

Revealing Your Confessions?

21 years in jail. That is the maximum sentence that a priest could potentially receive if he refused to break the seal of confession in Tasmania. Understandably, government officials want to protect children who have been abused and in fact the Church earnestly desires to protect children too. However, they are requiring priests to reveal what he heard in confession if there is someone suspected of child abuse. In fact, the state of South Australia has already implemented a law on Oct 1st, 2018 in which the priest could be fined \$10 000 for refusing to divulge information he had learned from the confessional.

Most recently, Bishop Robert Barron noted that the state of California is also considering implementing a piece of legislation which would require priests to do the same there too.

All of this makes us wonder what is at stake with the sacramental seal of confession?

The seal of confession is important in relationship to our Gospel today because in confession we encounter the Father's mercy through Jesus Christ present in the priest. "If you know me, you will know my Father also." In a way, Jesus is saying that his being reveals the Father in a unique way. Everything that Jesus says or does reveals the mystery of the Father. When Jesus dies on the cross, not only do we see his self-sacrifice, we also see the love of the Father: for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. Jesus is the revelation of the Father's heart.

This revelation is made concrete for us in the sacrament of confession. What are the first words of the prayer of absolution? God the Father of mercies through the death and resurrection of your Son has reconciled the world to himself... Through the priest, Jesus is present to the one going into confession in a unique way. When we encounter the love and mercy of Jesus, we also encounter the love and mercy of God. "If you know me, if you know my mercy, you will know my Father also, the mercy of my Father." Whoever has seen me has seen the Father because you can see the love of the Father in me.

This is why confession is so sacred. This conversation is not meant to be shared with anyone because it is a sacred conversation between God and the sinner, where the sinner reveals the uttermost darkness of his or her heart and brings it into the light.

Without the assurance that this privilege would be protected, people would not be vulnerable in revealing the deepest and darkest sins of their hearts and therefore receive forgiveness for it.

That is why the Church has stated in Canon Law: Can 983 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.

And if the priest does break the sacramental seal canon law also stipulates that the priest would be excommunicated on the spot. There are grave penalties for breaking the seal of confession because it is a grave matter. The Church wants to protect this sacred sanctuary to give us the freedom to be completely honest with God so that we can be completely forgiven.

In fact, priests are willing to die even if the law tried to force them to comply. During the Spanish civil war, many Catholics were targeted and Andres, a Franciscan friar, was going to be executed. Andres asked Fr. Felipe to hear his confession and Fr. Felipe gave him absolution. However, the soldiers tried to force him to reveal the contents of the confession, they even threatened to kill him. But Fr. Felipe replied: Do what you want but I will not reveal the confession. I would die before that.

And he did. On Sept 8, 1936, Fr Felipe was shot and gave up his life to protect his penitent.

Brothers and sisters, the priests of the Church are willing to be fined, sent to prison and even put to death just to protect your confessions, your sacred conversation with the Almighty and Merciful One.

Bishop Robert Barron received this advice about confession from his professor that he would never forget: "If someone asks, 'Father, would you hear my confession?,' the answer is always yes. Even if hearing that confession puts your own life in danger, the answer is always yes."