

**An exploration of the differences and similarities between Counselling and Confession, as experienced by Counsellors who are, or have been, Catholic Priests.**

***Jinson Devassia and Peter Madsen Gubi***

**Fr. Jinson Devassia, MA**, is a Counsellor and Catholic Priest serving in Chester.

**Revd. Professor Peter Madsen Gubi, PhD, ThD, DMin**, is Professor of Counselling and Spiritual Accompaniment at the University of Chester, UK, and a Minister in the Moravian Church.

**Corresponding author:** Revd. Professor Peter Madsen Gubi

**Email:** [p.gubi@chester.ac.uk](mailto:p.gubi@chester.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This research sought to examine the question, “what are the similarities and differences between counselling and Confession?”, by exploring the experiences of five Catholic priests, who are also qualified counsellors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants, who each have a minimum of five years of experience in both counselling and the Catholic priesthood. The data was analysed using Thematic Analysis. The research found that there are some similarities between the sacrament of Confession and the practice of counselling. These are that both practices involve being empathetic, unconditional, non-judgemental, keeping confidence, and careful listening. There are also clear differences between the two practices, the main differences being their intention and faith context. Both counselling and Confession deal with similar ‘human’ struggles, are understood using different languages (theology and psychology), have a different intention, but contribute much comfort to many who are seeking peace.

**Keywords:** Confession; Counselling; Similarities; Differences

## **Introduction**

Confession is a sacrament in the Catholic church, in which 'sinners' gain forgiveness and reconciliation with God and the Church. Counselling and psychotherapy are umbrella terms which are used to describe a variety of talking therapies.

The Catholic Church believes that Confession brings about the complete healing of a person's soul when the penitent is truly contrite. Summarised from Chapman (1994), Crock (1940), Sheen (1950), Kaiser (1963) and Mahoney et al. (1946), the essential features of Confession include:

- Sanctifying grace is restored and punishment due to sin is remitted, offering the penitent consolation from the guilt of sin;
- It is based on the unconditional forgiving love of God;
- It gives an opportunity for a transformation to a new life for the penitent, encouraging him/her to avoid sin and revive his/her commitment to good work;
- The seal of confession is absolute;
- The examination of conscience, the Act of Contrition (i.e. a short prayer of sorrow and repentance) and some form of penance are essential aspects of the sacrament

Counselling, on the other hand, is an informed and planned application of clinical processes and interpersonal stances, which originated from recognized psychological values. Its purpose is to help people to amend their behaviours, emotions, cognitions, and/or other personal characteristics (Norcross and Goldfried, 2005). Summarised from Merry (2002), Mearns, Thorne, and McLeod (2013), Corey (2013) and Nelson-Jones (2011b), the essential features of counselling are:

- It is a systematically arranged meeting between the client and a qualified therapist;
- There must be a contract between both;
- It is confidential unless either party feels legally bound to disclose;
- It is expected that both parties build a trusting relationship based on values such as unconditional regard, empathy, congruence and being non-judgemental;
- It has pre-defined boundaries.

Both practices of Confession and counselling are carried out by qualified practitioners who 'work' with people who are in need, with the intention of bringing about effective change and enhance comfort. Both practices would claim to improve a person's life.

In terms of the positioning of the researchers in this research, one is a serving Catholic priest who is a Counsellor, and the other is a Moravian Minister (who isn't a Catholic Confessor) who is also a Counsellor. To highlight some of the issues from personal experience which motivated this research, and to situate the reader to some of the challenges of being both priest/counsellor, we include two Case Study vignettes from Fr. Jinson's experience as a counsellor, and as a confessor (see Case examples 1 & 2).

**Case example 1.**

Mr. XXXX came for confession. He was a regular penitent who often approached me to hear his confession. He was very much haunted by feelings of guilt for a grave sin which he had committed in the past. As a Catholic priest, it was easy for me to absolve the sin, according to the guidelines of the Church. However, eventually I realised that my penitent was repeatedly confessing the same sin which is not needed, and not recommended by the Church. Somehow, I failed to convince him that God

has already forgiven him out of His great love. I felt that this man needed some form of counselling. At this point, I asked myself if I should approach this man as his confessor or his counsellor, or even as an amalgam of both.

