

Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston

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Archdiocese of St. Louis

THE noncurrent records of the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston are kept in the Chancery, at Brighton, Massachusetts, a fire-proof building erected in 1927 to house the offices of the Archdiocese.¹ The records occupy about half of the basement floor, walled off and secured by a fireproof steel door. This enclosure is subdivided by a steel-wire partition and another locked door, which cut off the archives proper from the record center. Keys to both the inner and the outer doors are kept by the archivist, Msgr. Francis J. Sexton.

The archival section is approximately 38 by 46 feet, with a concrete floor, brick walls, and plastered ceiling. One radiator for heating is suspended from the ceiling and is not close to any records. Both temperature and humidity are controlled by Baker Ice Machine equipment that has been in satisfactory operation for about 10 years. Because of the air-conditioning equipment the half-dozen opaque windows are never opened.

Most of the correspondence and other papers are in steel filing cabinets although some wooden cabinets are still in use, and there is some open-face, adjustable steel shelving near, but not against, two walls of the room. Steel cabinets are used for filing cards of various sizes.

The time when records are transferred to the repository varies according to their type. For instance, copies of pastoral letters of the Archbishop are sent there almost immediately, but the personal records of clergymen are not transferred until some time after their deaths. The records have always been retained and controlled by the archdiocese, and no schedule for disposing of any of them has been prepared. The decision to retain or dispose of particular papers is made by the archivist as the occasion arises. Space is not yet a pressing problem, for the archives, though comfortably filled, is not crowded. Under the supervision of Msgr. Sexton one full-

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time employee is at work in the archives — a graduate of Radcliffe College in history.

The archival holdings are of four general classes: (1) loose records, including correspondence, reports, and information submitted or compiled on cards; (2) record books, of original entry, such as the nineteenth-century baptismal registers of some archdiocesan parishes; (3) indexes to original entry books that are still retained by parishes and a long series of bound handwritten indexes to nineteenth-century issues of the *Pilot*; and (4) published works, some of which are regarded as archives because of their rarity and antiquity. An instance of the last class is a series of the *Official Catholic Directory* and its nineteenth-century predecessors. One section of shelving holds printed copies of the rules and constitutions of various religious orders and congregations functioning in the archdiocese; these are certainly archival materials. More in the nature of reference works are Boston city directories from 1900 to the present, and the issues of *Annuario Pontificio*. The latter is a catalog of the Catholic hierarchy throughout the world, while the *Catholic Directory* lists clergy, parishes, and organizations in North America principally. All these volumes are on open shelving in the record center, outside of the archives proper.

A guide to the holdings of the archives has been posted in the room. The titles suffice for those acquainted with the archives but would have little meaning if transcribed without explanation. A description of the collections within the four general classes will be more illuminating.

First among what has been termed loose records are the files of individual parishes. These are arranged in three chronological periods — 1909-40, 1941-50, and 1951-56; the year 1956 is the latest year for which noncurrent parish records have been transferred to the archives. Within each period the files are arranged alphabetically by name of town and thereunder alphabetically by name of parish. No card index is maintained, as the arrangement is in itself a sufficient finding aid. These parish files are in six 5-drawer letter-size cabinets, of which 27 drawers are now in use.

Six more cabinets of the same size and kind are in the same row. The manuscripts in all of them are under the nebulous classification "miscellaneous" and are arranged chronologically by decade and then alphabetically within each decade. These files antedate the incumbent archivist, and no plan has thus far been devised for classifying their contents more specifically.

Two 5-drawer cabinets are taken up with the files of individual priests of the archdiocese; these are alphabetically arranged by name of priest, and no card index is necessary. The files of priests not of the Archdiocese of Boston, however, are in a separate section; and in still another section are the files of clerics who were not priests.

Another cabinet contains correspondence with other dioceses and archdioceses in the United States. The correspondence of earlier date than 1950 has been kept distinct from the more recent letters. Still another row of drawers holds correspondence with institutions, such as hospitals, colleges, and orphanages. Because statistical compilations have been made from these records, almost all of them may ultimately be destroyed.

Two 5-drawer cabinets are filled with the correspondence of the late William Cardinal O'Connell — original incoming letters and copies of outgoing letters. A cursory inspection has revealed that much of this correspondence could be disposed of now because it is routine in nature. But apparently no action will be taken until a longer period of time has elapsed after the Cardinal's death.

In the same row with the foregoing are three more cabinets of the same capacity. These are labeled "Miscellaneous," and apparently the title is good even though the arrangement is not. The material in these files antedates the present archivist and his assistant. Inspection of the contents has been begun, and a more informative label may at least be expected soon.

Dispensations and correspondence relating to the relaxation of the general laws of the Church in particular circumstances take up six 5-drawer files. Apparently a 30-year disposal schedule is being followed for these records, which chiefly concern routine matters. Were the archives pressed for space, this material would be ideal for microfilming. The relative inconvenience of using microfilm would not be a great handicap considering the infrequency of reference.

