AI-JESUS, TECHNOPHOBIA AND THE INVIOLABILITY OF CONFESSIONAL SECRECY: CATHOLIC-MEDIA PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This position paper, anchored on media ecology theory, critically interrogates the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and Catholic sacramental theology through the provocative notion of 'AI-Jesus,' situating it on Catholic-media parlance. Beginning with an exposition of the sacrament of penance, its ontological, sacramental, psychological, and redemptive dimensions, the study accentuates the unique role of the ordained minister acting in persona Christi and the inviolability of the confessional seal, affirmed in magisterial documents and canon law. The discussion then examines how technophobia, both historical and contemporary, has shaped ecclesial responses to technology, tracing trajectories from the Syllabus of Errors through Inter Mirifica, Communio et Progressio, and recent Vatican reflections on AI. It evaluates the limits of AI as a catechetical tool versus its inauthenticity as a sacramental mediator, critically analyzing the theological and pastoral concerns raised by experiments such as the 'Deus in Machina' installation in Lucerne. By engaging the insights of theologians such as Ratzinger, de Lubac, and John Paul II, alongside contemporary reflections from the Pontifical Academy for Life, the paper develops theological, pastoral, and ethical frameworks for responsible discernment. It recommends a path where AI can serve evangelization and education without compromising sacramental integrity, pastoral authenticity, or the sacred inviolability of confessional secrecy.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Confessional Secrecy, Media Ecology, Sacramental Theology, Technophobia*

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1. Introduction

At the heart of Catholic sacramental theology lies the irrefutable doctrine of the seal of confession. The sacrament of Penance, as articulated in Canon 983 §1 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*[2] and affirmed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, stipulates that 'the sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore, it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent for any reason whatsoever'[3]. This principle is not simply a juridical stipulation but a theological necessity rooted in the Church's understanding of divine mercy. The confessional encounter transcends a sheer exchange of information: it constitutes a sacred dialogue between the penitent and Christ, mediated through the priest. Thus, the secrecy of the confessional seal is integral to the integrity of the sacrament itself, a theological truth that Aquinas (1948)[4] grounds in the divine economy of grace and Augustine (1998)[5] defends within his broader vision of the City of God.

The inviolability of this seal has, however, increasingly clashed with civil legislation in many parts of the world. In recent years, governments have introduced mandatory reporting laws concerning child abuse that would compel priests to disclose information heard in confession. This tension has been particularly visible in states such as Washington in the United States, where bishops have resisted legislation that obliges clergy to violate the confessional seal, even at the risk of legal penalties[6]. Scholars such as Martínez-Torrón[7] argue that this conflict exemplifies a deeper cultural struggle between secular notions of transparency and the Catholic understanding of sacramental mystery. The seal of confession is not an optional pastoral policy; it belongs, as canonists affirm, to the very essence

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[2] Canon Law Society of America. *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*. Washington, DC: CLSA, 1983, Canon 983 §1

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, no. 1467.

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl., q. 11, a. 1.

[5] Augustine, *The City of God*, 19.17

[6] Catholic News Agency, 'Priests Vow to Defend Seal of Confession Despite Legal Threats,' 2024, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com

[7] Javier Martínez-Torrón, 'Confession and the Law: The Conflict between Sacramental Secrecy and Legal Obligations,' *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 20, no. 1 (2018): 3–19

of the sacrament. Therefore, any civil intrusion into it represents not only a legal violation but a theological rupture.

Within this already complex terrain emerges the question of artificial intelligence and its relationship to sacramental life. The installation of '*AI Jesus*' in a confessional booth in Lucerne, Switzerland, although designed as an art experiment, has sparked global debates on the boundaries of digital mediation in religion[8]. The holographic figure, capable of responding in multiple languages and offering generic spiritual counsel, was experienced by some as meaningful and by others as trifling or even sacrilegious[9]. While such experiments may be dismissed as novelties, they point toward a pressing reality: as AI systems grow more sophisticated, their potential encroachment into religious domains, including confessional spaces, must be critically examined.

Theologically, such encroachment raises profound concerns. The sacrament of Penance is not reducible to words or advice; it involves sacramental efficacy conferred through priestly ordination and ecclesial mediation. As Benedict XVI (2009) stressed in *Caritas in Veritate*, truth in the Christian sense cannot be mechanised or commodified, for it is relational and incarnational[10]. No AI, regardless of linguistic fluency or affective mimicry, can confer absolution, discern true contrition, or personify Christ's pastoral presence. As Crag argues in his work on sacramental anthropology, the personal encounter between penitent and priest is essential to the sacrament's authenticity[11]. Any attempt to substitute AI for a confessor, therefore, risks collapsing the theological foundation of the rite.