**Case example 2.**

Mrs. XXXX came to me for counselling many times. She was a very vulnerable person who has been haunted by a life-changing accident which happened when she was a little girl. I was asked to be her counsellor and worked with her over a long period. She was a great believer in God, but not a practising Catholic. However, on a number of occasions, she asked me if it was possible for me to forgive her sins. This was not possible for me at that time and in that setting, because I was working with her as her counsellor and not as her confessor. I explained to her that she would have to approach a Catholic priest and ask him to hear her confession. I was in a great dilemma on this occasion.

These experiences led to us exploring the similarities and differences, based on the experiences of other counsellors who are, or have been, Catholic Priests. These experiences are outside of the practice and tradition of the second researcher, and so his function was to independently validate the findings and advise on the research process. The research question for this study is, “what are the similarities and differences between counselling and Confession?”

While there is a considerable amount written about each ‘discipline’ separately, there is only one article which offers an explanation of the similarities and differences of sacramental Confession and counselling. This was written by Valarie Worthen in 1974, and is an opinion piece, rather than one that is based on any research. In Worthen’s article, the similarities and differences between Confession and counselling are summarised as: the basic nature of counselling is non-judgemental, and being so, it never intends to condemn any client for any wrong-doing. In the

same way, Confession, based on the unconditional love of God, does not judge anyone for their faults; the ultimate goal of Confession is the penitent's spiritual, physical and mental well-being. The Church, through the sacrament of Confession, insists upon a firm purpose of amendment (and there is no more therapeutic power in human character than that). Counselling also aims at the integration and self-actualization of any clients; counselling is conducted on a one-to-one basis, as is confession; the sacrament of penance is not intended to cure mental and emotional ailments. It may help in these areas if the penitent keeps a continual open heart when speaking to his confessor. In the same way, counselling is not intended in any way to forgive sins but does much to free the individual from those compulsions which often may lead to a wrong path. Counselling and the sacrament of Confession do share similar approaches. Both try to be non-judgemental, empathic and confidential to a maximum extent. The differences can be summarised as: in Confession, a priest plays the role of mediator between the penitent and God. On the other hand, there is no mediator in counselling. Both client and counsellor share equal and different roles; the process of counselling is essentially straightforward, involving no form of ritual. Confession has to be conducted according to the universal teachings of the church. Counselling can be practised by any qualified person, in contrast to confession, which is reserved to priests. It may be argued that Confession deals with the evils that arise from choices offered by human freedom. On the other hand, counselling deals with the effects of human compulsion; confidentiality in Confession is guaranteed by the seal of confession, whereas confidentiality in counselling is assured by the contract agreed by the client and the counsellor. In Confession, the penitent accepts that he/she has done wrong and has turned away from God, whilst also in all probability harming his/her relationships with others.

He/she takes full responsibility for what he/she has done. In counselling, the client presents because his/her experience of self, the world and others, is in some way broken and disturbed. This may be in no way the fault of the client (Worthen, 1974).

With this being the only published article on this topic, it felt important to discover how other priests, who are also Counsellors, view the similarities and differences from their lived experience.

### **Methodological choices**

Participants were sought from advertising on the websites of all of the Catholic dioceses of England and Wales. The inclusion criteria were: that participants had at least five years' experience as a Catholic Priest/Confessor, and also as a qualified counsellor. Five participants responded, and all were interviewed. Before the interviews took place, all were sent a list of the questions that formed the basis of the interviews. These were based on the following semi-structured questions:

- Which profession did you choose first: counselling or the priesthood?
- What was the inspiration for this choice?
- Why did you later choose to become a Priest/qualified counsellor?
- What counselling approach do you practise?
- Did the long priestly training help you in your profession as a counsellor?
- Did you ever think of modern counselling as a secular form of Confession?
- Do you think there are similarities between counselling and Confession?
- What are the differences between them in your view?
- Have you ever found yourself acting as confessor in a counselling session?
- Have you ever found yourself acting as a counsellor in Confession?

