

# THE SEAL OF CONFESSION

I think I remember what that is...



I'm sure Alaskans know more than most people about seals, but this one is out of the ordinary. The seal of confession is the name given to the rule that no information obtained within the confessional may be revealed outside of it. The name comes from the old-fashioned practice of sealing a letter with wax. When this was done, there was no way to know the contents of the letter without breaking the seal.

## What's the importance of the seal?

Confession is one of the few acts in the Church where the priest acts "*in persona christi capitis*", Latin for "in the person of Christ the Head", that is head of the body, which is the Church. This is the name given to special acts in which the priest is an instrument of divine power. It is the priest who says the words, but it is Christ who consecrates the Eucharist. It is the priest who hears the confession, but it is Christ who forgives sins. For this reason, what a priest hears in confession is not for him, or for anyone else, but for Jesus Christ alone.



## How seriously should we take this seal?



Deadly serious. In Canon Law, the Church has declared that any priest so craven as to break the seal of confession is by the very act itself excommunicated from the Church. The Church takes great care in guarding the private nature of confession as an act between sinner and savior. Since the 1800s, politicians in America have tried to pass laws to force priests to break this seal. Our bishops have responded with the words of the Apostles: "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29).

## But what about the most terrible sins?

Without the seal, those who commit even small but embarrassing sins, let alone grave crimes, may never confess them out of fear of revelation. Since there is no sin outside of Christ's mercy, this is intolerable. Part of perfect justice would be to submit oneself to the consequences of any offenses committed against others. However, even as penance, a priest cannot ask a penitent to reveal their sin. It must remain a personal choice.



Please pray for our priests, whom Jesus Christ has given to us for the forgiveness of sins!



Office of Faith and Family Formation