

# Religious Freedom Week 2023

## Pray—Reflect—Act

June 23

**Pray** that governments would respect the seal of confession, as the Church in the United States continues to work to remove the scourge of clergy abuse.

### Reflect

The Sacrament of Reconciliation, sometimes called Confession or Penance, brings healing to damaged relationships. Different religions can have different versions of confession, because the practice addresses a basic human need to express regret and make restitution for wrongdoing. In the Catholic Church, Confession is an important sacrament. This is a sacred encounter between the penitent and the Lord who offers forgiveness and healing through the ministry of the priest. The Code of Canon Law forbids priests from divulging information received in confession. The penalty for a priest who directly violates the seal of confession is excommunication. The right to maintain the seal—or, clergy-penitent privilege—was upheld in what is possibly the first court case on the right to free exercise of religion in America, *People v. Philips*. Since the Philips case, clergy-penitent privilege has become recognized as a basic right. Today, protecting clergy-penitent privilege is still important. Some governments are seeking to revoke the privilege in the hopes of exposing crimes against children and vulnerable adults. Indeed, it is essential that, to the extent it can, the Church work with civil authorities to ensure that criminals are brought to justice and communities are kept safe. While a priest may not oblige a penitent to turn himself in as a condition for receiving absolution, priests can encourage the penitent to report crimes to the proper authorities, or the priest can ask the penitent to speak with him outside of the context of Confession. At the same time, the government has no right to encroach upon this sacred communication. Clergy-penitent privilege is the recognition of the proper relationship between church and state and the right to free exercise of religion, not only for Catholics, but for people of all faiths.

### Act

Make an act of reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the crimes committed by members of the Church against youth and vulnerable adults. While these attempted incursions on the seal of the confessional are misguided, they are often motivated by a desire to protect people from abuse. We share that desire to protect people, and we are sorrowful for these sins. Consider fasting from a meal or praying the Litany to the Sacred Heart, and offer up your sacrifice for those who have suffered abuse, praying as well for the renewal of the Church.

[www.usccb.org/ReligiousFreedomWeek!](http://www.usccb.org/ReligiousFreedomWeek!)

