

DOES CERTAINTY OF DIVINE FORGIVENESS PREDICT THE DISTINCT
PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE CATHOLIC RITUAL OF
CONFESSION?

BY

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Abstract

The Catholic Sacrament of Confession is unique among religious disclosure practices in that the priest absolves penitents of their sins, offering certainty of divine forgiveness and in turn producing distinctive psychological effects such as relief from shame and guilt, increased gratitude and peace, and greater negative emotions during confession. Comparably, personal prayer involves disclosure to God without a human intermediary to confirm forgiveness. To test the theory that certainty of divine forgiveness produces distinctive effects, the present study employed a within-subjects design where Catholic participants engaged in confession, private prayer, and a control condition, each for one week in counterbalanced order. A total of 89 individuals from the Psychology SONA pool and the Wake Forest University Catholic Community were recruited. Primary analyses used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to compare conditions on psychological outcomes. Results from the analyses showed that confession only predicted greater negative emotions during confession compared to personal prayer and the control, suggesting greater costs associated with confession. However, across all outcomes, participants reported greater benefits (i.e., relief from shame and guilt, greater feelings of peace, gratitude, and humility) after engaging in any religious intervention. These results contribute to the growing literature on the psychological effects of religious practices.

Introduction

In nearly every religious tradition, believers can (and regularly do) disclose their transgressions directly to God through private prayer. Catholics, too, pray privately. Yet the Catholic Church requires that its members periodically confess to a priest in the Sacrament of Confession, and many Catholics voluntarily attend far more often than the required annual minimum (Pew Research Center, 2025a; 2025b). What, if anything, does confessing to a priest add beyond what private prayer already provides?

This question matters for at least three reasons. First, despite approximately 52 million adults in the United States identifying as Catholic, remarkably little empirical research has examined the distinctive psychological effects of confession compared to other forms of religious disclosure (Pew Research Center, 2025a). Second, confession attendance has declined over the past half-century, with many Catholics citing discomfort and embarrassment as deterrents (Fakir et al., 2025; O'Toole, 2025). Understanding whether and how confession produces distinctive benefits could inform pastoral efforts to address this decline. Third, if confession does produce unique effects, identifying the mechanism responsible would advance the broader psychology of religion by clarifying how specific religious practices—beyond religiosity in general—shape well-being.

The present study proposes a theoretical model in which the distinctive effects of confession are driven by a single mechanism: the certainty of divine forgiveness conveyed through the priest's absolution. Unlike private prayer, where the believer must rely on their own subjective sense of being forgiven, confession culminates in the priest's pronouncement of absolution—an act understood by Catholic theology to be God's own forgiveness mediated through the priest (Cunningham, 2012; O'Toole, 2025). I argue that this certainty cascades into a series of downstream effects on shame, guilt, gratitude, peace, and other aspects of psychological outcomes.

It should be noted that little literature exists examining the distinctive effects of confession compared to personal prayer. As such, evidence for a competing model is limited. However, one possible consideration may be that penitents do not require nor experience a sense of certainty upon being forgiven. Rather, their belief that they have been forgiven by God may increase as a function of being a religious individual. Thus, the presence of another person when seeking forgiveness from God may not be crucial to their experience of subsequent downstream effects. However, the present study does not test this model. Rather, I am interested in testing a model where the individual feels greater certainty of feeling forgiven by God as a function of a moral and religious authority being present during the process.

To test this model, I employed a within-subjects design in which practicing Catholic participants completed three conditions (confession to a priest, private verbal prayer, and a verbal control task) in counterbalanced order. This design allows each participant to serve as their own control, increasing statistical power to detect the hypothesized condition differences. The following sections develop the theoretical model, derive specific hypotheses, and describe the study's methodology.

Religious Self-Disclosure as a Distinctive Form of Coping

Self-disclosure—the act of divulging personal information to another person—is a fundamental interpersonal process with well-documented consequences for well-being (Greene et al., 2009). Disclosing positive information tends to increase emotional well-being and feelings of social connection (Trinh et al., 2025). However, disclosing negative information, including transgressions, failures, and morally troubling experiences, has been linked to increased rumination and decreased emotional well-being over time (Trinh et al., 2025). This asymmetry is important for understanding religious disclosure practices, many of which center on the confession of sins and wrongdoing.

Across religious traditions, self-disclosure to God serves as a widespread coping mechanism. Religion provides a framework for meaning-making, and many believers rely on

disclosing their worries, wrongdoings, and suffering to God as a way of managing distress (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000; Park, 2005). In nearly every major religion, atoning for and disclosing one's transgressions is considered an important spiritual practice (Bennett & Elliot, 2013).

Several religious traditions involve structured disclosure of wrongdoing. In Islam, the tenet of *tawba* (repentance) involves acknowledging one's sins, resolving not to repeat them, making amends, and seeking forgiveness from God through *istighfar*. Psychotherapy derived from these practices has demonstrated mental health benefits for religious practitioners (Uyun et al., 2019). In Christianity more broadly, repenting during prayer and asking for God's forgiveness is integral to the faith; the Lord's Prayer includes the petition "forgive us our trespasses" (The Church of England, n.d.). Many Christians use prayer as a form of self-disclosure to God, repenting and seeking guidance during stressful events (Bennett & Elliot, 2013).

These disclosure-based practices share a common structure: the practitioner reflects on wrongdoing, expresses remorse, and seeks divine forgiveness. However, they differ in a critical respect. In Islamic *tawba* and in Protestant prayer, the process can be conducted entirely between the individual and God, without the involvement of a religious authority. In Catholicism, the Sacrament of Confession requires the presence of a priest; the only person to whom God has granted the power to absolve sins (O'Toole, 2025). Thus, while the motive behind confession is shared with other religious disclosure practices, the means of receiving forgiveness is fundamentally different: it requires a human intermediary with recognized divine authority.

This distinction has potential psychological significance. Given that disclosing negative information typically increases rumination (Trinh et al., 2025), the finality of priestly absolution may interrupt this process by providing an authoritative endpoint that private prayer cannot provide. At the same time, confessing to another person introduces vulnerability and the risk of judgment by another person that is absent in solitary prayer. The present study examines both

possibilities by testing the effects of confession relative to private prayer and a non-confessional control.

The Sacrament of Confession

The Sacrament of Confession (also known as the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance) can be conceptualized as comprising four parts: Examination of Conscience, Expression of Remorse, Confession, and Absolution (Cunningham, 2012). The penitent first reflects on their sins, then expresses genuine remorse and a determination not to sin again. Next, the penitent confesses their sins to the priest and recites the Act of Contrition, demonstrating sorrow for their transgressions. Finally, the priest pronounces absolution (a prayer that, according to Catholic doctrine, is God's own act of forgiveness mediated through the priest) and assigns penance. It is this final step that provides the penitent with certainty of being forgiven by God.

The ritual shares structural features with counseling: both are designed to involve a non-judgmental listener bound by confidentiality that assists the discloser in decreasing their sense of shame and guilt, and both aim to guide the discloser through their distress and provide long-term benefits for the individual's well-being (Devassia & Gubi, 2022). Over the past 70 years, Catholic seminaries have increasingly incorporated psychology-related coursework, amplifying confession's existing role as a form of pastoral care (O'Toole, 2025). However, the priest's role in confession extends beyond that of a counselor: the priest is understood to be *alter Christus* (another Christ) who, by virtue of ordination, possesses the God-given authority to absolve sins (Guido, 2008; O'Toole, 2025).

The psychology of divine forgiveness provides a framework for understanding why this authority matters. Receiving forgiveness from God has been associated with enhanced mental health, greater life satisfaction, flourishing, and increased capacity for self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others (Fincham, 2022; Fincham & May, 2022; 2024; Maranges & Fincham, 2024). Individuals may engage in greater self-forgiveness after receiving divine forgiveness

because the experience of being forgiven by God signals that one is worthy of forgiveness (Fincham & May, 2022). Additionally, the certainty of divine forgiveness derived from the authority of the priest reassures the penitent that God is active and intervenes in the world, providing a secure and trustworthy basis for coping with stress (Pargament et al., 2000). Previous research on confession attendance supports these associations: greater frequency of confession attendance was associated with higher well-being, life satisfaction, and perceived divine forgiveness (Fakir et al., 2025).

Despite these potential benefits, confession attendance has declined in recent decades. Many Catholics attend only once per year, and some cite discomfort and embarrassment as reasons for avoiding the practice (Fakir et al., 2025; O'Toole, 2025; Pew Research, 2025b). Historically, the confessional was sometimes experienced as adversarial, with penitents feeling as though they stood trial for their sins (O'Toole, 2025). Additionally, shifting moral norms (such as the designation of contraception as a mortal sin) increased the burden on penitents to track an evolving taxonomy of sins, contributing in some cases to scrupulosity, a form of religiously themed obsessive-compulsive disorder (Olatunji et al., 2007; O'Toole, 2025). Thus, while confession may have distinctive benefits for well-being, it may also carry distinctive costs.

A Theoretical Model: How Confession Produces Distinctive Effects

I propose that the distinctive psychological effects of confession can be understood through a causal model in which a single mechanism—*certainty of divine forgiveness*—drives a cascade of downstream effects. This model organizes the expected outcomes into a temporal sequence: the mechanism itself, followed by proximal costs, primary benefits, affective consequences, relational and identity consequences, and extended downstream effects. Finally, I consider how individual differences in religiosity and belief in divine intervention may moderate these relationships.

The Mechanism: Certainty of Divine Forgiveness

The central claim of this model is that confession increases the penitent's certainty of being forgiven by God, and that this certainty accounts for confession's distinctive effects relative to private prayer. Two features of the sacrament support this claim. First, the priest's pronouncement of absolution provides an external, authoritative signal that forgiveness has been granted. Penitents are taught from childhood that the priest possesses God's authority to absolve sins, and centuries of theological tradition reinforce this belief (Guido, 2008; O'Toole, 2025). Second, absolution carries a sense of finality: individuals who continue to ruminate over sins that have already been absolved are considered to be disrespecting the sacrament (O'Toole, 2025). Together, these features provide both the certainty that forgiveness has occurred and a theologically mandated endpoint to self-blame.

In contrast, private prayer, namely the prayer of confession, offers no comparable mechanism for certainty. There is no external authority to confirm that forgiveness has been received, and no determined endpoint to prevent the penitent from revisiting past sins in future prayers. While individuals engaging in private prayer can feel a subjective sense of divine forgiveness, this sense lacks the institutional reinforcement and perceived finality of priestly absolution. Furthermore, the prayer tested here is the prayer of confession, which is one of forms of private prayer in Catholicism. In both the prayer of confession and the sacrament, participants disclose their sins to God, the only difference being the presence of the priest. Consequently, prayer may leave more room for uncertainty and rumination (Trinh et al., 2025).

If this analysis is correct, participants should report greater certainty of divine forgiveness after confession than after private prayer or the control condition. This is the gating hypothesis of the entire model: if confession does not increase certainty of divine forgiveness, the downstream predictions that follow are undermined.

Proximal Effects: Acute Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment

Before turning to the hypothesized benefits of confession, it is important to acknowledge its immediate psychological costs. In a previous study examining the well-being correlates of confession attendance, many participants reported feeling embarrassed or ashamed immediately following confession, even as they also reported relief (Fakir et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with the broader self-disclosure literature: disclosing negative personal information to another person increases vulnerability and the risk of social judgment, which can produce acute negative self-evaluations (Trinh et al., 2025).

Confession requires the penitent to articulate their sins aloud to another person—a process that may intensify feelings of shame (a global negative self-evaluation) and guilt (remorse for a specific behavior; Tangney et al., 1996) during the act itself. Additionally, the presence of a human listener introduces the possibility of embarrassment—a self-conscious emotion tied to concerns about being evaluated by another person. These negative emotions are absent in private prayer, where no human witness is present. I therefore predict that participants will report greater acute shame, guilt, and embarrassment during confession than during prayer or the control condition. Critically, these proximal costs are expected to coexist with the downstream benefits described below, representing the immediate price of a practice that yields relief.

Primary Downstream Effects: Relief from Shame and Guilt

Despite the immediate costs just described, I predict that confession will produce greater relief from shame and guilt than private prayer. The logic follows directly from the proposed mechanism: if confession provides greater certainty of divine forgiveness, this certainty should enable the penitent to release negative self-evaluations more effectively than when forgiveness remains uncertain.

Two pathways support this prediction. First, the certainty of being forgiven by God may facilitate self-forgiveness. Prior research has demonstrated a positive association between divine

forgiveness and self-forgiveness, suggesting that individuals who feel assured of God's forgiveness become more willing to extend that forgiveness to themselves (Fincham & May, 2022). Self-forgiveness, in turn, directly addresses shame (by improving global self-evaluation) and guilt (by reducing remorse for specific transgressions). Second, the finality of absolution may interrupt ruminative cycles. Without a clear endpoint, penitents who pray privately may revisit their transgressions repeatedly, sustaining shame and guilt. Absolution provides a theologically sanctioned conclusion that discourages further rumination.

