

SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH + YORKVILLE

May 5, 2024

Newsletter no. 216

In the past few weeks our lengthy discussion of the sacrament of reconciliation, commonly known as confession or penance, has focused on what the Code of Canon Law, the Church's legal compendium, has to say about this sacrament. With this newsletter we conclude our discussion by touching on one of the most important aspects of reconciliation—namely, secrecy, or what is usually referred to as the seal of confession. The two canons cited below (I mistakenly implied in the previous newsletter that there was only one) deal with this issue.

Canon 983,1-2: “The sacramental seal is inviolable: therefore, it is absolutely forbidden for a confessor [in other words, the priest] to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason. The interpreter, if there is one, and all others who in any way have knowledge of sins from confession, are also obliged to observe secrecy.”

Canon 984,1-2: “A confessor is prohibited completely from using knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent even when any danger of revelation is excluded. A person who has been placed in authority cannot use in any manner for external governance the knowledge about sins that he has received in confession at any time.”

These two canons make it clear that whatever is said in confession may under no circumstances be repeated to anyone outside of confession in such a way that a third party would be able to identify a particular sin with a particular penitent. This includes not only the priest but also anyone who serves as an interpreter for the penitent (if the penitent speaks a different language than the priest, or cannot speak at all—although in such cases an interpreter is not required, and neither party needs to understand the other!) and anyone who may happen to overhear a confession. According to canon 1388,1-2, a priest who betrays a penitent is automatically excommunicated, and his excommunication can only be lifted by the Holy See; likewise, anyone who has overheard a confession and who betrays the penitent is in danger of excommunication. While a priest may talk with others about confessions that he has heard, without revealing the identity of the penitents, he should do so only for a good reason—for example, when a priest is teaching seminarians about the sacrament of reconciliation and is discussing difficult cases—and never in such a way as to demean the sacrament. So strict is confessional secrecy that the penitent himself may only give permission to a priest to tell his sins to another person if his own identity is not revealed, and it is considered highly inappropriate for a priest to raise confessional matters with a penitent outside of confession.

Even if a priest does not reveal a penitent's sins to anyone else, he may not use the information that he has gained to hurt the penitent, especially if he is in a position of authority and could use that information against a penitent. In other words, he has to act toward the penitent as though he had never heard his confession.

The secrecy of the confessional, as described, is supposed to be maintained even in circumstances involving criminal acts. Thus, a priest may not give confessional information to the civil authorities. Although confessional secrecy has been contested both in some states in the United States and elsewhere, it is broadly honored in civil law.

The patron saint of the confessional secret is St. John of Nepomuc (or John Nepomucene) (c. 1350-1393), who served as a priest in the present-day Czech Republic. The details of his life are obscure. According to legend, however, he was the confessor of Queen Sophia of Bohemia and refused to reveal the contents of the queen's confessions to her husband, King Wenceslaus IV. In his anger at John's refusal, the king had him tortured and thrown off a bridge in Prague into the Vltava River. John was immediately acclaimed as a martyr; he is invoked as the patron not only of the seal of confession but also of bridges, as well as a protector against drowning. Of interest is the fact that for a while two nearby churches in close proximity to one another were named after him—St. John Nepomucene on 66th Street and First Avenue and St. John the Martyr, which no longer exists, on 72nd Street between Second and Third Avenues.

Next Sunday, May 12th, is Mother's Day and the beginning of our annual Mother's Day novena. Mothers, living and deceased, may be remembered at the altar during the novena. If you wish to have your mother remembered, you will find envelopes for that purpose located at the entrances of the church. Also, the crowning of Our Lady will take place at the 10:00 am Family Mass on Mother's Day, and the recent First Communicants from St. Joseph's Church and elsewhere are warmly invited to participate in the procession and the crowning.

Finally, this coming Thursday, May 9th, is Ascension Thursday. The Mass schedule is on the next page.

Father Boniface

Mass intentions for the period from May 4th to 12th

Saturday-Sunday, May 4th-5th

4:00 pm: Jimmy Quinn (D)
8:00 am: Megan, Matt, Sarah and Ryan (L)
10:00 am (German): Bernhard and Mitzi Purk (D)
12:00 noon: Giuseppe Cristofalo (D)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Peter Geosits (D)
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners

Monday, May 6th

7:00 am: John McFarland (D)
12:15 pm: John Diaz (D)

Tuesday, May 7th

7:00 am: Pablo Munarriz (D)
12:15 pm: In Thanksgiving to St. Joseph

Wednesday, May 8th

7:00 am:
12:15 pm: Juanita Thomas (D)
6:00 pm: Michael Glynn (D)

Thursday, May 9th (Feast of the Ascension of the Lord)

7:00 am: Agnes Hogan (D)
9:00 am (School Mass):
12:15 pm: Ruth Dearaujo (D)
6:00 pm:

Friday, May 10th

7:00 am: Maria Monika (L)
12:15 pm: Gloria O'Donnell (D)

Saturday May 11th

8:00 am:
12:15 pm: Elena Martinez (D)
4:00 pm: Thomas Bernardi (D)

Sunday, May 12th (Mother's Day)

8:00 am: Angela Bartholomeusz (D)
10:00 am: Michèle Classe (L)
12:00 noon: Rose and Frank Christoforo (D)
2:00 pm (Hungarian): Fodor Margit (D)
6:00 pm: St. Joseph's Parishioners