Beyond sacramental theology, the ethical risks are equally stark. Research in AI ethics has shown that large language models and decision-making

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[8] Associated Press, 'AI Jesus Sparks Debate in Switzerland,' 2024, https://apnews.com
[9] *People*, 'Visitors Divided over Switzerland's AI Jesus Experiment,' 2024, https://people.com
[10] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009)
[11] Craig D. Clark, *Sacramental Anthropology and Pastoral Theology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021).

algorithms are susceptible to bias, hallucination, and inconsistency[12]. In a confessional setting, such limitations could lead to misleading or even harmful counsel. The seal of confession demands perfect fidelity and discretion, qualities that machines cannot guarantee. Furthermore, the presence of recording, data storage, or surveillance technologies in AI systems inherently threatens the confidentiality upon which the sacrament rests. Even encrypted platforms raise concerns, since the very act of digitizing sacramental dialogue risks exposure to breaches beyond the control of ecclesial authority[13].

The intrusion of AI into confessional life also signals broader cultural dynamics that cannot be ignored. In an age characterised by digital mediation, people increasingly seek spiritual comfort in technological surrogates, preferring anonymity to personified encounter. This is suggestive of an ailing understanding of the sacrament's healing capacity, since healing is not done by proxy or anonymity. Campbell, in his seminal work on digital religion, demonstrates how online practices reshape religious authority and ritual embodiment[14]. If penitents begin to prefer AI or digital confession to avoid the vulnerability of face-to-face interaction, the Church risks losing the deeply humanizing aspects of penance: compassion, empathy, and spiritual accompaniment. What is presented as accessibility may, in fact, erode the very relationality that makes confession transformative.

Moreover, this challenge is not isolated from the wider crisis of secularism and scandal that already burdens the Church. The erosion of trust caused by clerical sexual abuse scandals has led some to question whether priests can be trusted as guardians of the seal. Coupled with the rise of secularist pressures to prioritize state authority over ecclesial confidentiality, the temptation to outsource aspects of ministry to technology may grow

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[12] Emily M. Bender et al., 'On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?' in *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, 610–623 (New York: ACM, 2021).

[13] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Artificial Intelligence and the Human Person* (Vatican City: Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020)

[14] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013)

stronger. Yet, as Pope Francis[15] reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Church's vitality rests not in technological efficiency but in authentic witness to the Gospel. The confessional must remain a space of radical trust and mercy, not an experimental theatre for digital novelty.

At the same time, the Church cannot afford to retreat into technophobia. Media theology challenges us to ask how digital culture reshapes religious practice and how the Church can respond creatively while safeguarding doctrinal integrity[16]. While AI cannot and must not replace the priest in sacramental confession, it may serve in ancillary functions: providing catechesis on confession, training confessors, or aiding penitents in examination of conscience. The prophetic task, therefore, is not merely to denounce technology but to discern its proper role without compromising the inviolability of the seal.

The discussion of AI and confessional secrecy forces the Church into a deeper skirmish with modernity's epistemological and ethical demands. The inviolability of the seal is not simply a matter of clerical priviledge but a theological affirmation of the sanctity of conscience and the primacy of divine mercy. To compromise it in the name of technological innovation would be to hollow out the sacrament of Penance itself. Yet to ignore the growing presence of AI in the spiritual sphere would be pastorally negligent. The Catholic response must therefore be both protective and prophetic: safeguarding the seal of confession while articulating a theology of media that addresses the profound cultural shifts of our age. The problem, therefore, is how the Church can uphold the doctrinal inviolability of confessional secrecy while engaging the theological and cultural implications of AI within the broader media environment. The aim of this study is to explore the intersection of AI, sacramental theology, and media culture, with particular attention to how the Church can prophetically defend the seal of confession without retreating into reactionary technophobia. This study is guided by the following research questions:

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[15] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).
[16] Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

1. How does the notion of 'AI-Jesus,' challenge Catholic doctrinal understandings of sacramental confession and the inviolability of the seal?
2. In what ways does technophobia shape ecclesial responses to AI innovations?
3. What theological, pastoral, and ethical frameworks can the Church employ to engage with AI critically while preserving the sanctity of confessional secrecy?

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, position-based methodological approach, grounded in theological reflection, doctrinal analysis, and media studies scholarship, aiming to offer a coherent, scholarly perspective rather than empirical generalizations. The study is also grounded in Media Ecology Theory[17], which posits that communication technologies fundamentally shape human perception, social relationships[18], and cultural practices, applied here to examine how AI, exemplified by digital religious interfaces such as 'AI-Jesus', reshapes the experience of Catholic confession. Integrated within this is Technology Ethics, drawing on principles of data dignity, algorithmic accountability, and human-centred AI[19], which provides normative criteria to evaluate AI-mediated religious interventions[20].