It is important to distinguish this predicted relief from the acute shame and guilt discussed above. The temporal model I propose is that confession produces an increase in negative affect during the disclosure itself (acute shame, guilt, and embarrassment), followed by a reduction in baseline shame and guilt once absolution has been received. In other words, the immediate costs of confession are offset by the subsequent benefits, and these benefits exceed those produced by private prayer.

Affective Consequences: Gratitude and Peace

Beyond relief from negative emotions, confession may produce distinctive increases in positive affect. Two affective consequences are predicted: gratitude and peace.

Gratitude, defined here as feeling grateful or thankful toward God (Krause & Hayward, 2015), may be more salient following confession because the certainty of being forgiven provides a clear referent for the feeling. When a penitent has been absolved by a priest, the source and reality of God's forgiveness is concrete and immediate, potentially evoking stronger gratitude than a more ambiguous sense of having been heard during prayer.

Peace, a sense of inner calm and relief, is a commonly reported subjective experience following confession (Fakir et al., 2025). The restorative quality of confession, in which the penitent moves from the burden of unconfessed sin to the relief of absolution, may produce a meditative, cleansing sense of peace. Prior qualitative research found that many Catholics

described confession as lifting a great weight, consistent with the experience of psychological peace (Fakir et al., 2025; O'Toole, 2025).

Relational Consequences: Closeness to God

Confession may also produce distinctive effects on the penitent's sense of relationship with God and identification with the Catholic Church.

Closeness to God, defined as one's perceived relationship with God (Hill & Pargament, 2003), may increase following confession because the sacrament involves a direct encounter with what the penitent understands to be God's forgiveness, mediated through the priest. Previous research suggests that one's perceived relationship with God is an important predictor of well-being, mediating the effects of religious practices, including varying forms of personal prayer, on psychological outcomes (Jeppsen, 2022). Confession may strengthen this relationship because it provides the penitent with an opportunity to return to a higher moral standard through a process that involves direct communication with God's representative (O'Toole, 2025). In contrast, private prayer lacks the intermediary who confirms forgiveness and may therefore produce a less vivid sense of divine connection.

Extended Downstream Effects: Humility, Self-Compassion, and Other-Compassion

Several additional outcomes are plausible consequences of confession, though they are more distal and their causal connection to the proposed mechanism is less direct. I included them as exploratory predictions.

Humility may increase following confession because the sacrament involves acknowledging one's moral failings to a religious authority. Catholicism provides clear moral structure from childhood, and the priest reinforces this structure through guidance and penance (O'Toole, 2025). This process—in which the penitent is reminded of their moral limitations and the standards to which they aspire—may foster a sense of intellectual and moral humility. In private prayer, there is no comparable reinforcement from a qualified moral authority.

Self-compassion and other-compassion, feeling patience, love, and kindness toward the self and others (Sahdra et al., 2023), may be downstream consequences of the forgiveness experience. The certainty of being forgiven by God may encourage the penitent to extend forgiveness to themselves, fostering self-compassion. This self-compassion may then generalize to others, as prior research has found that acceptance of one's own flaws predicts acceptance of others' flaws (Zhang et al., 2020). However, the causal chain from confession to other-compassion likely involves multiple intermediary steps not measured in this study, and these predictions should be considered speculative.

It should be noted that previous studies have found a positive and significant relationship between divine forgiveness and self and other forgiveness (Fincham & May, 2022). However, these variables were not included within the present study because a previous study investigating the relationship between confession and downstream outcomes found no significant relationship between attending confession and other forgiveness (Fakir et al., 2025). The present study functions as logical extension of the previous study, with the goal to explain the mechanism driving the relationship between greater confession attendance and well-being benefits, there seemed a lack of theoretical support to include self and other forgiveness. Thus, while divine forgiveness may relate to other and self-forgiveness in certain religious contexts, previous research did not support the inclusion of these variables in a study of practicing Catholics.

Moderator Analysis: Religiosity

The effects described above depend on the penitent's acceptance of the theological framework within which confession operates. Religiosity may moderate the strength of confession's effects.

Religiosity: Individuals who are more religious may hold stronger beliefs in the priest's authority and in the reality of divine forgiveness, potentially amplifying the distinctiveness of confession's effects. However, given that our sample consists of practicing Catholics who attend confession at least annually, variability in religiosity may be restricted.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are derived from the theoretical model above. They are organized to mirror the causal structure of the model: mechanism, proximal costs, primary benefits, affective consequences, relational and identity consequences, extended effects, and moderation. All hypotheses compare confession to private prayer and the control condition unless otherwise noted.

Primary Hypotheses

H1: Confession will increase certainty of receiving divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer and the control condition. This is a key hypothesis; if not supported, the theoretical basis for the remaining predictions is undermined.

H2: Confession will increase acute feelings of (a) shame, (b) guilt, and (c) embarrassment during the practice compared to personal prayer and the control condition, reflecting the vulnerability of disclosing to another person.

H3: Confession will decrease post-session feelings of (a) shame and (b) guilt compared to personal prayer and the control condition, reflecting the relief conferred by certainty of divine forgiveness.

H4: Confession will increase feelings of peace compared to personal prayer and the control condition.

H5: Confession will increase feelings of gratitude compared to personal prayer and the control condition.

Exploratory Hypotheses

H6: Confession will increase feelings of closeness to God compared to personal prayer and the control condition.

H7: Confession will increase feelings of humility compared to personal prayer and the control condition.

H8: Confession will increase (a) self-compassion and (b) other-compassion compared to personal prayer and the control condition.

H9: The relationship between confession and the distinctive outcomes (H1–H9) will be moderated by religiosity, such that effects are stronger for individuals higher in religiosity.

Method

Design

The present study employed a within-subjects design comparing the effects of three conditions on psychological and spiritual outcomes in practicing Catholic university students: (a) confession (verbal confession to a priest in the Sacrament of Confession); (b) prayer (solitary verbal confession of sins to God in a private space); and (c) control (verbally describing one's morning in a private space). Each participant completed all three conditions, one per week, in an order determined by Latin-square counterbalancing to control for sequence and carryover effects (Reese, 1997). This study was approved by the Wake Forest University Institutional Review Board (IRB00026137).

A within-subjects design was chosen for two reasons. First, the target population (practicing Catholics at a single university who attend confession at least annually) is small enough that a between-subjects design would not yield sufficient power. Second, having each participant serve as their own control increases sensitivity to condition differences by eliminating between-person variability. While intervention research has traditionally used between-subjects designs, previous studies have successfully employed within-subjects designs for comparing interventions, using counterbalancing and wash-out periods to address threats to internal validity (Ardoin et al., 2008; Laharnar et al., 2020; Schoenherr, 2024).

The three conditions test two contrasts central to the theoretical model. The confession versus prayer contrast isolates the effect of the priest (the presence of a human intermediary with divine authority to absolve), since both conditions involve verbal disclosure of sins to God. The confession versus control contrast tests the overall effect of confession as a practice. An

additional prayer versus control contrast tests whether verbal disclosure of sins to God, even without a priest, differs from a non-confessional activity.

Participants

A power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) targeting a statistical power of .80 for a within-subjects MANOVA with an expected effect size of $f = .20$. I report the minimum detectable effect size at the achieved N in the Results section.

Participants were recruited from two sources: the Wake Forest University Psychology SONA Pool and the Wake Forest University Catholic Community. Eligibility criteria required that participants be 18 years or older, English-speaking, self-identified as a practicing Catholic, and have attended confession within the past year. The requirement for recent confession attendance ensured that participants were actively engaged with the practice; results may differ for individuals who have not attended confession since childhood. Participants were recruited in both the fall and spring semesters of the 2025 – 2026 academic year. It is worth mentioning that participants were recruited about 5 to 6 weeks prior to winter break and across the spring semester, with some participants engaging in the study around spring break and Easter.

A total of 89 participants were recruited (83 from the SONA Pool and 6 from the community) and 131 cases were recorded (108 from the SONA Pool, 13 from the community, and 10 without a listed source). A greater number of cases were recorded than participants were recruited because of numerous duplicate cases. The process for cleaning the data is described below. Before cleaning or removing the data, all surveys were merged using personal identifiers as the binding variable.

After merging the surveys, data were first removed if they did not complete the intake survey. Of the 131 cases, 15 cases had incomplete surveys. Then cases were removed if they responded “Never” to the question “How often do you attend confession?” Of the remaining 116 cases recorded, 31 responded “Never” when reporting their frequency of attending confession. Of the remaining 85 cases, participants data were removed if their last confession was greater

than a year ago (i.e., responded with a number greater than 52 to the question “When was the last time you attended confession? Please provide an estimate in weeks”). Of these 85 cases, 11 cases reported attending confession more than 52 weeks ago. Of the remaining 74 cases, 7 were removed because they cancelled survey participation. Lastly, three cases were removed for duplicate responses. These duplicate responses were assessed for time of completion, upon which the response closest to the time sent according to their designated condition schedule was selected and the duplicate case was removed. As such, 64 participants were included in the final analysis (59 from the SONA Pool and 5 from the community). A description of the sample size for each condition and time can be found in Table 1 in the supplementary materials. It should also be noted that of the 64 participants included in the final analyses, 31 had some form of missing data. As such, a post hoc power analysis was run to determine if the study was sufficiently powered.

Of these 64 participants ($M_{\text{Age}} = 18.77$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = .771$), 41 (64.1%) identified as a woman and 23 identified as a man. Additionally, 58 (90.6%) participants identified as White or Caucasian, 5 identified as Hispanic or Latino and 1 identified as Asian. Additionally, two questions were used to assess religiosity; “How important is religion in your life?” rated on a 7 point Likert-type scale (1 = Not at all important to 7 = Extremely Important; $M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.13$) and “How often do you attend religious services or meetings?” rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = Never to 7 = About once a day; $M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.12$).

Assessments of participants’ sense of anxiety and scrupulosity were conducted. Participants indicated the extent to which they had been bothered by anxiety symptoms within the past month on a scale of 0 (Not at all) to 3 (Severely – it bothered me a lot) (see Appendix B; Beck et al., n.d.). For ease of interpretation, these values were recoded to a 4-point Likert Type Scale (1 = Not at all and 4 = Severely – it bothered me a lot) and mean scores were computed. On average, participants reported low anxiety symptomology across the past month ($N = 64$; $M = 1.75$, $SD = .58$). Similarly, participants indicated how often they experienced symptoms of scrupulosity on a scale of 0 (never) to 4 (Constantly). For ease of interpretation, these values

were recoded to a 5-point Likert Type Scale and mean scores were computed. On average, participants reported low scrupulosity ($N = 64$; $M = 2.32$, $SD = .68$).

Furthermore, participants reported their sense of belonging and perceived discrimination during the intake survey. Participants indicated their sense of belonging on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and reported their perceived discrimination on a scale of 1 (Not at all/Does not apply) to 5 (A great deal) (For all descriptive measures, see Appendix B). On average, participants reported a moderate to high sense of belonging ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.03$) and low perceived discrimination ($M = 1.99$, $SD = .64$).

Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants completed an intake form including demographics (see Appendix B) and preliminary measures (see Appendix C) that established baseline levels of all study variables. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of six Latin-square counterbalanced sequences determining the order in which they would complete the three conditions.

Each condition was completed on one designated day of the week (typically Sunday). The day before each session, participants completed a pre-survey (see Appendix E) assessing current levels of divine forgiveness, shame, guilt, embarrassment, and affective states. The pre-survey also included the question “In how many hours do you plan to engage in prayer/confession/your morning description?” to serve as both a reminder and a goal-setting prompt.

Condition instructions are provided in Appendix D:

Confession condition. Participants attended the Sacrament of Confession with a priest at a time and location of their choosing. This condition was not standardized beyond requiring participation in the full sacrament (examination of conscience, confession of sins, act of contrition, receipt of absolution and penance).

Prayer condition. Participants were instructed to find a private space and verbally disclose their sins to God in prayer. This standardization ensures that the prayer condition involves the same core activity as confession (verbal disclosure of sins seeking divine forgiveness) while removing the priest as intermediary.

Control condition. Participants were instructed to find a private space and verbally describe their morning for at least five minutes. This condition controlled for the act of speaking aloud in a private setting without involving religious content, sin disclosure, or any forgiveness-seeking behavior.

