

Archives of Roman Catholic Orders and Congregations of Women

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IN THE United States there are over 400 Roman Catholic religious orders and congregations of women.¹ They range from autonomous convents of 30 members to organizations of 3,000 or more; they work in every State and in the territorial possessions; they began appearing in the days of President Madison; and they keep records.² There may be great resources for historical research in their archives. Recently I tried to find out what sort of records sisters have and what they do with them.

From the *Official Catholic Directory* of 1967, I chose at random the names and addresses of 50 such congregations of 500 or more members as subjects of my inquiry. Since sisters generally are very cooperative, 50 promised enough responses to give a sampling of common practices. Five hundred members indicated a fairly complex organization that had been growing long enough to have inactive records.

To the secretary general, the official most likely to be responsible for archives, I sent a questionnaire, with a covering letter asking for any further information she could find time to give me. Thirty-nine of the subjects responded. Four have no archives because they are branches of larger groups that absorb whatever inactive records are kept. Four others are "between archivists" and have no one who could answer the questions. Thirty-one filled out the questionnaire and 12 of these sent additional information.

According to the responses, most congregations leave archives in the charge of the secretary general, who is responsible for all current records except fiscal ones. Teaching congregations (the majority) generally select an English teacher for this office. This is logical considering many of her duties, but looking for historical value in records is far down on the list of these. Only five of the congregations that have designated archivists chose historians. Just one is a librarian; she works where the motherhouse (headquarters) is on the same property as a college, and she administers the archives of both. She took a workshop for archivists at a librarians' convention; two others took three courses at the Truman Library in Independence, Mo.; and one attended the National Archives

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¹ The distinction between orders and congregations is canonical. Nearly all the sisters in this country belong to congregations. Only those belonging to orders are nuns.

² The earliest are the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg, Md., established there since 1808.

summer workshop. Only three belong to historical societies at present. None is a member of the Society of American Archivists.

Practically all the congregations allow members to do research in the archives, and as a result most have had histories of the congregations and biographies of outstanding members published. Many theses, dissertations, and magazine articles in the field of education have been written on the basis of the records related to schools. Though about half said they have received requests for information from outsiders, all who specified said the requests were from parishes assembling information for commemorative anniversary books. Only five had been contacted by State historical societies. On whether the archives were open to nonmember researchers, only 10 said they were, but many more said the question had never come up so that they did not know what the answer would be.

On the average, these congregations have been established a little over a century in the same location. Only one mentioned that the archives ever have been destroyed by fire, and 25 of the 31 stated that they preserve all records even after they are not current. For anyone acquainted with the habits of sisters, this is not hard to believe. It also is easy to believe that they have been especially careful with documents related to the earliest periods in hope that these might some day be used as evidence for the canonization of their founders.

Since almost all the congregations have their headquarters east of the Mississippi, they were begun in areas already admitted to the Union. Only four say they have documents dated before statehood, but I suspect that an examination would turn up records from missions that were in Territories, though the motherhouses to which they reported were in States. State historical societies would be wise to investigate the resources not only of the motherhouses in the State but also of those that supply personnel to institutions in the State. I know one congregation that staffs schools ranging from New York to Hawaii and from Minnesota to Mississippi.³ Never having seen the archives, I do not know what they contain. I do know, for instance, that the sisters were teaching in Chicago before the fire of 1871, which destroyed many other records but not the ones they had hundreds of miles away. I know also that this congregation opened the first Catholic school for girls west of the Mississippi River in 1843 and boarded daughters of leading men from a vast western region. My own experience as a teacher tells me of the abundant personal information that goes into letters to school authorities. These two are among the research possibilities in the records of one congregation out of hundreds.

The scraps of information I gathered give this picture of archival practices. The secretary general, who also acts as archivist, removes the semicurrent files from her office to another room in the same building whenever she sees fit. There is no transfer of custody. The archives room

³ The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Dubuque, Iowa.

is fireproof but not air conditioned. There may be a vault for valuable papers; if not, she rents space in a bank vault for them and keeps copies or a list of them with her records. The other records are kept in several types of file cabinets and metal lockers acquired as the holdings expanded. Bound volumes are on steel shelves. The room also contains artifacts not archival but related to the history of the congregation. The treasurer general shares the use of the room and vault for fiscal records; more likely she keeps them in a separate place nearby. Most archivists have the use of a Thermofax machine for duplicating and laminating. None have microfilming equipment, though several have had their records filmed at Notre Dame University.

