

Catholic Archives in a Public Institution: A Case Study of the Arrangement Between Kent State University and the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio

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Abstract: Perhaps the most lasting effect of America's bicentennial was to encourage individuals and organizations to think more carefully of preserving and making available their historically valuable records. Consistent with this spirit, the American Catholic Church pursued active steps to ensure that its archival records would receive a higher priority than in years past. By 1974, a special committee had prepared and submitted a "Document of Ecclesiastical Archives." It would serve as the cornerstone for Catholic Archives from the mid-1970s onward. Of the many dioceses responding to the need to take better care of the records in their custody, some added support to established archival operations. Others either initiated programs or investigated and implemented alternatives.

This study examines the special arrangement between Kent State University and the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio. Among its purposes is that of providing a model for other public institutions and dioceses that may wish to consider entering a similar arrangement.

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NEARLY A DECADE AGO, Thomas W. Spalding identified many of the major problems that researchers might expect when using American Catholic archival material. In addition to the vast amount of material that existed in the arcane windings of the "largest number of archdioceses and dioceses" in the world outside Italy, a researcher might expect to "contend with a bewildering variety of policies and procedures in regard to the use of Catholic archives and collections in the United States." Spalding also bemoaned the absence of comprehensive bibliographic tools that were needed to locate extant collections; the problems involved in obtaining access to them; and the inadequate, but understandable, conditions under which most Catholic Church archives were maintained. Depending on the diocese, accessibility to collections ranged from "too easy access . . . without sufficient safeguards against irresponsible use" to no access at all. Spalding also commented generally on the individuals assigned the responsibility of servicing diocesan archival collections. More often than not, because of other responsibilities, these records custodians had neither "the time, the temperament, nor the training" to handle a collection. A researcher might expect "to work with chancellors, assistant superiors, or other harried subalterns" rather than with a professional archivist. With some exceptions, the physical conditions and facilities in which the archives were kept also needed improvement.¹

Spalding's article appeared at approximately the same time that a proposal was being considered by the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio and the American History Research Center at Kent State University. By the spring of 1976, these exploratory discussions culminated in an "interesting arrangement" whereby the diocese agreed to deposit its inactive chancery records at the university.² A brief overview of some significant turning points in the area of Catholic archives, especially the activity that has taken place since the mid-1970s, will be given, and then the relationship between the Youngstown Diocese and Kent State will be explained. Among the areas examined are the exact terms of the agreement, matters involving access, and the resulting benefits to both institutions. This study can perhaps be used as a basis for other dioceses and public archival repositories to enter into similar joint endeavors.

Few institutions can rival the long-term influence of the Catholic Church in American history. Whether in serving as a focal point of nativist hostility, in Americanizing ethnic groups, or in withstanding pressure from organizations favoring personal choice in the sensitive area of abortion, the Church has had a varied and diverse impact on the national destiny. The Catholic Church has been active in the United States since the founding of Saint Augustine, Florida, in 1565; but, when compared to the early and sustained efforts of other denominations, it has done little to

¹Thomas W. Spalding, "American Catholic Archives and Historical Research," *Catholic Library World* 47 (July 1975): 18-19. A diocese can be defined as the key, though not the highest, unit in the Catholic Church since its spiritual head, the bishop, has the authority to establish policies and procedures for the several parishes under his jurisdiction. See also Thomas T. McAvoy, "Catholic Archives and Manuscript Collections," *American Archivist* 24 (October 1961): 409-414.

²Quoted from James M. O'Toole, "Catholic Diocesan Archives: A Renaissance in Progress," *American Archivist* 43 (Summer 1980): 284-293, note 13.

preserve and make available its vast documentary heritage.³ Although a few interested and farsighted Catholic churchmen in the late nineteenth century took steps to prevent further destruction of important source materials, they failed to generate much concern from their peers and successors. This nascent movement did result, however, in the establishment of a few Catholic archives, such as the one at the University of Notre Dame.⁴

Tenets 375–384 of the Canon Law promulgated in 1917 by Pope Benedict XV require that each diocese establish and maintain an archives. Some diocesan officials, however, were unable to meet their responsibility in this area. Others tried to comply with this official requirement, but such efforts resulted usually in a fragmentary, sporadic approach. Most dioceses either ignored or paid lip service to the tenets. Among the problems they faced were inadequate space, shortage of funds, and the absence of trained personnel.