3. The Phenomenon of AI-Jesus: Innovation or a Profanation?

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[17] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

[18] Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992)

[19] mily M. Bender et al., 'On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?' in *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (Association for Computing Machinery, 2021), 610–623.

[20] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Artificial Intelligence and the Human Person* (Vatican City: Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020).

AI-Jesus represents a disquieting and innovative intersection of artificial intelligence and religious practice, most notably manifested in the '*Deus in Machina*' initiative in Lucerne's St. Peter's Chapel, a project placing an AI-driven Jesus figure within the confessional booth, capable of interacting in over 100 languages based on AI trained on theological texts. [21]For many, the appeal lay in its novelty: an accessible, multilingual interface inviting spiritual reflection and curiosity, indeed, over two-thirds of respondents described the encounter as a 'spiritual experience,' and over a thousand individuals participated during the two-month trial.[22] Yet critics argue that such AI lacks the essential human dimensions: empathy, spiritual discernment, and the incarnational grace, that are foundational to sacramental theology, reinforcing the Church's position that sacraments demand actual human mediation and cannot be replicated electronically[23].

The experiment, though labelled as art rather than sacrament, still problematises sacred space: placing an AI avatar in a traditional confessional prompts theological unease, as the Church's understanding of penance emphasizes human forgiveness within a communal, embodied context[24]. Moreover, the experiment's spiritual allure came paired with criticism, notably accusations of superficiality, cliché responses, and even blasphemy, arguing that such AI risks trivializing divine mystery and scandalizing the faithful[25]. In short, AI-Jesus opens urgent theological questions about the nature of sacramental mediation, the role of technology in religious spaces, and whether innovation can ever substitute for sacred embodiment.

Technophobia
History has it that technological advances have often triggered deeply ambivalent responses from the Catholic Church, what might be termed a

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[21] *The Guardian*, 'Switzerland Tests AI Jesus in a Confessional,' 2024, https://www.theguardian.com

[22] Associated Press, 'AI Jesus Sparks Debate in Switzerland,' 2024, https://apnews.com

[23] *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR Online), 'AI and the Confessional: Theological and Pastoral Concerns,' 2024

[24] Ibidem

[25] *The Guardian*, 'AI 'Confessional' Artwork Sparks Controversy in Religious Circles,' 2024.

tradition of prudential technophobia. The 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*[26] exemplified an early cultural circumspection toward modern forces viewed as morally destabilizing. As mass media grew in the 20th century, cinema, radio, and television, Catholic vigilance sharpened: the Legion of Decency in the U.S. personified institutional resistance to morally corrupting content while later evolving into bodies like SIGNIS, which shifted toward media critique and formation[27]. The watershed came with Vatican II's *Inter Mirifica*[28], which reframed media not as threats but as 'marvellous technical inventions' potentially useful for evangelization. *Communio et Progressio* (1971)[29] and subsequent Pontifical Council statements[30] developed a pastoral principle: media must serve human dignity and promote authentic human communion. This trajectory reveals that the Church's so-called technophobia is more accurately understood as measured prudence, always open, but always discerning. This pattern of cautious engagement is sharply illustrated in the Church's response to artificial intelligence and the so-called AI-Jesus experiment. On the one hand, the Vatican has asserted moral leadership in the field of AI through initiatives such as the *Rome Call for AI Ethics*, which signals a deliberate move toward doctrinal engagement with emerging technologies and questions of governance.[31] This trajectory is further consolidated in the recent doctrinal note *Antiqua et Nova* (2025), which explicitly identifies the anthropological dislocations and ethical hazards posed by artificial intelligence.[32] On the other hand, experiments such as *Deus in Machina* in Lucerne, an AI avatar of Jesus situated within a confessional booth, have

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[26] Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus Errorum* (Syllabus of Errors), 1864

[27] *Catholic Philly*, 'From the Legion of Decency to Modern Catholic Media Engagement,' 2019

[28] Second Vatican Council, *Inter Mirifica* (Decree on the Means of Social Communication), 1963.

[29] Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* (Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication), 1971.

[30] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Communications*, *Ethics in the Internet*, and *The Church and the Internet*, Vatican City, 2002

[31] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Rome Call for AI Ethics*, Vatican City, February 28, 2020, esp. principles §§1–6

[32] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education, *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*, Vatican City, 2025, nos. 6–12 (anthropological foundations) and 28–35 (ethical risks and governance).

reignited deep unease, with critics denouncing the project as a violation of sacramental integrity, and even as blasphemous[33], notwithstanding the experiment's disclaimers and controlled intentions.[34] This juxtaposition exposes a fundamental theological divide: whether AI-Jesus represents evangelistic creativity or a profanation of sacramental mystery. From a doctrinal standpoint, the sacrament's inviolability and incarnational mediation are not transferable to algorithmic processes, a principle firmly upheld in Canon Law[35] and ecclesial teaching.[36]