Within 24 hours of completing each session, participants completed a post-survey (see Appendix F) that included open-ended reflection prompts (“How did you pray/confess/reflect?”; “When did you pray/confess/reflect?”) followed by repeated measures of divine forgiveness, shame, guilt, acute shame, acute guilt, affective states, and embarrassment. For the confession condition, participants also reported the modality of confession (face-to-face vs. behind a screen), whether they confessed to a familiar or new priest, and rated the quality of the priest.

After completing all three conditions and any remaining wash-out period, participants completed a final assessment (see Appendix G) that re-administered baseline measures of all study variables. Participants recruited from the SONA pool received 3 course credits; participants from the Wake Forest Catholic Community were entered into a raffle for three \$50 gift cards.

Measures

All measures described below were administered at intake (baseline), in pre- and post-surveys surrounding each condition, and in the final assessment, unless noted otherwise. Measures are described in the order they appear in the theoretical model.

Divine Forgiveness

Certainty of divine forgiveness was measured using two items from Fincham and Maranges (2024): “I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness” and

“Knowing that I am forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults,” rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Because these two items assess relatively stable dispositional beliefs about divine forgiveness, two state-level items were utilized to capture condition-specific changes in felt certainty: “Right now, I feel certain that God has forgiven me,” “I feel that my sins have been fully absolved”. These state-level items were included in the pre- and post-surveys only.

Acute Guilt

Acute guilt experienced during each condition was measured using six items adapted from the SSGS (Marschall et al., 1994) with the prompt modified to “During confession/prayer/reflection, I felt...” Sample items include “During confession, I felt remorse, regret” and “During confession, I felt bad about something I have done.” This measure was administered in the post-survey only.

Acute Shame

Acute shame experienced during each condition was measured using five items adapted from the SSGS (Marschall et al., 1994) with the prompt modified to “During confession/prayer/reflection, I felt...” Sample items include “During confession, I felt small” and “During confession, I felt humiliated, disgraced.” This retrospective measure was administered in the post-survey only.

Embarrassment

Embarrassment was assessed with a single item (“I feel embarrassed”) rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) in the pre- and post-surveys.

Shame

Relief from shame was measured using five items from the State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS; Marschall et al., 1994). Participants rated how they felt “right now” on a 5-point scale (1 = Not feeling this way at all to 5 = Feeling this way strongly). Sample items include “I want to

sink into the floor and disappear” and “I feel like I am a bad person.” This measure was administered in pre- and post-surveys to compute change scores reflecting relief from shame. At intake and final assessment, baseline shame was assessed using the Guilt and Shame Questionnaire (GSQ-8; Hoppen et al., 2022).

Guilt

Relief from guilt was measured using five items from the SSGS (Marschall et al., 1994). Participants rated how they felt “right now” on a 5-point scale. Sample items include “I feel remorse, regret” and “I cannot stop thinking about something bad I have done.” This measure paralleled the shame relief measure and was administered in pre- and post-surveys.

Affective Outcomes: Gratitude and Peace

The main affective outcomes were assessed using single items with the prompt “Right now, I feel...” rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Items included: “a sense of gratitude towards God” (gratitude) and “a sense of peace and harmony in my mind” (peace; adapted from Lee et al., 2013).

Relational Consequences: Closeness to God

Closeness to God was assessed with one item adapted from the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale during the intake and final assessment (Underwood & Teresi, 2002): “In general, how close do you feel to God?” rated on a 4-point scale (1 = Not close at all to 4 = As close as possible).

Extended Downstream Effects: Humility, Self-Compassion, and Other-Compassion

Humility served as an exploratory outcome and was assessed using a single item, “Right now, I feel a sense of humility” rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

Self- and Other-Compassion were assessed using two items from Sahdra et al. (2023): “I am tolerant, benevolent, and caring with myself” and “I am tolerant, benevolent, and caring with others,” rated from 1 (Very seldom) to 5 (Very often), referencing the past seven days.

Manipulation and Compliance Checks

Qualitative manipulation checks were embedded in the post-survey reflection prompts, asking participants to describe how, when, and why they engaged in the assigned activity.

Analytic Strategy

All data were de-identified prior to analysis. Measures were scored according to their published instructions.

Primary analyses. Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANOVA) was designated as the primary analytic strategy. Dependent variables were grouped into theoretically coherent sets to reduce the number of separate tests: (a) divine forgiveness, closeness to God, and identification with the Church (mechanism and relational outcomes); (b) relief from shame and guilt (primary downstream effects); (c) acute shame, acute guilt, and embarrassment (proximal costs); and (d) gratitude, peace, humility, self-compassion, and other-compassion (affective and extended outcomes). Condition (confession, prayer, control) and time (pre and post) served as the within-subjects factors. Significant MANOVAs were followed by planned pairwise contrasts (confession vs. prayer; confession vs. control).

Multiple comparison correction. Given the number of hypotheses tested, we applied the Benjamini-Hochberg False Discovery Rate (FDR) correction to control the expected proportion of false positives among rejected hypotheses. H1 (certainty of divine forgiveness) was designated as the confirmatory gating hypothesis and was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$ without correction.

Mediation analyses. To test the proposed mechanism (that certainty of divine forgiveness mediates the effects of confession on downstream outcomes) we conducted within-subjects mediation analyses following the approach outlined by Montoya and Hayes (2017). These

analyses examined whether condition-level differences in certainty of divine forgiveness accounted for condition-level differences in the primary and secondary outcomes (shame relief, guilt relief, gratitude, peace).

Supplementary analyses. The moderation hypothesis (H9) is tested by regressing the proposed change scores of the outcomes from pre and post onto religiosity to examine whether religiosity predicted significant change from the pre survey to the post survey.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

I first ran the descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, order effects, the gating hypothesis (H1: Confession will increase certainty of divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer) and discuss the amount of attrition in the study. Furthermore, a full correlation matrix of all outcomes within condition and time (pre versus post) can be found in Tables 2 through 9. Readers will be directed to the corresponding tables when appropriate.

Descriptives

On average, across all conditions and time points (including the intake and final assessment), participants reported high levels of divine forgiveness ($M_{\text{Grand Mean}} = 4.40$, $SD_{\text{Grand Mean}} = .48$) and gratitude ($M_{\text{Grand Mean}} = 4.45$, $SD_{\text{Grand Mean}} = .46$), indicating that regardless of time and condition, participants experienced a high sense of being forgiven by God and a high sense of gratitude towards God. Furthermore, participants reported low levels of shame ($M_{\text{Grand Mean}} = 1.56$, $SD_{\text{Grand Mean}} = .58$) and guilt ($M_{\text{Grand Mean}} = 2.30$, $SD_{\text{Grand Mean}} = .81$) across all conditions and time points, indicating a low sense of shame and guilt regardless of condition and time. See Table 1 for the means and standard deviations of the outcomes at each condition and time point. Notably, the observed mean for divine forgiveness (4.40 on a 5-point scale) suggests a potential ceiling effect: participants reported high levels of certainty of divine forgiveness regardless of condition.

Attrition

During data analysis, it became apparent that some participants did not complete every survey or completed some surveys more than once. As such, each condition and time point has a different sample size, and duplicate cases were removed from each survey. See Table 1 for a complete list of the sample size across conditions and time points. Given that 31 of 64 participants (48.4%) had some form of missing data, analyses were conducted using listwise deletion, resulting in effective sample sizes ranging from 27 to 54 depending on the analysis.

Reliability Analyses

Reliability analyses were run for all hypothesized outcomes with more than one item. For a full table of reliability analyses across conditions and time, see Table 10.

Order Effects

Participants engaged in all conditions in a random order according to Latin-square counterbalancing. Although Latin-square counterbalancing is implemented to reduce order effects, order was still included in the analyses.

H1

A repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of condition (confession, personal prayer, control) and time (pre, post) on certainty of divine forgiveness. Contrary to my hypothesis, there was no significant interaction between condition and time, Wilks $\lambda = .999$, $F(2, 54) = .018$, $p = .982$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$. As such, there was no evidence that confession increased certainty of receiving divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer and the control condition (see Table 1 for means of each condition and time interaction). Additionally, there was no multivariate effect of condition, Wilks $\lambda = .873$, $F(2, 54) = 2.279$, $p = .112$, partial $\eta^2 = .078$. However, there was a significant multivariate effect of time (pre versus post), such that participants reported greater divine forgiveness after engaging in any religious intervention, Wilks $\lambda = .660$, $F(1, 27) = 13.897$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .340$. The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 27) = .823$, $p = .544$, partial $\eta^2 = .132$. A post hoc power analysis conducted using G*Power indicated sufficient statistical power ($1 - \beta$

= .75) to detect a partial $\eta^2 = .04$ ($f = .20$) with the available sample ($N = 54$), indicating that the study was only slightly below the conventional threshold of .80 for adequate statistical power.

As these results suggest, the gating hypothesis that confession would increase certainty of divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not supported. One possible explanation is that participants reported near-maximum divine forgiveness across all conditions ($M = 4.40$ on a 5-point scale), leaving insufficient variance for condition differences to emerge. This ceiling is unsurprising given the sample's high religiosity and active confession attendance. As per these results, the theoretical basis for the remaining predictions is undermined. Nonetheless, I report the results for the remaining hypotheses to characterize the pattern of effects across conditions. Furthermore, I report the results of the mediation analyses examining whether certainty of divine forgiveness mediates the effect of confession on the proposed downstream outcomes.

Outcomes

To test the following hypotheses, I conducted five repeated multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) to examine the effect of condition, time, and their interaction on the proposed outcomes. Furthermore, I conducted a within-subjects mediation analysis using the MEMORE macro to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of confession on the outcomes compared to personal prayer and the control (Montoya & Hayes, 2017). All paths are reported with confidence intervals, even if non-significant. It should be noted that the mediation analyses designed by Montoya and Hayes (2017) are suited for two conditions and, as such, the pairwise comparisons between confession and personal prayer and confession and the control condition are approximations.

H2: Acute Shame and Acute Guilt

A repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects of condition (confession, personal prayer, control) on acute shame (H2a), acute guilt (H2b), and embarrassment (H2c). Mauchly's test of Sphericity will be reported when the assumption is violated.

H2a: Acute Shame. Mauchly's test of Sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated for the effect of condition, $\chi^2(2) = 18.05, p < .001$. As such, Greenhouse-Geisser correct degrees of freedom were used. There was a significant multivariate effect of condition on acute shame such that participants reported increased acute shame across condition, Wilks $\lambda = .271, F(1, 36) = 23.217, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .392$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession predicted significantly greater acute shame compared to personal prayer ($M = .663, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.357, .969]$) and the control ($M = .838, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.485, 1.190]$). As such, there is evidence that confession increases acute shame compared to personal prayer and the control condition. The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 36) = .670, p = .649$, partial $\eta^2 = .085$, indicating there was no order effect on acute shame.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted using the MEMORE macro to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of confession on acute shame compared to personal prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of condition on divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = .00, p = 1.00, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.2352, .2353]$. However, divine forgiveness was significantly and positively associated with acute shame, $b = .7026, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.4224, .9828]$, indicating that variation divine forgiveness predicts greater within-person variation in acute shame. The total effect of condition on acute shame was significant and positive, $b = .7026, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.4224, .9828]$ and the direct effect was also significant and positive, $b = .7026, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.4166, .9885]$. However, the indirect effect of condition on acute shame through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = .0000, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.0882, .0656]$. These results suggest that confession predicted greater within-person variation in acute shame compared to personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. However, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in acute shame compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted using the MEMORE macro to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of confession on acute shame

compared to the control condition. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to the control condition was not significant, $b = .0395$, $p = .7467$, 95% CI [-.2063, .2853]. However, divine forgiveness was significantly positively associated with acute shame, $b = .9000$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.5828, 1.2172], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness predicts greater within-person variation in acute shame. The total effect of condition on acute shame was significant and positive, $b = .9000$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.5828, 1.2172] and the direct effect was also significant and positive, $b = .9061$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.5847, 1.2274]. However, the indirect effect of condition on acute shame through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = -.0061$, 95% CI [-.0671, .0656]. These results suggest that confession predicted greater within-person variation in acute shame compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. However, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in acute shame compared to the control through divine forgiveness.

