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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** February 4, 2020  
**TO:** All Clergy, Religious, Principals, Diocesan Staff and Religious Education Directors  
**FROM:** Bishop Oscar A. Solis  
**WHAT:** Bishop's Letter of Appeal to Oppose HB 90 Child Abuse Reporting Amendments and Letter Signature Campaign to our Legislators

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

There is a time when Catholics have to stand and speak for truth and our faith conviction. I am writing to you about a bill introduced in the Utah legislature, the HB 90 – Child Abuse Reporting Amendments. I ask all parishioners to help defend our religious rights and speak out our opposition against this bill that would take away the full right to confession from priests and other leaders of faith denominations, as well as break its sacred seal of confidentiality.

I do not question the good intentions of our legislators of wanting to prevent child sexual abuse and protect innocent and vulnerable children. However, there is no evidence that this legislation will help achieve that. Instead, it threatens a practice that is essential to our faith and religious identity. It is a government encroachment or intrusion into our religious practice.

The Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation (what we call “Confession”), is an important practice of our Catholic faith. The Bible records its divine origin. It was the first gift that Jesus gave to the world after rising from the dead. On the first Easter night, he breathed his Holy Spirit into his apostles, his first priests, and he granted them the awesome power to forgive sins in his name (*John 20:22-23*). Jesus gave us this gift so that we could always personally come to him, to confess our sins, and seek his forgiveness and the grace to continue on our Christian journey. The Sacrament of Confession is purely religious, and thus protected as one of our first freedoms in the Constitution.

For us Catholics, Confession like the other sacraments are channels of graces where we experience the loving and saving presence of God. In the confessional we can tell God before a priest, everything that is in our heart and seek his healing mercy. We express our sorrow for our sins and our sincere resolve not to commit these sins again; we accept the penance that is given to us; we receive spiritual guidance and encouragement; and through the ministry of the priest, Jesus speaks to us personally the consoling and saving words that set us free: “I absolve you of your sins.”

It is a great feeling to be able to speak to Jesus with total freedom and complete honesty. The privacy of that intimate conversation and our ability to speak with total honesty from our lips to God's ear, is absolutely vital to our relationship with God. Everything about this beautiful relationship depends on the divine assurance that what we say to Jesus in this sacrament will remain private and confidential.

Furthermore, a priest who hears confession is the sign and instrument of God's merciful love for us as sinners. He stands and exercises his ministry in the name of Christ. **The words he hears in the confessional are not spoken to him but as words addressed to God. Therefore, he takes seriously the sacred duty and obligation to protect its confidentiality and never to disclose what he hears in sacramental confession for any reason.**

In view of these, I find the HB 90 introduced in the Utah Legislature very troubling, as it would force a priest to reveal information he might hear in confession. Every priest knows the privilege to guide souls and grant forgiveness in God's name and the sacred trust to protect the confessional seal. That is why since it was instituted by Jesus, priests have chosen to suffer, get imprisoned and even die rather than betray the confidentiality of what they hear in confession.

For the past several decades, our Church in the United States has suffered and grappled with the horrific scandal of sexual abuse of minors. It is a horrible sin and a crime that afflicts churches and every area of our society which we must prevent from happening. Since the eruption of the scandal, our Church has taken actions to work, protect and report by putting up Safeguard the Children programs.

We put in place stringent measures and implemented policies to keep children safe. Priests, ministers and workers and adult volunteers who have regular contact with children, are trained in abuse prevention and reporting. Each year, students in our Catholic schools and parish religious education programs are taught boundary awareness and tools for reporting. We also follow strict protocols for handling allegations and are required to report cases of sexual abuse that we suspect or received. **All allegations of child abuse are taken seriously, and immediately reported to law enforcement, and we fully cooperate in the investigation.** Any accused clergy is immediately removed from ministry pending investigation while an Independent Lay Review Board reviews the reported allegations. Our Church remains vigilant in protecting children, commits to helping all victim-survivors find healing, and implements a Zero Tolerance policy against perpetrators.

HB 90 is not only a mortal threat to our religious freedom but has no clear evidence that it will protect children. Rather, it will discourage perpetrators from exercising their religious faith and receiving the grace of God they need in order to face the consequences of their wrongful acts.

This is why I am urging you today to write to our legislators and made them know where we stand. We continue to seek effective ways to fight the scourge of child sexual abuse in our church and maintain our commitment to build a society where every child is loved, protected and safe. But we cannot allow the government to enter into our confessionals to dictate the terms of our personal relationship with Jesus. Unfortunately, that is what this legislation would do. We need your help to protect this sacrament of the Church and keep confession sacred.