Inviolability of Confessional Secrecy
The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms this secrecy as essential, not a mere disciplinary convenience but a truth 'which admits no exceptions'[37] Doctrinally, the seal is grounded in divine law: the Sacrament of Reconciliation is mediated by Christ through the priest, and the Seal protects that sacred trust. The Apostolic Penitentiary declared in 2019 that inviolability 'derives directly from revealed divine law' and admits no exceptions, even in cases where civil legislation seeks disclosure[38]. The same note emphasized that priests must defend the seal 'even to the point of shedding blood,' affirming its nature as a possible form of martyrdom

From a legal and ecclesial practice standpoint, the Seal binds not only the confessor but also interpreters and anyone who becomes aware of the content of confession (Canon 983 §2). Confidentiality applies with absolute rigor and is distinct from professional secrecy because it is grounded in divine mandate, not human convention. The Apostolic Penitentiary (2019) reaffirmed that no civil authority, regardless of its

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[33] *Associated Press News*, 'AI Jesus Installation in Swiss Church Raises Blasphemy Concerns,' 2024

[34] *The Guardian*, 'AI Jesus in a Confessional Sparks Theological Backlash,' 2024

[35] Code of Canon Law (1983), canon 983 §1 (inviolability of the sacramental seal).

[36] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed., Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §§1461–1467 (the minister of the sacrament, absolution, and ecclesial mediation)

[37] C*atechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §1461 (Christ acting through the ordained minister *in persona Christi*).

[38] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation), December 2, 1984, nos. 28–31 (sacramental structure and mediation of divine forgiveness)

intentions, may override this religious mandate, since forcing disclosure would constitute 'a violation of religious freedom' and 'an unacceptable offense'[39].

Pastoral considerations and critiques highlight the tension between safeguarding the Seal and caring for victims of crime. While sacramental confidentiality must be upheld without compromise, confessors are obliged to encourage penitents to report crimes outside the sacramental forum and to seek reconciliation with both God and society (U.S. Catholic, 2023). Abuse or misuse of the Seal in the past is better explained by clericalism or cultural failings than by any doctrinal flaw. Theologically, then, the inviolability of confession is indispensable for protecting the integrity of reconciliation: it guarantees penitents the freedom to open their conscience without fear, and ensures that sacramental grace remains untouched by the demands of secular powers (John Paul II, 1984).

How does the notion of 'AI-Jesus,' challenge Catholic doctrinal understandings of sacramental confession and the inviolability of the seal? The notion of AI-Jesus directly challenges Catholic doctrinal understandings of sacramental confession and the inviolability of the confessional seal because it confronts the ontological, incarnational, and theological foundations of the sacrament. The Sacrament of Penance is inherently relational, redemptive, and mediatory: it is 'the sacrament through which the sinner obtains forgiveness of sins from God through the ministry of the Church.'[40] Its efficacy presupposes the presence of a human priest acting *in persona Christi*, as John Paul II affirms: 'The priest acts in the person of Christ the Head… [and] is the instrument of Christ Himself in the administration of the sacraments.'[41] Henri de Lubac emphasizes that the sacrament is a deeply personal encounter, rooted in the priest's moral discernment and interior attentiveness, whereby the penitent is reconciled

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[39] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Note on the Importance of the Internal Forum and the Inviolability of the Sacramental Seal*, Vatican City, July 1, 2019, nos. 3–6 (pastoral, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of confession).

[40] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §1422.

[41] John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 25, 1992), §20.

with God and the Church.[42] Similarly, Joseph Ratzinger (later Benedict XVI) underscores that the sacrament's efficacy depends upon the priest's capacity to mediate grace and respond pastorally to the penitent's interior state.[43]

While AI may simulate dialogue or provide religious instruction, it cannot convey sacramental grace, forgive sins, or discern the penitent's interior disposition, rendering any attempt to substitute it for a priest both ontologically and sacramentally invalid. The Apostolic Penitentiary reminds the faithful: 'The seal of confession is inviolable; it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.'[44] Even the use of intermediaries or interpreters is carefully circumscribed: Canon 983 states that a confessor may only use an interpreter 'when it is necessary to understand the penitent's confession,' preserving the human and sacramental essence of the rite.[45] AI, in contrast, would act autonomously, outside these juridical and theological safeguards, risking reduction of the sacrament to a mere simulation and undermining the sanctity of the confessional seal. The Congregation for the Clergy reiterates that 'spiritual formation of priests must ensure that the confessor is capable of pastoral discretion and moral discernment in the administration of the sacraments,'[46] capacities that no AI can authentically embody.

Consequently, while AI innovations may offer catechetical guidance, virtual spiritual accompaniment, or mediated religious reflection,[47] they

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[42] Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 112.

[43] Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 154.

