

## Trump Administration Secures Injunction Against Washington Law on Priests' Confession Obligations

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A federal judge in Washington state has issued a preliminary injunction blocking a controversial law, SB 5375, which sought to compel Catholic priests to report child abuse or neglect disclosed during the sacrament of confession. The ruling follows intervention by

the Trump administration, which argued that the law infringes on First Amendment religious freedoms.

Three Catholic bishops filed a lawsuit challenging the law's requirement to extend mandatory abuse reporting to confessions, which the Church considers prohibited. The Church considers the "seal of confession" inviolable, with priests facing automatic excommunication for disclosing details of confessions, a penalty described as risking "eternal damnation" in court documents.

In a statement, Archbishop Paul D. Etienne of Seattle emphasised the sanctity of the confessional, citing Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." He stressed that Catholics should have confidence that their confessions remain "sacred, secure, confidential, and protected by the law of the Church."

The U.S. Department of Justice supported the bishops' case, arguing that SB 5375 "impairs priests' fundamental right to freely exercise their religion." U.S. District Judge David G. Estudillo, in his ruling on Friday, agreed, stating, "There is no question that SB 5375 burdens plaintiffs' free exercise of religion." He noted that the law places priests in an impossible position: violate their faith or break the law. Estudillo's injunction prevents the state from enforcing the confession-related provision of the law, pending further legal proceedings.

The judge highlighted inconsistencies in Washington's approach, pointing out that while SB 5375 removes exemptions for clergy, a separate law grants privileges to secular professionals, such as lawyers, when dealing with confidential client information. "The government interest protecting children from abuse and neglect is the same in both statutes," Estudillo wrote, questioning why clergy were denied exemptions afforded to others.

SB 5375, signed into law by Governor Bob Ferguson in May, is set to take effect on July 27. Ferguson, a Catholic who has attended confession, defended the legislation, stating he had "no hesitation" in signing it. As state attorney general, Ferguson has previously accused the Catholic Church of obstructing investigations into the misuse of charitable funds to conceal priestly sexual abuse. The law adds religious leaders to a list of mandatory reporters alongside teachers, doctors, and childcare providers who face criminal charges for failing to report suspected abuse or neglect.

. The Trump administration's involvement aligns with its intervention in the lawsuit and emphasis on defending religious liberties. Critics argue these actions reflect a selective approach to defining "child abuse," particularly about transgender rights and healthcare for minors.

Washington's Catholic leadership argued that the law unfairly targets their faith, a view echoed by the Justice Department, which labelled SB 5375 "anti-Catholic." The lawsuit also drew attention to exemptions granted to other professionals, underscoring what the plaintiffs see as unequal treatment.

The injunction does not affect other aspects of SB 5375, meaning clergy must still report abuse learned outside of confession, regardless of their authority over the perpetrator. The case remains active, with a final ruling pending, and Eastern Orthodox Christian leaders have filed a similar lawsuit, indicating broader religious concerns.

This ruling marks a significant moment in the tension between state efforts to protect vulnerable children and the constitutional protections afforded to religious practices. As the legal battle continues, it raises critical questions about balancing these competing interests in a diverse society.