

“Deus in machina”: *The AI lands at the confessional booth*

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Confessing to a priest may seem outdated in the age of digital progress, so there are those who have chosen to go higher. In Switzerland, in the oldest Catholic church in the country, St. Peter’s Chapel in Lucerne, a special confessional booth has recently been installed; in the inside, it is possible to have a conversation with Jesus Christ. It is, of course, a holographic projection supported by an A.I. system, part of an art project called “*Deus in machina*” developed by a team of theologians and computer scientists from the Faculty of Applied Sciences and Arts at the University of Lucerne, part of the *Immersive Realities Research Lab*. Through a visual and phonetic reproduction of Christ, achieved by means of an animated avatar behind the grating, the program - based on knowledge of the Old and New Testaments - repeats the following sentence as its *incipit*: «Peace be with you, brother. In times of uncertainty and doubt, remember that faith can move mountains. What trouble is in your heart today?» Once in the confessional, the faithful are encouraged to express their concerns, thoughts, and questions to the *cyber-Christ*, where they can both receive spiritual advice and confess their sins. Among them, two-thirds said they had a «spiritually stimulating experience» or felt «cared for and comforted»¹ also raising issues of great social relevance such as love, war, loneliness, the existence of God, homosexuality and sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

The advantages of such an experiment, according to the program’s creators, would be above all in terms of efficiency, given its 24-hour availability, a time frame that cannot be covered by ‘physical’ pastors; usability, given the possibility of conducting an interview in more than 100 languages and the personalization of theological data, since, as reported in the *Peterskapelle* press release, A.I. might be able to answer individual questions and address concerns in a specific way, personalizing biblical and spiritual references, often faster and more completely than a human pastor².

This is an issue that raises questions about the relevance of A.I. to the religious phenomenon, intersecting several issues, both theological and legal. The first point of view concerns the value of any confession given to an artificial program and the absolution that is granted with it. In fact, although the project leaders have stated that «this is not a real confession, but spiritual advice»³, the placement of the

¹ The statements were made anonymously to the British online newspaper *Independent* and available at this website <https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/ai-jesus-church-switzerland-religion-b2653130.html>: «I was surprised, it was so easy. And though it’s a machine, it gave me so much advice. Also, from a Christian point of view, I felt taken care of and I walked out really consoled».

² Available in <https://www.kathluzern.ch/meine-kirche/pfarreien-standorte/peterskapelle>.

³ As reported on Project’s website, «Die experimentelle Kunstinstallation “*Deus in machina*” öffnet einen Raum der Intimität. Besuchende teilen ihre Gedanken und Fragen in einem Beichtstuhl mit einem himmlischen Hologramm, wo Worte nur für vier Ohren bestimmt sind

BOT in a confessional could raise a number of doubts among ‘penitents’ and lead most of them to believe that they have received the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1461, states that «since Christ entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to the Apostles, the Bishops, their successors, and the presbyters, the co-workers of the Bishops, continue to exercise this ministry. For it is the Bishops and presbyters who, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit».⁴

Canon Law also regulates the Sacrament of Penance⁵ by the combined provisions of can. 965 and can. 970, claiming that «the minister of penance is the priest alone» and that «the faculty of hearing confessions is granted only to presbyters who have been found suitable by examination or whose suitability is established by another source». It seems clear, over and above the theological and juridical data, that the sacrament of confession is grafted onto a clear personal presupposition, that of the minister acting *in persona Christi*; No other type of person is authorized to carry out that examination which, before granting absolution, assesses the degree of repentance of the faithful and their determination not to sin again, echoing the words of the Lord who, in the Gospel, does not grant cheap mercy, but gives to the adulteress the admonition «*Go and sin no more*» (Jn. 8:11).

The sacrament of confession must be distinguished from the the practice of spiritual direction, in that the two realities, although partially communicating, aren’t superimposable: in fact, to the confessor one confesses the sins actually committed in order to obtain absolution after a careful examination of conscience. On the other hand, to the spiritual father, outside the sacramental context but still in the interior forum, one manifests the desires and tendencies, the needs and doubts, the sufferings and joys of daily life, even if one has not committed any sin. In the practice of the ministry of listening, accompaniment and sacramental reconciliation can coexist, but they must be considered distinct, and all this must be made clear from the beginning of the spiritual direction relationship⁶. It is possible to have a spiritual direction interview and, at the end, the person can ask for absolution. Conversely, in the context of a sacramental confession and before receiving absolution, the person can ask for advice, suggestion, and this can take on the features of an embryonic spiritual colloquy.