By the mid-1970s, however, a change in attitude occurred as Catholic prelates began to show more concern for the archival records in their possession. Under the auspices of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and with the en-

couragement of leading church archivists, the Conference's Committee for the Bicentennial produced the "Document on Ecclesiastical Archives." Completed in November 1974, it would serve as "the impetus for the establishment of many new diocesan programs."⁵

The timing could not have been more auspicious. With preparations underway for America's bicentennial, communities and institutions alike became more cognizant of the need to locate, collect, preserve, and make available materials that could help document their contributions to the nation's past. In the area of Catholic archives, support arrived from two other directions as well. Shortly after the close of the bicentennial, the Vatican admonished American bishops to make diocesan archives more available to scholarly researchers instead of treating them as "private property."⁶ Concomitant with this concern, scholarly interests had also broadened in the preceding decade. No longer did historians focus principally on political or administrative topics. Instead, they required new source material for their qualitatively or quantitatively based studies. They showed more interest in the attitudes and habits of common people and less in the elite members of socie-

³See, for example, Dorman H. Winfrey, "Protestant Episcopal Church Archives," *American Archivist* 24 (October, 1961): 431–433; William E. Lind, "Methodist Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 24 (October 1961): 435–440; Edie Hedlin, "Ohio Mormon Church Records Kept in Utah and Missouri Reveal Interesting History," *Ohio Archivist* 5 (Spring 1974): 4–5; Anthony W. C. Phelps, "Ohio Episcopal Church Records Reveal Long and Diverse History," *Ohio Archivist* 5 (Fall 1974): 10–11; Les Hough, "The Unitarian-Universalist Church Has Deep Ohio Roots," *Ohio Archivist* 6 (Spring 1975): 11; and David E. Horn, "A Church Archives: The United Methodist Church in Indiana," *Georgia Archive* 8 (Fall 1980): 41–53. For an overview of some of the problems that a church archivist can expect to encounter, see Sister Jo Ann Euper, "Starting a Religious Congregation Archives: Administrative Formulas For Better or Worse," *Midwestern Archivist* 5 (1980): 21–28.

⁴John Francis Bannon, "The Saint Louis University Collection of Jesuitica Americana," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 37 (February 1957): 82–88; Henry J. Browne, "The American Catholic Tradition," *American Archivist* 14 (April 1951): 127–139; Paul J. Foik, "Catholic Archives of America," *Catholic Historical Review* 1 (April 1915): 63–64; Thomas F. O'Connor, "Catholic Archives of the United States," *Catholic Historical Review* 31 (January 1946): 414–430; Francis J. Weber, "Chancery Archives," *American Archivist* 28 (April 1965): 255–260; and Ralph Wright, "Something New For Historians [Notre Dame Archives]," *Catholic Educational Review* 47 (June 1949): 380–383.

⁵O'Toole, "Catholic Diocesan Archives," p. 287.

⁶"Vatican Criticizes U.S. Bishops on Handling of Archives," *SAA Newsletter*, (July 1977): 2.

ty. Researchers in such new interest fields as demography and ethnicity soon learned that sacramental records could "tell us much about who Catholics were and how they practiced their faith. Also such records [would] help historians trace the social and economic movement of Catholics from the development of neighborhood life in the large cities . . . to the present day dispersal to suburbia."⁷

