

The Secret Vatican Archives

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OF all the relations between Europe and America that from time to time have been reflected in European archives, perhaps the most continuous have been relations involving the Catholic Church. As one scholar has phrased it, "The records of that church are, therefore, organic archives for Canada and for the larger portion of the United States during their entire history."¹

This author recently had occasion to work in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano in search of materials dealing with the history of the Catholic Church in California. And it was while searching through the numberless indexes that he realized that the precious collection has not been exploited by English-speaking scholars to any great extent. The following observations are limited to that part of the greater collection of Vatican Archives known as "secret" but the reader should not overlook the other holdings of the Vatican, which can only be mentioned here in passing.

The Archivio Segreto Vaticano is really not "secret" at all, even though the archivist occasionally restricts the use of materials of a private nature (*carattere riservato*) "which cannot be given publicity for reasons of public interest, religious and social."² Any serious scholar will be admitted upon addressing a written request to the Prefetto dell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Città del Vaticano.³ Two small photographs of the petitioner are required along with a statement of his qualifications or letters of recommendation and a general description of the documentations he wishes to consult.⁴

The idea of grouping the archives of the various congregations or departments of the Holy See into one general collection had long been contemplated but it was Pope Paul V who actually initiated the *archivio* in 1611. With all the peregrinations in the Middle Ages

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¹ Carl Russell Fish, *Guide to the Materials for American History in Roman and Other Italian Archives*, p. 1 (Washington, 1911).

² Charles H. Haskins, "The Vatican Archives," in *Catholic University Bulletin*, 3:181 (Apr. 1897).

³ The present archivist is Msgr. Martino Giusti.

⁴ The archives are closed between July 16 and September 15. Normal hours are between 8 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. With special permission nonresident scholars can return for several hours in the afternoon.

to Anagni, Perugia, Lucca, Avignon, and elsewhere, much material was lost or alienated. Probably the greatest despoliation took place when the archives were carted off to Paris in 1810-11 by Napoleon and then moved back again in 1815 and 1817.⁵ One enormous mass of records from the Holy Office was burned in order to save transportation costs. The earliest entry to be found in the original collection today is an eleventh-century copy of a register of Pope John VIII (872-882). Chancery registers have continuity only from Innocent III (1198-1216). Hence it can be seen that existing papal archives, extensive as they are, represent only a small fraction of the documentary material connected with the Holy See through the ages. Carelessness, plunder, and accidents of transfer probably account for many times the number of documents now preserved. It might also be noted that many documents and copies from the papal archives are now in the Archivio di Stato at Rome as well as other Italian archives.

Access to the Vatican Archives became possible in the years after 1879 when the eminent scholar Prof. Joseph Hergenröther of the University of Würzburg became a cardinal and was placed in charge of the archives. Pope Leo XIII eagerly endorsed Hergenröther's historical activities and the collection was officially opened in January of 1881. Twelve years later the Biblioteca Leonina was added as a reference library along with a large consultation room.⁶

At present the 12 congregations and a number of commissions of the Roman Curia have their own record repositories. But as various series are "retired" from a particular congregation or commission, they become part of the greater collection known as the Vatican Archives, although retaining their original classification and series association. Hence the actual Secret Vatican Archives, consisting mostly of materials from the Secretariat of State, are but a small part of the overall holdings.

No detailed description of the contents of the Secret Vatican Archives has been attempted in English.⁷ The system of classification is, in many ways, "the result of historical accidents rather than of the application of any logical principle."⁸ Reduced to the barest outline, it comprises:

⁵ Several large series belonging to the Congregation of Rites were left in Paris and are now in the Bibliothèque Nationale.

⁶ Since that time the archives have been enriched by the purchase of the Borghese collections (1893) and the transfer of valuable series from the Lateran.

⁷ The most complete guide to the collection is K. A. Fink, *Das Vatikanische Archiv* (Rome, 1951).

⁸ Charles H. Haskins, "The Vatican Archives," in *American Historical Review*, 2:44 (Oct. 1896).

(i) *Vatican Registers* (Armario⁹ I-XXVIII)

The most important section of the Secret Vatican Archives is the great series of *regesta*, which are copies of papal letters extending, with a few breaks, from 872 to 1605. Each of the 2,041 volumes is inventoried with its own number and the year of pontificate. The order of the letters in the volumes is roughly chronological. The subject matter is of the widest possible variety and relates to the whole of Christendom.