[44] Apostolic Penitentiary, *Note on the Importance of the Internal Forum and the Inviolability of the Sacramental Seal* (Vatican City, June 29, 2019), §1.

[45] Code of Canon Law, Latin–English ed. (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), can. 983.

[46] Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* (Vatican City, December 8, 2016), §38

[47] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Rome Call for AI Ethics* (Vatican City, 2020); Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

cannot replace the human, sacramental, and redemptive dimensions of the Sacrament of Confession. Any attempt to deploy AI within the confessional context directly challenges the Church's understanding of the incarnational mediation of grace, the relational nature of forgiveness, and the theological inviolability of the sacramental seal.[48] This raises critical questions for pastoral praxis, canonical jurisprudence, and digital ethics, necessitating a careful and nuanced engagement by the Church with emerging technologies while upholding doctrinal integrity.

Ways by Which Technophobia shape Ecclesial Responses to AI Innovations

Technophobia-the apprehension or fear of emerging technologies-has historically shaped ecclesial responses by fostering prudence grounded in doctrinal, pastoral, and moral considerations. The Catholic Church's engagement with new media across history demonstrates that such caution is neither accidental nor reactionary, but intrinsic to its responsibility as a moral and sacramental guardian. Early ecclesial resistance to uncritical modernity can be traced to the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), which warned against ideological developments capable of undermining spiritual authority and moral order.[49] This posture of vigilance evolved rather than disappeared. By the mid-twentieth century, the Church formally acknowledged the power of mass communication while simultaneously insisting upon ethical restraint and theological accountability. This balance is articulated authoritatively in *Inter Mirifica*, which affirms:

> The Church recognizes that these media, if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to people's recreation and instruction, and to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. But the Church also knows that people can employ them in ways that are contrary to the Creator's design and damaging to themselves. Therefore, all must be exercised in accordance with moral law

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[48] Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1461–1462; John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, December 2, 1984), §14.
[49] Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (Vatican City, 1864)

and for the benefit of human dignity and the advancement of truth.[50]

This moral framing was further developed in *Communio et Progressio* (1971), which insists that communication technologies must serve the integral development of the human person and the salvific mission of the Church, rather than technological novelty or efficiency alone.[51] The document emphasizes that media are never morally neutral; their use always carries ethical implications that demand pastoral discernment and accountability.

Contemporary innovations in artificial intelligence, particularly projects such as the AI-Jesus installation in Lucerne, Switzerland—have reignited ecclesial concerns that some critics hastily label technophobia. However, these responses are neither irrational nor merely conservative. Rather, they reflect a historically grounded ethical vigilance aimed at protecting sacramental integrity, authentic human relationality, and doctrinal fidelity. Scholars of digital religion argue that AI's ability to simulate conversation, empathy, and spiritual guidance introduces unprecedented pastoral ambiguity, risking the reduction of sacred mysteries to functional simulations rather than encounters with divine grace (Campbell, 2013).[52] The Pontifical Academy for Life likewise cautions that technological power, when detached from moral anthropology, may obscure the uniqueness of the human person and the embodied nature of spiritual mediation.[53]

Theological concern intensifies when AI technologies imitate religious authority or sacramental presence. Massimo Faggioli warns that technological substitutions for pastoral ministry risk flattening the sacramental economy into 'symbolic efficiency,' where performance

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[50] Second Vatican Council, *Inter Mirifica* (Decree on the Means of Social Communication, December 4, 1963), §1.

[51] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* (Pastoral Instruction, May 23, 1971), §2

[52] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

[53] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Rome Call for AI Ethics* (Vatican City, 2020).

displaces incarnation.[54] John Paul II repeatedly cautioned against such reductions, particularly in the context of reconciliation and pastoral care. In *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, he situates the Church's mission firmly within a relational and redemptive horizon:

> The Church, since she is the disciple of the one teacher Jesus Christ, in her own turn, as mother and teacher, untiringly exhorts people to reconciliation. This mission is inseparable from her very nature and from her responsibility to lead humanity to conversion and peace.[55]

This self-understanding clarifies why ecclesial caution toward AI-driven religious simulations is not a rejection of technology per se, but a defense of the Church's incarnational identity. Viewed through the lens of Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation model, what is often characterized as technophobia more accurately reflects *measured adoption* rooted in moral evaluation rather than technological enthusiasm. The Church does not repudiate artificial intelligence outright; instead, it subjects such innovations to rigorous scrutiny to determine their compatibility with moral law, sacramental theology, and pastoral efficacy.[56]

In the specific case of AI-Jesus, ecclesial caution functions as a safeguard against the erosion of the human priesthood's irreplaceable mediatory role. Canonical and doctrinal authorities emphasize that pastoral discretion, moral discernment, and sacramental mediation require embodied presence and spiritual responsibility that cannot be automated or outsourced.[57] The Apostolic Penitentiary, in reaffirming the inviolability of the internal forum, underscores the dangers of technological mediation in sacred contexts where confidentiality, conscience, and grace converge.[58] Consequently, technophobia within ecclesial discourse should be

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[54] Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

[55] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, December 2, 1984), §9.

