

The International Scene

A New Access System for the Vatican Archives

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Abstract: The Vatican Archives, one of the major national and religious archives of the world, contains records from as early as the ninth century and continuous documentation of the church administration from the twelfth century to the present. Although a variety of specialized guides describe various parts of the archives, the lack of a comprehensive inventory of holdings makes access difficult for researchers. A team of archivists from the University of Michigan has begun a project to create a comprehensive, provenance-based access system, working from existing guides and inventories. The author, who is a member of the team, summarizes the history of the Vatican Archives and describes the plan of work for the project.

About the author: Leonard A. Coombs is associate archivist at the Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan. He has been associated since 1987 with the University of Michigan project to create a new access system for the Vatican Archives. A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the Midwest Archives Conference, Chicago, May 1989.

THE VATICAN ARCHIVES, OFFICIALLY the Archivio Segreto Vaticano or Vatican Secret Archives, is one of the major national and religious archives of the world. It contains some 50,000 linear feet of official records of the popes and of the central administration of the Catholic Church. Because of the continuing role of the church and the popes over the millennia—on the political stage as well as in the life of faith—the archives is important not only for the study of religious history but also for the study of political, economic, cultural, and social life throughout the world. Continuous documentation of the church administration can be found in the archives from the twelfth century to the present, while the earliest documents date from the ninth century.

Unfortunately, the access system at the Vatican Archives is imperfect. There is no comprehensive inventory of holdings. The organization and arrangement of the archives' unpublished inventories, as well as those of the records themselves, are not apparent to the neophyte researcher. It was this less-than-perfect access system that led Francis X. Blouin, Jr., director of the Bentley Historical Library, to propose a University of Michigan project to create a new, provenance-based access system for the archives.

The checkered history of the archives has had a great effect on the development of the current access system.¹ Pope Innocent III, a lawyer who reigned at the end of the twelfth century, was the first to regularize the church's archival policy. The earliest extant registers of outgoing letters begin with his reign. The archives in this period were merely a part of the pope's library. Neither the archives nor

the administration they served was formalized in any continuing way.

In the centuries following Innocent's record-keeping innovation, the archives suffered great losses, partly because the records were packed up and moved with the pope when he travelled outside of Rome. In the fourteenth century alone, the archives were moved from Rome to Perugia, Assisi, Avignon, and later Geneva, with portions being left behind at each stop. Finally, at the end of the Great Schism, most of the archives were moved from Geneva back to Rome between 1419 and 1422, by Pope Martin V.

Later in the fifteenth century a distinction began to be drawn between the pope's library and the archives. The most precious archival documents were moved to the Castel Sant' Angelo, the papal castle near the Vatican Palace. This move proved beneficial to the archives in 1527. During the sack of Rome by the armies of the German Emperor Charles V the papal library was looted and the streets were strewn with papal documents and manuscripts, but the archives in the Castel Sant' Angelo were untouched.

The beginnings of the modern Vatican Archives, along with the origins of the church administration that it documents, came as part of the church reforms of the Counter-Reformation. In 1565 Pope Pius IV set up a central church archives in the Vatican Palace, in order to make access easier for administrators. His successor, Pius V, decreed that private archives be searched for registers and other papal documents, and that inventories be made of the archives in their various storage places. The archives in this era were seen as a source of the pope's temporal power. As a Vatican major-domo of the time pointed out, "Old documents are non-military weapons for holding on to the property we have acquired."²

¹The following summary of the history of the Vatican Archives is based primarily on the brief history found in Leonard E. Boyle, *A Survey of the Vatican Archives and of its Medieval Holdings* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1972), 7-12, and the longer, but still relatively brief, history in Owen Chadwick, *Catholicism and History: The Opening of the Vatican Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

²Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes, from*



Figure 1: Interior courtyard in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano (Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan)

In the same period, Pope Sixtus V defined the modern administrative system of the Roman Curia in the constitution *Immensa Dei*, issued in 1588. With this system, consisting of congregations (similar to executive departments), tribunals (similar to courts), and offices (especially secretaries), the cardinals were reduced in a way to agents of the popes, members of a bureaucracy. By his action, Sixtus V made the church a prototype of the modern constitutional, bureaucratic state.³

the Close of the Middle Ages (London: Hodges, 1891-1953), 25:101-102, quoted in Chadwick, *Catholicism and History*, 9.

³H. Outram Evennett, *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 114-115; Paolo Prodi, *The Papal Prince: One Body and Two Souls: The Papal Monarchy in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2-3.