Whether or not scholarly demands preceded the issuance of the "Document on Ecclesiastical Archives" is academic, for there exists "A Renaissance in Progress" where diocesan archives are concerned. As James M. O'Toole observed, the 1970s not only witnessed phenomena such as the founding of a Center for the Study of American Catholicism, the development of a greater group identity among church archivists, and the appearance of a *Catholic Archives Newsletter*; but this "awakening" also spread to some 170 Catholic dioceses in the United States. Especially since 1974, many dioceses have given "at least part-time care to their archives."⁸

In this same period, dioceses with more established archival programs have arranged to publicize their holdings even more than previously through new or updated institutional guides or entries in sources such as the *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*.⁹ Other dioceses initiated archival programs; and at least

one, the Archdiocese of Boston, did so with governmental support.¹⁰ Another three followed a different approach by arranging to transfer the physical custody of their archival records to institutions of higher learning. The Archdiocese of Newark deposited records at Seton Hall University, while the Diocese of Duluth placed its archives at the College of Saint Scholastica. The most intriguing arrangement involved the Diocese of Youngstown and a secular institution, Kent State University.¹¹

Located in northeastern Ohio, Kent State consists of the Kent campus and seven regional campuses. The university has a student population in excess of 25,000 and offers degree programs ranging from the doctoral to the associate level. It is also one of eight charter members of the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers.

Under the Ohio Network agreement, Kent State is charged with identifying and, where possible, accessioning significant archival and manuscript collections from an eight-county area in Ohio. As a charter member of the Ohio Network, and with the historical spirit that prevailed in the mid-1970s, and with the other collections already committed to the American History Research Center, Kent State was in an ideal position to approach the Youngstown Diocese about the feasibility of transferring its archival records to the center.¹²

⁷William Halsey, "Historical Imagination and the Archivist," *Catholic Library World* 49 (July-August 1977): 29. Sacramental records are maintained in each parish and include information on baptisms, first communions, confirmations, marriages, and deaths that occur in that parish. The records are confidential and are distinct from parish office files, which include materials such as correspondence, notes, and photographs.

⁸O'Toole, pp. 284, 289.

⁹See, for example, Rev. Barnabas Diekmeyer, *Guide to the Catholic Archives at San Antonio* (San Antonio: Diocese of San Antonio, 1978). For an earlier overview of available finding aids, see also Francis J. Weber, "Printed Guides to Archival Centers for American Catholic History," *American Archivist* 32 (October 1969): 349-356.

¹⁰"A Model Records Project: The Boston Archdiocese," *Annotation: The Newsletter of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission* (July 1979): 2.

¹¹O'Toole, p. 290.

¹²For more detailed information on this repository, see James W. Geary, "KSU Archives: A Synopsis of the First Decade," *Society of Ohio Archivists Newsletter* 11 (Spring 1980): 2-6. The eight counties are Ashtabula, Carroll, Columbiana, Harrison, Jefferson, Mahoning, Portage, and Trumbull.

At the time, there existed other favorable circumstances that worked to Kent State's advantage. In the wake of the 1974 Bishops Conference, diocesan officials in Youngstown already were considering various alternatives on how best to handle the archival material in their custody. Hiring a full-time professional archivist and placing the records in a better physical facility were out of the question for the diocese because of the costs involved. They realized, nevertheless, that something needed to be done since a flood had destroyed some material just a few years earlier.

Diocesan officials were very responsive when a representative of Kent State first approached them in the summer of 1975. Not only did the Kent State Archives enjoy an impeccable reputation, but also the distance between Kent and Youngstown is only about forty miles. Moreover, five of the six counties for which the diocese was responsible fell within Kent State's jurisdiction under the Network charter. Only one fell outside of Kent State's area. This factor, however, did not pose a serious problem. The diocesan headquarters were located in Mahoning County, and a preponderant number of the counties coincided with Kent State's collecting area. In addition, the archivists involved did not question the importance of maintaining the archival integrity of the records as opposed to violating the collection's provenance by a strict adherence to geographical boundaries.

