

CONFESSIOAL VICTORY

The question before the court was, “Can a priest be forced to divulge what he has learned in the confessional?” The Louisiana Supreme Court said, “No.” This was a victory for religious liberty, Catholic civil rights, and the Catholic League—we filed an amicus brief in this historic case.

The Catholic League’s involvement began in 2014. We supported a Louisiana priest, Fr. Jeff Bayhi, who had been sued by the parents of a girl for failing to report to the authorities that she was abused by a now-deceased lay member of the parish. If the venue had not been the confessional, Fr. Bayhi would have been free to contact the police, but the confessional is no ordinary place: it is home to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the priest is not free to discuss what he learns from the penitent.

When this issue first went before the State Supreme Court, our side lost; the judge ruled that Louisiana law mandated that the priest report such crimes to the authorities. That ruling was overturned by the State District Court in February. Louisiana District Judge Mike Caldwell said Fr. Bayhi, who serves in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, was not required to break the seal of the confessional to report this offense. The Louisiana Supreme Court upheld that decision on October 28.

The Catholic League has fought to preserve the integrity of the confessional before, and we have always won. But given the number of highly secular federal judges appointed to the bench over the last eight years, this issue is bound to reappear. No religious liberty is safe in this hostile environment.