

The Index Indexed

Obsolete institutions of the Roman Catholic Church, like old sacristans, do not die; they merely fade away. The latest such anachronism to drift into disuse is the Index of Prohibited Books—some 6,000 immoral or heretical works that Catholics have been forbidden to read under pain of sin. Last week Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviana, whose Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is responsible for deciding which books to condemn, announced that the Index would never again be updated or reprinted, and will henceforth serve merely "as a historic document."

Matter of Conscience. The Index is a product of the Council of Trent's counter-reforming zeal to protect Catholics against Protestant error. The first Index was published in 1559; it gradually grew into an impressive reader's non-guide to literature that might endanger faith or morals. By the 18th century, it was something of a sign of excellence to be listed; among the condemned classics of the Index are Montaigne's *Essays*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, and the works of Descartes, Hume, Hobbes and Voltaire.

Rome's Indexers gradually found it impossible to keep pace with the modern world's publication explosion, and recent condemnations seem rather arbitrary. In 1948, the works of Jean-Paul Sartre were condemned for their existential atheism, and in 1952 those of André Gide for immorality. Oddly enough, neither Karl Marx nor Henry Miller have ever been indexed, although their writings were presumably forbidden for Catholics under a provision of canon law that automatically condemns Communist or pornographic books. Last reprinted in 1948, the Index has not had a new entry since 1961, when Rome banned a life of Christ by the late French Biblical scholar, Abbé Jean Steinmann.

Dead Letter. In theory, the penalty for reading indexed books is extremely severe; for works written by known heretics, the punishment is excommunication that can be lifted only by appeal to Rome. In recent times, this solemn sentence has not been imposed, largely because the Index itself has become one of the world's rarest books. Even many Catholic college libraries do not have a copy. While schools often go through the motions of getting official permission for their students to read forbidden books for classwork, most Catholics regard the Index as a dead letter and read what they want.

In the future, what Catholics should and should not read will be left to their individual consciences, although national conferences of bishops, said Ottaviana, will be empowered to issue warnings—as distinct from bans—against specific books. The cardinal thought that such warnings would be rare.

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