- Has there ever been any tension in exercising your roles as confessor or counsellor and, if so, how you did manage these situations?
- Do you think that a trained counsellor priest can be a better confessor?
- Similarly, do you think that a being a priest can help you to be a better counsellor?

All of the interviews were conducted using the Zoom online platform. It was made clear that the participants would not be expected to share anything which may indicate a particular confession. In this way, the Seal of Confession would not be threatened. However, extra care was taken in transcribing the data and in protecting them. All of the names, places and other clues which might hinder anonymity were removed from the transcripts.

**Table 1. Participants' details**

<b>Participant 1</b> Priest for 15 years; Counsellor for 6 years; Psychodynamic
<b>Participant 2</b> Priest for 50 years; Counsellor for 50 years; Behavioural
<b>Participant 3</b> Priest for 20 years; Counsellor for 44 years; Integrative
<b>Participant 4</b> Priest for 44 years; Counsellor for 24 years; Integrative
<b>Participant 5</b> Priest for 10 years; Counsellor for 5 years; Integrative

Reference to data from each interviewee was coded (P), based on the number of the interview (1-5). Thematic Analysis was chosen for analysing the data because of its accessibility and flexibility (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). The process of thematic analysis requires the identification of themes emerging from close assessment of the data collected. Ethics permissions were granted by the University of Chester. **The findings were validated by the second researcher who was 'independent' of the study in that what was being researched, didn't fall within his tradition or experiencing.**



## Findings

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are presented below:

Theme	Subthemes:
Theme 1: Similarities between Confession and counselling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acting as a confessor in a counselling session.</li> <li>• Acting as a counsellor in Confession.</li> <li>• Effect of long priestly formation on priests' counselling.</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Differences between Confession and counselling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life is an ongoing journey.</li> <li>• Priest as a better counsellor.</li> <li>• Counsellor priest as a better confessor.</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Is counselling a form of Confession?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselling as second profession.</li> <li>• Tension in exercising dual roles.</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Main Themes and Sub Themes which emerged from the interviews.**

### Theme 1: Similarities between Confession and counselling

P1 feels that the priesthood and counselling shared common ground. He feels Confession and counselling share the same base. He also feels that caring, giving people a feeling that they are listened to, providing a safe and secure place and maintaining a non-judgemental attitude, are some of the qualities shared by both the confessor and counsellor.

P5 commented:

“A sort of catharsis takes place. Of course, there are lots of similarities: either, one is pouring out spiritual grievances in the confessional or mental stresses in counselling: there are similarities and healing takes place in both”

P5 suggested that Confession and counselling are built on similar foundations, requiring confidentiality, availability, a non-judgemental approach, careful listening

and the maintenance of boundaries. Making appropriate challenges for the penitent and the client when needed is another similarity that he emphasised. In his opinion, there are more similarities than differences. P2 commented that both professions aim for transformational relationships, and both share similar attitudes. They accept their client/penitent unconditionally. However, P3 argues that there are minimal similarities between confession and counselling. Rather, he feels there is more that differentiates the two practices. He said *“One person is talking and the other one is listening”*. This is the most visible similarity shared by both that he could find. He also believes that the role of the listener in Confession is fundamentally different to the role of the listener in counselling. P5 sees both priesthood and counselling as a service, and he hesitates to refer to either as a ‘profession’. He says that human beings have a body and soul which have different domains, including the physical, the spiritual and the emotional. He agrees that he himself is a human being; he too carries a material self which also needs to be cared for. In his own words: *“I became a priest and counsellor to give attention to the spiritual as well as emotional needs of the people”*. P4 suggested that some people prefer to have their own regular confessor. Such a penitent believes this will help him/her in his/her spiritual growth. P4 saw this as another possible similarity shared with counselling, where many clients work with the same counsellor, at least for a period of time. This priest went so far as to suggest that all people should ideally have the possibility of a regular confessor. He believes that this would enable them to develop in their spiritual life. As others have said, P4 also pointed out that many skills were practised in both ministries, such as: confidentiality, careful listening, congruence, empathy and unconditional regard.

