



Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September X,
2025

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BREAKING: Washington withdraws attack on seal of confession

In landmark settlement, state says it will not force clergy to violate sacramental seal

WASHINGTON – The State of Washington agreed today not to force Catholic priests to violate the sacred seal of confession. The law at issue in [Etienne v. Ferguson](#) required priests to report information shared within the sacred confines of the Sacrament of Confession. A federal court [blocked](#) the unconstitutional law earlier this summer, just days before it was set to take effect on July 27. 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 the [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 Church originally supported the law's broader goal of strengthening protections for minors and asked only for a narrow exemption to protect the Sacrament of Confession.

For centuries, the Catholic Church has upheld the belief that confession is a sacred encounter between a repentant sinner and God, acting through the priest, and must remain confidential so as to encourage such repentance. 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 claimed the law was designed to protect minors, it permitted 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. That's why the Church supported the intent behind the law and objected only to one provision: the elimination of long-standing protections for the sacrament of confession. In every other setting, the Church has long supported—and continues to support—mandatory reporting.

Quotes for media use:

"Washington was wise to walk away from this draconian law and allow Catholic clergy to continue ministering to the faithful," said **Mark Rienzi, president and CEO of Becket**. "This is a victory for



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religious freedom and for common sense. Priests should never be forced to make the impossible choice of betraying their sacred vows or going to jail.”

“Preventing abuse and upholding the sacred seal of confession are not mutually exclusive—we can and must do both,” said **Jean Hill, Executive Director of the Washington State Catholic Conference**. “That’s why the Church supported the law’s goal from the beginning and only asked for a narrow exemption to protect the sacrament. We’re grateful the state ultimately recognized it can prevent abuse without forcing priests to violate their sacred vows.”

“It is a credit to the Attorney General of Washington, the Governor, and the Archbishop and Bishops that they were able to come together and find common ground under the First Amendment to protect religious liberty while seeking to eradicate the scourge of sexual abuse,” said **Hiram Sasser, Executive General Counsel for First Liberty Institute**. “I hope we can all learn from their noble examples.”

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:

- Settlement agreement in *Etienne v. Ferguson* (September, 2025)
- [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.