Because it was more convenient to have his archives in the Vatican than in the nearby castle, Pope Paul V built the present archives building in the Vatican Palace in 1610. The first records, transferred from the Vatican Library, the Castel Sant' Angelo, and other places, were stored in specially designed cabinets, or *armaria*, where they are still found today.

But all official records did not become part of the archives. In spite of the formal organization of the Curia, until 1692 the administration of the Vatican was conducted primarily by a relative of the pope, known as the Cardinal nephew. When the pope died and the nephew left office, his papers remained with his family archives, not with the Vatican Archives. As a result, important administrative records are scattered among the archives of the great Roman families.

The Vatican Archives was considered strictly administrative in the early centuries, open only to the pope, the Secretary of State, or someone acting on their orders. Occasionally it was open to others. In 1737, for instance, Cardinal Acquaviva, acting for the king of Spain, saw the secret letters of the Secretary of State on payment of a suitable fee to the archives staff. The organization of the records was not well developed, due to the small size of the staff, which sometimes led to embarrassment for the archives. During the negotiations of the 1640s leading to the Peace of Westphalia, the papal envoy Chigi requested copies of documents relating to the papal protest against the terms of the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, but the archivists could not find them. Beginning in 1740 Pope Benedict XIV provided more support for the archives, increasing the size of the staff and encouraging the development of indexes by archivist Giuseppe Garampi.⁴

⁴The Vatican Archives uses the term *index* generically to refer to its finding aids.

Unfortunately for the archives, the intervention of Napoleon followed shortly after Garampi's work, leading to disruption of the archives and destruction of records. The bulk of the archives was removed to Paris on the order of Napoleon in 1810 and 1811, as part of a plan to create a consolidated central archives of Europe. French archivists saw the archives as a powerful tool to combat the religious and political power of the pope. They began to reorganize the archives, but did not complete the task.

Some records disappeared while the archives remained in France, primarily those relating to French history and those useful for political attacks on the pope, such as the record of the trial of Galileo before the Inquisition. A much more significant loss of records took place when the archives were returned to the Vatican after the Congress of Vienna. After having been reminded of the power of the records, the papal commissioners supervising their return to Rome deliberately destroyed part of the archives of the Inquisition. Other records were lost in transit. Altogether perhaps a third of the archives never returned to Rome.

The French reorganization of the archives resulted in partial indexes to their contents, and whetted historians' appetites for access to the records. The archives remained officially closed to researchers, under threat of excommunication, after their return to Rome. Even the indexes were closed to outsiders. But some scholars gained access to particular records through personal negotiation with the archivist, and payment of a proper fee. Whether because of the disorder introduced during the French period or due to a lack of trained staff, the organization of the records was poor in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1870 Italian armies occupied Rome and annexed the Papal States to Italy, ending the pope's political power over the city. The question then arose whether the archives would be nationalized. To forestall this, both the archives and the Vatican Li-

brary were completely closed, and their doors walled up.

The complete closure turned out to be only a pause before a great liberalization. As part of a program of reconciling the Vatican to European governments, the archives was opened to qualified researchers by Pope Leo XIII in 1881. The volume of new accessions increased as a result of the increased visibility of the archives after its opening, but the staff could not keep pace with the increase.

Since the archives was opened to scholars, much of the work done to make archival material accessible has been through the work of the foreign schools in Rome. The *École française de Rome* began calendaring papal letters even before the archives was officially open, and has been responsible for the publication of a great deal of other documentation. Schools and institutes of other European countries have published series of edited documents, calendars, and guides to resources relating to their countries. But these projects have never been coordinated, so there has been much overlap among the work of the various

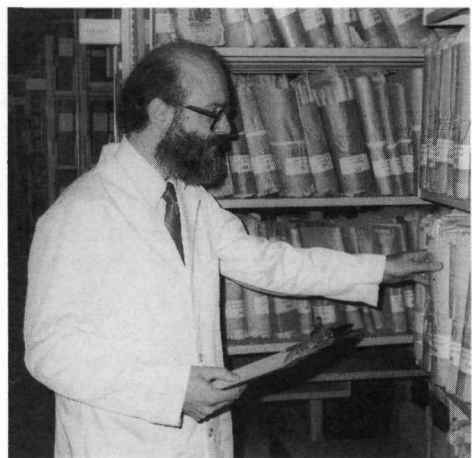


Figure 2: Leonard Coombs examining documents in the Vatican Archives (Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan)

schools. In addition, their reliance on an item-level approach to the description of records has made the goal of a complete guide to the holdings of the Vatican Archives seem extremely remote. Although the specialized guides can be very useful, the lack of a comprehensive guide makes access difficult for researchers.

