



Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 14, 2025

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Washington bishops defend seal of confession in federal court

Clergy ask federal district judge to block law targeting confession before July 27

WASHINGTON – The Catholic bishops of Washington state and a group of priests were in federal court today asking the court to block a new state law that forces priests to face jail time unless they break the sacred seal of confession. The law at issue in [Etienne v. Ferguson](#), set to take effect on July 27, requires clergy to report abuse if 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.

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 hundreds of years, the Catholic Church has upheld the belief that confession is holy and must stay private. During the sacrament of confession, the priest acts as the mediator between God and the penitent, which requires complete confidentiality from the priest so people feel comfortable repenting their sins. This absolute secrecy is known as the seal of confession, which 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, 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 long-standing Canon law. 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 Yakima and Spokane, 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.

Quotes for media use:

“Washington wants to force Catholic priests into an impossible choice between betraying their ancient faith practices or facing jail time,” said **Mark Rienzi, president and CEO of Becket**. “In a free nation like ours, no one should have to make that choice. We’re hopeful the court will block this draconian law and protect the sacredness of confession.”



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“Confession is a refuge for the human soul, where the faithful come to seek God’s mercy and forgiveness,” said **Jean Hill, Executive Director of the Washington State Catholic Conference**. “If priests face criminal sanctions for following their faith and refusing to break the seal of confession, it threatens the freedom of everyone to practice their faith without fear. We are hopeful that the court will protect religious freedom for all Washingtonians.”

“Religious liberty gives room for all faiths to thrive in our country, including protecting the Church, which is seeking a very narrow exception for the centuries-old Sacrament of Confession and otherwise supports the reporting law,” 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:

- [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.