

THE NEW ZEALAND TABLET

'To promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.'

LEO XIII. to the N.Z. TABLET.

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CATHOLICS AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES.



THE whole question of the duties and responsibilities of the committees of our public libraries has been raised by a warm controversy—now concluded—which for a brief space bubbled and flowed like a geyser in the columns of the *Westport Times*. The question is of deep practical interest to a far wider public than those who are resident in the cosy western port. The whole subject is dominated by the fact that the Westport public library, like other institutes of a similar nature throughout the Colony, is supported by public funds: its revenue is derived from three sources—(1) direct local taxation, (2) Government grants, and (3) the fees paid by subscribers. This dominant fact seems to have been ignored or lost sight of in the heated discussion which frizzled the fourth page of successive issues of the *Westport Times*. A Catholic writer pleaded with considerable dialectic skill for the exclusion of publications of an immoral or rabidly anti-Catholic character. Two ultra-Protestant opponents stoutly contended for wholesale license to the individual in the matter of reading, and directly or in effect maintained the principle that it is the duty of the committees of public libraries to cater indiscriminately for every taste—the bad and the utterly depraved as well as the indifferent and the good.

That Index.

It was stated, with more of heat than of knowledge that the principle of safeguarding or restricting the purveying and perusal of reading matter was one of those exploded ideas peculiar to the Church of Rome from which the world was (we are assured) happily freed by the leaders of the great religious revolution of the sixteenth century. And the word 'Index' was gaily bandied about by persons who probably could not, to save their more or less valuable lives, repeat even the substance of the wise and prudent rules—whether old or revised—of that useful and venerable institution. Nothing could be farther from the truth than to hint or assert that the censorship of books was peculiar to the Catholic Church. By the nature of things it could not well be so. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, pagans, have alike recognised the fact that indiscriminate reading may be a grave moral danger to the individual and a menace to the well-being, and even the stability, of the State. The censorship has been—more especially in Protestant countries at certain periods—strained beyond the bounds of right and justice. But the abuse of a sound principle is no argument against its right use. The need of such censorship has never been lost sight of either by Church or sect or civil government. And it is in full operation even at this hour.

Jews and Others.

Among the Jews, long before the Christian era, no person was allowed to read the Canticle or Song of SOLOMON—although it was recognised as a portion of the Sacred Writings—until he had attained his thirtieth year. Even pagan Greece and Rome recognised the fact that a deadly poison may lurk in books. The Senate of Athens, for instance, ordered the books of PROTAGORAS to be destroyed by fire. Those of EPICURUS were also publicly burned as being inimical to good morals. The books of ARCHILOCHUS were publicly condemned at Sparta, and the perusal of them made an offence punishable by law. In Rome, AUGUSTUS had over two thousand seditious tracts destroyed by fire. He

banished the sensual and cringing OVID beyond the seas, and forbade the reading of his *Art of Love*. And sundry tracts that anticipated MACHIAVELLI and MAZZINI by advocating political assassination were destroyed by order of TIBERIUS and DOMITIAN. Briefly, the pagans of ancient days recognised the urgent need of protecting the public from books that incite citizens to sedition, corrupt the heart, or sap the foundations of morality.

Christian Censorship.

The higher moral code of the Christian Church would naturally imply a more watchful care over everything that could degrade the hearts of her children. A censorship over writings is implied in several of St. PAUL's epistles—as, for instance, *Rom.*, xvi., 17; *I Tim.*, vi., 20; *II. Tim.*, ii., 16. And in the nineteenth chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles* it is recorded that the converts at Ephesus voluntarily brought their books of magic—valued at 50,000 pieces of silver—to St. PAUL, and flung them into the flames. The introduction of the art of printing—the invention, by the way, of Catholic brains and hands—greatly enlarged the sphere of the old dangers from bad reading and led to the appointment of official censors, the system of licensing and *imprimaturs*, and finally to the formation of the Congregation of the Index by Pope St. PRUS V. The Reformers—who severely limited to their own persons what was called the 'right' of private judgment—exercised a strict surveillance over the reading matter of their adherents. The Reformation period was marked in Germany, and to a vastly greater extent in England, Scotland, and Ireland, by the destruction or dispersion of enormous literary treasures, the loss of which is irreparable. LUTHER—some of whose books are of a very gross nature—vigorously denounced the works of JUVENAL, MARTIAL, CATULLUS and VIRGIL. Under the Puritan régime the inquisition into books reached a degree of searching severity—not to say ferocity—such as was probably never known at any other period in history. It extended not merely to doctrinal works, but to poetry, plays, songs, ballads, etc. Many of the most beautiful and innocuous treasures of English literature were placed under a ruthless ban by those stern, hard-visaged old Puritans who made even the social and domestic life of their day intolerable by their harsh prohibition of games and sports and their far-reaching intermeddling with the cut of women's caps, petticoats, and aprons, and modes of arranging the hair. In Ireland, during the penal days, the possession of an old book or manuscript by a Catholic was a high crime. The ownership of a book of Catholic liturgy might have been 'a hanging matter.' So ruthlessly was the campaign against reading pushed in Ireland that a price of £10 was placed upon the head of a Catholic schoolmaster, and the professional priest-hunter was scarcely less eager on the scent of the pedagogue than upon that of the higher-priced but better-guarded clerical quarry.

A censorship over books is exercised to the present day by practically every Protestant denomination. In 1896 a High Church publication now before us, and entitled *The Catholic Religion*, was boycotted by the Anglican Diocesan Library in Melbourne. The reading of a large class of books is strictly forbidden by the *Larger Catechism* of the Presbyterians (Q. 139). And books and other printed matter are to this day—as in the case of Dr. BRIGGS—important witnesses in the heresy trials which take place from time to time in the various Presbyterian denominations. If any of our readers is curious to know the extent to which the censorship of books is to this hour a living reality in any Protestant denomination he has only to offer a few dozen copies of *Catholic Belief* or *Faith of Our Fathers* to one of its clergymen for distribution to the children attending his Sunday school.

Civil Governments.

Nor are the Churches alone in their campaign against the principle of indiscriminate reading. The Governments of every civilised country have stringent laws framed against the publication of books that are inimical to good morals or social order. The Belgian Government, for instance, suppressed all the railway bookstalls in the country, because it was found difficult to prevent them becoming so many marts for the circulation of French pornographic literature of

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