Similarly, Kent State expressed enthusiasm at the prospect of accessioning this collection for its archives. Although the Youngstown Diocese was not established until 1943, its archives contained a wealth of information of potential research value. Since it was created out of

the Diocese of Cleveland, the Youngstown Diocese naturally assumed control of parishes in the six-county region over which it had been given jurisdiction. The importance of parish office files and sacramental records for scholarly research could not be disputed; and those in the Youngstown Diocese represented more than 125 parishes and, depending on the parish, date from 1830 to the 1970s.¹³ Other inactive chancery records, which were subsequently transferred to the center, included the files of Bishops James McFadden, James Malone, and Emmet Walsh. Materials from Vatican II, numerous photographs, records pertaining to various social service organizations and religious societies, proceedings of conferences, official correspondence files, and records of committee meetings comprised but a few examples of the types of materials that would arrive in the American History Research Center by 1981. Not only could a number of significant studies be done using the entire collection, but also parts of the collection could be used to augment research in other holdings at the Kent Center as well as in other repositories.

Given the collection's importance and anticipated frequent use by researchers, the Diocese of Youngstown records received a high priority for processing. The center retained about 60 percent of the 125 cubic feet of records transferred. All unwanted material was returned directly to the diocese. By comparative standards, processing the collection was relatively easy. The materials arrived in generally good order, which facilitated arrangement and description. Where possible, provenance was observed. A standardized format was established to be used in preparing an inventory for

¹³For uses of parish records, see, for example, Lucinda Kay Arnold, "Our God, Our Country, Our Rights! The National Parish in Youngstown, Ohio, 1853-1943" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Kent State University, 1980); and Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church; New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 173, 175.

each of the fifty-four distinct records series; and a copy of each was given to the Youngstown Diocese.

Inventories were done for several reasons. Not only did they help to establish bibliographic control over the entire collection, but they also facilitated the use of the materials. The archival staff used the inventories to locate and send a copy of any item that the diocese later determined it needed. Diocesan officials retained all current and heavily used materials in order to have more immediate access and retrieval than they could have had if these records had been placed at Kent State. Aside from these practical considerations, the preparation of inventories was also required in the agreement between the Youngstown Diocese and the American History Research Center at Kent State.

The complete details of this agreement deserve mention. Perhaps most importantly, it was to remain in effect for five years. At the conclusion of this period, the agreement could be "either renewed or terminated unilaterally" with thirty days advance notice. The diocese agreed to transfer inactive records to the American History Research Center, but the university reserved the right "to return any material deemed unusable for historical research." The diocese retained all property rights, and materials were placed on deposit only. "Unless otherwise specified," the diocese agreed to dedicate to the public such literary rights and copyrights as it held in the sources transferred. The center agreed to provide reference service for this collection to the donor. Further, the diocese permitted the university, at its discretion, to allow duplication of any unrestricted materials either for interlibrary loan or for placement at other repositories "subject [only] to the identical terms

promulgated" in the original agreement.

Potentially, the most difficult and problematic section of the agreement to implement would involve the matter of access to sensitive material. To the credit of diocesan officials, the sentiments of Pope Leo XIII were followed as a general rule. A century ago, as the Pontiff reflected on the need to examine more fully the Church's contribution to society, he quoted Cicero's statement "that the first law of history is not to dare to utter falsehood; the second, not to fear to speak the truth; and moreover, no room must be left for suspicion of partiality or prejudice."¹⁴

With the exception of restricted materials requiring written permission from either the Bishop or the Chancellor, the Diocese of Youngstown authorized general access to qualified scholars and graduate-level students who desired to use parts of the collection for their research. Of the fifty-four record series that ultimately arrived in the center, the diocese restricted access to less than a dozen of them. This limited number involved sources such as sacramental records, parish office files, the personal papers of bishops, and materials that might compromise an individual's privacy. To this author's knowledge, however, the Youngstown Diocese has never denied a request for access to any restricted material needed for scholarly research. It also has been liberal in granting permission to bona fide representatives from a parish who needed access to local files, but not the sacramental records, of a particular parish. Such requests have stemmed usually from an individual preparing a parish history as part of a forthcoming anniversary celebration.

