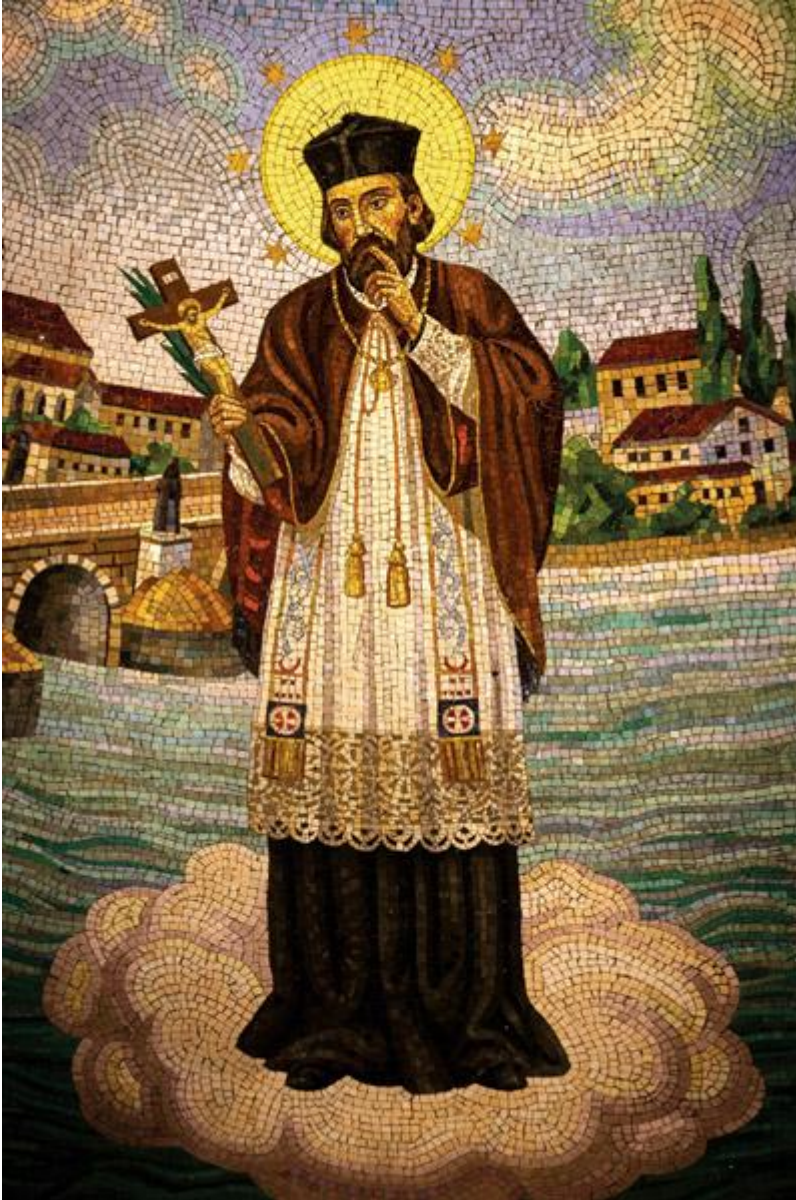


Priests have been martyred to uphold seal of confession

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



The **SEAL of CONFESSION**

Part 2 of 3

‘Dangerous’ California bill withdrawn on seal of confession

LOS ANGELES (CNS) — In a last-minute twist, a California bill that would have required priests to break the sacramental seal of confession was shelved by its sponsor amid a remarkable grassroots campaign mounted by the state’s Catholics, members of other faith groups and religious liberty advocates from across the country.

S.B. Bill 360 was withdrawn the day before a scheduled July 9 hearing in the California

Assembly Public Safety Committee, effectively removing it from any further consideration this year.

“S.B. 360 was a dangerous piece of legislation,” said Los Angeles Archbishop Jose H. Gomez, who had led the California bishops in opposing the bill.

Part 1: Vatican: Secrecy of confession must never be violated

NEW YORK — A symbol of the historical commitment priests have to the seal of confession greets people as they cross the threshold of a Catholic church in Manhattan’s Upper East Side.

Above the door is a stone-carved image of St. John Nepomucene holding two fingers to his lips, signifying that priests must never reveal what is said to them in the confessional, even if that means paying the ultimate sacrifice of death.

This church is named for St. John Nepomucene — considered the patron saint for the seal of confession — and it’s adorned with artwork that tells the story of this 14th-century Bohemian priest who chose death rather than reveal what was said during the sacrament of penance.

His story demonstrates how seriously the Catholic Church takes the privilege between priest and penitent that a member of the clergy is willing to sacrifice his freedom, or even his life, to protect the seal of confession, said Dominican Father Pius Pietrzyk, a canon and civil lawyer who teaches at St. Patrick’s Seminary and University in Menlo Park, Calif.

It also shows that the current struggle for the Church to have governments fully respect the sanctity of the seal of confession is not a new one, Father Pietrzyk told Catholic News Service in a May interview.

St. John Nepomucene was born sometime around 1340 and became a popular priest in what was then known as Bohemia. Ultimately, he was invited to be a confessor at the court of King Wenceslaus IV in Prague.

According to historical accounts, a jealous King Wenceslaus ordered John Nepomucene to tell him what his wife, Queen Johanna, revealed in the confessional and when he refused to break the seal of confession, the ruler made threats of torture and eventually had him bound and thrown off the Charles Bridge in Prague, where he drowned March 20, 1393.

Father John Nepomucene’s martyrdom for the seal of confession was accepted by the Church and he was canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1729.

“St. John Nepomucene is a symbol of what all priests know and that is the seal of confession is absolute and the privilege between priest and penitent must be absolute,” said Father Richard D. Baker, pastor of St. John Nepomucene Church in New York City. “What happens there never, never is repeated.”

Father Pietrzyk makes a point of sharing this chapter in Church history with the seminarians he teaches in his penance class at St. Patrick Seminary to help them understand why priests are willing to be martyred to protect the sanctity of confession.

The Code of Canon Law states the penalty for a priest who violates the seal of confession is automatic excommunication, which can only be lifted by the pope himself.

Though St. John Nepomucene is the most well-known martyr for the seal of confession, other priests throughout history were either jailed or condemned to death rather than reveal what was confessed in the sacrament of penance, including three in the 20th century.

St. Mateo Correa Magallanes, canonized by St. John Paul II in 2000, was shot to death in 1927 in Mexico after refusing the orders of Gen. Eulogio Ortiz to reveal the contents of the confessions of imprisoned members of an insurgency movement, the Cristeros.

He was joined by two Spanish priests — Blessed Felipe Ciscar Puig and Blessed Fernando Olmedo — both considered martyrs of the sacramental seal, executed in 1936 for refusing to reveal the contents of confessions of prisoners held during the Spanish Civil War.