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Online Access to American Diocesan Archives: Current State and Lessons for Other Repositories

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Introduction:

A 1997 circular letter from the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church said that “In the mind of the Church, archives are places of memory of the Christian community and storehouses of culture for the new evangelization.”¹ This is true of the archives and libraries of all denominations; they are the repositories of a church’s history and thus a vital resource for understanding a church’s future. As such, it is essential that the official repositories of an organized religion, such as Catholic diocesan archives, be accessible to scholarly researchers, genealogists, members of the faith, and other patrons.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the Code of Canon Law sets forth several requirements for archives at the diocesan level. Canon Law requires that:

- “All diocesan and parochial documents must be protected with the greatest care. In every curia there is to be established in a safe place a diocesan archive or storeroom in which the instruments and writings which refer to both the spiritual and temporal affairs of the diocese, properly arranged and diligently secured, are to be safeguarded” (cc. 486, §1-2).² In other words, there must be an archival repository established for the diocese.
- “The diocesan bishop is also to see to it that there is an historical archive in the diocese in which documents having an historical value are diligently preserved and systematically arranged” (cc. 491, §2).³ There is a value to historical items related to the Church, and not just the sacramental records and other official documents. These items may be stored in the diocesan archives or somewhere else within the diocese—a vague requirement that opens up the possibilities for records relating to the history of the Church to be stored at university archives or government-affiliated archives.
- “There is to be an inventory or catalog of the documents contained in the archive” (cc. 486, §3).⁴ At least rudimentary finding aids must be created.
- “It is a right of interested parties to obtain personally or through their proxy an authentic written copy or a photocopy of documents which are public by their nature and which pertain to the status of such persons” (cc. 487, §2).⁵ At least some of the materials in the archives must be made available to researchers.

Outside of Canon Law, what was then known as the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops echoed many of these points in its 1974 pamphlet *A Document on*

¹ Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church, “The Pastoral Function of Church Archives,” *The Holy See*, February 2, 1997, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc_com_pcchc_19970202_archivi-ecclesiastici_en.html.

² *The Code of Canon Law: a Text and Commentary*, eds. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, Donald E. Heintschel (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 395.

³ *ibid.*, 397.

⁴ *ibid.*, 395.

⁵ *ibid.*, 395.

Ecclesiastical Archives.⁶ The document highlights the necessity of hiring trained archivists, or at least providing professional training for those assigned responsibility over the archives. It also emphasizes the value of opening the archives to historical researchers:

Finally, we express our sincere hope that the residential bishops may be disposed to grant access to the diocesan archives without undue limitations when properly accredited ecclesiastical historians request it. The past products of such research support, we believe, the contention that serious historians, even graduate students and doctoral candidates, have, with very rare exceptions, used such permission with honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect for the documents, and true Christian charity.⁷

Today, diocesan archives are heavily used by historians in the field of Catholic history. A citation analysis of the three major journals in this field found that between 2010 and 2012, approximately 22% of citations of archival repositories were to diocesan archives. This compares with 23% to the archives of Catholic religious orders, 21% to Catholic university archives, and 31% to non-Catholic repositories.⁸ These results were in some ways not surprising, given the significant role that the Church hierarchy plays in the history of the Church in America; what made it more noteworthy to the researchers was how it contrasted with the colloquial understanding that diocesan archives are less accessible to researchers than their counterparts at universities or government funded archives. While online finding aids and digital collections are *de rigueur* at university archives in the United States, their experience was that these access points were the exception rather than the rule at diocesan archives.⁹

This paper aims to continue that line of research and confirm that American Catholic diocesan archives are lagging behind the current professional norms with regard to online access to finding aids, digital collections, and collection information. The data may clarify opportunities for growth across the field.

Literature Review:

In his 1980 and 1998 articles on the state of Catholic archives, James O'Toole captures the seismic changes that the field has undergone over the past few decades, from being an ignored need to a growing presence in the Church. In 1980, he wrote that "There has been an awakening of interest in Catholic Church archives," detailing the growing awareness that Church archives must be maintained by properly trained staff.¹⁰ In his 1998 follow-up, he tracks the progress made by the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists (ACDA) and focuses on the improvements in the training of diocesan archivists, as well as improved access to collections for researchers.¹¹

⁶ National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for the Bicentennial, *A Document on Ecclesiastical Archives* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1974).

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Jillian M. Slater and Colleen Mahoney Hoelscher, "Use of Archives by Catholic Historians, 2010-2012: a Citation Study," *Archival Issues* 36, no. 1 (2014): 49.

⁹ *ibid.*, 51-52.

¹⁰ James O'Toole, "Catholic Diocesan Archives: a Renaissance in Progress," *American Archivist* 43, no. 3 (1980): 284-293.

¹¹ James O'Toole, "Diocesan Archives: Twenty-Five Years of Preserving American Catholic History," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 16, no.1 (1998): 1-13.

