

WIN FOR PRIEST-PENITENT PRIVILEGE

In mid-July, a federal district judge ruled that a controversial bill that would eviscerate the priest-penitent privilege was unconstitutional. It was due to a lawsuit filed by the Department of Justice that settled this issue.

The Trump administration's lawyers filed suit in June, saying that Senate Bill 5375 violates the free exercise of religion for all Catholics. Specifically, it requires priests to violate the seal of Confession; they could be excommunicated if they disclosed what the penitent said.

"Laws that explicitly target religious practices such as the Sacrament of Confession in the Catholic Church have no place in our society," said Assistant Attorney General Harmeet K. Dhillon of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

Judge David Estudillo agreed. He said the bill "modifies existing law solely to make members of the clergy mandatory reporters with respect to child abuse and neglect." As such, the law is "neither neutral nor generally applicable" insofar as it "treats religious activity less favorably than comparable secular activity."

The Catholic League addressed this issue in January. That is when Bill Donohue wrote to all lawmakers in the state of Washington. He also wrote to its most vocal advocate, State Sen. Noel Frame, in May, registering his criticisms of the measure.

In his letter to the state's legislators, Donohue asked the following: "Where is the evidence that child molesters—in any state—report their crimes to priests in the confessional? We have been studying this issue for decades but we can't name a single instance where this had happened. If any lawmaker has

evidence to the contrary, you have an obligation to make it public. If not, what exactly are you trying to do?"

In his letter to Sen. Frame, Donohue took aim at a disingenuous remark she made. She said, "I am reminded that Canon law has changed many times over the years in the Catholic faith and there's nothing to say they cannot change their rules to allow the reporting of real time abuse and neglect of children. That is within their power to change and I think they should do so."

Donohue replied, "Funny thing is I feel the same way about your state legalizing assisted suicide. Except I would recommend that state law follow Canon law." He added, "I am reminded that state law has changed many times over the years in secular society and there's nothing to say they cannot change their rules to follow Canon law and put an end to assisted suicide. That is within their power to change and I think they should do so."

What is really outrageous about bills like this is that its proponents are not seriously concerned about child sexual abuse. If they were, they would know that this problem in the Catholic Church has long been checked. Instead, they would turn their attention to the public schools— that is where minors are being molested, yet nothing is done about it.

It is no secret that the teachers' unions are among the most generous donors to the Democrats. Accordingly, Democrat lawmakers are reluctant to anger them. They are ready to ignore those administrators, teachers, counselors and coaches who are preying on children, lest their coffers suffer.

Whenever the state encroaches on religion, as the lawmakers in Washington sought to do, it is a threat to all people of faith, not just the ones targeted by a particular bill. That is why Protestants, Jews, Muslims and others need to oppose these bills. It is only a matter of time before the same

lawmakers come after them.