[56] Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2003).

[57] Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* (Vatican City, 2016), §38

[58] Apostolic Penitentiary, *Note on the Importance of the Internal Forum and the Inviolability of the Sacramental Seal* (Vatican City, June 29, 2019).

understood not as fear of innovation, but as a principled commitment to ethical prudence, doctrinal integrity, and authentic pastoral care in an age of rapid technological transformation.

4. Theological, Pastoral, and Ethical Frameworks that the Church Employ to Engage with AI Critically while Preserving the Sanctity of Confessional Secrecy

To engage artificial intelligence critically while safeguarding confessional secrecy, the Church must rely on an interlocking set of theological, pastoral, and ethical frameworks. Theologically, Catholic sacramental doctrine is unequivocal: only a human priest, validly ordained and acting *in persona Christi*, can effectuate authentic confession and absolution. This principle is firmly rooted in conciliar teaching, magisterial authority, and canon law. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that reconciliation is not merely a ritual exchange of information but a sacramental encounter mediated through the Church's ordained ministry.[59] John Paul II reinforces this incarnational mediation in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, insisting that forgiveness is inseparable from ecclesial and personal presence.[60] The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* further underscores that priestly mediation requires moral discernment, pastoral responsibility, and spiritual maturity capacities that cannot be transferred to technological systems.[61] This theological foundation establishes clear boundaries for pastoral application. Within these limits, AI may be employed as a catechetical or devotional aid rather than as a sacramental mediator. Digital tools can support guided reflection, spiritual education, and religious formation without intruding upon the inviolability of the Seal of Confession. Contemporary magisterial reflection recognizes this auxiliary role. The Pontifical Academy for Life, in articulating principles for ethical AI use, emphasizes that technological innovation must always remain subordinate to human dignity and moral responsibility.[62] Similarly, the Synod on Synodality encourages

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[59] Catechism of the Catholic Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §1422.

[60] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, December 2, 1984), §§9, 31

[61] Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* (Vatican City, 2016), §38.

[62] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Rome Call for AI Ethics* (Vatican City, 2020).

discernment in the adoption of digital technologies, urging that they foster communion, participation, and mission rather than replace embodied ecclesial relationships.[63]

Ethically, the Church has articulated firm criteria governing AI engagement, particularly in contexts involving privacy, conscience, and sacred trust. The *Rome Call for AI Ethics* explicitly identifies respect for human dignity, data privacy, and transparency as non-negotiable principles, especially where technologies intersect with intimate aspects of human life.[64] In sacramental contexts, these concerns intensify. Confessional secrecy is not merely a disciplinary norm but a theological absolute rooted in the sanctity of conscience. As the Church has consistently maintained, no system, human or artificial, may intrude upon or instrumentalise this sacred interior forum. Kevin Flannery captures this ethical posture succinctly, arguing that AI must remain a tool under human and ecclesial oversight, never an autonomous agent exercising moral or spiritual authority.[65]

Taken together, these frameworks converge upon a decisive principle: **AI is a medium, not a mediator of grace.** While artificial intelligence may stimulate spiritual curiosity, facilitate religious dialogue, or enhance faith-based education, it cannot replicate the incarnational, relational, and moral dimensions intrinsic to priestly mediation. John Paul II's vision of priesthood makes this limitation explicit:

> The priest is not the author of grace, nor its master. He is the servant of Christ and the steward of the mysteries of God, called to make present not to replace the saving action of Christ through his own human and ecclesial ministry.[66]

Accordingly, digital innovations demand circumscribed deployment within a carefully articulated theological, pastoral, and ethical scaffold. Such restraint preserves the sacredness of confession, ensures relational

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[63] Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report of the Synod on Synodality* (Vatican City, 2023).

[64] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Rome Call for AI Ethics*, §§3–5.

[65] Kevin L. Flannery, *Artificial Intelligence and Moral Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019).

[66] John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 25, 1992), §15.

authenticity, and prevents the dilution of Catholic sacramental identity. Historical prudence, contemporary ethical reasoning, and sustained theological reflection together guide a mode of engagement that is neither technophobic nor technologically naïve, but critically aware and pastorally responsive.

