

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I write to you on a matter of great urgency. You may be aware that a bill has been introduced in the North Dakota Senate that would violate the religious rights of the faithful. **SB2180** imposes a reporting mandate on those who learn of abuse of a minor even in the context of spiritual advising. This would include every priest who hears confessions.

The Church condemns the abuse of minors by any person. Priests and deacons are already mandated reporters of any suspected abuse of a minor. Up until now, spiritual advising has been exempted from this mandate, but SB2180 would end this exemption.

This proposed law would require priests to violate the sacramental seal of confession under threat of imprisonment and fines. And of equal importance, it would violate the rights of all people of faith to practice their religion without government interference. Every penitent has the right to confess their sins anonymously in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the seal of confession is inviolable. No priest may reveal anything he hears in confession, and he may not identify any person who comes to Confession. SB2180 would violate that right of religious practice and undermine the confidentiality of these most personal and sacred encounters with God's mercy.

Not only is this proposed law a violation of religious liberty, but it is also inherently biased against religion. If it were not, then the sponsors would have included other such confidential relationships in the bill like the attorney-client privilege. Moreover, it sets a dangerous precedent for further incursions by civil authority into the spiritual lives and religious practice of all people of faith. Once this mandate of disclosure is imposed, others will surely follow. For centuries, tyrants have attempted to infiltrate the sanctity of the confessional for their own ends, and this is yet another attempt to violate the sacred confidentiality of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Please contact your state senator and tell him or her to vote **NO on SB2180**. You can contact your senator at the Senate Message Center, or by phone or mail. Please do this today so our lawmakers will understand that we expect them to protect the religious liberty that our Constitution guarantees. We all denounce the abuse of minors and are committed to preventing such abuse. But this bill is a grave assault on the religious rights of every citizen, and we must act to defeat it. Finally, let us pray for our elected officials that they will act with wisdom and prudence in representing us and acting for the common good.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+John T. Folda
Bishop of Fargo