



From all bishops to lay faithful

Subject: Settlement reached in lawsuit over sacred seal of confession

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

As you may recall, the Washington bishops filed a lawsuit in May challenging a state law that would have required priests to violate the seal of confession. Earlier this summer, a federal court issued an order preventing the governor, attorney general, and county prosecuting attorneys in the state of Washington from requiring priests to violate the seal of confession while the lawsuit proceeded.

We are now pleased to report that this case has been resolved. The governor, attorney general, and all county prosecuting attorneys have agreed to a court order finding that the state law violates our free exercise and have agreed not to force priests into the impossible choice between obeying God or complying with the law.

The Church teaches that “the sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason.” Because of this, Catholics have for centuries turned to the confessional seeking God’s mercy and reconciliation, trusting that their words will remain completely confidential. This agreement preserves that trust and keeps the sacrament of confession what it has always been: a holy encounter with God’s forgiveness.

The Church remains unwavering in its commitment to prevent abuse and protect the vulnerable. Priests and Church personnel across Washington are already required to report suspected abuse outside of confession, and they will continue to do so faithfully. That is why the Church supported the law’s broader goal of strengthening protections for minors from the very beginning and asked only for a narrow exemption to safeguard the sacrament.

We are grateful that this matter has been resolved in a way that respects our duty to prevent abuse and our right to religious freedom. This outcome protects not only the religious freedom of Catholics, but also people of all faiths across Washington.



Thank you for your prayers and faithfulness during this time. May God bless you, and may Our Lady keep you in her care.

In the Heart of Christ,

Most Rev. Paul D. Etienne
Archbishop of Seattle

Most Rev. Joseph J. Tyson
Bishop of Yakima

Most Rev. Thomas A. Daly
Bishop of Spokane

Most Rev. Eusebio Elizondo, M.Sp.S
Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle

Most Rev. Frank Schuster
Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle