Catholic Diocesan Archives: A Renaissance in Progress

JAMES M. O'TOOLE

NOT VERY LONG AGO, a discussion of the latest developments in the archives of dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church in America would have been a very brief one. Such a discussion would have included a description of a handful of diocesan archival programs or, in most cases, individual archivists working single-handed in cities scattered across the country. The collection of archives, taken from their original locations and centralized at the University of Notre Dame during the late nineteenth century, would have stood out as the best and most available source of diocesan records in the country. Researchers might have exchanged horror stories about the number and variety of collections to which they had been denied access in the course of their research. Beyond that, there would have been little to say. The conclusion would have been that there was a great deal to be done and little actually being done.

In the last few years there has been a dramatic change in this picture. There has been an awakening of interest in Catholic Church archives in general. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious has taken the lead by sponsoring a succession of projects that will conclude with the publication of a guide to the records of orders of nuns in the United States. A number of colleges and universities have begun actively to collect the records of Catholic lay and social action organizations. Notre Dame has established a Center for the Study of American Catholicism, which publishes a newsletter and actively encourages the preservation and use of church records. Publication has begun of a *Catholic Archives Newsletter.* The Catholic Library Association has formed an archives section which is also issuing a newsletter. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission have sponsored a number of projects the goals of which are to organize and make available for use collections of records generated by the Catholic Church and its people. This awakening is now spreading to the archives of the nearly 170 dioceses in the United States.[1]

[1] A diocese is a geographical unit of organization composed of a number of local parishes and presided over by a bishop. An archdiocese is a diocese whose bishop has broad supervisory functions over other neighboring bishops. Dioceses vary in size according to their Catholic population. They may be as small as the Diocese of Brooklyn (consisting of the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens) or as large as the Diocese of Cheyenne (consisting of the entire state of Wyoming).

The magnitude of the change can be seen by comparing the diocesan archives cited in the standard archival reference works that have appeared in the last two decades.[2] Philip M. Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (1961) described the holdings of 1,300 repositories. Included were only four diocesan archives and one diocesan seminary library, those of Baltimore, Detroit, Dubuque, Monterey-Fresno, and St. Louis. The single-sentence description provided for the archival collections at Dubuque typifies the mystery in which diocesan records were still shrouded: "An unknown quantity of papers, chiefly the business and ecclesiastical archives of the Dubuque archdiocese." For all practical purposes, diocesan archives seemed nonexistent in 1961.

The *Directory of Archives and Manuscripts in the United States,* published in 1978 by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, significantly expanded the coverage of diocesan archives. The *Directory* not only surveyed a larger number of repositories (more than double that of Hamer), but also, plainly, there were many more diocesan archives to be found. Thirty-four archives were identified, varying in total volume from eight filing cabinet drawers (Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska) to more than 700 linear shelf feet (Archdiocese of New Orleans). The dioceses of most of the major cities were included (although there were several obvious omissions) and the centers of major Catholic historical importance were well covered. In the seventeen years between the publication of Hamer's *Guide* and the NHPRC's *Directory,* the diocesan archives of the American Catholic Church had made substantial progress.

An even clearer indication of the burgeoning interest in this area was a meeting and workshop for diocesan archivists held at Dayton, Ohio, in March 1979. What began with a casual conversation over breakfast at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting in Nashville became a four-day session in which diocesan archivists, as a body, exchanged information and ideas for the first time. Forty-five dioceses (more than one-quarter of those in the entire country) were represented, extending from Portland, Maine, to San Diego, and from Fargo to San Antonio. The archivists came from programs at every stage of development: the old and well-established, the new, the part time. Several bishops sent staff members charged with collecting and arranging their archives for the first time. There was even one interested laywoman who was engaged in lobbying her apparently uninterested bishop to establish a diocesan archival program. More will be said about the discussions and results of this meeting; but the sheer numbers in attendance demonstrate the seriousness with which the problems of diocesan archives are now being considered.

The development of church concern for its archives has been a long process. English historian Owen Chadwick has recently provided the background details of this process, in his *Catholicism and History: The Opening of the Vatican Archives.*[3] Chadwick traces the gradual yielding of the Vatican to the demands

[2] I am grateful to James E. O'Neill, Acting Archivist of the United States, for suggesting this comparison.

[3] Owen Chadwick, *Catholicism and History: The Opening of the Vatican Archives* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

of historical researchers seeking access to church records, culminating in Pope Leo XIII's 1883 letter *Saepenumero considerantes.*[4] Leo had little real knowledge or understanding of historical method, but he believed in the ability of research to illuminate the role of the church in Western culture. (It must be pointed out that this letter is almost as significant for what it did not do. Although it opened the general archives to research, it did not make available the records of particular Vatican departments, including the Congregation de Propaganda Fide, the missionary office which, until 1908, supervised American church affairs.

Interest in diocesan archives eventually became a part of formal church law. The New Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1917 by Benedict XV, required that archives be kept in every diocese and made provision for maintaining personal and confidential records separate from other records. The Code defines access to the records very broadly, saying that diocesan archives may be examined and used "by anyone interested in them."[5] In 1960, John XXIII expanded on the provisions of the code by issuing an "Instruction on the Administration of Archives."[6] This document showed a remarkable degree of archival sophistication, including such statements as: "In every archives the oldest materials form a unity with the more recent ones. . . . Therefore, the entire archival collection should be treated with equal care." Any type of alienation of records was "strictly forbidden," and bishops were urged to appoint as archivists "persons who have the necessary training." Inventories were to be made and updated regularly, and physical restoration work was to be entrusted to "competent technicians." Access by researchers "should be granted with liberality," Pope John said, and photocopies were to be made available. John even seems to have anticipated today's great concern over grantsmanship by opening the door to "proposals for obtaining aid from secular institutions for archival improvements." These rules were clarified even further by the Vatican Secretariate of State in July 1978 by the publication of a set of "Norms for the Photomechanical Reproduction of Documents from Ecclesiastical Archives," which encouraged the microfilming of diocesan and other church records.[7]

The single most important statement on diocesan archives in the United States is the "Document on Ecclesiastical Archives," issued in November 1974 by the Committee for the Bicentennial of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.[8] Acting at the prompting of noted Catholic his-

[4] Pope Leo XIII, *Saepenumero considerantes,* 18 August 1883; *Acta Sancta Sedis* 16 (1883): 49–57.

[5] Canon 384. The canons regarding archives are the subject of two doctoral dissertations at the Catholic University School of Canon Law. See William F. Louis, *Diocesan Archives: A Historical Synopsis and Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1941), CUA Canon Law Studies #137. Confidential records, known by the perhaps misleading title of "secret archives," are the subject of Charles A. Kekumano, *The Secret Archives of the Diocesan Curia: A Historical Synopsis and Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), CUA Canon Law Studies #350.

[6] Istruzioni. . .sull'amministrazione degli Archivi," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 52 (1960): 1022–1025.

[7] The "Norms," Vatican protocol number 352.779/210, were communicated by Archbishop Jean Jadot, Apostolic Delegate to the United States, to Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, on 4 August 1978.

[8] This statement is available from the NCCB publications office, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue, NW., Washington, DC 20005.

torian John Tracy Ellis, Archivist of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Francis J. Weber, and others, the Bishops Conference sought to encourage the best possible care and the widest possible use of diocesan records. American Catholic history was inadequately studied and understood, the statement said, because researchers had not been able to utilize important collections of source material. To correct this problem, the Bishops Conference urged that an archivist be appointed in every diocese, even if that person could work only on a part-time basis. The importance of formal professional training, especially for newly appointed archivists, was stressed. Bishops were encouraged "to grant access to diocesan archives without undue limitations." Referring to Leo XIII's original letter, the statement concluded by placing its faith in the processes of scholarship as a key to understanding the American Catholic experience.

This 1974 statement of the Bishops Conference provided the impetus for the establishment of many new diocesan archival programs. The participation in the 1979 meeting of diocesan archivists at Dayton and its 1980 successor at San Antonio is a demonstration of the statement's impact. The discussions at these gatherings concerning the role of the archivist in the total diocesan administration, the development of written archival policies, the question of access to particularly sensitive records, and the participation of diocesan archivists in the larger American archival community testify to increasing professionalism (or at least the potential for it) among diocesan archivists. The exchange of information that took place in informal discussions at these workshops also makes it possible to sketch in broad outline both the kinds of records to be found in diocesan archives and the various approaches to dealing with those records.

Most diocesan archives contain significant collections of bishop's papers as the core of their collection. Especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, in the early years of a diocese's existence, diocesan administration was a relatively small and extremely personalized operation: from one perspective, what the bishop was doing was what the diocese was doing. Letters, sermon notebooks, official diaries or chronicles, financial records, and papers relating to the recruitment and training of clergy and religious are some of the materials commonly included among the papers of bishops. These collections can be of greater or lesser value, depending on the individual bishop's performance as a record-creator and a record-keeper. The long tenure of many bishops (until recently there was no retirement age) provided a greater degree of continuity than can be found among the archives of organizations with frequent changes of leadership.[9] Because the bishop as an individual combines official functions with personal activities, there can be a blurring of precisely what records constitute the bishop's "papers"; this problem is akin to the recent debate over the nature and ownership of presidential papers. Most diocesan archives, however, seem to maintain an appropriate distinction between those records that relate specifically to a bishop and those that are of a different origin.

The majority of records in diocesan archives will probably be those generated as part of the larger diocesan ad-

[9] The Diocese of Brooklyn seems to hold the record in episcopal longevity. The administration of Brooklyn's first three bishops covered 103 years (1853–1956)!

ministrative process. The First Plenary Council of Baltimore (1852) mandated the establishment in every diocese in the United States of a chancery as the chief administrative office of the bishop. Originally intended as a clearinghouse for canonical documents of various kinds (marriage dispensations, for example), the chancery is the parent organization for the diocesan archives.[10] Today, the chancery has evolved in many places into an elaborate administrative organization frequently containing a number of smaller, specialized departments: financial management, insurance, engineering and building, educational and counseling programs, communications, and so on. The financial, personnel, and administrative control systems created by this organizational structure are of course significant creators of records. These are the records most often found in diocesan archival collections, records which were originally created to perform a particular administrative task but which are now of value to researchers for other reasons as well.

Many diocesan archives also contain collections of records which were originally created and stored in local parishes but which have been centralized in the archives at the chancery. Most common among these are the parish sacramental records, chiefly those of baptisms and marriages. These church equivalents of civil vital records are created only in the parishes at the time the sacrament is performed; because of the volume of records, there are seldom central indexes or lists of names. In many dioceses, these sacramental records prior to a certain date have been centralized in the archives to insure their proper handling and to facilitate their use by researchers. The records of parishes that are no longer in existence are often stored in the archives, although they are just as likely to be found in the records of the existing parish which assumed responsibility for the defunct parish's territory. Many dioceses microfilm sacramental records as a matter of course (often billing each individual parish for the cost of filming its own records, thereby spreading the cost over a wider area and reducing its impact). In such cases the original record volumes are then returned to the parishes, with the complete set of microfilms remaining in the archives. Such microfilming has been carried out for reasons of security as much as for the assistance of researchers, and there seems to be some variety in the degree to which archivists encourage or allow use of these centralized collections for research. In dealing with personal records of this kind, records that were created on the assumption that they would not be generally available, the question of the protection of privacy rights is not inconsiderable.

Similar to these collections of parish sacramental records are the records frequently gathered in diocesan archives of church-related charitable, educational, and social service organizations. The records of schools, orphanages, hospitals, and similar agencies are originally kept in the agency or institution creating them, but are frequently transferred to the archives when the agency goes out of

[10] In fact, the only responsibility of the chancellor specified in the canon law is the care of the records of the diocese. In actual practice, however, the chancellor is the chief administrator of the diocese after the bishop. The origins and functions of the various offices of church administration are described in L. Mathias, *The Diocesan Curia: Its Organization According to History and Canon Law* (Madras, India: Good Pastor Press, 1947).

existence. General chancery administrative records may have materials (correspondence files, for example) relating to these church-affiliated institutions, in addition to the records of the institutions themselves, centralized in the archives. Many diocesan archival programs are actively seeking to go beyond a definition of their function as merely the archives of the central church administration. By extending their care to the records of all church agencies, they are attempting to approach more closely the goal of being the archives for the diocese as a whole.

