

In December, 1938, the Catholic Bishops of the United States created The National Organization For Decent Literature—the hierarchy changed the title to “Office” in 1955—“to set in motion the moral forces of the entire country ... against the lascivious type of literature which threatens moral, social and national life.” Fort Wayne Archbishop John Francis Noll spearheaded the group’s initial efforts, which focused solely upon the magazine industry. According to Paul Blanshard, in its first year alone, NODL’s exclusively clerical staff drove 27 publications out of business.³ But despite this instant success, no one seemed to take note of the Office until it had operated for ten years.

In 1947, NODL expanded its function and began to evaluate the comics and paperbacks which first appeared in 1939. Noll continued as NODL’s leader and directed a staff of 79 priests who served as “diocesan watchdogs.”⁴ But the Office became much more active in the early fifties after Pittsburgh Bishop John J. Deardea became its figurehead leader,⁵ and Monsignor Thomas J. Fitzgerald took over as executive secretary and effectual leader. By the time NODL established its national Chicago office in April, 1955,⁶ Catholic housewives formed the core of the organization’s now chiefly volunteer staff.

The volunteers’ primary function was to help compile the list of disapproved titles. To evaluate comic books, the Office divided 150 mothers into groups of five.⁷ When four of the five declared a publication to be “objectionable,” NODL placed that title on its blacklist. To judge magazines and paperbacks, one “qualified” man or woman would mark any questionable passage for later review by a committee of five. Before the Office labeled any title “objectionable,” all six reviewers had to agree that it violated a plank in the NODL code:

Publications listed as objectionable are those which:

- 1) glorify crime or the criminal;
- 2) Describe in detail ways to commit criminal acts.
- 3) Hold lawful authority in disrespect.
- 4) Exploit horror, cruelty or violence.
- 5) Portray sex facts offensively.
- 6) Feature indecent, lewd or suggestive photographs or illustrations.
- 7) Carry advertising which is offensive in content or advertise products which may lead to physical or moral harm.
- 8) Use blasphemous, profane or obscene speech indiscriminately and repeatedly.
- 9) Hold up to ridicule any national, religious or racial group.⁸

Each month, NODL compiled their reviewers’ recommendations and mailed its lists to as many as 15,000 unsolicited subscribers.⁹