

Prof Ian Waters

There is much ignorance and confusion about what the Church requires. It is this...

- Confessions are normally heard in a confessional, i.e. the place in the church building where the sacrament is celebrated, except for a just reason. However, not every conversation in a confessional is a celebration of the sacrament. Some could use it as a safe place for counselling.
- The seal of confession (that is, the matter which many never be revealed by the priest to anyone) is restricted to whatever sins of the penitent that the penitent reveals to the priest. It does not include other matters discussed.
- If a person discussed in a confessional, or during confession, other matters than his/her own sins, that is not under the confessional seal.
- Those who require anonymity behind a screen have a right to this.
- In every celebration of the sacrament, the priest must decide whether to grant absolution, or deny absolution, or defer absolution.
- This decision to grant, deny or defer is to be based on the disposition of the penitent.
- There are four parts of the sacrament. The priest is responsible for one, namely the absolution. The penitent is responsible for three, namely contrition, confession and satisfaction. Contrition is the most important and may never be omitted.
- Normally, the act of satisfaction is carried out after the absolution (e.g. the penitent confesses robbery, the priest judges he is sorry and will make restitution and so pronounces the absolution, then the penitent afterwards pays back the money he stole). However, the priest can require that the absolution be deferred until the act of satisfaction is carried out (e.g. the penitent confesses paedophilia, the confessor requires he go to the police, and when he produces evidence he has done so the priest absolves).

Has there been poor practice that has contributed to current problems? Possibly ...

- Priests giving the penitent the benefit of the doubt and absolving rather than denying or deferring absolution?
- The anonymity makes it difficult to recognise a recidivist.
- Lack of clear boundary between sacramental confession and mere counselling – both on the part of the priest, and on the part of the penitent.