Despite the similar kinds of records to be found in most diocesan archives, a number of different approaches for dealing with those records have emerged. The discussions at Dayton and San Antonio brought several of these approaches to light. The most common and, in this writer's view, most commendable, is that of the diocese itself assuming the responsibility for its archives. All the larger dioceses in the United States, and most of the smaller ones, have adopted this approach. There is an encouraging number of dioceses that have designated a full-time archivist, although most seem to be part-time. The composite demographic picture of diocesan archivists is an interesting one. They are almost evenly divided between men and women and, although the majority are religious of some kind (priests or nuns), there is a substantial body of lay people. The archivist may be a professional hired by the diocese (as in Cleveland and San Francisco, for example) or someone who learned archives on the job and may have subsequently obtained professional training (as in Little Rock and Detroit). Most priests holding the position of archivist also perform regular pastoral duties. Some hold faculty appointments in the diocesan seminary (as in Chicago and Cincinnati). While the ideal is still a full-time archivist to give attention to the records, the 1974 call of the Bishops Conference to give at least part-time care to their archives has been heeded by many dioceses.

Where the archives are maintained by the dioceses, the basic archival functions seem to be proceeding well. Each archival program adopts its own specific approach to the arrangement and description of its records, within acceptable professional limits. One finds as much variety here as elsewhere in the profession: card catalogs, inventories, registers, and other internal finding aids are adapted to the nature and demands of the particular groups of records. There has been no great tendency to publish formal guides to archival collections, although a number of notable guides have appeared.[11] Diocesan archivists seem to be well aware that their duties include not merely the preservation of records but also the processing of those records so they can be readily used for research of all kinds.

The question of access to and use of diocesan records is asked more frequently than almost any other. Diocesan archives have had something of a reputation for not being especially hospitable to outside researchers, a reputation not entirely justified. The Historical Records Survey of the Works Progress Administration inventoried a number of diocesan archives,[12] but the survey was not given access to many

[11] Francis J. Weber, "Printed Guides to Archival Centers for American Catholic History," *American Archivist* 34 (October 1969): 349–56, is an excellent review of these publications.

[12] The guides published as a result of this work are cited in ibid,, p. 354 n.34.

repositories, including that of the Archdiocese of Boston. Many church officials tended to stress the private nature of the records and feared the possibility of focusing undue attention on actions of their predecessors that may not have been particularly noble—this latter attitude undoubtedly a holdover from the lurid nativist publications in the nineteenth century that were so much a part of the corporate Catholic memory in the days before the Second Vatican Council. Access was often not encouraged because the diocese had little idea of what materials were in its possession. The 1974 statement on archives of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops argued specifically against these attitudes in urging greater access to diocesan records.

The situation is now quite different. There is a growing realization by both archivists and diocesan administrators that only those records that can legitimately be restricted because of the nature of the information they contain ought to be restricted. These would include records containing private or personal information relating to individuals still living or recently deceased, and information gathered in situations presumed to be confidential. Some archives restrict access to collections until they have been processed; while this may not be an ideal procedure, for many archives (especially those with only part-time staffing) it is a necessary compromise with reality. Naturally, one will find variations from place to place, as different archivists interpret differently the balancing of responsibility to preserve their records and to make them available. In the Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston, for example, the papers of both William Cardinal O'Connell (Archbishop, 1907–44) and Richard Cardinal Cushing (Archbishop, 1944–70) are open to research; in the Archives of the Archdiocese of New York, the papers of Francis Cardinal Spellman (Archbishop, 1939–67) are not yet open. In general, diocesan archives have adopted a rational and justifiable approach to the question of access, a tendency that will be aided by the increasing professionalism among diocesan archivists.