H2b: Acute Guilt. There was a significant multivariate effect of condition on acute guilt, Wilks $\lambda = .271$, $F(1, 36) = 71.173$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .781$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession differed significantly from personal prayer ($M = 1.05$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [.732, 1.362]) and the control ($M = 2.001$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.643, 2.360]), As such, there is evidence that confession increases acute guilt compared to personal prayer and the control condition. The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 36) = .214$, $p = .955$, partial $\eta^2 = .029$, indicating there was no order effect on acute guilt.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted using the MEMORE macro (see Montoya & Hayes, 2017) to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of confession on acute guilt when compared to personal prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .00$, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI [-.2352, .2353]. However, divine forgiveness was significantly and positively associated with acute guilt, $b = .9282$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.6005, 1.2559], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness predicts increased within-person variation in acute guilt, regardless of condition. The total effect of condition on acute guilt was significant and positive, b

= .9282, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.6005, 1.2559] and the direct effect was also significant and positive, $b = .9282$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.5956, 1.2608]. However, the indirect effect of condition on acute guilt through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = .0000$, 95% CI [-.0596, .0862]. These results suggest that confession predicted greater within-person variation in acute guilt compared to personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. However, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in acute guilt compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted using the MEMORE macro (see Montoya & Hayes, 2017) to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on acute guilt when compared to the control. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .0395$, $p = .747$, 95% CI [-.2063, .2853]. However, divine forgiveness was significantly and positively associated with acute guilt, $b = 1.8526$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.5022, 2.2031], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness predicts greater within-person variation in acute guilt, regardless of condition. The total effect of condition on acute guilt was significant and positive, $b = 1.8526$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.5022, 2.2031] and the direct effect was also significant and positive, $b = 1.8555$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.4965, 2.2145]. However, the indirect effect of condition on acute guilt through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = -.0029$, 95% CI [-.0430, .0950]. These results suggest that confession predicted greater within-person variation in acute guilt compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. However, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in acute guilt compared to the control through divine forgiveness.

H2c: Embarrassment. There was a significant multivariate effect of condition on embarrassment, Wilks $\lambda = .761$, $F(1, 36) = .580$, $p = .451$, partial $\eta^2 = .016$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession significantly predicted greater embarrassment compared to personal prayer ($M = .674$), $p = .002$, 95% CI [.268, 1.081]). However, confession did not significantly predict greater embarrassment compared to the control ($M = .180$), $p = .451$, 95% CI [-.299, .659]), As such, there is evidence that confession increases embarrassment

compared to personal prayer, but not the control condition. The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 36) = 1.104, p = .376$, partial $\eta^2 = .133$, indicating there was no order effect on embarrassment.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on embarrassment when compared to personal prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .00, p = 1.00$, 95% CI $[-.2352, .2352]$. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with embarrassment, $b = .00, p = 1.00$, 95% CI $[-.5903, .5903]$, indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict greater within-person variation in embarrassment across conditions. The total effect of condition on embarrassment was not significant, $b = .00, p = 1.00$, 95% CI $[-.5903, .5903]$ and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = .00, p = 1.00$, 95% CI $[-.5942, .5942]$. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on embarrassment through divine forgiveness was also not significant, $b = .0000$, 95% CI $[-.0802, .1254]$. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in embarrassment compared to personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Furthermore, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in embarrassment compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted using the MEMORE macro (see Montoya & Hayes, 2017) to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on embarrassment when compared to the control. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to the control condition was not significant, $b = .0395, p = .747$, 95% CI $[-.2063, .2853]$. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with embarrassment, $b = .1053, p = .657$, 95% CI $[-.3707, .5812]$, indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in embarrassment across condition. The total effect of condition on embarrassment was not significant, $b = .1053, p = .657$, 95% CI $[-.3707, .5812]$ and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = .1034, p = .670$, 95% CI $[-.3842, .5909]$. Furthermore, the indirect effect of

condition on embarrassment through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = -.0019$, 95% CI $[-.0692, .1786]$. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in embarrassment compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Additionally, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in embarrassment to the control through divine forgiveness.

H3a: Relief from Shame. There was no significant multivariate effect of condition and time on shame, Wilks $\lambda = .853$, $F(2, 54) = .630$, $p = .536$, partial $\eta^2 = .023$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession did not differ significantly from personal prayer ($[M = .100]$, $p = .314$, 95% CI $[-.099, .299]$). Additionally, confession did not differ significantly from the control ($[M = -.004]$, $p = .961$, 95% CI $[-.160, .153]$). As such, there is no evidence that confession decreases shame compared to personal prayer and the control condition. Additionally, there was no multivariate effect of condition, Wilks $\lambda = .966$, $F(2, 54) = .961$, $p = .389$, partial $\eta^2 = .034$. However, there was a significant multivariate effect of time (pre versus post), Wilks $\lambda = .463$, $F(1, 27) = 11.492$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .299$ such that participants reported greater shame before engaging in the religious intervention ($[M = .269]$, $p = .002$, 95% CI $[.106, .432]$). The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 27) = .819$, $p = .547$, partial $\eta^2 = .132$, indicating there was no order effect on relief from shame.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on shame when compared to personal prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .00$, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI $[-.2352, .2352]$. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with relief from shame, $b = .1641$, $p = .266$, 95% CI $[-.1303, .4585]$, indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in shame across condition. The total effect of condition on shame was not significant, $b = .1641$, $p = .266$, 95% CI $[-.1303, .4585]$ and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = .1641$, $p = .261$, 95% CI $[-.1272, .4554]$. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on shame through divine forgiveness was also not significant, $b = .0000$, 95% CI $[-$

.0738, .0968]. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in shame compared to personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Furthermore, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in shame compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on shame when compared to the control. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to the control condition was not significant, $b = .0395$, $p = .747$, 95% CI [-.2063, .2853]. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with shame, $b = .1053$, $p = .421$, 95% CI [-.1567, .3672], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in shame across conditions. The total effect of condition on shame was not significant, $b = .1053$, $p = .421$, 95% CI [-.1567, .3672] and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = .1148$, $p = .383$, 95% CI [-.1488, .3784]. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on shame through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = -.0095$, 95% CI [-.1072, .0616]. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in shame compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Additionally, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in shame to the control through divine forgiveness.

H3b: Relief from Guilt. There was a significant omnibus interaction of condition and time on guilt, Wilks $\lambda = .853$, $F(2, 54) = 3.582$, $p = .035$, partial $\eta^2 = .117$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession did not differ significantly from personal prayer ([$M = .076$], $p = .544$, 95% CI [-.177, .329]). Additionally, confession did not differ significantly from the control ([$M = -.004$], $p = .975$, 95% CI [-.265, .273]). As such, there is no evidence that confession decreases guilt compared to personal prayer and the control condition. Additionally, there was no multivariate effect of condition, Wilks $\lambda = .966$, $F(2, 54) = .208$, $p = .813$, partial $\eta^2 = .008$. However, there was a significant multivariate effect of time (pre versus post), Wilks $\lambda = .463$, $F(1, 27) = 30.237$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .528$, such that participants reported greater guilt during the pre-surveys, across conditions ([$M = .614$], $p < .001$, 95% CI [.385, .843]). The

between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 27) = .276, p = .922$, partial $\eta^2 = .049$, indicating there was no order effect on relief from guilt. Although the omnibus condition $\times$ time interaction reached significance ($p = .035$), neither planned pairwise comparison (confession vs. prayer; confession vs. control) was significant.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on guilt when compared to personal prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .00, p = 1.00$, 95% CI $[-.2352, .2352]$. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with guilt, $b = -.1692, p = .257$, 95% CI $[-.4669, .1284]$, indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in guilt across condition. The total effect of condition on guilt was not significant, $b = -.1692, p = .257$, 95% CI $[-.4669, .1284]$ and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = -.1692, p = .261$, 95% CI $[-.4698, .1313]$. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on guilt through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = .0000$, 95% CI $[-.0213, .0520]$. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in guilt compared to personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Furthermore, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in guilt compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on guilt when compared to the control. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to the control condition was not significant, $b = .0395, p = .747$, 95% CI $[-.2063, .2853]$. However, divine condition was significantly associated with guilt, $b = -.4421, p = .015$, 95% CI $[-.7927, -.0915]$, indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did predict within-person variation in guilt across condition, such that greater divine forgiveness predicted decreased guilt. The total effect of condition on guilt was significant and negative, $b = -.4421, p = .015$, 95% CI $[-.7927, -.0915]$ and the direct effect was also significant and negative, $b = -.4561, p = .012$, 95% CI $[-.8066, -.1056]$. However, the indirect effect of condition on guilt through divine forgiveness was not

significant, $b = .1040$, 95% CI $[-.0878, .1414]$. These results suggest that confession did predict greater within-person variation in guilt compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. However, divine forgiveness did not mediate the relationship between confession and guilt when compared to the control condition.

H4: Peace. There was no significant multivariate effect of condition and time on peace, Wilks $\lambda = .833$, $F(2, 54) = 1.325$, $p = .274$, partial $\eta^2 = .047$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession did not differ significantly from personal prayer ($M = .008$, $p = .936$, 95% CI $[-.206, .223]$). Additionally, confession did not differ significantly from the control ($M = .006$, $p = .962$, 95% CI $[-.245, .257]$). As such, there is no evidence that confession increases peace compared to personal prayer and the control condition. Additionally, there was no multivariate effect of condition, Wilks $\lambda = .955$, $F(2, 54) = .003$, $p = .997$, partial $\eta^2 = .000$. However, there was a significant multivariate effect of time (pre versus post), Wilks $\lambda = .538$, $F(1, 27) = 17.598$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .395$, such that participants reported greater peace after completing each religious intervention ($M = -.583$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.868, -.298]$). The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 27) = .480$, $p = .788$, partial $\eta^2 = .082$, indicating there was no order effect on peace.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on peace when compared to personal prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .00$, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI $[-.2352, .2352]$. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with peace, $b = -.2821$, $p = .196$, 95% CI $[-.7154, .1513]$, indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in peace across condition. The total effect of condition on peace was not significant, $b = -.2821$, $p = .196$, 95% CI $[-.7154, .1513]$ and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = -.2821$, $p = .196$, 95% CI $[-.7157, .1516]$. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on peace through divine forgiveness was also not significant, $b = .0000$, 95% CI $[-.1262, .1034]$. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in peace compared to

personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Furthermore, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in peace compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on peace when compared to the control. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared the control condition was not significant, $b = .0395$, $p = .747$, 95% CI [-.2063, .2853]. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with peace, $b = -.1842$, $p = .450$, 95% CI [-.6727, .3043], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in peace across condition. The total effect of condition on peace was not significant, $b = -.1842$, $p = .450$, 95% CI [-.6727, .3043] and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = -.2006$, $p = .411$, 95% CI [-.6905, .2892]. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on peace through divine forgiveness was also not significant, $b = .0164$, 95% CI [-.1421, .1733]. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in peace compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Furthermore, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in peace compared to the control through divine forgiveness.

H5: Gratitude. There was a significant multivariate effect of condition and time on gratitude Wilks $\lambda = .833$, $F(2, 54) = 3.340$, $p = .043$, partial $\eta^2 = .110$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession did not differ significantly from personal prayer ($M = .099$), $p = .254$, 95% CI [-.075, .274]). Additionally, confession did not differ significantly from the control ($M = .067$), $p = .413$, 95% CI [-.099, .234]), As such, there is no evidence that confession increases gratitude compared to personal prayer and the control condition. Additionally, there was no multivariate effect of condition, Wilks $\lambda = .955$, $F(2, 54) = .740$, $p = .482$, partial $\eta^2 = .027$. However, there was a significant multivariate effect of time (pre versus post), Wilks $\lambda = .538$, $F(1, 27) = 11.818$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .304$, such that participants reported greater gratitude after completing each religious intervention ($M = -.356$), $p = .002$,

95% CI [-.569, -.144]). The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 27) = 2.125, p = .093$, partial $\eta^2 = .282$, indicating there was no order effect on gratitude.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on gratitude when compared to personal prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .00, p = 1.00$, 95% CI [-.2352, .2352]. However, divine forgiveness was significantly associated with gratitude, $b = -.3590, p = .009$, 95% CI [-.6218, -.0962], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness predicted within-person variation in gratitude across condition. The total effect of condition on gratitude was significant, $b = -.3590, p = .009$, 95% CI [-.6218, -.0962] and the direct effect was also significant, $b = -.3590, p = .008$, 95% CI [-.6193, -.0987]. However, the indirect effect of condition on gratitude through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = .0000$, 95% CI [-.0926, .0736]. These results suggest that confession predicted greater within-person variation in gratitude compared to personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. However, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in gratitude compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

A within-subjects mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on gratitude when compared to the control. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .0395, p = .747$, 95% CI [-.2063, .2853]. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with gratitude, $b = -.1316, p = .303$, 95% CI [-.3870, .1238], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in gratitude across conditions. The total effect of condition on gratitude was not significant, $b = -.1316, p = .303$, 95% CI [-.3870, .1238] and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = -.1386, p = .286$, 95% CI [-.3981, .1209]. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on gratitude through divine forgiveness was also not significant, $b = .0070$, 95% CI [-.0572, .0874]. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in gratitude compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Furthermore, confession

did not predict greater within-person variation in gratitude compared to the control through divine forgiveness.

