



Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 18, 2025

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BREAKING: Federal court blocks Washington law targeting seal of confession

District judge rules priests cannot be forced to violate sacramental seal

WASHINGTON – A federal court today [blocked](#) a new Washington state law that would have forced Catholic priests to face jail time unless they broke the sacred seal of confession. The law at issue in [Etienne v. Ferguson](#), which was set to take effect on July 27, required clergy to report abuse shared within the sacred confines of the confessional. WilmerHale and co-counsel Becket and First Liberty Institute represent the lead plaintiffs Archbishop Paul D. Etienne, Bishop Joseph J. Tyson, and Bishop Thomas A. Daly, who filed an [initial lawsuit](#) earlier this summer.

After a July 14 hearing where Washington argued its new law lacked “legislative animus,” the court ruled that the state was, “unable to explain why the language in § 1(b) of the bill doubled down on singling out clergy.”

As part of its commitment to Safe Environment, the Catholic Church already requires priests to report abuse and neglect to law enforcement and other state authorities. The only exception would be if the information is learned during the sacrament of confession. The new law singles out this specific privilege for religious activities but allows protections to remain in place in secular settings.

For centuries, the Catholic Church has upheld the belief that confession is holy and must stay private. This principle—known as the seal of confession or sacramental seal—requires absolute secrecy from priests about anything said while administering the sacrament. A priest has a sacred obligation to keep everything he hears during the sacrament of confession completely confidential. The seal is so vital to the Catholic faith that any priest who violates it faces automatic excommunication. Over the centuries, priests have been imprisoned, tortured, and even killed for upholding the seal. Penitents today need the same assurance that their participation in a holy sacrament will remain free from government interference.

Washington’s new law, which was slated to take effect on July 27, threatened to impose penalties of up to 364 days in jail, a \$5,000 fine, and potential civil liability on priests who uphold the seal of confession and obey God’s command. Although the state claims the law was designed to protect minors, it still permits attorneys and others to maintain confidentiality when given identical information.

The Catholic Church in Washington has spent years strengthening its approach to protecting minors and vulnerable adults through its Safe Environment programs, background checks, and reporting policies. Across the Archdiocese of Seattle and the Dioceses of Spokane and Yakima, priests—and all Church personnel—are already required to report suspected abuse to law enforcement or child protection agencies. These policies cover diocesan parishes, schools, and other ministries. The Church supports mandatory reporting except in the narrow instance of the sacrament of confession.



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Quotes for media use:

“This ruling confirms what has always been true: In America, government officials have no business prying into the confessional,” **said Mark Rienzi, president and CEO of Becket.** “By protecting the seal of confession, the court has also safeguarded the basic principle that people of all faiths should be free to practice their beliefs without government interference.”

“For centuries, Catholic faithful around the world have sought reconciliation with God through the sacrament of confession,” **said Jean Hill, Executive Director of the Washington State Catholic Conference.** “This ruling protects that sacred space and ensures that Washingtonians of all religious stripes can live out their beliefs in peace.”

“The First Amendment did its work today in protecting the confessional and I am proud of the Church for its continued support of the reporting law’s application outside of that context,” **said Hiram Sasser, Executive General Counsel for First Liberty Institute.**

For more information or to arrange an interview, contact Ryan Colby at media@becketfund.org or 202-349-7219 or John Manning at media@firstliberty.org or 972-941-4453.

Additional Information:

- [District court order in Etienne v. Ferguson](#) (July 18, 2025)
- [Becket’s motion for preliminary injunction in Etienne v. Ferguson](#) (June 5, 2025)
- [Becket’s complaint in Etienne v. Ferguson](#) (May 29, 2025)
- [Case page for Etienne v. Ferguson](#) (Images for media use, legal documents, videos)

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*Becket is a non-profit, public-interest law firm dedicated to protecting the free expression of all religious traditions and has a 100% win-rate before the United States Supreme Court. For over 30 years, it has successfully defended clients of all faiths, including **Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Native Americans, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians** (read more [here](#)).*

First Liberty Institute is a non-profit public interest law firm and the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.