



## Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 6, 2025

Contact: Ryan Colby  
E-mail: [media@becketfund.org](mailto:media@becketfund.org)  
Phone: 202-349-7219

Contact: John Manning  
E-mail: [media@firstliberty.org](mailto:media@firstliberty.org)  
Phone: 972-941-4453

## Catholic bishops ask court to quickly block unconstitutional Washington law breaking seal of confession

*Clergy are asking the federal district court to rule before law takes effect July 27*

**WASHINGTON** – The Catholic bishops of Washington [asked](#) a federal court late yesterday to block a new state law that forces priests to choose between breaking the sacred seal of confession or facing jail time before it takes effect on July 27. The law at issue in [Etienne v. Ferguson](#) requires clergy to report abuse if shared within the sacred confines of the confessional. WilmerHale and co-counsel Becket and First Liberty Institute represent Archbishop Paul Etienne, Bishop Thomas Daly, and Bishop Joseph Tyson who filed an [initial lawsuit](#) in federal court last week.

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 clergy but allows protections to remain in place for lawyers.

For hundreds of years, 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.

Washington's new law, slated to take effect on July 27, imposes 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 is 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.

A hearing in the case is likely to occur in the summer of 2025.

### Quotes for media use:

“Washington state has no business intruding into the confessional—particularly when they give a free pass to lawyers who have legally protected confidential relationships with clients,” **said Mark Rienzi, president and CEO of Becket.** “Punishing priests for following the Catholic Church’s millennia-old faith traditions isn’t just wrong, it’s unconstitutional.”



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“Confession is a sanctuary for the human soul and must be kept private not only because it’s a sacred duty of Catholic priests, but also to ensure the faithful are free to participate in this act of reconciliation with their God,” said **Jean Hill, Executive Director of the Washington State Catholic Conference**. “We are hopeful that the court will recognize the law not only punishes priests but sets a dangerous precedent that erodes trust in sacred practices for all faiths.”

“We are committed to protecting the sacrament of confession and believe the purposes of Washington’s mandatory reporting law can be achieved without infringing on the First Amendment rights of clergy,” 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](mailto:media@becketfund.org) or 202-349-7219 or John Manning at [media@firstliberty.org](mailto:media@firstliberty.org) or 972-941-4453.

### Additional Information:

- [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.