One major caveat in using the archives is that records created after 1922 are currently closed to research. That date coincides with the end of the pontificate of Benedict XV. There is no set procedure for opening records. At the pope's discretion, the records of the reign of the following pope, Pius XI, from 1922 to 1939, will be opened.

The most comprehensive English language guide to the archives is Leonard Boyle's *A Survey of the Vatican Archives and of its Medieval Holdings*.⁵ Boyle concentrated on describing the archives' medieval records but he also provided an overview of the entire holdings of the archives. The format is typical of Vatican Archives guides. It is arranged roughly according to provenance and includes brief record descriptions at the series level, with references to inventories and published descriptions. The key parts of the description are the correct name of the series, which is necessary for retrieval, inclusive dates, and size. Boyle attempted at least to mention all holdings, but since he was interested chiefly in medieval records, the largest part of the work is devoted to medieval registers and other early records. The guide includes little information on more recent material, and almost no information about nineteenth- and twentieth-century records. During a survey by the University of Michigan team of the records of the Vatican Secretary of State in the archives, almost half of

the record series inspected had not been mentioned by Boyle.⁶ Many of these were recent accessions, but a major difficulty for Boyle was that he never had access to the archives stacks. He had to base his guide on the existing inventories and on information gleaned from the staff.

The best guide to the archives' modern records is Lajos Pásztor's *Guida delle fonti per la storia dell' America Latina*.⁷ Pásztor concentrated on records relating to Latin America, but he described all series that include any information relating to his topic, so this work provides much more detail than Boyle about eighteenth- and nineteenth-century records in general.

A classic earlier guide is Karl August Fink's *Das vatikanische Archiv*.⁸ This work is an attempt at a complete description of the holdings, but it was written at a time when all records created after 1846 were closed, so it does not describe records after that date.

Many other guides have been published to describe records dealing with particular subjects, geographical areas, or time periods, but no other modern guides attempt to cover the entire holdings of the Vatican Archives.

Boyle, Pásztor, Fink, and the other published guides lead the researcher to the index room of the archives, which contains various manuscript inventories, calendars, and summaries of holdings. These vary greatly in quality and legibility. Some of the indexes were prepared at the time of records creation, others were prepared by archivists or researchers at a later date.

⁶During the pilot project, the University of Michigan team included Francis X. Blouin, Jr., Leonard A. Coombs, and Thomas E. Powers.

⁷Lajos Pásztor, *Guida delle fonti per la storia dell' America Latina: Negli archivi della Santa Sede e negli archivi ecclesiastici d'Italia* (Vatican City: Archivio Vaticano, 1970).

⁸Karl August Fink, *Das vatikanische Archiv: Einführung in die Bestände und ihre Erforschung*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Regenberg, 1951).

⁵Leonard E. Boyle, *A Survey of the Vatican Archives and of its Medieval Holdings* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1972).



Figure 3: The oldest stack in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano (Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan)