Although most dioceses devoting serious attention to the question of archives have decided to care for their records themselves, several dioceses have chosen a significantly different approach: the deposit of their archives in a local college or university. The archives of the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, have been deposited at Seton Hall University; the archives of the Diocese of Duluth, Minnesota, at the College of St. Scholastica; and the archives of the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, at Kent State University. The records are transferred from the diocesan offices to the college special collections department or archives, which processes them and makes them available for research. A detailed examination of these arrangements may be helpful.

The Youngstown diocese has a specific deposit agreement with Kent State.[13] The diocese was established in 1943, making it one of the younger dioceses in the country. Still, a large enough volume of unprocessed papers had accumulated by 1976 that some provision for their care was necessary.

[13] I am grateful to the Reverend Norbert C. Brockman, S.M., of the Bergamo Center, Dayton, Ohio, who made available this information provided by the Reverend James A. Clarke, vice chancellor of the Diocese of Youngstown. Professor James Geary of Kent State has also provided helpful details of this interesting arrangement between the church in Youngstown and a public university.

A flood had destroyed some duplicate microfilm of sacramental records held by the diocese, leading chancery officials to accept the university's offer to deposit some diocesan records there. Administrative files, including correspondence with parishes, schools, hospitals, and other institutions and organizations, were transferred to Kent State, which has arranged the records and makes them available for research. The property rights remain with the diocese, although the copyright has been given to the public. The university provides reference service to the records for the diocese. Confidential records, including items from the parish files and the personnel files of the diocesan clergy, were not transferred to Kent State but remain at the chancery. The agreement is valid for a five-year period and is subject to renewal. Both the diocese and the university have expressed their satisfaction with the arrangement.

The deposit of the archives of the Archdiocese of Newark at Seton Hall was part of a larger effort to promote the preservation of Catholic Church records in all of New Jersey.[14] In 1976, a New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission was established jointly by the university and the bishops of the state, with a view toward collecting church records and encouraging research in local Catholic history. Administrative records and the papers of bishops were transferred from the Newark chancery to Seton Hall, and a grant proposal was submitted to the records program of the NHPRC to support the other aspects of the commission's program, including the deposit of the records of the four other New Jersey dioceses (Camden, Paterson, Trenton, and the Greek rite Eparchy of Passaic). Although the proposal was not funded by the NHPRC, the deposit of non-current records from Newark continued and, with the appointment of a full-time archivist at Seton Hall, work on the arrangement and description of the records has proceeded.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to a deposit arrangement between a diocese and a university. Depending on the state of development of the university's archives, such an arrangement can insure that some professional care will be given to diocesan records, and that materials will be made available to researchers under reasonably adequate conditions. It helps solve the archival problem, especially for smaller dioceses not able to afford even part-time support for their archives. On the other hand, diocesan archival records tend to be scattered under such arrangements, with the attendant risks of loss and confusion. If confidential or personal records are retained by the diocese while other material is transferred to the university, the fundamental integrity of the archival collection is jeopardized. It may also make any continuing records management program for the diocese more difficult to sustain; most university archives find it difficult enough to administer the school's own records, without assuming responsibility for outside agencies as well. Still, the deposit of diocesan archives with a university (or other research institution) has been successful in a number of cases and should be considered when the only other choice is continued neglect of records.

An interesting hybrid of these two approaches to diocesan archives, the diocese providing its own care and the

[14] Professor Joseph F. Mahoney of the History Department at Seton Hall graciously provided the information concerning this effort.

