SEAL OF CONFESSION
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The seal of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the longest standing and most sacred obligation of those who hear confessions, including non-clerical translators who may assist in the sacrament when there is a language or communication barrier. In brief the confessor is barred from indicating in any way such that another would then be able to surmise the identity of the penitent and the matter confessed (CIC #983). Nor may the confessor use any knowledge gained from confession in any manner that the penitent might find burdensome, including in future spiritual direction, without the express prior permission of the penitent (CIC #984-985). This seal is absolutely inviolable, and even if divulging confessional matter should be commanded by civil law any confessor who directly breaks the seal of confession is subject to a latae sententiae penalty of automatic excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See, and indirect or partial violations are subject to lesser penalties (CIC #1388). A confessor may seek counsel from another priest or canonical expert on how to handle a particular type of case, but must take great care in posing his questions that he not indirectly provide information that would allow the other person reasonably to guess the probable identity of the penitent.

Relevant canons from the 1983 Code of Canon Law:

#979: The priest in posing questions is to proceed with prudence and discretion, with attention to the condition and age of the penitent, and he is to refrain from asking the name of an accomplice.

#983 §1 The sacramental seal is inviolable; therefore, it is a crime for a confessor in any way to betray a penitent by word or in any other manner or for any reason.
§2. An interpreter, if there is one present, is also obliged to preserve the secret, and also all others to whom knowledge of sins from confession shall come in any way.

#984 §1. Even if every danger of revelation is excluded, a confessor is absolutely forbidden to use knowledge acquired from confession when it might harm the penitent.
§2. One who is placed in authority can in no way use for external governance knowledge about sins which he has received in confession at any time.

#985. A director of novices and his associate, the rector of a seminary or other institution of education are not to hear the sacramental confessions of their students living in the same house unless the students in particular cases spontaneously request it.

#1388 §1. A confessor who directly violates the seal of confession incurs an automatic (latae sententiae) excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See; if he does so only indirectly, he is to be punished in accord with the seriousness of the offense.
§2. An interpreter and other persons mentioned in can. 983 §2 who violate this secrecy are to be punished with a just penalty, not excluding excommunication.

See also the following canons for further information on the application of the various penalties: #1352, #1354
Key Latin Terms


Cum gravamine poenitentis (paenitentis)

Gravamen

Prodere peccatorem, Proditio peccatoris