



March 23, 2023

Dear Chair Senn and Members of the Committee on Human Services, Youth, and Early Learning:

I am Bishop Frank Schuster, speaking on behalf of the five Catholic bishops who shepherd one million Catholics in our state. I urge you to pass SB 5280 as proposed, with no changes to eliminate or undermine the clergy-penitent privilege which has long existed under state law.

The Catholic Church acknowledges that wrongful acts of abuse have occurred to children under our watch. It is imperative that we continue to work so that needed healing and restoration from these offenses can be realized by these individuals.

The Catholic bishops of Washington also want to convey that we support the clergy reporting components of the underlying bill because we already consider clergy to be mandatory reporters at all times, in every setting but with one critical exception: during the sacrament of reconciliation, also known as confession. Let me explain:

- When the priest celebrates the sacrament of reconciliation, the priest is fulfilling the ministry of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep. Jesus commanded his apostles and their successors to do so because the forgiveness of sins is necessary for salvation.
- The seriousness of this sacrament prohibits priests from disclosing anything said in the confessional. If they do so, they are excommunicated. This penalty is enforced so that Catholics can confess their sins without fear.
- Preserving the seal of the confessional does not prevent a priest from promoting justice. In fact, confession is an opportunity to tell offenders to turn themselves in as a matter of restitution.
- It may interest you that in response to our tragic history of abuse in the past, the Catholic Church in the US established the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in 2002 (also known as the Dallas Charter). It is a comprehensive set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors and includes provisions for accountability, prevention of future acts, healing, and reconciliation. An outside consulting firm also collects data and performs on-site audits of dioceses and parishes.
- Our church today continues to do all we can to ensure that our schools, parishes and ministries are safe places for our children, their families, and everybody.

In conclusion,

- It has been stated, with no factual support, that an attack on the clergy-penitent privilege is necessary to make this bill “stronger.” On the contrary, any such amendment will accomplish nothing, and will only serve to undermine the freedom of religion.
- To be clear: Over history, priests have been martyred and imprisoned for refusing to break the seal of the confessional. For love of our people, we would never do it. For your part, any attempt

to harm the privacy and confidentiality of this sacrament would harm the very souls that public servants vow to protect.

- Please respect the constitutional right of Catholics in our state to come to confession and unburden their hearts without fear.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Frank Schuster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "F".

Most Rev. Frank Schuster  
Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle