

Seal of confession



Question: If a priest would consistently violate his vow of celibacy, even to the extent of abusing others, why should a penitent feel assured that a priest will not break the seal of confession?

– **Ed Siering**, Muscatine, Iowa

Answer: Absolute assurance that something will never happen is not available to us. However, of all the clerical misdeeds reported, the violation of the seal of the confessional is seldom, if ever, numbered among them. I cannot recall even one reported violation.

Your concerns are understandable. If a priest repeatedly violates his vows and promises, he engages not only in illicit sexual acts but sacrilege as well. Potentially, his willingness to violate one sacrament might lead to other abuses.

But in terms of the seal of confession, there is no evidence of this happening in any widespread way. Therefore it would seem that the faithful can be reasonably confident that even a sinful, struggling priest is able and willing to revere the seal.

Priestly titles

Question: I know of a priest who is the rector of a Catholic cathedral who uses the title “Very Reverend.” What is the protocol for such titles?

– **Name withheld** via email

Answer: Terms and titles such as “Very Reverend” usually indicate something of the role of the priest who bears it. The

rector of a cathedral may be one. Deans and other chancery officials such as the vicar general, judicial vicars, tribunal judges; priest-provincials of religious orders and priors of monasteries may also receive the title. The title denotes a priest who is more than a pastor and has some sort of jurisdiction beyond a parish.

Other titles such as “Monsignor” are merely honorific. A monsignor may or may not be a “Very Reverend.” The title “Monsignor” is usually conferred on priests who have served in some exemplary manner and the bishop wishes thus to honor him. Some of them may also be deans or chancery officials and go by the title, “Very Reverend Monsignor.” Others having this title but who do not have these roles go by the title “Reverend Monsignor.” The current pope has limited the bestowal of this honor to priests over age 65.

As far as protocol, the title “Very Reverend” is seldom used except in formal correspondence, such as formal letters. Most priests with this title are simply addressed as “Father” or “Monsignor” by their parishioners. As with most formalities, there is a time and place for them, but they are nothing to be fussy about.

Holy interpreter

Question: What does it mean that the Catechism calls the Holy Spirit the “interpreter of Scripture”?

– **Thomas Stillwater**, Cary, North Carolina

Answer: Well, of course, the best interpreter of a text is its author. And as the primary author who inspired and worked through the human authors, the Holy Spirit best interprets Scripture. However, to be clear, the Catechism does not teach that the Holy Spirit officially interprets Scripture in the individual. Private interpretation of Scripture apart from the Church is not taught. Rather the Church’s Magisterium applying

numerous rules of interpretation, as listed in the Catechism (Nos. 111-119), is the chief place the Holy Spirit supplies this interpretation.

Msgr. Charles Pope is the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian in Washington, D.C., and writes for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., blog at blog.adw.org. He is also the recent author of "[Catholic and Curious: Your Questions Answered](#)" (OSV, \$18.95). Send questions to msgrpope@osv.com.