

Safeguarding and the Seal of the Confessional

Confession *

It is possible that relevant information may be disclosed in the particular context of confession. It is in everyone's interest to recognise the distinction between what is heard in formal confession, however this might take place, which is made for the quieting of conscience and intended to lead to absolution, and disclosures made in pastoral situations. For this reason, it is helpful if confessions are normally heard at advertised times or by other arrangement or in some way differentiated from a general pastoral conversation or a meeting for spiritual direction. A stole might be worn and a liturgy should be used.

Canon Law constrains a priest from disclosing details of any crime or offence which is revealed in the course of formal confession; however, there is some doubt as to whether this absolute privilege is consistent with the civil law. Where a penitent's own behaviour is at issue, the priest should not only urge the person to report it to the police or the local authority children's social care, if that is appropriate, but may judge it necessary to withhold absolution. In such a case the priest may consider it necessary to alert the bishop to his or her decision in order to safeguard himself or herself and seek advice on the issues, though the penitent's details would not be shared without their permission. The priest might also judge it appropriate to encourage the penitent to speak personally to the bishop.

** from Protecting All God's Children, The Policy for Safeguarding Children in the Church of England 4th edition 2010 p35.*

GKJ/DSA April 2017