A cross-cultural lens further illuminates the practical and pastoral nuances of AI engagement. Responses to initiatives such as AI-Jesus vary significantly between contexts characterized by strong sacramental religiosity and those shaped by technologically saturated media cultures. In some regions, AI may be received as an innovative catechetical resource; in others, it may provoke deep ethical and theological unease, particularly concerning sacramental substitution or symbolic confusion. Empirical studies on religion and technology suggest that cultural expectations strongly shape perceptions of religious authority and authenticity.[67] John Paul II's teaching on inculturation provides a guiding framework here, insisting that evangelization and pastoral practice must engage culture critically while remaining faithful to doctrinal truth.[68] Synodal discernment reinforces this approach, enabling the Church to evaluate AI applications contextually so that technology serves to deepen, rather than undermine, spiritual life and communal identity.[69]

5. Discussion

The Sacrament of Penance is not merely a therapeutic or dialogical encounter; it is a privileged locus of Christ's real presence mediated through a human minister who acts *in persona Christi* and exercises pastoral judgment, penitential direction, and juridical as well as spiritual authority. Catholic doctrine affirms that sacramental absolution is inseparable from the ordained priest's personal and ecclesial mediation.[70] John Paul II articulates this incarnational logic with clarity, insisting that

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[67] Pew Research Center, *Religion and Technology in Global Perspective* (Washington, DC, 2015).
[68] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Encyclical Letter, December 7, 1990), §§52–54
[69] Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report of the Synod on Synodality*, §§56–59.
[70] Catechism of the Catholic Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §§1461–1462.

reconciliation is never a purely interior or symbolic act but a concrete ecclesial event in which Christ acts through the ministry of the priest.[71]

Canon law renders this theological claim juridically explicit. The confessional seal is not a prudential guideline but an absolute norm rooted in divine law:

> The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore, it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.[72]

The Apostolic Penitentiary and other curial authorities have consistently reiterated that this inviolability flows from the ontological character of ordained ministry itself. Because the priest acts sacramentally as a mediator of grace, any substitution of a non-human agent in the internal forum would be not only illicit but theologically incoherent.[73] The confessional is thus constituted by personal presence, sacramental intentionality, and ecclesial authority—conditions that cannot be replicated by technological simulation.

What the Lucerne *Deus in Machina* experiment actually did—and did not do—is therefore crucial for theological evaluation. Installed in the Peterskapelle, the project presented a trained conversational AI situated within a confessional booth, capable of responding to questions in multiple languages after being trained on theological texts. Visitors were explicitly informed that the interaction did not constitute sacramental confession and were cautioned against disclosing personal data. Church authorities framed the installation as an experiment in religious curiosity and accessibility rather than a liturgical or sacramental innovation.[74] Yet despite these disclaimers, the experiment immediately raised a canonical and pastoral question central to contemporary ecclesial discernment: when an avatar

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[71] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, December 2, 1984), §§31–32.

[72] Code of Canon Law, Latin–English ed. (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), can. 983 §1.

[73] Apostolic Penitentiary, *Note on the Importance of the Internal Forum and the Inviolability of the Sacramental Seal* (Vatican City, June 29, 2019).

[74] A. Kassam, 'Swiss Church Installs AI Jesus for Confessional Conversations,' *Associated Press*, 2024

identified as 'Jesus' receives private spiritual questions within a confessional-like space, does the practice blur sacramental boundaries and risk simulating what only ordained ministry can effect? Reporting on public reactions revealed sharply divided responses—some participants described the encounter as spiritually evocative, while others experienced it as hollow or unsettling.[6] These reactions demonstrate both the pastoral appeal of mediated spiritual dialogue and the latent theological hazard of symbolic confusion, particularly where sacramental semiotics are closely imitated.

Artificial intelligence systems—regardless of linguistic sophistication—lack the metaphysical attributes that sacramental theology identifies as essential for ministerial efficacy. They cannot be persons capable of spiritual reception, interior intentionality, or sacramental agency grounded in ordination. This distinction is underscored in the recent Vatican reflection *Antiqua et Nova*, which insists that while AI systems possess ethical and social consequences, they are not moral subjects or agents of sacramental mediation. The document repeatedly emphasizes that machines do not possess personal moral subjectivity and that human oversight is indispensable.[7] Philosophers of information and AI ethicists similarly caution against conflating functional performance with personhood, warning that the attribution of moral agency, pastoral discretion, or sacramental competence to algorithmic systems constitutes a category error.[75]

Taken together, theological doctrine and philosophical ethics converge on a consistent conclusion: AI may simulate answers, prompt reflection, or host catechetical dialogue, but it cannot confer sacramental grace or assume the juridical responsibilities proper to ordained ministers.