### ***Subtheme 1.1: Acting as a confessor in a counselling session***

P5 commented:

“I have not acted as a confessor in a counselling session. I shall not... I should not... but as a priest I might have done so unknowingly sometimes. I don't think that is a right thing to do”.

P1 remarked that he would keep both separate. He said, *“I wouldn't want to take the role of a priest in counselling. It may not be a helpful intervention if I do so”*. P2 said:

“No. One reason for this.....When people approach me to work as a counsellor, knowing me as a priest, I ask them, what they are asking for. Sometimes people reply.... ‘Father you are a priest and a psychologist’. I ask them, which do you want from me? Are you coming to meet a priest or a psychologist? Some people think that confession is a simple form of counselling”.

P4 accepted that he had acted as a confessor in a counselling session. He confirms that the need and request must always come from the client, and then confession can be arranged after the counselling session. P4 said:

“Yes. I have acted as a confessor in a counselling session. Not explicitly. I have not uttered the words of absolution on those occasions, but I have been listening to the client's words as a form of confession”.

However, he stressed that he is fully aware of the boundaries of both practices.

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Acting as a counsellor in Confession***

“Yes. *Very many times*”, was the reply of P5. He continued:

“A lot of problems that emerge in Confession are not strictly spiritual in nature. Rather they involve daily worries, economic problems, and things like that. Sometimes there are long queues at the confessional...”

By this, he meant that time often did not allow him to give sufficient attention to this sort of practical need. P1 commented: *“It is a temptation....I call it a temptation... it is not appropriate to make confession a counselling session...”* He suggested that one can use his skills, as a counsellor, to listen and help the penitent to open up.

“Yes. Quite often I now find myself using my tools as a counsellor in my priestly ministry. Certainly, in the confessional setting, I have taken the other role on occasions” (P1).

However, P2 stated, “*not really*”. “*I didn’t want to*”. P4 felt that he has acted as a counsellor in the confessional more often than he taken the role of a confessor in a counselling setting. He thinks that the skills he has learned from the counselling profession have often been very useful in the confessional. He believes that his listening skills have improved; he has developed better insights into his penitent’s needs because of his counselling training.

### ***Subtheme 1.3: Effect of long priestly formation on priests’ counselling***

P5 said his long priestly formation had helped him enormously in his counselling. For him, the basis of Christianity is encounter with God and one another.

“During this long formation, I was trying to connect with God and with people. Reaching out can be in different forms. As a trained counsellor, it is easy for me to reach out to the needs of the people, while being within the boundaries”.

P1 suggested that his long priestly formation had given him many opportunities for self–reflection, meditation, spiritual guidance, self-examination and a general increase in self-awareness. Even when keeping professional relationships with clients in counselling, he found that he could easily transfer skills he had acquired in his priestly training which had made him reflective, disciplined and practised in maintaining the boundaries. P3 wholeheartedly accepted this benefit of long priestly formation giving strength to his counselling profession. This priest also mentioned that he had worked with the Samaritans for four years during his priestly formation. He suggested that living in a very big priestly community helped him very much, and prepared the way for his counselling profession. He said:

“There was more giving and taking, we did a lot of group work, we sat quietly with others and listened to them, and it produced familiarity with others and accepting others” (P3).

P4 commented:

“No. Generally the long seminary training did not help me at all. Not very much at all... except for one person who taught me moral theology. He said, “the law is to help not to hinder”. That helped me. The extra-curricular activity, which I underwent during my priestly training, outside the curriculum, helped me very much”.

## **Theme 2: Differences between Confession and counselling**

According to P1, a priest in the confessional, and a counsellor with a client, predominantly use different languages.

“The priest looks at it from a spiritual point.... Priestly life has a different aspect... In the confessional, being a sacred place, things are opened which have never been opened. The priest is like a good shepherd.... there are links but...” (P1).

