

### **Seal of Confession, McNamara, L.C. Zenit**

Q: Following a recent adult education class, a brother priest and I have been discussing a discrepancy in each of our understanding of the nature of the seal of confession as per Canon 983 and 984 of the 1983 code. Canon 983.1 says, "The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason." Canon 984.1 says, "A confessor is prohibited completely from using knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent even when any danger of revelation is excluded." Both of us were formed in seminaries known for orthodoxy, and both of us are determined to preach and practice in full fidelity with authentic Catholic teaching. The question is as follows: A "penitent" tells a priest in confession that he has poisoned the wine for Mass. The priest fails to successfully convince the malicious "penitent" to rectify the situation, thus leaving the confessor in the position to consume the poisoned wine and in some parishes even to administer it to the faithful. Is it permissible for the priest to use such knowledge gained in the confessional in order to change the course of events so that no one is poisoned by the wine, even if the penitent were in no way revealed? One argument is that the confessor's acting to change the wine by either dropping the cruet or simply pouring it out and refilling the cruet without anyone's knowledge does not constitute a violation of the seal, since he neither betrayed the "penitent" nor did anything detrimental to "penitent." The contrary argument is the confessor can in no way use the knowledge gained from the confessional, for the "penitent" would in fact know that the confessor had done so, which constitutes a betrayal of the "penitent" and is consequently detrimental. In fact, the confessor's action could render the sacrament of confession as odious to the "penitent" or lead the "penitent" to tell others that Father X has broken the seal, which would also render the sacrament odious. Extensive research into the question led me to find reputable priest-theologians and canonists who hold both positions, so we are no closer to an answer. Moreover, as far as I can find, the Holy See has never addressed the specific question at hand, and we have no idea where the scenario first was taken up. Admittedly, the likelihood of such a situation ever happening is miniscule, and the discussion is extremely casuistic. Nevertheless, the example is actually cited here and there -- even in seminaries -- to illustrate the absolute inviolability of the seal of confession and the obligations of priests relevant to the same. -- C.M., Camden, New Jersey

A: This classical conundrum of casuistry does tend to come up often as a kind of no-win scenario. The Holy See would probably never address such a situation, as it would give credence to speculation and might even induce some people to actually attempt to abuse the sacrament in this or other ways. Indeed, the first thing to note is that this is an abuse of the sacrament. A person in the situation described would be manifestly unrepentant and hence could not receive absolution even though the confessional seal applies, independent of absolution. In the present case there is no danger of the sacrament's becoming odious to the penitent, since he or she has already demonstrated total disrespect for the sacrament by an attempt to abuse the seal. It is also probable that the person needs professional help.

Another element that must be considered is the equivocal use of the word "betray" in the replies that our reader's research has discovered.

The "betrayal" (*prodere* in the Latin original) mentioned in the canon is something objective and external. That is, it means revealing the sin and the sinner, either directly or indirectly to other people.

The "betrayal" of the penitent mentioned in one of the replies is a subjective betrayal in the sense of disappointment, not living up to expectations, hurt feelings and the like.

Only the first meaning has bearing on the seal of confession. That the penitent might be understandably distraught at the priest's failure to drop dead on consuming the chalice has no bearing on the canonical question of violating the seal.

With this clarified, we can see that, provided the priest says nothing, changing the wine or breaking the cruet would in no way lead people to suspect either sin or sinner, and so is not really a violation of the seal. If asked, a priest can give a deliberately ambiguous answer such as "it needed changing," and his action would not lead to any revelation.

In some cases it could lead to a suspicion, especially if the person was seen going to confession and is known to be disturbed. A suspicion, however, is not a direct revelation, and there is nothing in the material act of changing the wine to justify such a suspicion.

Furthermore, the confessor (like every other person) has a duty to preserve his own life and health and that of others. This duty is certain and does not cease because he is a confessor. The alleged violation of the seal is dubious at best. Between a certain duty and a dubious one we should always follow what is certain.

It could be argued that this duty is non-existent if its fulfillment entailed perpetrating an intrinsically immoral act such as the direct or indirect violation of the seal of confession by culpable negligence. In the view of several eminent moralists, such culpable negligence could only occur if the priest were to speak about what he had done to others in such a way as to lead them to identify sin and sinner.

A further point would be that the priest would also know that the matter of the sacrament (of the Eucharist) had been adulterated and was probably no longer valid matter for the sacrifice of the Mass. Since he should never consciously celebrate an invalid Mass, the priest would also have a certain moral duty to replace the altar wine.

For all of these reasons, I would say that the priest in this very hypothetical case could, and indeed should, replace the wine while avoiding any words that might remotely lead to the revelation of sin and sinner.

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#### Follow-up: Degrees of Blessings

Pursuant to our May 14 comments on blessings at Mass, a reader queried: "With regard to a priest's blessing of sacramentals being 'permanent' and the varying degrees of blessings ... I brought a rosary to Mass so that our parish priest could bless it afterward, but he declined, saying that his final blessing was equal to any blessing he could perform again, and that my faith should allow me to believe that another blessing was not necessary. Since I am obedient to my parish priests, I believe him, and want my faith to be as simple and secure as he expects. Do you agree that the final blessing at Mass is 'good enough' to bless sacramentals, even if it was not my intention at the time it was offered?"

The short answer would be no.

The final blessing at Mass is an evocative blessing upon the persons who are present so that, in a way, they carry the fruits of the Mass away with them and into their daily lives. In the mind of the Church it is a blessing of persons and not objects.

When the Church desires to bless an object, it has proper rites for doing so. These are found in the Book of Blessings. Part III of this book, "Blessings of Articles Meant to Foster the Devotion of the Christian People," has a chapter dedicated to the blessing of rosaries with two formularies, depending on whether there are many or few rosaries to be blessed.

It is also possible, in special circumstances, for a priest or deacon to bless a rosary saying simply, "May this rosary and the one who uses it be blessed in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In other words, there is the need to specify what is being blessed. It is also noteworthy that although the rite for blessing rosaries foresees the possibility of a community celebration, it does not include a rite for blessing them within Mass.

An exception to this general rule would be that of papal blessings. At papal audiences it is formally announced that the Pope intends to bless any religious objects brought to the audience.

Even though there is no such announcement on other occasions, the Holy Father is well aware that many pilgrims can assist at only one papal event and that they also bring devotional objects to be blessed at the weekly Angelus and pontifical Masses. The blessing of such objects would thus be included in his intention at the moment of blessing.

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Readers may send questions to [liturgy@zenit.org](mailto:liturgy@zenit.org). Please put the word "Liturgy" in the subject field. The text should include your initials, your city and your state, province or country. Father McNamara can only answer a small selection of the great number of questions that arrive.