Exploratory Analyses

It should be noted that mediation analyses assessing the effect of divine forgiveness on the relationship between confession and the hypothesized outcomes were not conducted for measures only collected during the intake and final assessment.

H6: Closeness to God. As previously mentioned, closeness to God was only measured during the intake and final assessment. There was a significant multivariate effect of time (intake to the final assessment) on closeness to God Wilks $\lambda = .589$, $F(1, 44) = 26.192$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .373$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' closeness to God differed significantly across time ($[M = -.422]$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.588, -.256]$), such that participants reported greater closeness to God during the final assessment compared to the intake.

H7: Humility. There was no significant multivariate effect of condition and time on humility Wilks $\lambda = .833$, $F(2, 54) = .657$, $p = .522$, partial $\eta^2 = .024$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that confession did not differ significantly from personal prayer ($[M = .099]$, $p = .075$, 95% CI $[-.204, .354]$). Additionally, confession did not differ significantly from the control ($[M = .101]$, $p = .422$, 95% CI $[-.153, .356]$). As such, there is no evidence that confession increases humility compared to personal prayer and the control condition. Additionally, there was no multivariate effect of condition, Wilks $\lambda = .955$, $F(2, 54) = .389$, $p = .680$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$. However, there was a significant multivariate effect of time (pre versus post), Wilks $\lambda = .538$, $F(1, 27) = 4.377$, $p = .046$, partial $\eta^2 = .139$, such that participants reported greater humility after completing each religious intervention ($[M = -.244]$, $p = .046$, 95% CI $[-.484, -.005]$). The between-subjects effect of order was not significant, $F(5, 27) = 2.125$, $p = .719$, partial $\eta^2 = .615$, indicating there was no order effect on humility.

I next conducted a within-subjects mediation analysis to examine whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on humility when compared to personal

prayer. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to personal prayer was not significant, $b = .00$, $p = 1.00$, 95% CI [-.2352, .2352]. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with humility, $b = -.2308$, $p = .238$, 95% CI [-.6205, .1590], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict greater within-person variation in humility across condition. The total effect of condition on humility was not significant, $b = -.2308$, $p = .238$, 95% CI [-.6205, .1590] and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = -.2308$, $p = .247$, 95% CI [-.6285, .1669]. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on humility through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = .0000$, 95% CI [-.0992, .0879]. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in humility compared to personal prayer, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Additionally, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in humility compared to personal prayer through divine forgiveness.

Next, I conducted a within-subjects mediation analysis examining whether changes in divine forgiveness mediated the effect of condition on humility when compared to the control. In line with the results of H1, the effect of confession on divine forgiveness compared to the control was not significant, $b = .0395$, $p = .747$, 95% CI [-.2063, .2853]. Additionally, divine forgiveness was not significantly associated with humility $b = -.0263$, $p = .9099$, 95% CI [-.4942, .4416], indicating that variation in divine forgiveness did not predict within-person variation in humility across condition. The total effect of condition on humility was not significant, $b = -.0263$, $p = .910$, 95% CI [-.4942, .4416] and the direct effect was also not significant, $b = -.0362$, $p = .8764$, 95% CI [-.5051, .4327]. Furthermore, the indirect effect of condition on humility through divine forgiveness was not significant, $b = .0090$, 95% CI [-.1515, .0749]. These results suggest that confession did not predict greater within-person variation in humility compared to the control, even when controlling for divine forgiveness. Furthermore, confession did not predict greater within-person variation in humility compared to the control through divine forgiveness.

H8a: Self-Compassion. As previously mentioned, self-compassion was only measured during the intake and final assessment. There was a significant multivariate effect of time (intake

to the final assessment) on self-compassion. Wilks $\lambda = .589$, $F(1, 44) = 11.183$, $p = .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .203$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' self-compassion differed significantly across time ($[M = -.510]$, $p = .002$, 95% CI $[-.818, -.203]$) such that participants reported greater self-compassion during the final assessment compared to the intake.

H8b: Other-Compassion. As previously mentioned, other compassion was only measured during the intake and final assessment. There was no significant multivariate effect of time (intake to the final assessment) on other compassion. Wilks $\lambda = .589$, $F(1, 44) = .833$, $p = .366$, partial $\eta^2 = .019$. LSD-adjusted pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' compassion to others did not differ significantly across time ($[M = -.114]$, $p = .366$, 95% CI $[-.137, .365]$). As such, there is no evidence that participants reported greater compassion to others during the final assessment compared to the intake.

H9: Religiosity as a Moderator

To test religiosity as a moderator, I regressed the change in outcomes from pre to post confession onto religiosity. In doing so, I test whether religiosity predicts the change in the outcomes. If significant and positive, individuals higher in religiosity experienced greater change in the outcomes. If negative, individuals lower in religiosity experienced greater change in the outcomes. If non-significant, religiosity did not predict change in the outcomes from pre to post confession.

Acute Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment. I regressed post-acute shame and guilt onto religiosity. Additionally, I regressed the change in embarrassment from pre to post confession onto religiosity. Results indicated that religiosity did not significantly predict change in acute shame ($R^2 = .005$, $b = .073$, $F(1, 52) = .238$, $p = .628$), acute guilt ($R^2 = .031$, $b = .178$, $F(1, 52) = 1.641$, $p = .206$), and embarrassment ($R^2 = .031$, $b = .228$, $F(1, 46) = 1.475$, $p = .231$). following confession. As such, religiosity did not strengthen the relationship between confession and acute shame and guilt and embarrassment.

Shame and Guilt. I regressed the change in shame and guilt from pre and post confession onto religiosity. Results indicated that religiosity did not significantly predict change

in shame ($R^2 = .010$, $b = .087$, $F(1, 46) = .482$, $p = .491$) and guilt ($R^2 = .003$, $b = -.046$, $F(1, 46) = .127$, $p = .723$). As such, religiosity did not strengthen the relationship between confession and shame and guilt.

Peace, Gratitude, and Humility. I regressed the change in peace, gratitude, and humility from pre and post confession onto religiosity. Results indicated that religiosity did not significantly predict change in peace ($R^2 = .004$, $b = .061$, $F(1, 46) = .167$, $p = .685$), gratitude ($R^2 = .030$, $b = -.113$, $F(1, 46) = 1.412$, $p = .241$), and humility ($R^2 = .034$, $b = .186$, $F(1, 46) = 1.641$, $p = .207$).

Discussion

The gating hypothesis (H1) that confession would increase certainty of divine forgiveness relative to personal prayer and a control condition was not supported. The most parsimonious explanation is a ceiling effect: participants reported high levels of divine forgiveness across all conditions and time points ($M = 4.40$ on a 5-point scale). This is arguably unsurprising given that all participants were practicing Catholics who had attended confession within the past year and reported moderately high religiosity. The only supported hypothesis was that confession increases acute shame, guilt, and embarrassment during the practice itself (H2), consistent with the psychological costs of disclosing negative personal information to another person.

I argued that confession provides an external, authoritative signal of forgiveness that private prayer cannot. However, this claim assumed that penitents experience meaningful uncertainty about God's forgiveness prior to confession, and that absolution resolves this uncertainty. The present study suggests that practicing Catholics who attend confession regularly may already possess high certainty of divine forgiveness as a stable dispositional belief, such that the marginal increase provided by any single act of absolution is negligible. In other words, the mechanism may operate not at the level of state-like fluctuations in certainty following each confession, but at the level of a trait-like belief. Future studies should recruit samples with greater variability in certainty of divine forgiveness (for example, lapsed Catholics returning to

confession after an extended absence, or individuals preparing for their first confession) to provide a stronger test of the proposed mechanism.

The finding that confession significantly increased acute shame, guilt, and embarrassment relative to personal prayer is consistent with the broader self-disclosure literature; disclosing negative personal information to another person introduces vulnerability and the risk of social evaluation (Trinh et al., 2025). This interpretation is consistent with the finding that embarrassment was significantly higher during confession compared to prayer but not compared to the control condition, suggesting that it is the act of disclosing to a person, rather than the religious content of the disclosure, which generates self-conscious emotions.

However, these proximal costs did not translate into greater relief from shame and guilt following confession compared to the other conditions. This pattern suggests that confession may impose a higher emotional burden without providing correspondingly greater emotional resolution, at least as measured in this study. One possibility is that the relief following confession is real but operates on a longer timescale than the 24-hour post-survey window captured here. Another is that both confession and private prayer provide genuine relief through different mechanisms (absolution in the case of confession, direct communion with God in the case of prayer) that happen to produce equivalent outcomes. An alternative interpretation is that practicing Catholics derive similar affective benefits from any sincere engagement with God, regardless of whether a priest mediates the encounter.

The finding that acute shame and guilt were elevated during confession but not afterward is noteworthy. In Catholic theology, remorse for one's sins is not merely an incidental cost of confession but an integral part of the sacrament: the Act of Contrition explicitly requires the penitent to express sorrow for wrongdoing. Thus, elevated acute guilt during confession may reflect successful engagement with the ritual rather than a negative side effect. This interpretation suggests that the psychological costs of confession may not be straightforwardly categorized as negative, since they may be part of the mechanism of moral renewal. Future research might examine whether the magnitude of acute guilt during confession predicts

subsequent behavioral change. A useful comparison comes from research on Muslim youth, who showed decreased shame and guilt around Ramadan compared to periods of lower religious engagement, presumably because systematic communal reminders to pray reduced shame and guilt around religious non-participation (Balkaya-Ince et al., 2025). Similarly, Catholic penitents' shame and guilt may be particularly salient during confession because the ritual itself activates communal expectations and the presence of a moral authority. This interpretation is consistent with a situated-cognition account in which moral emotions are activated by contextual features of the religious environment.

Perhaps the most robust finding in this study was the consistent main effect of time: across all conditions, participants reported less shame and guilt and greater peace, gratitude, and humility after completing their assigned activity compared to before. This pattern suggests a general benefit of religious engagement not specific to confession. For religious practitioners, setting aside time for any form of structured reflection (whether confessing to a priest, praying privately, or even describing one's morning) may provide an opportunity to reconnect with one's values, process recent experiences, and achieve a sense of closure. This finding is consistent with a growing literature on the psychological benefits of contemplative and meditative practices across religious traditions (e.g., Oviedo et al., 2025; Teut et al., 2025).

However, these results should be interpreted cautiously given the potential for demand characteristics. The study was described to participants as investigating how religious activities impact happiness and well-being, which may have shaped expectations about how participants should feel before and after each activity. This possibility cannot be ruled out, and future studies should use more neutral framing (e.g., "assessing your experiences during religious activities") to reduce expectancy effects. Nonetheless, even if demand characteristics contributed to the time effect, the absence of condition differences argues against a simple expectancy explanation: if participants expected confession to be uniquely beneficial, condition effects should have emerged alongside time effects.

Exploratory analyses revealed significant increases in closeness to God and self-compassion from intake to final assessment, though not in other-compassion. These effects are difficult to attribute to any specific condition because they reflect change across the entire study period during which participants completed all three conditions. The increase in closeness to God and self-compassion may reflect the cumulative effect of sustained religious engagement over several weeks, consistent with previous research linking ongoing religious practice to enhanced perceived relationship with God (Jeppsen, 2022). The absence of change in other-compassion suggests that any benefits were directed inward (toward the self and toward God) rather than outward (toward others), though this may also reflect the limited sensitivity of a single-item measure.

I argued that certainty of divine forgiveness (an epistemic state regarding whether God has forgiven the penitent) drives confession's distinctive effects. However, for practicing Catholics with high baseline faith, the relevant psychological variable may be something closer to felt assurance, or the experienced quality of the forgiveness experience rather than the certainty that forgiveness has occurred. A penitent who already believes with high certainty that God forgives may nonetheless experience absolution as more vivid, immediate, or emotionally resonant than private prayer. This distinction between certainty and vividness was not captured by the present measures, which assessed certainty in cognitive terms ("I am certain that God forgives me"). Future research should develop measures that distinguish between cognitive certainty and experiential qualities of the forgiveness encounter.

It is also worth noting that the Catholic tradition itself treats private prayer as a legitimate form of confession for venial sins, with the Sacrament reserved for mortal sins (O'Toole, 2025). Many Catholics regularly pray the Rosary, a meditative and recitative prayer with demonstrated benefits for well-being, including increased coping and peace (Oviedo et al., 2025; Teut et al., 2025). From this perspective, the finding that prayer and confession produced comparable downstream benefits may not represent a failure of confession but rather a confirmation that both practices serve genuine and distinct spiritual functions within the Catholic tradition. The

distinctive contribution of confession may lie not in producing greater certainty of forgiveness but in other elements not tested here: the moral accountability provided by the priest, the structured examination of conscience, or the assignment of penance as a concrete behavioral commitment.

