

The Small, Limited, or Specialized Church Archives

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“IT has been asserted,” wrote a member of the Committee on Archives of the United Church of Canada, “that the Catholic Church has always had an historical sense.”¹ In point of fact the Bull of Pope Benedict XIII (*Maxima Vigilantia*), issued on June 14, 1727, shows the traditional anxiety of the Holy See to safeguard the records whence, it is said, “faith and truth can be transmitted for the remembrance of our successors.”

Here in the United States, however, although the organizational life of the church has matured and reached impressive proportions, Catholics “still suffer from the growing pains of the so-called ‘brick and mortar’ age. In former conditions, which should now be outgrown in most parts of the country, the stark necessities of ecclesiastical life as well as the fears and foibles of churchmen militated against the well being of ‘archives for the historian.’”² And unlike the European or French-Canadian diocesan archivists, the chancellors of our dioceses, who are also the archivists, are very busy men.

These facts largely explain the lack of attention paid to Catholic church archives. It is not therefore surprising to find that, in the opinion of William Sweet, “the Presbyterians have the best official depositories for their archives.”³ I must add that, from what I gather of the work of August Suelflow, the Lutheran Church cannot be far behind in housing and servicing its records.

Today the practical necessity of improving administrative efficiency—which is after all the primary reason for the establishment

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¹ E. C. Kyte, “Archives of the United Church of Canada,” in *American Archivist*, 13:229 (July 1950).

² Henry J. Browne, “The American Catholic Archival Tradition,” in *American Archivist*, 14:129 (Apr. 1951).

³ “Church Archives in the United States,” in *American Archivist*, 14:329 (Oct. 1951).

of archives—is forcing more and more church administrators (even Catholics!) to recognize the need for well-kept archives, and therefore the need for well-trained archivists, in order to avoid greater loss and confusion in their records. That is precisely how I came to be an archivist.

The older our church records become and the more our church documents accumulate, the clearer becomes the realization that the records manager, who deals with “hot archives,” cannot also manage the “cold archives”—at least not without additional training. This is true even in our Catholic religious communities and educational establishments, where it has been a tradition to guard the archives as family secrets.

Rarely does the busy ecclesiastical administrator bother about the cultural and historical reasons for the establishment of archives, unless of course he himself has been bitten by the “history bug.” We must therefore “play up” the primary reason for our archives. In this we will be following such famous archivists—to name but one—as Charles Braibant, first president of the International Council on Archives, for many years Director General of the French Archives.

However, since religion is the mother of culture, and since to lack an appreciation of the force of religion in American history is to misunderstand American culture and civilization, we render a great service to historians by encouraging the establishment of archives *and the training of ecclesiastical archivists*, not only in our own milieu, within our own denomination, but within the American church in general.

Those of you who have had the opportunity to hear Ernst Posner lecture on the history of archival administration will remember that he insists on the fact that manuscript collectors have played such an important role in America because the archivist was not on the job early enough. Let us therefore take it upon ourselves to see to it that the manuscript collector will no longer have to gather up fragments and scraps of organic bodies of religious records. Let us see to it that these bodies are not broken up in the first place.

The services we can render to the church administrator—not only as archivists, but also as participators in the setting up of records management programs—will speak for themselves once they are rightly presented. We must, however, be unstinting of self in striving to show the worth of our services.

I know nothing of the salaries of church archivists. I should judge that they are, as usual, underpaid. (We Catholic Religious archivists receive no salary and usually no budget allotment.) But

to be an archivist one must be dedicated to the task. To a greater extent even than the State or Federal archivist, the church archivist must be a devoted person. Only on our own blood, sweat, and tears will the church archives of America grow so that historians in the future will bless us and church administrators in the present will appreciate our efforts in their behalf.

To have good church archives, we must have well-trained archivists. For this we must recognize the necessity of preliminary training in history—getting a historical sense. After this will come specialized knowledge; however, to quote T. R. Schellenberg, "This special knowledge, which may be referred to as a subject-matter knowledge, is . . . as important as a knowledge of archival principles and techniques."⁴ The archival institute given at Radcliffe in summer is perhaps best suited for church archivists, since it deals with historical materials in general. The courses offered by the American University at the National Archives are quite advanced and are directed to archivists in larger institutions. I must say here, however, that I wish that all of you could have the experience of hearing such distinguished men as Ernst Posner, Oliver W. Holmes, T. R. Schellenberg, and the many other guest lecturers in those courses—who are known in the archival world, both American and foreign, and who without doubt have made the profession what it is today. I must also warn you that, if you intend to take both courses, you should enroll in the Radcliffe institute first, lest you be denied admittance because you already have too much knowledge of archival matters—as I was.

Despite these courses, however, I believe that what was said in 1946 still holds true today: "No completely adequate training is yet available in this country for the Catholic ecclesiastical archivist." Melvin Gingerich, however, is remedying the need for a "manual of archival economy prepared with a view to the needs of ecclesiastical collections in this country."⁵

In small, specialized archives, there very often is close contact between the records manager and the archivist. In fact it may often happen that only in schizophrenic personalities may the two be distinguished, since in the small institutions the records manager (chancellor, secretary, or other) is usually the archivist as well. This *can* be an ideal situation, if the records manager is also a trained archivist. When he is not the result may be disastrous for histo-

⁴ *Modern Archives; Principles and Techniques*, p. 126 (Chicago, 1956).

⁵ Thomas F. O'Connor, "Catholic Archives in the United States," in *Catholic Historical Review*, 31:430 (Jan. 1946).