Only one congregation mentions the term "record group,"⁴ but all seem to use natural divisions rather than a system of subject classification. Most congregations underwent a reorganization of government after the new code of canon law was issued in 1918. Now canon law is being revised again, and many congregations are in the process of writing new constitutions that will provide another chronological breaking point. As the governments are set up now, the nonfiscal records fall naturally into four groups: general chapter, general administration, personnel, and missions. (Any place to which the sisters are sent away from the motherhouse is called a mission.)

The general chapter is the policymaking body of a religious congregation. The members, some *ex officio* and some elected from throughout the congregation, meet at least every 6 years to review the preceding period, to elect administrative officers for the next term, to make major decisions, and possibly to appoint commissions to carry out some of these decisions. Since these meetings ordinarily are at 6-year intervals, the proceedings document broad changes. A radical proposition dismissed at one meeting may have received serious consideration at the next and have been adopted at the third.

Usually the congregation is administered by a board (the council or curia) that varies in size according to the complexity as well as the size of the congregation. The chairman of the council (the superior general) is the congregation's executive and is authorized to carry out facilitative business. This work may be divided among the offices of the councilors if they do not have other full-time jobs. All important decisions must be reached in council and recorded in the minutes. The secretary general keeps these minutes as well as handling correspondence, reports, and directives related to council business, and managing the files on personnel and missions.

If the congregation's membership is over a thousand, both the personnel and the institutions they staff are likely to be divided into administrative units, probably geographical provinces. In that case there is a level of

⁴ This one congregation is the Sisters of Mercy of Bethesda, Md. Their archives are patterned closely on the National Archives. Some years ago they mimeographed a manual for the use of sister-archivists, but the supply is exhausted. A revision is being prepared now.

administrative authority between most of the members and the council, and much of the information on personnel and missions in the central office duplicates what is filed in the provincial office. It is the central office copies that go into the archives. For convenience, the central files may be grouped according to provinces. In the active personnel file is a dossier on each living sister, starting with her application to enter the congregation. Some congregations file a photograph there, but others keep a photograph file on all subjects separately. When the addition of the sister's death certificate renders the dossier inactive, it is removed to the archives. There the records on deceased sisters are filed separately from those of women who applied to enter the congregation but did not come or entered but did not stay.⁵

Each mission submits yearly reports both to the secretary general and to the treasurer general. There may be two reports to each, one concerning the state of the convent (household) and the other about the institution(s) that the sisters of that convent staff; or the information about both may be supplied in one document. Only the more recent of these reports are kept in the active files, record retirement age being likely to depend on the space limitations of the office. The official reports are rather statistical. Human interest information is sent to an intracongregational publication. (There may be another publication for alumni and other interested persons outside the congregation.) These also are on file.

The archives of a moderate-size, typically organized congregation could probably be arranged like this:

1. General chapters.
2. Council.
3. Office of the executive.
4. Office of the treasurer general.
5. Office of the secretary general.
6. Legal documents (civil and canonical).
7. Blueprints, maps, and pictures.
8. Documentation of history before formal organization as a congregation.
9. Deceased sisters.
10. Former members or applicants.
11. Functioning missions.
12. Closed missions (including house records transferred from those missions).

How much information of general interest to American historians is included under these headings remains unknown and apparently not even considered. The 1963 *Directory of Religious Archival and Historical Depositories in America*, published by the Church Records Committee of the Society of American Archivists, does not mention sisters'

⁵ This is not a waste of file space. There are cases where a congregation has benefited from being able to state not only that there was no proof that a person had ever been a member but that there was proof that she had been rejected. Maria Monk turns up now and then with an alias.

records. The Reverend Thomas F. O'Connor's *Historical and Archival Activities of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States*, a bulletin of the American Association for State and Local History, states that they exist. Perhaps they should not, strictly speaking, be called "church archives," but they do not fall under other classifications either. That may be why they have been ignored. Let me assert, with Father O'Connor, that they do exist and in abundance. A survey of them would be a tremendous undertaking; it might be a profitable one.

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