

# THE SEAL OF CONFESSION

(a.k.a. "The Sacramental Seal" or "The Seal of the Confessional")

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0059.html>

When a person unburdens his soul and confesses his sins to a priest in the Sacrament of Penance, a very sacred trust is formed. 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. This secrecy is called "the sacramental seal," "the seal of the confessional," or "the seal of confession."

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 (for example, as a witness in a court trial).

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.

The Seal of Confession is taken so seriously that, according to the Catechism (the official Catholic book of teachings), a priest "who directly violates the seal of confession incurs an automatic excommunication". This means that the person has removed himself from the Catholic Church and can no longer receive any of the sacraments (except for the Sacrament of Confession).

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**A beautiful story (perhaps embellished with time) which captures the reality of the Seal of Confession is the life of **St. John Nepomucene (1340-93)**.**

King Wenceslaus IV, described as a vicious, young man who easily succumbed to rage, 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 actually innocent of any wrongdoing). Wenceslaus, as king, demanded that St. John break the sacramental seal. 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.

Similar stories abound, especially in the past century during the awful persecution of the Church under Communism and Nazism, where priests were tortured, imprisoned, and executed because they would not break the sacramental seal.