

Firstly, let me say unequivocally that I am as sickened and indeed angry as anyone about the horrible crimes that have rocked the Church I love, and as a priest I've been tarnished by association with them. We must do all we can to bring healing and justice to victims, accountability to perpetrators, and to enact reforms that will help the Church return to holiness. The problem is that the proposed legislation will not actually make young people any safer, and it may actually make things worse.

I suspect there's some wild fantasising about what goes on in the confessional in the popular imagination. The notion that criminals are all lining up to confess their sins is just silly (except perhaps occasionally when they're already in prison). And in the very rare instance that someone might confess a serious crime with true contrition, the confessional is perhaps the only place where they might be given serious counsel, including potentially being exhorted to turn themselves in. But of course, the likelihood that someone would confess a crime if they know the priest was required to report it to the authorities is virtually non-existent (just as no-one would hire a lawyer if they were compelled to betray their clients' confidence).

In any event, a penitent always has the option of confessing anonymously. Most of the time I have no idea whose confession I am hearing, either because I don't recognise them or because they are behind the screen. Indeed, I suspect one result of this sort of legislation would be that many parishes would likely phase out face-to-face confession altogether so as to protect the priest.

This kind of legislation is also unenforceable. Short of bugging confessionals, the only way to catch a priest in this would be to try to trap him with fake penitents armed with recording devices, which would be a particularly malicious course of action.

Aside from the Mass, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is probably my favourite thing about being a priest. There have been times when penitents have run out of tissues—the healing has been that powerful—and it's something I suspect non-Catholics can't fully appreciate. Furthermore, the healing that we Catholics believe takes place in this sacrament has eternal significance, and this far outweighs any this-worldly efforts at forcing priests to break the seal. As Pope Francis has said, the confessional seal is an "indispensable" part of the sacrament, allowing the penitent the freedom to be completely open to the supernatural mercy of Christ, and "no human power has—nor may it claim—jurisdiction over it."

We priests make solemn commitments before God, and I am much more concerned by how God will judge me than by how I am seen by the powers of this world. I would absolutely go to jail or face any other civil penalty before I broke the sacramental seal, and I suspect that all priests—regardless of their ideological persuasion—would say the same. Indeed, there have been a few priest saints over the centuries who have been martyred for their refusal to break the confessional seal. That said, I have no desire to be a martyr—figuratively or otherwise—and I pray that reasonable heads prevail in this matter, allowing civil and Church leaders to work collaboratively to ensure the safety of the young and the vulnerable in our community.

Fr Mark Baumgarten