In summary, the present study found no evidence that confession increases certainty of divine forgiveness relative to prayer or a control condition, most likely due to ceiling effects in a highly devout sample. Confession did produce greater acute shame, guilt, and embarrassment, consistent with the interpersonal costs of disclosing negative information to another person. The most consistent finding was a pre-to-post improvement across all conditions, suggesting that any structured reflective or devotional practice benefits practicing Catholics' affective states. Future research should target samples with greater variability in baseline divine forgiveness, develop measures that distinguish cognitive certainty from experiential vividness, and isolate the specific elements of confession (priest presence, absolution, penance) that may produce distinctive effects.

Limitations

I note a number of limitations. First, the within-subjects design, while advantageous for power, introduces the possibility of demand characteristics: practicing Catholics may have strong expectations about how confession “should” make them feel, and completing all three conditions may have made the study’s hypotheses transparent. Second, the confession condition combined multiple elements (the presence of another person, a recognized religious authority, the act of absolution, the assignment of penance, and potential spiritual guidance) that cannot be fully disentangled in a single study. It is possible that multiple mechanisms may explain the benefits or effects of individuals engaging in religious practices, thus obscuring the effect of divine forgiveness on the relationship between confession on the proposed outcomes.

Second, the sample was required to have attended confession within the past year, resulting in a highly devout group who reported high levels of divine forgiveness regardless of condition. Future studies should recruit participants with greater variability in divine forgiveness

(for example, lapsed Catholics, individuals returning to confession after an extended absence, or cultural Catholics who identify with the faith but do not regularly practice the sacraments). Although recruiting such participants introduces its own challenges (e.g., willingness to attend confession for research purposes), doing so would provide a more sensitive test of the proposed mechanism.

Third, several core outcomes were measured with single items, which limits reliability and decreases the sensitivity of the measures. Future research should address these limitations by employing multi-item measures, larger samples, and designs that isolate specific components of the confessional experience.

Fourth, participants engaged in all three conditions on their usual confession days and were not asked to refrain from their regular confession practice during non-confession weeks. This creates a possible confound: participants assigned to the prayer or control condition on a given week may have also attended confession, contaminating the comparison conditions. Future studies should address this by providing a designated location for prayer and control conditions, ensuring participants complete those activities before attending confession, or by collecting daily logs of religious activities throughout the study period.

Furthermore, participants may conceive the prayer of confession as a form of individual confession that is comparable to the sacrament. In the pre-confession qualitative questions (see Appendix E), some participants stated that they engaged in confession by themselves, at home, using prayer. Future studies should clarify the differences between the sacrament and the prayer of confession for participants prior to their engagement in the conditions with more detailed instructions.

Despite these limitations, the present study addresses a key gap in the literature. As of writing, very little research has directly compared confession to other religious practices using an experimental design. The results will contribute to the growing literature on divine forgiveness, inform our understanding of why individuals engage in (or avoid) confession, and may provide practical insights for clergy seeking to encourage greater participation in the sacrament.

Conclusion

This study tested whether the certainty of divine forgiveness conferred through priestly absolution accounts for the distinctive psychological effects of the Catholic sacrament of confession. Using a within-subjects design comparing confession, private prayer, and a control condition in practicing Catholic university students, I found no evidence that confession increases certainty of divine forgiveness relative to the comparison conditions, most likely due to ceiling effects in a highly devout sample. However, the study yielded three substantive findings. First, confession produced significantly greater acute shame, guilt, and embarrassment than private prayer, confirming that confessing to another person carries distinctive psychological costs. Second, all conditions produced consistent pre-to-post improvements in affective outcomes, suggesting that structured reflective or devotional practice benefits practicing Catholics regardless of format. Third, closeness to God and self-compassion increased across the study period, though these effects cannot be attributed to any specific condition.

Despite the null findings for the proposed mechanism, this study makes a methodological contribution as one of the first within-subjects experimental comparisons of confession and prayer in practicing Catholics. The results suggest that the distinctive effects of confession may not operate through cognitive certainty of forgiveness but through other elements of the sacramental experience (for example, the interpersonal encounter with a priest, the structured examination of conscience, or the experiential vividness of absolution) that were not isolated in the present design. Future research should develop measures that capture these experiential dimensions, recruit samples with greater variability in divine forgiveness, and employ designs that can isolate the specific components of confession responsible for its distinctive effects.

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Appendix A: Initial Intake Instructions

Estimated time: 10–15 minutes

Thank you for your interest in our study.

You will be asked to complete a brief intake questionnaire, and then will be asked to complete three different religious or personal rituals across the span of three to six weeks (depending on your assigned schedule). Your condition will be randomized such that you may be asked to pray by yourself, attend confession, or describe your morning in any order.

You will complete a brief intake questionnaire. This intake should take no longer than 10 to 15 minutes. Then you will be randomly assigned to pray by yourself, attend confession, or to describe your morning. Once you have been assigned, you will receive instructions where you will be asked to pray, confess, or describe your morning on the Sunday of the corresponding week.

You will then be sent a link to a pre-survey that you will complete the Saturday before you pray, confess, or describe your morning.

Then you will be asked to engage in prayer, confession, or describing your morning the next day, on Sunday.

Following prayer, confession, or describing your morning, you will have 24 hours to take a post-survey where you will be asked to reflect on your experience praying, confessing, or describing your morning. You will complete this process three times. Following your last condition, you will complete one final assessment.

Please give your full attention to the questionnaires. If you can, please try to silence any potential distractions in your environment. Read each question carefully, and remember that there are no right or wrong answers. It's best to go with your first judgment and not to spend too much time mulling over any one question.

You will be asked to complete demographic questions on the next page.

Appendix B: Demographics

(Administered during initial intake only)

Age

What is your age in years?

Gender

What do you identify as?

- Man
- Woman
- Transgender Man
- Transgender Woman
- Gender non-binary
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to say

Race

What is your race? (Select all that apply)

- Asian
- Black or African-American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American or Alaskan Native
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White or Caucasian
- Other (please specify)

Education

What is your level of education?

- Less than a high school diploma
- High school degree or equivalent
- Some college, did not complete degree
- Associate's degree (e.g., AA, AS)
- Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)
- Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd)
- Doctorate (e.g., PhD, MD, EdD)
- Other (please specify)

Income

What is your yearly income?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000–\$19,999
- \$20,000–\$29,999
- \$30,000–\$39,999
- \$40,000–\$49,999
- \$50,000–\$59,999
- \$60,000–\$69,999
- \$70,000–\$79,999
- \$80,000–\$89,999
- \$90,000–\$99,999
- \$100,000–\$149,999
- More than \$150,000

Political Orientation

Which of the following groups do your political views align with?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other (please specify)
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

Please rate your overall political orientation: 1 (Very liberal) to 11 (Very conservative)

Anxiety

Below is a list of common symptoms of anxiety. Please carefully read each item in the list.

Indicate how much you have been bothered by that symptom during the past month, including today, using the scale below:

0 = Not at all; 1 = Mildly, but it didn't bother me much; 2 = Moderately – it wasn't pleasant at times; 3 = Severely – it bothered me a lot

Numbness or tingling

Feeling hot

Wobbliness in legs

Unable to relax

Fear of the worst

happening

Dizzy or lightheaded

Heart pounding or racing

Unsteady

Terrified

Nervous

Feelings of choking

Hands trembling

Shaky

Fear of losing control

Difficulty breathing

Fear of dying

Scared

Indigestion or discomfort in abdomen

Faint

Face flushed

Sweating (not due to heat)

Scrupulosity

The following statements refer to experiences that people sometimes have. Please indicate how often you have these experiences using the following scale:

0=never; 1=almost never; 2=sometimes; 3=often; 4=constantly.

I worry that I might have dishonest thoughts

I fear that I might be an evil person

I fear I will act immorally

I feel urges to confess sins over and over again

I worry about heaven and hell

I worry I must act morally at all times or I will be punished

Feeling guilty interferes with my ability to enjoy things I would like to enjoy

Immoral thoughts come into my head and I cannot get rid of them

I am afraid my behavior is unacceptable to God

I fear I have acted inappropriately without realizing it

I must try hard to avoid having certain immoral thoughts

I am very worried that things I did may have been dishonest

I am afraid I will disobey God's rules/laws

I am afraid of having sexual thoughts

I worry I will never have a good relationship with God

I feel guilty about immoral thoughts I have had

I worry that God is upset with me

I am afraid of having immoral thoughts

I am afraid my thoughts are unacceptable to God

Confession History

When was the last time you attended confession? Please provide a rough estimate in weeks.

Do you attend confession during the holidays? (Yes / Sometimes / No)

On which holidays do you go to confession? [Open-ended]

How often do you attend confession?

- More than once a week
- Once a week
- Every 2 to 3 weeks
- Once a month
- Every 2–5 months
- Every 6–11 months
- Once a year
- Never

Priest Quality (Baseline)

Rated on a 5-point Likert scale:

- How empathetic is the priest to your problems?
- How well do you know the priest?

- How comfortable are you disclosing your mistakes to the priest?
- The priest helps me understand the nature of my mistake.
- The priest helps me understand how I should make amends for my mistake.
- The priest is helpful in guiding me through the ritual of confession.
- The priest is warm and genuine in his manner.
- The priest is accepting and respectful of me.
- The priest is attentive to my confession.

Appendix C: Preliminary Measures (Intake and Final Assessment)

Divine Forgiveness

Scale: Fincham & Maranges (2024). 5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

1. I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness.
2. Knowing that I am forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults.

Identification with the Church

Adapted from Mael & Ashforth (1992); Li et al. (2021). 5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

1. When someone criticizes the church, it feels like a personal insult.
2. I am very interested in what others think about the church.
3. When I talk about this church, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’
4. This church’s successes are my successes.
5. When someone praises this church, it feels like a personal compliment.
6. If a story in the media criticized the church, I would feel embarrassed.

Closeness to God

Adapted from Underwood & Teresi (2002). 4-point scale (1 = Not close at all to 4 = As close as possible).

1. In general, how close do you feel to God?

Shame and Guilt (GSQ-8)

Hoppen et al. (2022). Frequency in past 4 weeks: 0 = Never to 4 = Daily.

1. I felt embarrassed during the last 4 weeks.
2. I felt guilt during the last 4 weeks.
3. I felt regret during the last 4 weeks.
4. I felt disgusting during the last 4 weeks.
5. I felt remorse during the last 4 weeks.

6. I felt humiliated during the last 4 weeks.
7. I felt ashamed during the last 4 weeks.
8. I felt intense guilt during the last 4 weeks.

Various Feelings

5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Prompt: “Right now...”

1. I feel a sense of gratitude towards God. (Gratitude)
2. I feel a sense of humility. (Humility)
3. I have a sense of peace and harmony in my mind. (Peace; Lee et al., 2013)
4. I feel compassion for myself. (Self-Compassion)
5. I feel compassion for others. (Other-Compassion)
6. I feel cheerful and in good spirits. (WHO Well-Being; Topp et al., 2015)
7. I feel calm and relaxed. (WHO Well-Being)
8. I feel active and vigorous. (WHO Well-Being)

Appendix D: Condition Instructions

Confession Condition

For the next part of the study, you will be asked to attend confession this upcoming Sunday. On Saturday, you will be sent a survey to complete before Confession. You will be asked to respond to brief questionnaires and open-ended questions. You will have between 6:00 am and 11:59 pm to complete the pre-survey. After you attend confession, you will have 24 hours to complete the post-survey where you will respond to open-ended questions and brief questionnaires. These surveys should take no longer than 5 to 10 minutes.

Prayer Condition

For the next part of the study, you will be asked to find a private space and verbally disclose your sins to God in prayer this upcoming Sunday. Please spend at least five minutes in prayer, directing your prayer toward acknowledging your sins and asking God for forgiveness. On Saturday, you will be sent a survey to complete before you pray. You will be asked to respond to brief questionnaires and open-ended questions. You will have between 6:00 am and 11:59 pm to complete the pre-survey. After you pray, you will have 24 hours to complete the post-survey where you will respond to open-ended questions and brief questionnaires. These surveys should take no longer than 5 to 10 minutes.

Control Condition

For the next part of the study, you will be asked to find a private space and verbally describe your morning for at least five minutes this upcoming Sunday. On Saturday, you will be sent a survey to complete before you describe your morning. You will be asked to respond to brief questionnaires and open-ended questions. You will have between 6:00 am and 11:59 pm to complete the pre-survey. After you describe your morning, you will have 24 hours to complete the post-survey where you will respond to open-ended questions and brief questionnaires. These surveys should take no longer than 5 to 10 minutes.

Appendix E: Pre-Survey

Estimated time: 5–10 minutes

Tomorrow you will reflect/confess/engage in personal prayer. Before you do so, please complete this brief survey and reflection. Please read the questions carefully and go with your first response. There is no right or wrong answer; we are merely interested in your experience. We ask that you do not share the contents of your prayer/confession/reflection.