For a discussion of such a manual, see Melvin Gingerich's article in this issue.—ED.

rians, as witness the case in many of the archives of Catholic institutions. As Dr. Schellenberg has said, "It is a curious anomaly that the more important a matter, the less likely is a complete documentation of it to be found."⁶

It is therefore imperative that church archives be established even in smaller denominations or geographical areas of larger denominations. But in these archives let it be remembered that "all definitions are changing in time and place and in response to external circumstances" (Posner), and therefore "each archivist has a definite need to redefine archives in a manner more suited to his own requirements" (Schellenberg). I believe that the archivist in a smaller institution needs both a wider and a deeper outlook than his confrères. His smaller material wealth means for him more work, not less, since he must see to it that his administration and future historians get as much as possible out of his records. His analysis of material must extend even to the individual document; it must be a deeper analysis, though in a larger institution a single document may not be looked upon as worthy of the archivist's attention; he must have greater control of every item of his material—a control that would be impossible in a larger institution.

Archivists on the Federal or State level usually do not have to manage a Federal or State museum; yet in fact there is often some form of exposition or exhibition surrounding an archives project that substantiates written records with artifacts. Let us here recall again Charles Braibant. Though occupied with manifold duties and beset by a limited—and limiting—budget, he found it possible to recreate the Museum of the History of France, in which work he was ably seconded by Mlle. Pernoud. Certainly, then, we too should not limit ourselves to the written or photographic history of our denomination but we should capture part of the *artifact-ive* history as well, in order to become the *total* historical research center for a denomination or a geographical area. Let us remember that these artifacts, or museum pieces, are truly records of the past and therefore worthy of our attention.

As a matter of fact most church archivists and keepers of church records see their office in this light. Many are not only archivists but librarians, as well as curators of at least the beginnings of an ecclesiastical museum, though informally. "The time has not come when we distinguish between [ecclesiastical] archival and library materials" (Suelflow). We who seek to be efficient servants of our church administrators must also seek to be efficient servants of our future historians. We therefore must try to preserve records of

⁶ *Modern Archives*, p. 38.

the past in the full meaning of this term. Because we are here dealing with small archives that have neither extensive personnel nor wealth (financial or archival), we should not philosophize on the various distinctions to be made among the instruments that record our church's past. Indeed, lacking personnel, we cannot go "whole-hog" into any of these areas; but what we do have we must strive to service to the greatest extent.

Certainly archivists have no qualms of conscience in accepting the printed or mimeographed sheet, or even the tape-recording or the disk. We are all out to preserve the important messages no matter what the medium. Naturally we strive to preserve the original medium if this can be done, but it is the message that counts. We are now faced with the fact that the museum object also has a message for future historians, though it is not always thought of in this light. As true recordkeepers we must be interested in preserving this record as best we can—and this without overstepping the bounds of our profession.

Our fellow archivists on the State and national level call us specialized archivists. But is it not they, rather than we, who have become specialized? Are they not limiting themselves more than we are, not in "message content," but in media? The wealth of their written material would of course force them into this specialization, just as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been forced into a specialization of its own—genealogy—because of its wealth of material in this field. Yet that must not deter us from acknowledging the fact that these "fringe records" exist and are worthy of our attention, though they need special treatment.

From the time of the Temple Archives of Nippur to the founding of the Archives of Simancas (and after), library materials were never treated separately from archives. Even today many volumes of printed books can be found in our archives as true archival material. We speak of church recordkeepers; these library materials are also records of our churches and therefore must be given our attention. These books written by or about our churches or church members, which record the history of our churches and which are important very often both to the administrator and to the historian, should be preserved by the church archivist. When we can no longer be considered as small archives, when the wealth of our materials has grown to huge proportions, then we might agree to separate these library records—and I insist on the word *records*—and allow them to be serviced by another department within our administration.

We are not, however, speaking here of libraries in general or of

books in general. We are speaking of true church records, though in their broadest meaning. Not every book that happens to come into a church library is necessarily a record of that church or of its individual members.

One last point I would like to make, and that is the need for preservation and dissemination of our material through the means of microfilm. Bishop Donohue, the chancellor of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, has written of the earthquake and fire of 1906: "In that disaster the City Hall as well as numerous churches were burned, and with them went the public and ecclesiastical records. Through the intervening years the resultant personal losses of time and other values have been monumental, probably exceeding property damage in its total effect."⁷ Much concern has been expressed to lower the cost and raise the standards of microfilming archives. Microfilm has been used—and abused—a great deal, both for dissemination of materials and for security purposes. Much more thought will be given to it in the future and progress will undoubtedly be made. But if we wait for perfection we shall not get ~~our~~ our own microfilming programs started and perhaps much of our material will meanwhile disappear either through act of man or accident of nature.

The Archdiocese of San Francisco was a pioneer in the American Catholic microfilming program. It has been followed by many American Catholic dioceses whose records have been microfilmed and whose bishops have begun the microfilming of all parish records, in this way centralizing these records while at the same time preserving them through security copies. I believe, however, that the Genealogical Society of the Mormon Church has shown the most amazing use of this process: 2,000,000 pages per month, microfilmed by over 25 microfilm operators.⁸

My dear colleagues, we are the custodians of the official memory of the ecclesiastical institutions of America. Let us strive to fulfill our duty and obligations not only well but completely. Let us not forget that we can be more efficient "servants of the servants of history," only if we become more efficient "servants of the servants of God."

⁷ Most Rev. Hugh Donohue, "Microfilming Parish Records," in *Church Property Administration*, vol. 16, no. 6, p. 54 (Nov.-Dec. 1952).

⁸ As of 1952. Archibald P. Bennett, "The Record Copying Program of the Utah Genealogical Society," in *American Archivist*, 16:228 (July 1953).