enlisting of an outside agency, is the example of Catholic records in Texas.[15] Beginning in the early 1920s, under the auspices of the Texas Knights of Columbus Historical Commission, original documents and photostats of all kinds were assembled with a view toward documenting fully the state's Catholic history. In 1948, the bishops of the state organized the Texas Catholic Historical Society, and the Knights of Columbus donated their complete collection, which was moved to Amarillo. The idea of a central collection was still a forceful one, and the bishops began to deposit their diocesan records on a regular basis. In 1958, the collection moved to Austin, and each diocese committed itself to contributing $1,000 annually for the support of these Texas Catholic Archives, which very quickly became the centralized repository for the records of the eleven dioceses in Texas (Amarillo, Austin, Beaumont, Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Galveston-Houston, San Angelo, and San Antonio). Following publication of the Bishops Conference statement on archives in 1974, each diocese appointed its own archivist, thereby ending the centralization of records at Austin. The Texas Catholic Archives still exists and provides care for the records of church-related institutions and individuals. Each diocese, however, now assumes the responsibility for the care of its own archives.

This survey of current activities among diocesan archives presents one of the most encouraging pictures in the archival profession. From a few scattered centers of activity, something of a nationwide movement has developed. Several serious problems do, however, exist. The first involves overcoming the pattern of generations of archival inactivity by bishops and chancery administrators. Convincing those responsible for diocesan budgets that the archives has a legitimate claim to support requires sustained effort. The causes of this needed effort are not difficult to find: historical training in American seminaries ranges from inadequate to nonexistent, and too often it concentrates either on pious narratives of church "progress" or on local clerical gossip. Many church officials are therefore lacking in any kind of historical sense that leads naturally to an appreciation of archival activity. Diocesan archivists must work to overcome this inertia by seeking the aid of researchers and other archivists, and arguing the value of archival programs from several perspectives. The financial savings and increased efficiency of records management programs should be stressed, for example, and no diocesan anniversary should be allowed to pass unnoticed.

The question of professional education for diocesan archivists is also an important one. Many archivists find themselves facing their responsibilities without even the most basic introduction to modern archival theory and practice; many are appointed primarily on the basis of former careers as history teachers or writers of diocesan history. Diocesan archivists must begin to take advantage of the broad range of educational and training opportunities available from the National Archives, colleges and universities, and the meetings of regional and national professional associations. The plans for continued meetings of diocesan archivists, to be held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, can help meet

[15] I am grateful to Ofelia Tennant, Archivist of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, for this information concerning the history and current status of Catholic archives in Texas.

this need. Additional effort on the part of diocesan archivists and chancery officials will also be required.

Finally, archivists must seek to make an impact on church policy as it affects their work. As individuals, they should work with their own bishops and chancellors to develop policies that are neither too careless nor too restrictive. The legitimate demands of researchers and the requirements of sound archival practice cannot be disregarded. Archivists must not be passive recipients of archival policy, they must join in the formation of that policy. Collectively, they must begin to make recommendations to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on specific aspects of church archives and records management: the encouragement and support of archival programs, records management, access to diocesan archives, and professional training for archivists. At the 1979 Dayton meeting, Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati, chairman of the Bishops Conference Canon Law Committee, invited the archivists as a group to make such recommendations; and they must respond to this invitation adequately. The San Antonio meeting appointed a committee which is preparing several draft recommendations. The canons affecting archives are now being reconsidered along with the rest of church law by the Vatican's Commission on the Revision of the Canon Law. Diocesan archivists should be prepared to review the proposed changes for their bishops and to work toward the rational implementation of those changes in light of the American archival situation.[16]

In general, most of the problems facing diocesan archivists are similar to those facing the archival profession as a whole: archivists must broaden their base of support by solidifying their professional standards and activities. Still, the timing for the current surge of interest in diocesan archives is particularly auspicious. Church officials are becoming interested in making the records under their control available at the very time increased numbers of researchers are becoming interested in exploring them. The research community can help promote these efforts by supporting diocesan archives where they now exist and by working for their establishment elsewhere. Archivists, both individually and collectively, can also help by encouraging activity in their own region and by drawing diocesan archivists into professional activities. Increasing the level of professionalism among diocesan archivists can only help church officials come to a better understanding and appreciation of the importance of their archives.

[16] The Reverend Dennis W. Morrow, Archivist of the Diocese of Grand Rapids, has prepared a detailed analysis and critique of the proposed canons.

JAMES M. O'TOOLE is the archivist of the Archdiocese of Boston.