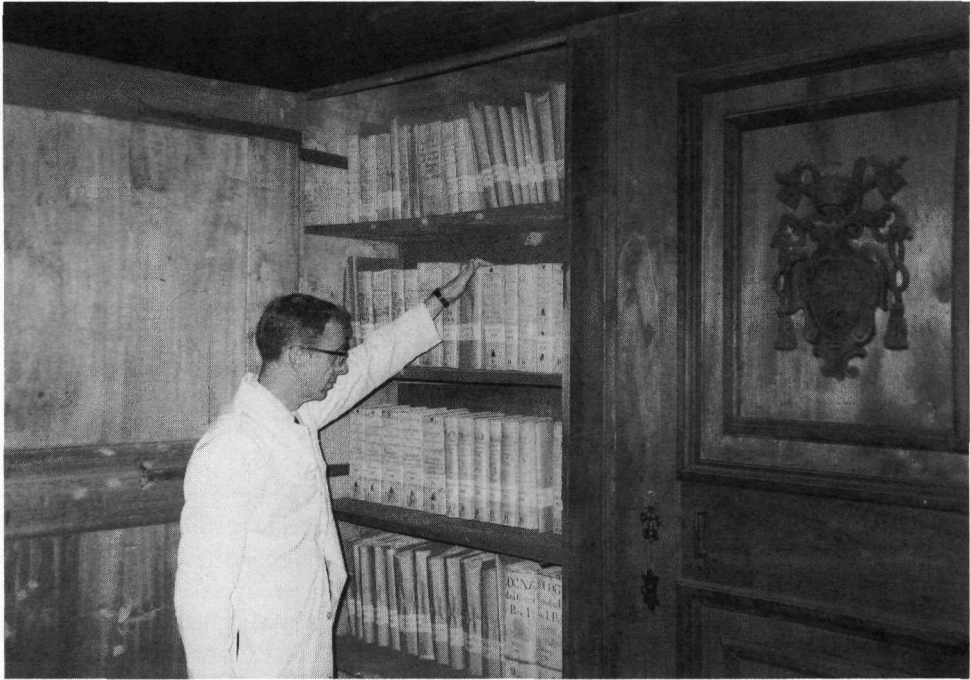


Figure 5: Thomas Powers in the Vatican Archives (Courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan)

Josef Metzler, prefect of the archives. Metzler was interested in improving research access to the archives. The prefect of the Vatican Library, Father Leonard Boyle (who had written the major English guide to the archives) was also committed to improving access to the library's collections, and was in the process of installing a Geac integrated library system. Metzler gave Blouin's proposal his complete support, going so far as to promise unlimited access to the archives' stacks, a privilege that had not been given to Boyle or earlier writers of guides to the archives' holdings.

After reviewing the current means of access to the archives, the University of Michigan team proposed that a comprehensive catalog of the holdings at the series and record group level, based on the existing system of guides and inventories could be created, saying that this could be done in a reasonable amount of time. What is

chiefly lacking in the current system is a sense of the overall structure of the archives, the relationships between one series and another, between records and inventories, and between records and the agencies that created them, along with information about records that have not been inventoried. The team did not propose to relocate or change any records or inventories in the archives or eliminate any existing finding aids or indexes in the creation of this new catalog, a factor that reassured many who are familiar with the current access system.

The most efficient means of creating this new catalog was to divide the work into two parts: first, by studying the administrative history of the Vatican, to develop agency histories of all records-creating agencies; and second, by studying the existing guides and inventories, and later the records themselves, to create series-level

record descriptions. The result of these two activities would be two databases, which would then be matched and combined to create a comprehensive guide to the holdings of the archives and of the agencies that had created the records.

In order to test the plan, a pilot project was carried out in the fall of 1987. In that project the team surveyed and created a guide to the records of the pope's Secretary of State, the chief foreign policy officer of the Vatican since the sixteenth century.

The team first developed a preliminary database of agency histories, based on sources available at the University of Michigan, and of series-level record descriptions, based on the published archives guides. The database was created with MicroMARC:amc software, utilizing the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format. The team then visited the Vatican Archives to survey the actual records and match them with the unpublished inventories. The database was revised and updated to reflect the new information obtained in the survey. This pilot project confirmed that the existing guides were terribly incomplete, that it was possible to locate, inspect, and describe the records in a reasonable amount of time, and that it was reasonable to apply the methods of modern archival description to the records of the Vatican administration.

Based on the results of the successful pilot project, a proposal to complete the catalog of the archives was prepared, and was funded by the Getty Grant Program and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The work began in September 1989, after the archives reopened from its two-month summer holiday.

At that time the project archivist, Elizabeth Yakel, and the project historian, Katherine Gill, both based in Rome, began to work their way through the archives' stacks, surveying each shelf and comparing holdings with the existing inventories to

prepare, for the first time, a comprehensive inventory of the archives' holdings. Most of this effort is concentrated on the records created since the Vatican's modern administrative system was developed by Sixtus V in the late sixteenth century. Yakel and Gill then create new catalog records for all new record series they identify and revise the catalog records already in the MicroMARC:amc database, adding detailed information about organization and arrangement, scope and content, and finding aids.

The database revisions are forwarded to the University of Michigan, where Leonard Coombs and Thomas Powers review them for consistency and perform authority work on name headings and access points. At the same time, Sister Claudia Carlen works at the University of Michigan to complete the database of agency histories that was begun in the pilot project. Access will be provided to the records through form and function terms as well as by agency names and geographical names. Records will be transferred from the MicroMARC:amc database into the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) database, and tapes will be furnished to the Vatican Library for loading into their Geac system. At this time the archives has no automated system, but it is wired for Geac. In addition, the agency history database, the series descriptions, or both, may be published in book form.

When the project is completed in the fall of 1990, access to records described in existing inventories will be enhanced through expanded, consistent description and through the added context provided by the history of the agencies that created the records. Records that are not currently described anywhere will become accessible for the first time. The project will provide researchers with the first comprehensive, integrated guide to the holdings of one of the most important national and religious archives in the world.