outside of a confessional booth, face masks should be used, surrounding surfaces should be sanitized frequently, and there should be social distancing while also guaranteeing discretion and safeguarding the seal of confession.

The cardinal's comments reiterated what the apostolic penitentiary said in mid-March when it released a note "On the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the present emergency of the coronavirus."

The sacrament must be administered according to canon law and other provisions, even during a global pandemic, it said, adding the indications he mentioned in the interview about taking precautionary measures to reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

"Where individual faithful should be in the painful impossibility of receiving sacramental absolution, it should be remembered that perfect contrition, coming from the love of God, loved above all else, expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness — one which the penitent is able to express in that moment — and accompanied by the 'votum confessionis,' that is, by the firm resolution to receive sacramental confession as soon as possible, obtains the forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones," the mid-March note said.

Pope Francis repeated the same possibility during a livestreamed morning Mass March 20.

People who cannot get to confession because of the coronavirus lockdown or another serious reason can go to God directly, be specific about their sins, request pardon and experience God's loving forgiveness, he said.

The pope said people should, "Do what the Catechism [of the Catholic Church] says. It is very clear: 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."

Make an act of contrition, the pope said, and promise God, "'I will go to confession afterward, but forgive me now.' And immediately you will return to a state of grace

with God."

"As the catechism teaches," Francis said, "you can draw near to God's forgiveness without having a priest at hand."

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