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The Seal of Confession

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The standard of secrecy protecting a confession outweighs any form of professional confidentiality or secrecy. When a person unburdens his soul and confesses his sins to a priest in the Sacrament of Penance, a very sacred trust is formed. While the priest is the minister of the sacrament, Christ is forgiving the sins, and the priest must not reveal to anyone else what has been really confessed to the Lord. Moreover, what sins are forgiven are now in one's past not to be carried into the present via some communication. Therefore, the priest must maintain absolute secrecy about anything that a person confesses. For this reason, confessionals were developed with screens to protect the anonymity of the penitent and to alleviate the possibility of the priest remembering a "face" with a confession. This secrecy is called "the sacramental seal," "the seal of the confessional," or "the seal of confession."

The sacramental seal is inviolable. Quoting Canon 983.1 of the Code of Canon Law, the Catechism states, "...It is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason" (No. 2490). A priest, therefore, cannot break the seal to save his own life, to protect his good name, to refute a false accusation, to save the life of another, to aid the course of justice (like reporting a crime), or to avert a public calamity. He cannot be compelled by law to disclose a person's confession or be bound by any oath he takes, e. g., as a witness in a court trial. A priest cannot reveal the contents of a confession either directly, by repeating the substance of what has been said, or indirectly, by some sign, suggestion, or action. "A Decree from the Holy Office" (Nov. 18, 1682) mandated that confessors are forbidden, even where there would be no revelation direct or indirect, to make any use of the knowledge obtained in the confession that would "displease" the penitent or reveal his identity.

Therefore, from the time a person makes the sign of the cross and begins "Bless me father for I have sinned" to the last words of absolution, the information exchanged between the priest and the penitent is protected by the sacramental seal. Even if a confession is made in a less formal atmosphere or in a less formal way, if a priest imparts absolution, what he absolves is under the sacramental seal never to be revealed by him.

(Just as an aside, a great movie which deals with this very topic is Alfred Hitchcock's "I Confess," which deals with a priest who hears a murder confession and then is framed for the murder. As a priest, I was in agony during much of the movie.) There are certain circumstances in which the priest would have to discuss the matter of a confession with another but would do so without revealing the identity of the person. For instance, some sins are so grievous that the priest must ask for permission from a superior to grant absolution. For example, if a person desecrates the Holy Eucharist in some sacrilegious act or just "throws away" the Holy Eucharist, he incurs an automatic excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See (Canon 1367); therefore, when this sin is confessed, a priest must inform the penitent that he must contact the Bishop, who would obtain from the Apostolic See the proper permission for the absolution of the sin and the lifting of the ban of excommunication. While keeping the seal of confession, some arrangement would have to be made for the penitent to return to the priest and receive absolution and the appropriate penance.

Or, if a priest needs guidance from a more experienced confessor to deal with a difficult case of conscience brought to him in confession, he first must ask the permission of the penitent to discuss the matter and make arrangements for another meeting. Here again, the priest must keep the identity of the person secret.

Sometimes a penitent wants to discuss the subject matter of a previous confession — a particular sin, fault, temptation, circumstance — in a counseling session or in a conversation with the same priest. Respecting the seal of confession, the priest would have to ask the penitent to refresh his memory, so as to revisit the particulars again outside of confession. For example, especially with the advent of "face-to-face confession," I have had individuals come up to me and say, "Father, remember that problem I spoke to you about in confession?" I have to say, "Please refresh my memory."

What happens if a priest violates the seal of confession? The Catechism (No. 1467) cites the Code of Canon Law (No. 1388.1) in addressing this issue, which states, “A confessor who directly violates the seal of confession incurs an automatic excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; if he does so only indirectly, he is to be punished in accord with the seriousness of the offense.” From the severity of the punishment, we can clearly see how sacred the sacramental seal of confession is in the eyes of the Church.

Actually, the Church’s position in this matter has long-standing credibility. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) produced one of the first comprehensive teachings concerning the Sacrament of Penance. Addressing various problems ranging from abuses to heretical stands against the sacrament, the council defended the sacrament itself, stipulated the need for the yearly sacramental confession of sins and reception of the Holy Eucharist, and imposed disciplinary measures upon priest confessors. The council decreed, “Let the confessor take absolute care not to betray the sinner through word or sign, or in any other way whatsoever. In case he needs expert advice he may seek it without, however, in any way indicating the person. For we decree that he who presumes to reveal a sin which has been manifested to him in the tribunal of penance is not only to be deposed from the priestly office, but also to be consigned to a closed monastery for perpetual penance.”

A beautiful story (perhaps embellished with time) which captures the reality of this topic is the life of St. John Nepomucene (1340-93), the vicar general to the Archbishop of Prague. King Wenceslaus IV, described as a vicious, young man who easily succumbed to rage and caprice, was highly suspicious of his wife, the Queen. St. John happened to be the Queen’s confessor. Although the king himself was unfaithful, he became increasingly jealous and suspicious of his wife, who was irreproachable in her conduct. Although Wenceslaus tortured St. John to force him to reveal the Queen’s confessions, he would not. In the end, St. John was thrown into the River Moldau and drowned on March 20, 1393.

Each priest realizes that he is the ordained mediator of a very sacred and precious sacrament. He knows that in the confessional, the penitent speaks not so much to him, but through him to the Lord. Therefore, humbled by his position, the priest knows that whatever is said in confession must remain secret at all costs.

Another interesting side to this question is the obligation of the laity to uphold the seal of confession: An interpreter needed for someone to make a confession or anyone who gains knowledge of a confession (such as overhearing someone’s confession) is also obligated to preserve secrecy (Code of Canon Law, No. 983.2). For such a person to violate the secrecy of another person’s confession is a mortal sin and warrants “a just penalty, not excluding excommunication” (No. 1388.2). Moreover, a person who falsely accuses a priest of breaking the seal of the confession incurs a mortal sin and perhaps other canonical penalties, including excommunication.

Clearly, the Church regards the seal of confession as sacred. Every person — whether priest or laity — must take the obligation to preserve the secrecy of confession absolutely seriously.