

## THE SACRED CONGREGATION OF THE INDEX.



OUR world is so much the sport of a multitude of dangers that warning signs are in demand at every step. Along railway routes one meets "crossings," the purpose and necessity of which are evident. Travellers by water welcome the lighthouse that prevents disaster to life and property. Innocent looking drugs are carefully marked "Poison" to guard unwary mortals from untimely graves. Prisoners are branded and given a distinctive dress as a protection for civil society against the worst class of citizens. So is it in the Church of God. She suffers, perhaps, more than any human society from dangers incidental to her scope and constitution, and needs protection against them. The most formidable enemies have continually endeavoured to crush or cripple her. To survive their attacks she was forced to adopt adequate means of defence. The struggle gave rise to different powerful organizations, and among them the Roman Congregations. Of the latter one of the best known is certainly the Sacred Congregation of the Index. To writers of books, as well as to readers, this establishment stands forth an unmistakable danger-signal.

The art of writing, by the facilities it affords for the treasuring and spread of knowledge, has rendered invaluable services to humanity. Unhappily it has also often been a fruitful source of harm. Its destructive influences as well as the efforts made to check them, date from an early period. It is claimed that the works of Pythagoras were burned on account of their atheistical tendencies. That such an event could happen even among the lax pagans, the sad fate of a no less renowned philosopher, Socrates, proves beyond cavil. Venturing to teach things not in line with popular superstition and accused of corrupting by his teaching the Athenian youth, he was put to death.

The Roman emperor, Diocletian, deeming it not sufficient to persecute the Christians by tortures and martyrdom, also condemned their books to the flames. In the light of these and innumerable other similar facts, it is not surprising that immoral and irreligious literature could expect little mercy from a divinely-instituted society to whose heaven-taught and living body of religious truths it was in direct opposition. Hence the Church has ever been severe in matters of this kind, and in virtue of one of the essential duties of her mission adopted even apparently harsh measures to remove the curse of bad literature from amongst her children. In the New Testament is an instance of some bad books destroyed by the converts of St. Paul at Ephesus. The works of Arius in the fourth century were condemned to a similar fate. The popes, forced by their position to assume the lead, continued to exhort the episcopate and the whole body of the faithful to be on their guard against heretical writings. But the evil swelled to uncontrollable proportions with the advent of the printing press and the so-called Reformation. The press lent itself to every species of imposture. The Council of Trent endeavoured to find a suitable remedy. A committee of its members was set to work, but such was the number of books in publication, that the Council did not see the possibility of itself deciding on any definite measures. In consequence it handed its labors over to Paul IV., then Pope, under whose direction and approval a list or Index of Prohibited Books was shortly afterwards prepared and published. The committee, though temporary, had been of great service. Pius V., successor to Paul IV., replaced it by a permanent board of ecclesiastics, whose sole business it was to correct the Index and bring it down to date. This body received the name of the Congregation of the Index; its powers, extended by Sixtus V., were confirmed by Benedict XIV.