At the same time, the contemporary Church operates within complex demographic and pastoral realities. While the global Catholic population has increased in recent decades, priestly vocations have declined in certain regions, even as pastoral demands intensify in the Global South and in

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[75] Luciano Floridi et al., 'AI4People—An Ethical Framework for a Good AI Society,' *Minds and Machines* 28, no. 4 (2018): 689–707.

urban peripheries.[76] These structural pressures generate practical incentives for technological experimentation: shortages of confessors, linguistic barriers in multilingual parishes, and security risks in regions where physical pastoral presence is dangerous. Vatican statistical yearbooks and sociological studies document these stresses clearly, helping to explain why parish communities may test digital outreach strategies and AI-assisted spiritual aids.[77]

Nevertheless, empirical scarcity does not dissolve doctrinal constraints. Canonical norms and sacramental theology continue to delineate what technologies may be legitimately employed for catechesis, accompaniment, or pastoral triage, and what may not substitute for sacerdotal action. The distinction between assistance and replacement remains theologically decisive. The confessional seal is also a living flashpoint in contemporary law and public policy. Recent litigation in the United States illustrates this tension, as state efforts to compel clergy to report crimes disclosed in confession have prompted federal legal challenges and religious liberty interventions.[78] These cases reveal the collision between public protective objectives and constitutional protections for sacramental confidentiality. They also demonstrate why any normalization of non-human, confession-like interlocutors could invite new regulatory pressures-such as data retention, mandatory reporting, or surveillance compliance-that risk criminalizing fidelity to the seal or pushing confession into juridically ambiguous spaces.[79] Law thus emerges as a critical variable informing ecclesial policy on technology and the internal forum.

Two competing hermeneutical frames dominate current debates. The first interprets AI instrumentally, as a sophisticated pastoral aid for catechesis, linguistic accessibility, and non-sacramental accompaniment, including

[76] Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections* (Washington, DC, 2015).

[77] Vatican Secretariat of State, *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae 2023/2024* (Vatican City).

[78] U.S. Department of Justice, press releases on clergy–penitent privilege litigation, 2023–2024.

[79] B ecket Fund for Religious Liberty, case summaries and injunction reports on sacramental seal litigation, 2024.

tools that help penitents prepare for confession or engage in supervised spiritual reflection. The second frame views any AI representation of Christ within a confessional context as inherently profanatory or idolatrous, symptomatic of the commodification and secularization of sacramentality. Many Catholic commentators and faithful criticized the Lucerne installation precisely on these grounds.

Recent Vatican documents urge restraint rather than absolutism. Both *Antiqua et Nova* and the *Rome Call for AI Ethics* insist that AI must remain accountable, transparent, and subordinate to human and ecclesial responsibility.[80] The tension between these positions is not merely ideological but pragmatic: proponents of instrumental use point to genuine pastoral deficits and accessibility concerns, while critics rightly insist that simulating sacramental presence risks displacing the relational, incarnational, and juridical core of confessional life.[81]

In sum, the doctrinal case remains robust. Sacramental confession presupposes human, ordained mediation, and canon law enshrines the absolute inviolability of the seal. The *Deus in Machina* experiment illuminated public appetite for spiritual dialogue but simultaneously exposed serious doctrinal, pastoral, and juridical concerns. Contemporary Vatican teaching and leading ethical scholarship converge on the necessity of human oversight, accountability, privacy protection, and the categorical rejection of sacramental substitution by artificial agents.

6. Recommendations

The Holy See (and episcopal conferences) should issue clear, binding norms specifying that algorithmic systems may be used for catechesis, spiritual preparation, and pastoral triage, but must not be used in any space or form that mimics, replaces, or receives sacramental confession (canonically explicit safeguard). Dioceses should develop supervised digital-pastoral protocols - including explicit informed-consent scripts,

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[80] Pontifical Academy for Life, *Rome Call for AI Ethics* (Vatican City, 2020); Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education, *Antiqua et Nova*, 2025.

[81] Kassam, 'Swiss Church Installs AI Jesus'; Pontifical Academy for Life, *Rome Call for AI Ethics*.

secure data governance, and human escalation paths - so that AI tools function under clerical oversight and never in the internal forum. Seminary and continuing formation curricula should urgently include digital pastoral theology, AI literacy, and data ethics so ministers can (a) evaluate tools prudently and (b) accompany people pastorally in digitally saturated lives

7. Conclusion

The Church stands at a hinge moment. Technological advance will continue; some uses of AI can be a service to pastoral outreach, catechesis, and the work of evangelization — but whenever innovation crosses the threshold from instrument to mediator of sacramental grace, it collides with the Church's understanding of personhood, mediation and mystery. The healthiest ecclesial posture is thus neither Luddite rejection nor naïve technologism but a discerning custodianship: defend the sacramental center with juridical clarity, equip ministers with digital wisdom, regulate technologies in ways that respect human dignity, and offer the world both pastoral proximity and theological depth. Vatican documents and leading ethicists have given us a starting map; what remains is stable episcopal policy plus formation that honors the incarnational constitution of the Church's sacramental life (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith & Dicastery for Culture and Education, 2025; Rome Call, 2020).

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