

Bishop Oscar Cantú's Statement on CA Confession Bill - SB 360

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Some of you may be aware that legislation has been proposed in California (SB360) that reaches deep into the most intimate elements of our sacramental practice – the “seal of confession.” This proposed legislation would require priests to break that seal. The seal of confession is inviolable in church law: a priest who violates the seal of confession by disclosing anything revealed during confession is automatically excommunicated. This is how seriously we take the matter. The church wants penitents to feel that nothing should come between the honesty of their soul and the abundant mercy of God.

The Church has provided many measures to keep our children safe, such as training for clergy, employees and lay volunteers; background checks; reporting to civil authorities when warranted; cooperating with state agencies, etc. We continue to be supportive of measures that help us to provide a safe environment for our children. SB360, however, is not a measure that would be productive; priests or lay persons who commit the crime of child abuse do not come to other priests in confession to reveal their crimes. There is no evidence that this has ever occurred. Moreover, this measure would chip away with government intrusion at one of the most sacred aspects of our Catholic faith and practice, the inviolable confidentiality between the penitent and God. Bishop Robert Barron goes into greater detail on the troubling nature of this proposed law in his video, which I recommend all to watch. Let’s keep protective measures to those that are actually productive and do not intrude into the sacramental structure of our faith.

Even with the proposed amendments, which limit the occasions to report when abuse is revealed from another priest or a church staff member – even in these limited occasions, I object to the proposed legislation, as it does not accomplish what it purports and sets a dangerous precedent of government intrusion in the free exercise of our Catholic faith. Priests should not be faced with the dilemma of being excommunicated or going to jail!

For over 800 years, leaders throughout the world have attempted to usurp this sacred placed for different reasons but wisdom prevailed to keep the state and church separate in this area. For over 200 years, U.S. law has respected the inviolability of the seal of confession. Let’s keep it sacred.

As the State Senate has already passed this bill, I ask that you help me raise these concerns to the State Assembly. Please contact your State Assembly Representative immediately and tell them to vote “No” on SB360. You can also make your voice heard through the Action Alert process of the Catholic Legislative Network at www.cacatholic.org.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. Be assured of my daily prayers for you and your families!

Oscar Cantú
Bishop, Diocese of San Jose