(ii) *Copies of Registers*

Armario XXXI is a series of 85 volumes containing extracts from chancery records from the twelfth century to the sixteenth. Material is arranged chronologically by pontificate. Armario XXXII has only 65 volumes but is a more diverse collection of letters and bulls, many of which are undated. There are 152 volumes in Armario XXXV relating to the temporal rights of the Holy See and classified chronologically by countries.

(iii) *Letters to Italian Dukes and Others*

Armario XLVI contains 63 volumes of letters to the Dukes of Ferrara, mostly copies from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Barroaldi collection of 30 volumes (Armario XLVII) is now in the Vatican Library. Armario XLVIII is a series of 54 volumes relating to Ferrara and other Italian cities while Armario XLIX has 48 volumes concerning several *feudi diversi*. The 31 volumes of Armario LX concern the Duchy of Urbino while those of Armario LXI relate to the Duchies of Parma and Piacenza.

(iv) *Signatures, Judgments, Commissions, and Visitations*

Armario LII is a set of 65 volumes (including 26 appendixes) from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries dealing with the Holy See's Office of Commissary General.

(v) *Formularies of the Papal Chancery and Datary*

The 79 volumes of Armario LIII form an important adjunct for scholars interested in the science of diplomatics. Many of the volumes are well indexed and contain formularies for official visitations, reservations, absolutions, etc.

(vi) *The Great Schism*

The contents of Armario LIV deal with the Great Schism, 1378-1418. Several eyewitness accounts of the disputed papal election of April 8, 1378, are contained in volumes 14-39.

(vii) *The Council of Trent*

Armario LXII and LXIII contain 155 volumes of documents on or about the Council of Trent. Copies of the *Acta*, diaries, and letters are included in this priceless collection.

⁹ The term "armarium" means "cupboard" and refers to the container in which the documents are filed.

(viii) *Material for Sixteenth-Century European History*

The majority of the 34 volumes of Armarium LXIV deal with the Germanic nations although some material on England, Ireland, Scotland, Poland, Spain, Portugal, and France is included in the last 7 volumes.

A fairly comprehensive index is contained in Volume 133 of the *Indices* and gives an inventory of all the Armaria of the Secret Vatican Archives volume by volume.

As was mentioned earlier, that part of the vast papal collection known as the Secret Vatican Archives actually represents only a small part of the overall holdings.¹⁰ Registers and miscellaneous documentation from Avignon, the Datary, Apostolic Camera, Consistorial Congregation (and College of Cardinals), Apostolic Chancery, Roman Rota, and other sources¹¹ have elicited from one observer the comment: "Of all the great repositories of historical documents, the archives of the Papacy possess the widest interest."¹² Indeed, the extent of its materials can be judged from the fact that there are no fewer than 681 massive volumes of inventories and indexes.

And certainly, as part of the largest collection of ecclesiastical documents in existence, the Secret Vatican Archives is an embodiment of the principle that "each dead hand relinquishes a light; each living hand carries it on. This light is the dream which burns in every heart, the dream of Constancy, Love, Honor and Courage."¹³

¹⁰ Of special interest to students of American Catholic history are the Archives of Propaganda Fide, a separate collection of documents dealing with those areas of the world subject directly to that congregation. From its founding until 1908 the Catholic Church in the United States fell under the Propaganda's jurisdiction. Papal bulls and briefs dealing with the appointment of bishops are housed in the Chancery of Apostolic Briefs.

¹¹ An excellent survey of these holdings is Leslie MacFarlane, "The Vatican Library and Archives," in *Wiseman Review*, 235: 128-141 (Summer 1961).

¹² Haskins, in *American Historical Review*, 2: 40.

¹³ Carlos E. Castaneda, *Our Catholic Heritage*, dedication page (Austin, 1936).

The Many Forms of Archives

Dr. Ernest Trice Thompson, the noted church historian, has left no stone unturned (almost literally) in his thorough research into early archives.

—PRESBYTERIAN BOOK STORES' announcement of the publication of *Presbyterians in the South. Volume 1. 1607-1861* (Richmond, Va., John Knox Press, 1963).