About 15 file cabinets are taken up by correspondence and other records relating to cemeteries, seminaries (both of the archdiocese and of religious congregations), wills that have been closed, and copies of circular letters from the chancery office to parishes, clergy, and institutions. Within these classifications the records are arranged in chronological order. Accelerated disposal schedules could be applied to this section without loss of content value and would result in a significant saving in space.

For all the other files inspected, the same system has been followed as for those discussed above. For the sake of completeness these will be enumerated, together with figures on the amount of

space taken up by the individual subjects. Permissions to publish books and other printed material nearly fill one 5-drawer cabinet. Correspondence with the various offices of the Holy See in Vatican City occupies about the same amount of space. Testimonial letters, usually for religious, also take up a cabinet, as do the forms and correspondence relating to the appointment of confessors, chiefly for religious communities. In another 5-drawer cabinet are the topics for the periodic conferences of the clergy of the archdiocese and material pertaining to examinations of the junior clergy.

In other cabinets separate drawers contain such material as correspondence in regard to the incardination and excardination of clerics, letters concerning externs who formerly worked in the Archdiocese of Boston, and records concerning the local Catholic Charities Bureau, which maintains its own files in its office separate from the chancery. Other files concern two institutions in Washington, D. C., the Catholic University of America and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. A final drawer is filled with parish jubilee books. There must have been a selective retention of these, for otherwise much more space would have been needed. In a quartet of 4-drawer cabinets are deeds and mortgages for all ecclesiastical property in the Archdiocese of Boston, filed according to parish or institution and arranged chronologically under those subjects.

Open-face shelving is used for material that is not suited for file cases. Several shelves are taken up with the printed constitutions and rules of religious orders and congregations within the Archdiocese of Boston, almost all in the form of bound books. Sacramentary books form another large and important collection on the open-face shelves. These are books of original record of baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and deaths, practically all for the nineteenth century. But by no means all such records prior to 1900 are on hand. Probably exceptional circumstances accounted for those present being transferred to the archives instead of being retained in the files of the several parishes. A miscellaneous assortment fills the rest of the open shelves. There are diaries of various deceased clerics, account books of the archdiocese during its early years and similar records of its bishops and archbishops, and manuscript histories of parishes and institutions. There are bound files of the *Pilot*, the *Jesuit*, and the *Catholic Press* for the early nineteenth century and a handwritten index to the *Pilot* for all of that century.

Several 4-drawer cabinets, distinguished from the prevailing steel gray by an olive finish, also are noteworthy as containing the one body of papers in which the integrity of collections in these archives

has been disturbed. Labeled "Historical," these files undoubtedly were organized during the writing of a 3-volume *History of the Archdiocese of Boston*, published in 1944. Each of the cardboard letter-size folders in these cabinets contains a single incoming letter (in a few instances some other type of document), and the folders are arranged chronologically from the seventeenth century to the 1940's. Though the papers have never left the archives, their abstraction from the original series has in effect made this file a historical manuscript collection.

On top of the "Historical" file cabinets are two indexes on 3-by 5-inch cards. One of them contains the names of the writers of the letters in the files, as well as subject entries for the few documents. The second card index is believed to pertain to this "Historical" file, too, but the key to its use has not yet been discovered.

Two metal cabinets in the archives are kept locked because of the value of their contents, which in the main are diaries. The most precious of these are four bound volumes of the daily manuscript diary of the second Bishop of Boston, Benedict J. Fenwick. The first entry is dated November 1, 1825, the day of Bishop Fenwick's consecration, and the day-by-day chronicle continues almost until his death in 1846.

Valuable statistics are available for the researcher in 36 drawers of the last section of the archives. Though the material is on 3-by 5-inch forms, the cards are actually original reports, signed by pastors or others in authority. One group contains census figures, another records of cemeteries, and the third, school enrollments. For all three the period covered is 1907 to 1951.

There is much to be praised in the operation and maintenance of the archives of the Archdiocese of Boston. The primary purpose of a repository is to preserve the papers entrusted to it. In the archives of this archdiocese the purpose has been accomplished in a fireproof, well-kept building, under atmospheric conditions that retard deterioration. The archives is administered so as to facilitate finding the material desired. The lack of a copying machine cannot be rated as a deficiency because of the infrequent requests thus far for such service.

The fact that the "Historical" file has been singled out for comment is itself a commendation of the operation. This file aside, there has been little violation of the integrity of series. The original arrangement — with such cross-reference as is possible — often helps to show the circumstances in which a letter or document was written. The various indexes would be of greater assistance if con-

solidated, but even without consolidation they are useful finding aids.

Until the numerous miscellaneous files for the first part of the twentieth century are classified more precisely, a researcher cannot be certain that he has inspected everything pertaining to a given subject. But continued competent attention to this problem should improve the situation. Since no material dated before 1900 is believed to be in general or unclassified files, prospects are considerably brighter for gathering all available information in regard to topics of the nineteenth century.

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