In how many hours do you plan to engage in prayer/confession/your morning description?

Divine Forgiveness

Fincham & Maranges (2024). 5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

1. I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness.
2. Knowing that I am forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults.

State-Level Divine Forgiveness (NEW)

5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

3. Right now, I feel certain that God has forgiven me.
4. I feel that my sins have been fully absolved.
5. I still wonder whether God has truly forgiven me. (Reverse-scored)

Relief from Shame and Guilt

1–7 scale (Not at all to Extremely).

1. Right now, to what extent do you feel shame about the transgression you will disclose/disclosed?
2. Right now, to what extent do you feel guilt about the transgression you will disclose/disclosed?

Various Feelings

5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Prompt: “Right now...”

- I feel a sense of gratitude towards God. (Gratitude)
- I feel a sense of humility. (Humility)
- I have a sense of peace and harmony in my mind. (Peace; Lee et al., 2013)
- I feel cheerful and in good spirits. (WHO Well-Being)
- I feel calm and relaxed. (WHO Well-Being)
- I feel active and vigorous. (WHO Well-Being)
- I feel ashamed. (Shame)
- I feel guilty. (Guilt)
- I feel embarrassed. (Embarrassment)

Perceived Severity of Sin (Confession and Prayer Conditions Only)

On a scale of 1 (Not at all severe) to 5 (Extremely severe), please rate the severity of the transgression you plan to disclose.

Between-Condition Compliance Check (Prayer and Control Conditions Only) (NEW)

Since your last assigned activity, have you verbally confessed your sins in a private space outside of the assigned condition? (Yes / No)

Thank you for completing the pre-survey. Now, we ask that you confess/pray/describe your morning tomorrow, on Sunday. You will be sent a post-survey to complete after you confess/pray/describe your morning.

Please reach out if you have any questions or concerns in the meantime.

Appendix F: Post-Survey and Reflection

Estimated time: 5–10 minutes

Now that you have prayed/confessed/reflected, you will complete a brief reflection asking about your experience. Afterward, you will answer a short collection of questionnaires assessing your experience. Please read the questions carefully and go with your first response. There is no right or wrong answer; we are merely interested in your experience. We ask that you do not share the contents of your prayer/confession/reflection.

Reflection Prompts

- How did you pray/confess/reflect?
- When did you pray/confess/reflect?

Please take at least 30 seconds to reflect on your experience. Use the following questions to guide your thinking:

- What were my motivations for confessing/praying/reflecting?
- How did it feel to confess/pray/reflect?

Divine Forgiveness

Fincham & Maranges (2024). 5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

1. I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness.
2. Knowing that I am forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults.

State-Level Divine Forgiveness (NEW)

5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

3. Right now, I feel certain that God has forgiven me.
4. I feel that my sins have been fully absolved.
5. I still wonder whether God has truly forgiven me. (Reverse-scored)

Guilt (SSGS)

Marschall et al. (1994). 5-point scale (1 = Not feeling this way at all to 5 = Feeling this way strongly).

Prompt: “The following are some statements which may or may not describe how you are feeling right now.”

1. I feel remorse, regret.
2. I feel tension about something I have done.
3. I cannot stop thinking about something bad I have done.
4. I feel like apologizing, confessing.
5. I feel bad about something I have done.

Shame (SSGS)

Marschall et al. (1994). 5-point scale (1 = Not feeling this way at all to 5 = Feeling this way strongly).

1. I want to sink into the floor and disappear.
2. I feel small.
3. I feel like I am a bad person.
4. I feel humiliated, disgraced.
5. I feel worthless, powerless.

Acute Shame

Adapted from Marschall et al. (1994). 5-point scale. Prompt: “During confession/prayer/reflection, I felt...”

1. I wanted to sink into the floor and disappear.
2. I felt small.
3. I felt like I am a bad person.
4. I felt humiliated, disgraced.
5. I felt worthless, powerless.

Acute Guilt

Adapted from Marschall et al. (1994). 5-point scale. Prompt: “During confession/prayer/reflection, I felt...”

1. I wanted to sink into the floor and disappear.
2. I felt remorse, regret.
3. I felt tension about something I have done.
4. I could not stop thinking about something bad I have done.
5. I felt like apologizing, confessing.
6. I felt bad about something I have done.

Priest Quality (Confession Condition Only)

5-point Likert scale.

1. The priest was empathetic to my problems.
2. I knew the priest I confessed to well.
3. I felt comfortable disclosing my mistakes to the priest.
4. The priest helped me understand the nature of my mistake.
5. The priest helped me understand how I should make amends for my mistake.
6. The priest helped guide me through the ritual of confession.
7. The priest was warm and genuine in his manner.
8. The priest was accepting and respectful of me.
9. The priest was attentive to my confession.

Confession Modality (Confession Condition Only)

How did you engage in confession? (Face to face / Behind a screen / Other)

Did you visit a new priest or a priest you’ve confessed to before? (A new priest / A priest I have confessed to before)

Various Feelings

5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Prompt: “Right now...”

- I feel a sense of gratitude towards God. (Gratitude)
- I feel a sense of humility. (Humility)
- I have a sense of peace and harmony in my mind. (Peace; Lee et al., 2013)
- I feel cheerful and in good spirits. (WHO Well-Being)
- I feel calm and relaxed. (WHO Well-Being)
- I feel active and vigorous. (WHO Well-Being)
- I feel embarrassed. (Embarrassment)

Quantitative Manipulation Check (NEW)

Confession condition:

- I confessed my sins to a priest and received absolution. (Yes / No)
- To what extent did you feel you fully participated in the Sacrament of Confession? (1 = Not at all to 5 = Completely)

Prayer condition:

- I verbally confessed my sins to God in prayer for at least 5 minutes. (Yes / No)
- To what extent did you feel you fully engaged in prayer? (1 = Not at all to 5 = Completely)

Control condition:

- I verbally described my morning for at least 5 minutes. (Yes / No)

Thank you for completing the post-survey. You will receive your next instructions according to your assigned schedule. We ask that you do not verbally disclose your sins in a private space (as we have previously asked) until your next assigned condition. You may continue to pray in other ways.

Please reach out if you have any questions or concerns in the meantime.

Appendix G: Final Assessment

Thank you for your participation in this study! To conclude the study, please complete one last survey.

Divine Forgiveness

Fincham & Maranges (2024). 5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

1. I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness.
2. Knowing that I am forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults.

Identification with the Church

Mael & Ashforth (1992); Li et al. (2021). 5-point scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

1. When someone criticizes the church, it feels like a personal insult.
2. I am very interested in what others think about the church.
3. When I talk about this church, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they.'
4. This church's successes are my successes.
5. When someone praises this church, it feels like a personal compliment.
6. If a story in the media criticized the church, I would feel embarrassed.

Closeness to God

Underwood & Teresi (2002). 4-point scale (1 = Not close at all to 4 = As close as possible).

1. In general, how close do you feel to God?

Shame and Guilt (GSQ-8)

Hoppen et al. (2022). Frequency in past 4 weeks: 0 = Never to 4 = Daily.

1. I felt embarrassed during the last 4 weeks.
2. I felt guilt during the last 4 weeks.
3. I felt regret during the last 4 weeks.
4. I felt disgusting during the last 4 weeks.

5. I felt remorse during the last 4 weeks.
6. I felt humiliated during the last 4 weeks.
7. I felt ashamed during the last 4 weeks.
8. I felt intense guilt during the last 4 weeks.

Gratitude (GQ-6)

McCullough et al. (2002). 7-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). Items 3 and 6 are reverse-scored.

1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.
2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.
3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for. (R)
4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.
5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.
6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone. (R)

Humility (GT Single Item Scale)

7-point scale (1 = Not at all to 7 = Fully).

1. I am someone who is intellectually humble. (Intellectual Humility: An ability to admit to intellectual limitations, generally acknowledging and accepting that there are gaps in one's knowledge.)

Feelings of Peace (Peace of Mind Scale)

Lee et al. (2013). 5-point scale (1 = Not at all to 5 = All the time). Items 5 and 7 are reverse-scored.

1. My mind is free and at ease.
2. I feel content and comfortable with myself in daily life.
3. My lifestyle gives me feelings of peace and stability.

4. I have peace and harmony in my mind.
5. It is difficult for me to feel settled. (R)
6. The way I live brings me feelings of peace and comfort.
7. I feel anxious and uneasy in my mind. (R)

Self- and Other-Compassion

Sahdra et al. (2023). Scale: 1 (Very seldom) to 5 (Very often). Referencing the past seven days.

1. I am tolerant, benevolent, and caring with myself.
2. I am tolerant, benevolent, and caring with others.

Belonging (Exploratory)

Perceived Cohesion Scale (Chin et al., 1999). 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree).

Sample items: “I feel that I belong to this group”; “I see myself as part of this group.”

Discrimination (Exploratory)

Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (Exline et al., 2014). 1 (Not at all/Does not apply) to 5 (A great deal).

Prompt: “Over the past few months, to what extent have you had each of the experiences listed below?”

Sample items: “I felt like youth had no say in my religious community”; “I felt people from certain ethnic/racial groups were favored in my religious community.”

Table I

Table I

Descriptives and Sample Sizes for Condition and Time

Variable	Intake		Pre Confession		Post Confession		Pre Prayer		Post Prayer		Pre Control		Post Control		Final Assessment	
	M	N	M(SD)	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M	N
1. Divine Forgiveness	4.22(.74),	64	4.41(.67)	50	4.62(.47)	54	4.38(.56)	49	4.51(.77)	52	4.36(.62)	50	4.34(.75)	53	4.67(.48)	52
2. Guilt	2.54(1.13)	64	2.64(1.11)	50	1.97(.94)	54	2.53(1.00)	49	1.88(.97)	52	2.50(1.08)	50	2.18(1.01)	53	1.90(1.02)	52
3. Shame	1.66(.75)	64	1.66(.79)	50	1.47(.77)	54	1.66(.89)	49	1.35(.60)	52	1.82(.86)	50	1.44(.70)	53	1.40(.80)	52
4. Gratitude	4.30(.68)	64	4.46(.54)	50	4.54(.54)	54	4.22(.74)	49	4.69(.54)	52	4.30(.65)	50	4.53(.61)	53	4.69(.47)	51
5. Humility	3.83(1.00)	64	3.78(.79)	50	3.91(.94)	54	3.59(.81)	49	3.96(.71)	52	3.70(.93)	50	3.74(.81)	53	4.24(.71)	51
6. Peace	3.47(1.08)	64	3.74(.96)	50	4.11(.86)	54	3.51(.92)	49	4.15(.80)	52	3.58(1.13)	50	4.00(.94)	53	4.29(.78)	51
7. Self-Compassion	3.73(.98)	64													4.33(.74)	51
8. Other-Compassion	4.23(.83)	64													4.45(.67)	51
9. Closeness to God	2.29(.52)	64													2.69(.61)	
10. Acute Shame					2.13(1.07)	54			1.39(.61)	52			1.37(.62)	53		
11. Acute Guilt					3.39(1.00)	54			2.50(1.17)	52			1.60(.73)	53		

Empty spaces denote no values for that condition or time.

