

NEW HAMPSHIRE BILL TARGETS CONFESSIONAL

The New Hampshire state legislature is currently considering a bill (House Bill 1127) sponsored by Representative Mary Stuart Gile that would mandate all members of the clergy to report instances of suspected child abuse to the authorities, allowing of no exceptions. The bill seeks to remove the priest-penitent privilege that has traditionally been granted by legislators.

Catholic League president William Donohue wrote to New Hampshire lawmakers who serve on the Children and Family Law Committee urging them to reject this initiative. He spoke to this issue today:

“In January 2003, the Catholic League publicly protested a proposed New Hampshire bill designed to break the seal of the confessional—all under the guise of protecting young people. The bill eventually lost. But now the same person who sponsored that bill is back, Mary Gile, thus assuring round two. She seems not to know when to quit.

“Gile’s bill is flawed in three ways: (a) it is an unconstitutional encroachment by the state on religion (b) it is based on the superstition that child molesters are going free because priests are shielding them from the authorities, and (c) it is premised on the fatuous notion that priests would violate the seal of the confessional before ever going to prison.

“The priest-penitent privilege has been honored by the courts for over 200 years. Neither Rep. Gile, nor anyone else, has one scintilla of evidence suggesting that child abuse would decrease if what is heard in the confessional were made public. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is conditioned on

confidentiality, much like lawyer-client, doctor-patient, reporter-source relationships. For all these reasons, Gile's bill is a loser, and should be shot down again."