According to him, Confession is something spiritual, transcendental, above us... and it has no continuity. Very often, the priest is anonymous. In counselling, however, there is much more of a personal relationship: there is understanding and reflection, and the process is generally continuous. P1 also highlighted the question of confidentiality, which is conditional in counselling but absolute in confession.

P5 also highlighted the point about confidentiality. He too spoke about the seal of Confession, emphasising that confidentiality in Confession is absolute. The seal of Confession can never be broken in any circumstances. In his view, Confession is set mainly in the spiritual realm, while counselling concentrates on the intellectual and emotional aspects of a person. He finds Confession can be more effective, healing and transformative, even when dealing with emotional aspects, provided that the penitent has faith. P2 stressed that the relationship in both practices is transformational in nature. In Confession, a priest is a mediator between the penitent

and God, while in counselling the relationship is between the counsellor and the client. Thus, a confessor's relationship with the penitent need not be constant or long-lived, as in the case of counselling. A confessor may not even meet the penitent at all, as a stranger to the Parish may enter the confessional box without ever seeing the priest in advance. Generally, in counselling, a much deeper relationship than this is built up between counsellor and client over a period of time. Maintaining a relationship in the counselling process is critically important: developing a relationship between priest and penitent in Confession is, to all intents and purposes, irrelevant. P3 commented that counselling is a "*disciplined conversation*". The counsellor, in P3's view, is essentially there to listen carefully and altruistically or, as he puts it, in a 'self-denying way'. On the other hand, P3 sees Confession as a ritual absolution. The aspect of 'self-denying', which is seen in counselling, is not prominent in Confession, where the priest is not required to be curious or even to engage with the penitent. He puts the penitent's role as follows:

"When I go to confession... I regret what is done... I ask God's forgiveness.... I might possibly ask for advice.... I receive absolution... Done.... I might never see this priest again..." (P3).

*"It is different in terms of intention and faith"*. P4 reminds us that in confession, God is the final word: it is God who forgives, not the priest. Receiving God's grace in this way usually brings huge relief and happiness to the penitent. P4 stressed that in confession, the love of God is explicit and implicit. However, he believes that, in counselling, the love of God is only implicitly present.

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Life is an ongoing journey***

P1 sees life as a journey or pilgrimage. For him, the confessor accompanies the penitent on a stage in his/her spiritual journey while the counsellor accompanies the

client on his/her emotional journey. P5 commented that Christian life is a continuous journey where one tries to encounter God.

### **Subtheme 2.2: *Priest as a better counsellor***

P1 accepted that his priestly training had helped him to be a better counsellor. At times, however, he felt it as a barrier too. P5 said, "*Any spiritual person can cater for the spiritual and material needs of another*". He was referring not just to priests here. However, he also mentioned a hidden danger when a spiritual person is offering counselling. Such a person can be easily moved by a form of prejudice, especially with issues which conflict with his spiritual and moral values, e.g. abortion and same sex marriage are not accepted in the Catholic Church and, therefore, would cause a Catholic counsellor major conflict. P2 feels that a priest can be a better counsellor. He believes that all priests will be offered rich opportunities in their day-to-day priestly ministry to develop such skills as careful listening, congruence and especially unconditional love. However, P3 points out that a priest does not automatically become a better counsellor. He suggests that a priest is normally heavily influenced by the didactic teachings of the Church, which naturally can limit his way of thinking.

P3 said:

"The Church teaches about good and evil, sin and virtue, how to lead a good life etc... A counselling priest, if he can somehow not overburden his clients with the Church's stricter teachings, can be a better counsellor".

P4 suggested that being a priest does not necessarily make someone a better counsellor. He thinks the level of self-knowledge and personal development a priest has, determines his performance in counselling. Becoming a priest by ordination does not necessarily make a priest a better listener or skilled in counselling. This participant pointed out that in the early practice of the Church, when a new priest was

ordained, he was not immediately given the 'faculty of Confession'. Originally, he saw this as bad practice, but now he believes that a priest needs time and appropriate experience to become sufficiently congruent and empathetic, and to become a better listener.