Table II

Table 2

Intake Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Divine Forgiveness	—									
2. Guilt	.06	—								
3. Shame	.00	.26*	—							
4. Gratitude	.39**	-.04	-.31*	—						
5. Humility	.14	-.03	-.17	.47***	—					
6. Peace	.03	-.22	-.46***	.32**	.32**	—				
7. Self-Compassion	.08	-.17	-.408***	.36**	.23	.60***	—			
8. Other-Compassion	.24	-.18	-.223	.44***	.412***	.49***	.31*	—		
9. Closeness to God	.43**	.10	-.143	.341**	.23	.191	.31*	.04	—	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table III

Table 3

Correlations Among Pre Confession Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Divine Forgiveness	—						
2. Guilt	.33*	—					
3. Shame	.02	.59***	—				
4. Gratitude	.51***	.06	-.25*	—			
5. Humility	.10	-.17	-.08	.05	—		
6. Peace	.36*	-.26	-.36*	.43**	.43*	—	
7. Embarrassment	.04	.62***	.56***	-.07	-.04	-.26	—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table IV**Table 4***Post Confession Correlations*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Divine Forgiveness	—									
2. Guilt	-0.105	—								
3. Shame	-0.128	.546***	—							
4. Acute Shame	-0.128	.481***	.361**	—						
5. Acute Guilt	0.010	.346*	0.245	.660***	—					
6. Gratitude	.452***	0.035	-0.051	-0.035	0.078	—				
7. Humility	0.242	.07	0.144	0.062	-0.094	.399**	—			
8. Peace	.413**	-.02	-0.181	-0.209	0.106	.356**	0.223	—		
9. Embarrassment	-0.100	.431**	.381**	.500**	0.211	-0.082	0.038	-.343*	—	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table V**Table 5***Pre Personal Prayer Correlations*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Divine Forgiveness	—						
2. Guilt	0.073	—					
3. Shame	0.023	.582***	—				
4. Gratitude	.514***	-0.107	-0.265	—			
5. Humility	0.161	-0.157	-0.139	0.258	—		
6. Peace	0.164	-0.255	-.481***	.287*	0.145	—	
7. Embarrassment	0.015	.511***	.564***	-0.040	-0.034	-.312*	—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table VI

Table 6

Post Prayer Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Divine Forgiveness	—									
2. Guilt	-0.167	—								
3. Shame	-.362**	.653***	—							
4. Acute Shame	-.318*	.569***	.654***	—						
5. Acute Guilt	-0.182	.485***	.310*	.546***	—					
6. Gratitude	0.218	-0.059	-.295*	-.366**	0.087	—				
7. Humility	0.144	-0.177	-0.178	-0.236	0.047	0.171	—			
8. Peace	0.156	-0.160	-.285*	-.390**	-0.180	0.156	0.216	—		
9. Embarrassment	-0.254	.323*	.516***	.454**	.472***	-0.106	-0.272	-0.120	—	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table VII

Table 7

Pre Control Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Divine Forgiveness	—						
2. Guilt	0.260	—					
3. Shame	0.103	.547***	—				
4. Gratitude	.486***	0.028	0.152	—			
5. Humility	0.243	-0.194	0.072	.423**	—		
6. Peace	0.191	-0.234	-0.161	0.120	.286*	—	
7. Embarrassment	0.039	.505**	.433**	0.038	0.009	-0.196	—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table VIII

Table 8

Post Confession Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Divine Forgiveness	—									
2. Guilt	0.069	—								
3. Shame	0.082	.586***	—							
4. Acute Shame	-0.024	.351**	.433**	—						
5. Acute Guilt	0.066	.470***	.334*	.567***	—					
6. Gratitude	.315*	-0.090	-0.269	-.308*	-0.178	—				
7. Humility	-0.149	-0.006	-0.170	-0.041	-0.125	0.249	—			
8. Peace	0.095	-.311*	-.461**	-0.125	-0.123	.303*	0.050	—		
9. Embarrassment	0.003	.471***	.343*	-0.020	0.123	-0.191	-0.191	-.472**	—	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table IX

Table 9

Final Assessment Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Divine Forgiveness	—									
2. Guilt	0.102	—								
3. Shame	-0.093	.698**	—							
4. Gratitude	.509***	.325*	0.187	—						
5. Humility	0.051	-0.121	-0.017	0.166	—					
6. Peace	.307*	-0.207	-0.169	0.257	.377**	—				
7. Self-Compassion	0.249	-0.046	-0.065	0.250	.457**	.692**	—			
8. Other-Compassion	-0.004	0.019	0.075	.331*	.402**	.389**	.335*	—		
9. Closeness to God	.316*	0.235	.698**	.441*	.302*	.437**	.444**	.379**	—	

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table X**Table 10***Reliability Across Conditions and Time Points*

Measure	Intake	Pre- Confession	Post- Confession	Pre- Prayer	Post- Prayer	Pre- Control	Post- Control
Divine	.81	.69	.80	.66	.86	.78	.75
Forgiveness							
Guilt	.92	.93	.91	.90	.92	.91	.91
Shame	.86	.90	.95	.92	.90	.85	.88
Acute Shame	—	—	.92	—	.89	—	—
Acute Guilt	—	—	.88	—	.91	—	—

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. Dashes indicate that the measure was not assessed at that time point or condition.

Education

Middle College at Durham Technical College, Durham, NC
High School Diploma, 2021

Durham Technical Community College, Durham, NC
A.S in Psychology, 2021

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC
B.S in Psychology, 2024
Minor in History

Wake Forest University, Winston Salem, NC
M.S. in Psychology, May 2026

Related Coursework:

- AFRS 3240 African Americans and the Legal Process
- HONR 3700 Social Justice Movements from the African Diaspora to Black Charlotte
- PSYC 715 Research Design and Analysis I
- PSYC 716 Research Design and Analysis II
- PSYC 742 Seminar in Developmental Psychology
- PSYC 757 Seminar in Personality Psychology
- PSYC 752 Seminar in Social Psychology

Research Experience

Wake Forest University: Masters Thesis

Primary Investigator, June 2025 – May 2026

- Developed a unique methodology to assess participants' experience of confession compared to fellow confessional religious practices such as personal prayer
- Managed participants via the Psychology SONA Pool and the WFU Catholic community
- Collaborated with community members for recruitment
- Successfully defended to a committee of professionals
- Ran multiple complex analyses including MANOVA, mediation via the MEMCORE macro, and regression analyses

Wake Forest University: First Year Project

Primary Investigator, Aug. 2024 – May 2026

- Designed a unique study aimed at understanding individuals experience of confession and filling a gap in the religiosity and divine forgiveness literature
- Conducted multiple complex analyses including mediation and moderation using the PROCESS macro and regression analyses
- Recruited and managed participants and compensation via Prolific
- Collaborated with co-authors on a manuscript based on the results of the study

- Presented the results of the study to the WFU Psychology Department and to the community at SSSP

University of North Carolina at Charlotte: Honors Thesis

Primary Investigator, Jan. 2023 – May 2024

- Researched and analyzed multiple, complex questions, psychological constructs, and measures on belonging, nature-relatedness, social connectedness, and eudaimonic well-being
- Created original manipulations for an online experiment
- Defended the thesis proposal to a committee of professors
- Synthesized complex topics and evidence into coherent arguments and ideas

University of North Carolina at Charlotte: Relationships and Social Motivation Lab

Research Assistant, Jan. 2023 – December 2023

- Conducted secondary data analysis amongst other complex data analyses, including ANOVA and regression, on complex research questions
- Collaborated with co-RAs on designing and developing posters to be presented at conferences
- Assisted in participant recruitment and survey creation

Durham Technical Community College: Honors Program

Primary Investigator, Sep. 2020 – March 2021

- Analyzed and compared multiple texts from two authors
- Synthesized arguments for presentations and lay-person summaries
- Produced a 15-page paper of literary and historical analyses
- Prepared updates on the project for advisors and professors

Teaching Experience

Wake Forest University, PSY 211/311 Research Methods and Statistics

Teaching Assistant, Aug. 2024 – May 2026

- Led a lab section of 10 to 20 students each week
- Designed Canvas materials for students
- Submitted detailed and organized feedback to students on reports and weekly lab assignments
- Guided students through complex research methodology

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, PSYC: 2100 Psych Success for Transfers

Teaching Assistant, Aug. 2022 – May 2023

- Supervised and participated in class discussions around collegiate success in psychology programs
- Assisted the professor in leading and organizing class agendas
- Submitted detailed and organized feedback to students on homework assignments
- Assisted in developing a sense of belonging and community within the classroom

Research Presentations

Kryschelle Fakir and Eranda Jayawickreme. *Examining relationships between the ritual of confession and flourishing*. Presented at the 2025 SSSP Annual Conference, St. Petersburg, FL, November 2025.

Kryschelle Fakir and Eranda Jayawickreme. *Examining relationships between the ritual of confession and flourishing*. Oral presentation presented at a grant meeting funded by the Templeton Word Charity Foundation, Glasgow, Scotland, March 2025.

Kryschelle Fakir and Amy Canevello. *Interconnection: Is believing and seeing connections in the world and between the self, others, and nature linked to well-being?* Oral presentation presented at the UNC Charlotte Undergraduate Research Conference, Charlotte, NC, April 2024.

Kryschelle Fakir, Gabbie Boutte, Bryan Perez, Thao Nguyen, and Amy Canevello. *Leaving the nest: Predictors of belonging in first year college students*. Poster presented at the 2023 SSSP Annual Conference, Charlotte, NC, November 2023.

Daniel Jackson, Thao Nguyen, **Kryschelle Fakir**, Kirby Magid, Sam Clarkson, Amy Canevello. *Trust, commitment, and responses to partner transgressions in close relationships*. Poster presented at the UNC Charlotte Undergraduate Research Conference, Charlotte, NC, April 2023.

Bryan Perez, **Kryschelle Fakir**, Sudhanshu Deshpande, Kirby Magid, Sam Clarkson, Amy Canevello. *Rumination and forgiveness from transgressions in close relationships*. Poster presented at the UNC Charlotte Undergraduate Research Conference, Charlotte, NC, April 2023.

Kryschelle Fakir. *Black women: The anguish of being societies mule*. Poster presented at the Lloyd International Honors College's 21st Annual Undergraduate Honors Symposium, Durham, NC, March 2021.

Publications

Fakir, K., Jayawickreme, E., & Brady, M. (2025). Examining relationships between the ritual of confession and flourishing [Manuscript in preparation]. Department of Psychology, Wake Forest University.

Awards, Honors, and Certifications

SSSP Award for Best Graduate Student Poster	Nov.
2025	
Nila and Stokley Bailey PFLAG Scholarship	Aug. 2021 & 2022
University Honors College Program	Aug. 2021 & 2022
Charlotte Chapter of Executive Women International (EWI) Endowed Scholarship	May.
2022	
Alumni Book Scholarship	May.
2022	
Dr. Gregory Davis '76 UNC Charlotte Alumni Association Scholarship	April
2022	
Abigail Elizabeth Gudeman Scholarship	July 2021

Professional Experience

Student Office Assistant

June 2025 – August

2025

Department of Psychological Services – Wake Forest, NC

- Assisted Academic Coordinators in managing departmental
- Coordinated movement of offices for professors
- Aided the Academic Coordinators in management of departmental events

Peer Educator

Counseling and Psychological Services – Charlotte, NC

Aug. 2022 – Dec. 2023

- Assisted in the creation and distribution of marketing materials
- Facilitated discussion between the student body and Counseling and Psychological Services staff
- Attended two professional conferences

Student Director for Civic Engagement and Democracy and Student Director for Advocacy and Awareness

The Office of Leadership and Community Engagement – Charlotte, NC Aug. 2022 – May 2023

- Supervised a committee of four volunteer members to create events centered around democracy and voter engagement on campus
- Promoted conversations around voting and civic engagement through tabling, presentations, and engagement opportunities
- Established connections between off campus partners, organizations, and campus departments and student organizations

SECU Public Fellow Intern

The Males Place – Charlotte, NC

June 2022 – August 2022

- Created a directory and filing system to track attendance and member information
- Designed multiple spreadsheets to monitor the TMP community garden output, harvesting schedules, and sales at a local farmers market
- Assisted in harvesting and maintaining produce on a community garden
- Managed output and profits at a local farmers market

Intern

Youthworks, Duke Health – Durham, NC

June 2021 – June 2021

- Participated in discussions with professionals to expand awareness of careers
- Listened to presentations to connect with local experts at Duke Medical Center
- Presented findings and ideas to peers to conclude the program

Volunteer Experience

Site Leader for Alternative Service Break – Office of Leadership and Community Engagement
Sept. 2022 – May 2023

- Planned a trip to engage students in justice-oriented service over spring break
- Facilitated discussions with program participants around environmental justice
- Supervised participants to ensure safety, comprehension, and enjoyment

MLK Jr. Day of Service Site Leader – Office of Leadership and Community Engagement
January 2023

- Assisted the Leadership and Community Engagement department in leading a large group of participants
- Encouraged open and thoughtful discussions around social issues before, during, and after the event
- Collaborated with an assigned partner in coordinating and leading the group
- Supported the dissemination of educational content and materials during the volunteer event

Gold Rush Day of Service Site Leader – Office of Leadership and Community Engagement
August 2022

- Supervised a group of participants on a day of volunteering with Crisis Assistance Ministry in the Charlotte area
- Participated in sorting clothes for communities experiencing homelessness or poverty
- Functioned as a bus captain to ensure on time arrival to the organization's site

Counseling and Psychological Services – Charlotte, NC
Oct. 2021 - June 2022

- Assisted CAPS employees in reaching out to the community to foster engagement and mental health awareness
- Represented CAPS and the Student Advisory Board at campus events by providing information and interacting with students

Alternative Service Break – Office of Leadership and Community Engagement
March 2022

- Travelled to Selma, Alabama over spring break to help a community partner by aiding the community food pantry, resale store, and community farm with the LCE
- Discussed issues around environmental justice, pollution, and food deserts

Certifications

Peer Educator Certification

Issued Jan. 2023

Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR)

Issued Nov. 2022

Mental Health First Aid

Issued March 2022

Interests

Environmental Justice, Nature, Art, Dancing, Music, Traveling, Video Games, Fashion, Design