

Instruction of the Holy Office, June 9, 1915

An Instruction of the Holy Office, sent to the Ordinaries of places and to the General Superiors of religious Orders, is as follows:

That the natural and divine law of the sacramental seal has always and everywhere in the Church of Christ been most faithfully kept, not even the bitterest enemies of sacramental confession have ever been able seriously to question. And beyond a doubt this is to be attributed to the most provident design of the Almighty, who, in mercifully offering sacramental confession to men as a “second plank after the shipwreck of the loss of grace,” has deigned to keep far from it every ground of offense.

Yet there are sometimes found ministers of this salutary sacrament who, though they keep silence about anything that might in any way betray the person of the penitent, yet are not ashamed rashly to speak, in private conversation or in public sermons, for the edification of their hearers, as they say, of matters which have been submitted to the power of the keys in sacramental confession. Now, since in a matter of such gravity and importance not only a perfect and consummated injury but every appearance and suspicion of injury must be studiously avoided, everyone must see how thoroughly such a practice is to be condemned. For, even though it be done without substantial violation of the sacramental secret, it cannot fail to offend the ears of pious listeners and to produce in their hearts uneasiness and diminished confidence – a thing which is surely entirely foreign to the nature of this sacrament, through which the most merciful Lord, *by the pardon of His loving mercy, entirely wipes away and quite forgets the sins which through human weakness we have committed.*

In consideration of these facts, this Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office deems it its duty to give all Ordinaries of places and Superiors of regular Orders and of all religious institutes, a command in the Lord, gravely binding in conscience, that if they find such abuses anywhere, they take measures promptly and efficaciously to repress them; and that in future, not only in theological classes but also in conferences on moral “cases” as they are called, and in public and private talks and exhortations to the clergy, they carefully see to it that the priests subject to them be taught never to dare mention anything which pertains to the matter of sacramental confession in any form or under any pretext, especially on the occasion of sacred missions or spiritual exercises, nor even incidentally, directly or indirectly, in public or private speech (excepting the case of necessary consultation to be made according to the rules laid down by approved authors); and that they give orders that their subjects be examined specially in this matter in the tests which are given them to determine their ability to hear confessions.

The Sacred Congregation is confident that no confessor will transgress these prescriptions. If the event prove otherwise, the aforesaid Ordinaries and Superiors must seriously warn the transgressors, punish with suitable penalties those who repeat the offense, and in more serious cases refer the matter as soon as possible to this Sacred Tribunal.

Given at Rome, from the palace of the Holy Office, on the 9th day of June, 1915.