### ***Subtheme 2.3: Counsellor priest as a better confessor***

P1 is convinced that both practices are adding something to the other. He is convinced that his counselling expertise has helped him to be a better confessor. In his own words, "*As a priest you are like wine... The older the wine, the better it is*". P5 strongly affirms that a counselling priest can indeed be a better confessor. He explained:

"Suppose someone comes for Confession and says, "I get angry". If the priest is not aware of the psychological aspects of the emotion, he might say, oh... no... You should not get angry. The Bible says... Jesus told us... that is a sin. Indirectly the priest is adding to the guilt feeling in the penitent. If I am a trained counsellor, I can understand the penitent's anger as a physiological, hormonal and psychological reaction. It gives me a more compassionate understanding of the person. The counsellor priest acquires a wider perspective..." (P5).

P3 feels that his priestly training helped him to be a better listener. P4 commented that a trained counselling priest will actually be a better person. Whatever he does will benefit from the counselling training he has had. P4 suggests that this priest will have a greater level of self-awareness and his task is to integrate these two ministries into one person. P4 feels that a counselling priest can be a better confessor. Counselling involves lengthy training and self-reflection. He said, "*It is not about knowing more; but knowing with the self, and with it, he will be a better confessor*".

### ***Theme 3: Is counselling a form of confession?***



P5 suggested that he does not believe this. He thinks both practices developed in separate contexts; one in a secular context and the other in a spiritual. He believes that counselling in one form or another has always existed, long before it emerged in its modern guise. However, he accepts there are several similarities between counselling and confession, and he suggests that counselling might have some roots in the medieval monastic tradition. P2 accepted that modern counselling might well be a secular form of Confession, pointing out that some of the main proponents of modern counselling have a very strong Christian background. However, it must be said that a number of them also wished to put their Christian traditions behind them. *“We have a long tradition in the Church of talking to someone who is wise” (P3)*. P3 offered this comment in support of a long tradition of informal counselling in the Catholic Church. However, he does not think that modern counselling is a secular form of confession. His view is that there is, *“a strong human need to speak to somebody”*. In this modern world, he points out, it is becoming impossible to meet this requirement, and it is this desperate need of people to talk to somebody that inspired modern counselling. P4 agrees with the view that modern counselling is a secular form of Catholic confession. He said that there is an “overarching element” for both these practices, and he calls it ‘unconditional’. He told me that during his formation he had worked with a permanent confessor or spiritual director. He believes that ‘the father confessor’ image or role has been borrowed, to some extent, by modern counsellors. Modern counsellors are a consistent and regular support to their client and in this respect at least, he believes that modern counselling has been influenced by traditional confession.

### **Subtheme 3.1: *Counselling as second profession?***

*"We live in a world where there is no one to listen to us"* (P3). P3 said when he was ordained a priest, many people came to him for spiritual counselling. He was hesitant to do this because of his inexperience and lack of training. He felt counselling was very important and decided he would in fact train to become a qualified counsellor. He said, *"I did not see it as another profession but a specific way of being a priest"*. P5 feels that some of his rectors and spiritual directors were not qualified and skilled. He was generally not satisfied with the directions he received from them. This was his inspiration to become qualified as a counsellor. Now, when people approach him for assistance, he feels he can guide them appropriately. P4 had undergone some counselling for himself, when he had been at a crisis point in his own life. He felt this support was very useful. Inspired by this, he chose his second profession, thinking that he could better help other people on occasion and he believes that he is a better priest with this qualification. He also said that he had wished to understand God's unconditional love when he was a child. This prompted him to opt for priesthood and later he chose the counselling profession. He thinks that his counselling work allows him to put into practice this unconditional love of God.

### **Subtheme 3.2: *Tension in exercising dual roles***

P2 commented that he had indeed faced tension in exercising these roles. He said;

*"Yes. Changing the role is like changing a hat... Have I experienced tension! Someone inappropriately expecting both roles simultaneously... So, I have often had to explain firmly to them that is not my role"*.