Also from the agent’s point of view, while the active subject of the Sacrament of Penance is only the ordained minister, Bishop or presbyter, those who offer spiritual direction can be men and women,

- jedoch ohne Beichte. Eine künstliche Intelligenz, die ästhetisch als Jesus reagiert, schafft vielleicht einen heiligen Moment». This statement is accessible at <https://www.kathbluzern.ch/mein-engagement/deus-in-machina>.

⁴ See THOMAS WEINANDY, *Sacrament of Mercy: A Spiritual & Practical Guide to Confession*, Pauline Books & Media, Boston, 1997, p. 54 ff.; FÉLIX MARÍA AROCENA, *Il sacramento della penitenza, realtà antropologica e culturale*, in *Scripta Theologica*, 3, 2009, p. 756 ff.

⁵ See BRUNO FABIO PIGHIN, *I sacramenti. Dottrina e disciplina canonica*, Marcianum Press, Venezia, 2020, p. 248 ff.

⁶ See RAIMONDO FRATTALLONE, *Direzione spirituale. Un cammino verso la pienezza della vita in Cristo*, Las, Roma, 2006, p. 186.

religious and lay, couples and, in a broader sense, even communities, and the mutual spiritual exchange makes it more difficult to indicate who is only offering or who is only receiving, precisely because the emphasis is on co-participation and involvement, albeit with a distinction between individuals and different stages of human and Christian life⁷.

What emerges from what has been observed is the incompatibility of the practice inspired by the “question & answer” between the faithful and A.I., neither with the case of confession, which lacks both the sacramental element and the absolute and formal element (which takes the form of the Trinitarian invocation provided for by law), nor with spiritual direction, since the answer to a question, moreover inspired by an algorithmic logic based on a pre-set database (albeit with the *ad casum* flexibility proper to the digital interface), cannot be compared with a personal accompaniment, which hardly leaves aside the aspect of trust placed in the spiritual director; an element that does not arise from simple declarations of intent, but as the fruit of a daily and weekly relationship inspired by the logic of continuity.

Ultimately, the *cyber-Christ* project also raises significant questions in relation to the processing of any personal data released by subjects during the interview, making the danger of a violation of both religious freedom and privacy rights entirely tangible⁸. The confessional space constitutes, in fact, a perimeter protected by the sacramental seal that, by legal provision, is completely inaccessible⁹. The content of the dialogue between the penitent, who accuses his sins, and the priest, who administers the Sacrament of Reconciliation, is sealed by the confessor in an absolutely «inviolable» way, according to can. 983 §1 of the Code of Canon Law, from the moment the sign of the Cross is made until the end of the confession, with or without sacramental absolution, in order to protect the freedom of conscience of the faithful and to safeguard the sanctity of the Sacrament instituted by Christ (*Jn 20:22-23*). For these reasons, can. 983, §1, CIC provides that it is never licit for the confessor to reveal, even partially, directly or indirectly, and for whatever reason, what the penitent has told him during sacramental confession¹⁰.

Such cautions seem to be completely absent in the virtual conversation with the deus in machina, in a logic that also goes far beyond the concessions made in times of pandemic, where - while finding room in emergency situations for an expanded use of the collective absolution governed by canon 961, §1, n. 2 CIC¹¹ contingent, however, on the absence of a priest-the Church has firmly reiterated the

⁷ See CARLO SQUARICE, *La confessione tra sacramentalità, direzione spirituale e richiesta di aiuto*, in *Credere oggi*, 75, 1993, p. 13.

⁸ Cf. ALBERTO PERLASCA, *La tutela civile e penale delle «notizie» apprese «per ragione del proprio ministero» come applicazione del principio della libertà religiosa*, in *Quaderni di diritto ecclesiale*, 2, 1998, p. 304 ff.

⁹ On the subject, see GERALDINA BONI, *Sigillo sacramentale e segreto ministeriale. La tutela tra diritto canonico e diritto secolare*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*. Online Magazine (www.statoechiese.it), 34, 2019, p. 2 ff.