In the area of birth, marriage, and other sacramental records, the diocese

¹⁴Quoted from minutes of the 15th General Meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 18-22 November 1974, p. 65.

has been quite strict in limiting access solely to scholars, graduate students, and church officials. This policy has understandably provoked the ire of some users, particularly genealogists. Although the diocese has exemplified a dual desire of encouraging use of the materials while simultaneously protecting individual privacy, it nevertheless insists on its prerogative in limiting access to certain records. At the same time it occasionally has granted permission to an individual who wanted to learn more about an ancestor. To avoid potential problems in this area, however, only the archives can release information from the parish records and then only under very carefully prescribed conditions. Although no personal or direct access to a parish's sacramental records is granted to a genealogist, the diocese and the center have followed a practice whereby the user submits the name of the ancestor on which he or she wishes information as well as the approximate time period and the parish in which the ancestor was active. If the user obtains written permission from an appropriate diocesan official, then, subject to other demands on and commitments of the center staff, the desired information will be retrieved for the user. Fulfilling such a request is contingent strictly on securing diocesan approval and having the archival staff and time available to peruse the records of a particular parish for a specified time period. If and when the information is located, a letter is sent to the genealogist in which only the extant documentation on the ancestor is noted. A copy of the letter is also sent to the diocese.

The agreement between the Diocese of Youngstown and the Kent State American History Research Center worked so well after its inception in 1975 that in the fall of 1980 the two institutions renewed

their agreement for another five-year period. In large part, the success of this special program has been due to the fact that both parties have honored all commitments to the letter.

On a more practical level, distinct advantages have accrued to both institutions. The diocese, for example, has an inexpensive way to preserve its archives under professional care and supervision and, significantly, with a much greater degree of access and retrieval than existed previously. Although a records management program is not in operation, nor is one contemplated as an extension of this agreement, at least the diocese can recover information from its historical records much more easily through the perusal of an inventory than through a *de visu* examination of numerous boxes of records. In addition to improved bibliographic control, the diocese also acquired a place to store, without cost, a security microfilm copy of its sacramental records. After the diocese transferred the film to Kent State, the staff at the center ascertained that several were either damaged or missing from the 477 reels that should have existed. Diocesan officials investigated and discovered that much of the film had been either destroyed or severely damaged following a flood. In order to ensure that a complete second microfilm copy of these vital records existed at another location, the diocese arranged to reproduce 290 reels of film and deposited the duplicate set at the center. Such episodes only reinforce the point that, while it might be desirable for each diocese to have its own archives, "the deposit of diocesan archives with a university . . . has been successful . . . and should be considered when the only other choice is continued neglect of records."¹⁵

The American History Research

¹⁵O'Toole, p. 291.

Center has benefited as well from this accession. Such a collection not only brings prestige to a repository, but it also serves as an additional incentive for other individuals and organizations to donate their records. Also, the Youngstown diocesan records directly support graduate and other scholarly studies. At least one thesis was based on a significant segment of the collection. Other users have consulted parts of it to complement their research in other areas such as local or labor history in northeastern and eastern Ohio. Scholars from other institutions also have visited Kent State to use the collection. Among other advantages, and perhaps most importantly, this collection contributed to Kent State's commitment under the Ohio Network charter to collect, preserve, and make available significant source

materials from the area for which it is responsible.

Beyond these more parochial considerations, Kent State and the Diocese of Youngstown have demonstrated that religion is no barrier to cooperation between two institutions that share an educational mission. Just as the church is interested in making its contribution known more widely to society, so too is higher education interested in advancing that knowledge. Whether an arrangement between another Catholic diocese and a public institution can work as successfully as the one described here is for others to explore and decide. The foundation has been established, however, in a uniquely cooperative relationship between the Diocese of Youngstown and the American History Research Center at Kent State University.