However, this priest could not remember a particular example, which might explain how he could manage such a situation. P3 has not experienced any tension at all while acting as a confessor or counsellor. P4 said that he has not experienced any tension while he was exercising his confession ministry. On the other hand, on

several occasions, he has experienced a dilemma when counselling. He recalled many times when people came for counselling, knowing that he is also a Catholic priest and asked for absolution. He admitted that on those occasions, he could not hesitate to give absolution after the counselling session. He simply said, "*The need came from the person, I simply can't say, sorry I can't give absolution; please go to another priest for it*" (P4).

## **Discussion**

From the data, the following similarities between confession and counselling emerged from the interviews with the five participants:

- Both practices share similar attitudes. The penitent/client is listened to, cared for and unconditionally accepted, without judgement;
- Confidentiality is maintained in both ministries, although the nature of the confidentiality may be different;
- Both ministries carry a healing effect;
- Confession and counselling take place in a safe and secure space;
- Both counselling and Confession are transformational in nature;
- Both ministries are conversational in nature: one person talks and the other listens;
- Both ministries require the client/penitent to be self-reflective;
- A sort of catharsis often takes place in Confession and in counselling.

All of the participants unanimously accepted that there are similarities between these two ministries.

The data describes the differences between both of these 'ministries' as:

- A priest can be anonymous in a Confession, whereas the counsellor reveals his/her identity;
- Normally, a confessor does not have an ongoing working 'relationship' with a penitent, but a counsellor does, at least for a period of time;
- A priest, in the Confession, is a representative of the Church, and a mediator between God and the penitent. A counsellor does not play either of those roles;
- Confession is a spiritual exercise. Counselling is largely secular in nature. Consequently, each employs its own vocabulary and has a different intent;
- The nature of confidentiality is different in both;
- In Confession, God has the final word. In counselling, decisions are made by humans;
- Confession is based on the grace and love of God. Counselling is based on the relationship between a client and a counsellor;
- Confession has a universally accepted method, while counselling employs a variety of therapeutic methods;
- Counselling is a disciplined conversation, while Confession is a ritual practice.

All participants valued their ability to use counselling skills in Confession as enabling them to offer a better experience of hearing Confession, e.g. their perception was that their depth of listening in Confession was better as a result of training to be a Counsellor. However, for most participants, the importance of keeping the two roles as separate, was clear in the data. P2 achieved that by asking clients which role they needed from him. Although some (e.g. Gubi, 2015) argue for the integration of the 'self' with integrity in counselling, and for less rigidity for practitioners when working

with psyche and soul, it is perhaps inevitable that the two roles can become conflated in the minds of penitents and clients, which can sometimes lead to problematic dual relationships, as priests who offer therapeutic services may offer sacramental and other pastoral interventions (Gula, 1996; Haug, 1999; Kane, 2013; Shaughnessy, 1998). Priests do not necessarily have the training and awareness of the potential difficult impact of dual boundaries on clients/penitents – although priests who have trained as Counsellors should hold an awareness of those difficulties as a consequence of their Counsellor training, because dual relationships are discouraged in professional ethical frameworks for Counsellors (e.g. BACP, 2018). The data also reveal a desire/temptation of some participants (e.g. P1; and in Case example 1 above) to offer absolution in a counselling session, but demonstrate their resistance to offering absolution in an ‘actioned’ manner. Instead, the conflation of roles is more present in how things are reflected on, in the moment, in the mind of the priest who is also a counsellor, as befits a reflexive practitioner.

## **Conclusion**

There are different forms of Confession practised around the world in different communities, so a limitation of this research is that it concentrates only on Catholic confession within a UK context, with a small sample size of participants. However, apart from Worthen’s (1974) opinion piece, there has been no research published which has considered the relationship between counselling and Confession. This research contributes to that discussion. Both counselling and Confession deal with similar ‘human’ struggles, are understood using different languages (theology and psychology), have a different intention, but contribute much comfort to many who are seeking peace. **The research indicates that whilst there are sometimes temptations**

to integrate these two practices, maintaining clarity by priests who are also counsellors, is important.

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