

SEAL OF CONFESSION UNDER FIRE

Catholic League president Bill Donohue addresses the priest-penitent privilege under scrutiny in Vermont:

The Catholic League is used to doing battle with lawmakers who want to violate the seal of confession. Their intentions vary, but in each case the proximate cause of such legislation is the sexual abuse of minors.

In the last few years we succeeded in beating back attempts to vitiate the priest-penitent privilege in Utah and North Dakota. Now Vermont is considering such a law.

The sponsor of the Vermont legislation is State Sen. Dick Sears Jr. Unlike many other lawmakers, he comes to this matter with good credentials: he has a record of combating child abuse. Unfortunately, his dedication to this cause has allowed him to think that progress could be made if we lifted the priest-penitent privilege.

In a letter I sent today, I commended Sears for his work. I also mentioned that I am a Catholic leader and author, and that my interest in this subject led me to write a book about it, [*The Truth about Clergy Sexual Abuse: Clarifying the Facts and the Causes*](#).

"I am writing to you in the hope that you might reconsider one aspect of your bill on this issue," I said, "namely the part that touches on the priest-penitent relationship. If the seal of the confession is broken, it would vitiate its *raison d'être*. It is also unenforceable: no priest I know would ever violate his obligation to maintain confidentiality."

Whenever we have dealt with this matter, I always ask those sponsoring a bill like the one proposed by Sen. Sears the same question. "Where is the evidence that the priest-penitent privilege plays a role in the unfolding of the clergy sexual

abuse scandal?" I am aware of none.

It must be said that the scandal that rocked the Catholic Church took place mostly between 1965 and 1985. Moreover, the reforms enacted over the past two decades have been a stunning success: the average number of credible accusations made against approximately 50,000 members of the clergy is in the single digits. The fact is that most of the molesters are either dead or have been kicked out of the priesthood.

Journalists will go to prison before giving up their sources. Psychologists would never divulge what they learn from their patients. Lawyers learn of things from their clients that must remain secret. Ditto for priests in the confessional.

There are some important steps that can be taken to curtail the abuse of children. They should be implemented. But not among them is busting the seal of the confessional.

We copied the other members of the Vermont Senate Judiciary Committee, as well as Burlington Bishop Christopher Coyne. We are not asking that the bill be withdrawn: our only interest is having all parties to it to reconsider the decision to bust the seal of confession. It won't protect one minor, but it will trample on the Sacrament of Reconciliation.