

Statement from Bishop Donald Bolen In response to the disclosure from a former St. Paul's High School student, who advised that he told of abuse by Rev. William (Hod) Marshall (when he taught at the Saskatoon school 1958-1961) to another priest in confession (as reported in the July 16 issue of The Saskatoon Star Phoenix):

I'm deeply saddened in hearing of the person's experience in the confessional after suffering the abuse. Ideally, the celebration of reconciliation is an encounter with the gentle mercy and forgiveness of God. We cannot know the intent of the priest, nor is it reasonable to judge the actions of someone 50 years ago with the criteria of our understanding of today. In the present context, we would say that what the priest should have done was to listen attentively, offer consolation, assure the person that this was not their fault, and then discern which of the following options is best: encourage the person to report what happened to the police (even indicating that if he was asked, outside of the sacrament, he would be willing to accompany the person to the police station); or invite the penitent to give him the information outside of the confessional, letting them know that they would then report the abuse to the police and the bishop. But the priest is not free to report the incident if he has only received the information within the sacramental celebration, nor (obviously) can he force the penitent to report the incident to parents or the police.

+Don Bolen

Further statements regarding a disclosure occurring in the confessional during the sacrament, and about the seal of confession:

Francis G. Morrissey, OMI, Catholic Canon Law expert:

Throughout the centuries, the Church has always given primacy to the respect of an individual's conscience. For this reason, it has imposed absolute secrecy relating to any matter revealed to a priest in the hearing of sacramental confessions. This is the one area in Church law where there are no exceptions. So, in other words, whatever a priest learns in confession, he does not know, nor can he act upon it externally, even if the existing civil law would not recognize this inviolable responsibility.

Priests have been put to death in the past for refusing to reveal sacramental material. Probably the best-known of these is St. John Nepumoceno, who is buried in the Cathedral in Prague, Czech Republic.

The existing canonical rules relating to the seal of confession were placed in legal form in AD 1234 (Pope Gregory IX); they were renewed by Pope Benedict XIV on July 7, 1745, and there has been no change in the legislation since that time.

Pressure to allow for one exception to the rule would mean that, if this were accepted, the seal would no longer be inviolable, and thus the sanctity of the sacrament would be dissipated. This would mean that the faithful would no longer feel secure in approaching a priest in confession.

It is a case of competing values, but the Church gives priority to individual conscience over social order since there are other ways of providing for good social order.

Fr. Stefano Penna, of Newman Theological College, speaking about some of the philosophical or theological and practical elements underlying the importance of the secrecy, and inviolable confidentiality of the Sacrament:

The Seal of the Sacrament is not about protecting people from facing the consequences of their sins; rather it is the mature development of at least fifteen hundred years of practice of how best to empower people - through an encounter with justice and mercy of God - to convert and in surrendering to the "mind of Christ" repair the hurt that they have done to the community. Catholics have a profound believe that all sin affects the community - it is not "between me and God".

We have discovered - and whole professions like law, medicine and counselling have learned from the experience of the Church because their early practitioners were in the main clerics - that the best context for people to actually feel free to admit to the truth of what they have done or has happened to them in their lives is one of utter security, safety and privacy. For the sake of this safe encounter, which to our understanding is a sacred event as a person in the depths of their soul meets with God, Catholic priests are bound by the most absolute Seal of Secrecy neither to divulge nor use any information obtained in the confessional. Priests have died rather than break this seal.

It is also to be remembered that because of the absolute seal of the Sacrament many, many victims of abuse (physical and sexual) actually find the necessary security to be able to talk about what has happened. So often victims live in fear of retribution or - because of a psychological inversion where they experience guilt - a fear of revelation. The Sacramental Seal allows a kind of conversation in which an able confessor is able to encourage and support a person who has so suffered to find ways of seeking help.

So what is the "ideal response of a priest to hearing in the confessional from a child that they have been sexually abused"? The priest should be willing to ask appropriate questions if he suspects that there is a situation of sexual abuse - often children give allusive or euphemistic indications of such an event. The priest must judiciously inquire without creating a false consciousness in the penitent.

If the priest is certain that such an abuse has occurred he must offer a calm and measured response that assures the victim of their complete innocence in this situation (they did not make x "do it"), that God utterly loves them, that this is not God's will, but rather that God wants anyone who has suffered this to be protected and that God and His Church want the person who perpetrates this to be stopped.

The priest can (I think must) speak to the child about there being people with whom it would be safe to talk about this - a teacher, another member of the clergy or parish team, etc. - and hopefully get them to articulate a concrete plan that they can follow. The priest cannot insist that they do something ... but a skilled confessor can certainly move a child along the way to approaching a safe intervener.

In an extreme case, the priest might make the offer to the child of asking the child to see him outside of the Sacrament, but when this happens he must make clear that there is not a celebration of the Sacrament going on and that the priest feels obligated to act upon any information that is received. The priest has to hear all the details again outside of the Sacrament

and can only act upon those issues he has heard in this context. This is not an ideal situation and the priest should only do this at the last instance.

When absolving the child the priest must make it completely clear that they have not sinned in this act committed on them.

The priest must pray fervently for this child ... but cannot directly or indirectly do anything about this ... for example, there can be no going and asking the teacher if they have talked to the child recently.