¹⁰ See THEODOR SCHNEIDER, *Nuovo corso di dogmatica*, vol. II, Queriniana, Brescia, 2005², p. 364 ff.

¹¹ See NICO TONTI, *Il sacramento della riconciliazione dinanzi alla pandemia di Covid-19. L'assoluzione generale senza previa confessione individuale e le disposizioni di diritto particolare di alcuni vescovi diocesani italiani*, in *Diritto e Religioni*, 2, 2021, p. 102 ff.

invalidity of absolutions given through digital means¹². And if the absence of the minister, acting *in persona Christi*, makes it useless to discuss a possible violation of the sacramental seal - since the sacrament is absent - the danger of uncontrolled disclosure of personal data remains. This is a wound of no small importance, since the unlawful use of data concerning the religious beliefs of individuals «may entail significant risks for the exercise of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual [...], especially in view of the serious discriminatory effects that may result from the collection of such information»¹³. To be sure, it does not specify whether or not there are devices to record the believers' statements, or in what way they are or are not reused and/or disseminated, which sketches out complex scenarios in terms of liability for possible violations, which could lie as much with the parish facility hosting the artificial bot as with the team that oversaw its design and installation.

Moreover, the fact that a robotic voice invites «not to disclose personal information» at the moment the button is turned on seems totally insufficient to warn the person approaching the interview with the *cyber-Christ*, and this for two reasons: First, because of the lack of persuasiveness that an impersonal, verbal recommendation can evoke in the absence of a written document that commits the institution or, at the very least, requires its explicit exoneration of responsibility by the discloser; second, because it would be difficult to remove any personal connotation from the set of existential-type arguments to which the program itself invites reflection. On the other hand, the aforementioned need to «personalize the spiritual datum» could not lead to a productive outcome without precisely such a contribution from the person addressing the digital confessional.

It is, therefore, a precarious terrain that must lead to reflection on the need to establish boundaries between the use and the abuse of A.I., which is increasingly present in the most diverse areas of human existence and is undoubtedly a potential ally of common progress, understood also in its fideistic declination. But at the same time an insidious antagonist of that personalistic implication that is cardinal to every experience of faith and that Christ himself made primary with the mystery of his incarnation, made of blood and humanity¹⁴, and a little less of algorithms and microchips. The fact that the adherents of the artificial confessional are not only Catholics, but also followers of other religious denominations, and even atheists and agnostics¹⁵, can lead to reflect on the potential of its application in the perspective of a multireligious pastoral. In fact, the new 'deconfessionalized' digital Christ - in addition to the intrinsic

¹² See JOHN PAUL II, *Adbortatio Apostolica "Lettera circolare agli episcopati sull'uso dei mezzi tecnologici e rispetto del segreto della coscienza*, October 22, 2022, in www.penitenteria.va. About this topic see, recently, RAFFAELE SANTORO, PAOLO PALUMBO, FEDERICO GRAVINO, *Diritto canonico digitale*, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli, 2024, p. 340 ff.; see also CLAUDIA CIOTOLA, *Confessione anche on line? Spunti di riflessione sul sacramento della penitenza*, in *Diritto e Religioni*, 2, 2010, p. 13 ff.

¹³ See FABIO BALSAMO, *La protezione dei dati personali di natura religiosa*, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, Cosenza, 2021, p. 7.

¹⁴ Cf. GIBERT GRESHAKE, *Il Dio Unitrino. Teologia trinitaria*, Queriniana, Brescia, 2008³, p. 362 ff.

¹⁵ This data is taken from the project report published by *Peterskapelle's* press release and available on the parish website <https://www.kathbluzern.ch/meine-kirche/pfarreien-standorte/peterskapelle>.

weaknesses highlighted - could become a vehicle for a secular use of the religious message, which would rise to the status of an aggregating factor, where multiculturalism and A.I. could constitute accelerators of innovative configurations of religiosity, paving the way for stimulating frontiers of pastoral ecumenism. Once again, the role of religion as an element of unity stands out, rising above all personal differences and categorizations, and proving to have a key function in overcoming the divisive barriers that the contemporary, complex, conflicted world, in all its facets, raises daily¹⁶.

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¹⁶ See MARIA D'ARIENZO, *Pluralismo religioso e dialogo interculturale. L'inclusione giuridica delle diversità*, Luigi Pellegrini Editore, Cosenza, 2018.