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A priest hears a young man's confession at Toronto's Coronation Park during World Youth Day 2002. Some state legislatures are introducing bills that would force priests to divulge the content of confessions if they relate to the sexual abuse of minors.

Private confession?

Some states want priests to violate confessions' seal

WASHINGTON — The clergy sex-abuse crisis in the U.S. Catholic Church has sparked a variety of state legislative initiatives to strengthen child-abuse laws, including efforts in five states to force a priest to violate the seal of confession if he learns about abuse of a child during a sacramental confession.

Legislatures in Maryland and Kentucky have rebuffed those attempts, but in early March new bills were introduced in Nevada and Florida. A New Hamp-

shire bill introduced in January was due to be reported out of committee in late March.

"This is of great concern to us," D. Michael McCarron, the Florida Catholic Conference's executive director, said March 5 of bill H1321, filed in the Florida House the previous day.

"As it's written now, it will eliminate the clergy confidentiality privilege and thereby directly impact the seal of confession in the sacrament of reconciliation," he told Catholic News Service.

Church law says if a priest directly violates the seal of confession — revealing something said in confession in a way that

the penitent is or can be identified — he is automatically excommunicated.

Even an indirect violation — when there is simply a risk that something revealed about a confession could lead another person to recognize the identity of the penitent and his sin — is a church crime to be punished by penalties commensurate with the seriousness of the violation.

In Maryland, Cardinals William F. Keeler of Baltimore and Theodore E. McCarrick of Washington — whose archdiocese includes five Maryland counties — promised to go to jail rather than obey a

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Story and photos by Catholic News Service