Today, most within the Church recognize the need for diocesan archives and trained professionals staffing them. New challenges now face the field. David Gray examined the need for integrated archives and records management programs at the diocesan level.¹² Looking more specifically at the challenges posed by electronic records, Maria Mazzenga argues that diocesan archives lag behind their peers (university archives, government-affiliated archives) in handling born-digital records. She also discusses constraints slowing digitization efforts, primarily a lack of financial and professional resources.¹³

Not only have Catholic diocesan archives changed drastically over the past several decades; academic libraries and other archival repositories have as well. Today, it is expected that library websites serve “as a tool for information, reference, research, and instruction,” according to Noa Aharony.¹⁴ Bradley J. Daigle writes that the “digital transformation [of libraries] has thrust special collections to the foreground of most library-wide content strategies.”¹⁵ It is no longer enough for an archival repository to simply exist; it must also be accessible to patrons from anywhere in the world through the digitization of materials. These trends across the field have to be matched within the subfield of diocesan repositories.

Methodology and Data:

A spring 2016 survey of the 178 American Catholic dioceses collected data about the accessibility of their archival holdings. The survey assessed the presence of the following items on the diocesan websites: email contact information, a dedicated website for the archives, online finding aids, digitized materials, guidelines for use, collection development policies, and record request forms. The project also included consultation of the *Official Catholic Directory* (an annual publication by P.J. Kenedy recognized by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, abbreviated hereafter as *OCD*) for contact information for each diocesan archives. The data was gathered by surveying the diocesan websites, then performing Google searches if a website for an archives could not be found. It is possible that this methodology missed some results that were particularly well-hidden on a diocesan website; however, it is equally informative that the website was not findable by a professional librarian, nevermind an untrained member of the public.

This survey revealed large variations in the web presences of American diocesan archives. Only 112 archives (63%) had websites with information about the repository; an additional 15 (8%) had contact information available, but no dedicated webspace; 21 repositories (12%) were listed in the *OCD* with no web presence; and the 30 remaining dioceses had no information about their archives online or in the *OCD* (17%).

¹² David Gray, “The Roman Catholic Diocesan Information Management Enterprise: a Model for Diocesan Archives-Records Management/Library Programs,” *Catholic Library World* 77, no. 1 (2006): 33-37.

¹³ Maria Mazzenga, “The Brave New Digital World of US Catholic Archives,” *Catholic Library World* 84, no. 4 (2014): 249-256.

¹⁴ Noa Aharony, “An Analysis of American Academic Libraries’ Websites: 2000-2010,” *The Electronic Library* 30, no. 6 (2012): 764-776.

¹⁵ Bradley J. Daigle, “The Digital Transformation of Special Collections,” *Journal of Library Administration* 52 (2012): 244-264.

Even among those archives that had a web presence at the time of the survey, the quantity, quality, and accessibility of content and services varied widely. Only ten repositories (6%) had online finding aids, which are crucial for researchers to identify holdings of interest. Thirteen repositories (7%) had digital collections, meaning digitized materials that can be accessed by researchers from anywhere around the world. One of the central functions of diocesan archives is to provide access to sacramental records; primarily these requests come from genealogists or individuals looking for their own records. Forty-six repositories (26%) had sacramental record request forms on their websites, which would provide easier access to these records for patrons.

Discussion:

Several trends can be seen to emerge from this data, providing lessons that can be applied not only to Catholic diocesan archives, but to other religious libraries and archives as well as secular repositories. The examination of the web presence of such a large corpus of similar repositories, which revealed disparities between the best and the worst instances, allows one to make some general conclusions about what bare minimums we should strive to achieve. All libraries and archives should have contact information available on the Internet. Every diocese in the United States has a website; adding contact information for the archivist or chancery staff is a way to improve access that requires a low threshold of resources. It would be difficult to say, however, that a repository providing only contact information online is meeting the standard of openness to researchers that Canon Law prescribes.

It was unsurprising that some of the archdioceses associated with major metropolitan areas that traditionally have large Catholic populations—New York City, New Orleans, Philadelphia—also had robust websites that included collections of digitized materials. What was surprising, however, is the success of some much smaller dioceses in creating strong digital collections. For instance, the dioceses of Baton Rouge, Helena, and Spokane all have digitized material on their websites. These collections include such items as historic photographs, diocesan newspapers, and curated virtual exhibits. Many of these smaller dioceses are working in collaboration with institutions outside of the Catholic Church. For instance, the Archdiocese of Newark is collaborating with Seton Hall University, which hosts digital collections of diocesan materials using CONTENTdm. In another case, the Diocese of Tucson contributed digitized material to the Arizona Memory Project, a website run by the Arizona State Library that hosts digital projects from any Arizona cultural institution. As many religious institutions have limited financial, technological, and staffing resources, collaborations can allow them to take advantage of the greater resources that outside organizations might have.

A collaboration with an outside organization does not provide solely technical and financial resources to the diocesan archive. It can provide professional expertise in an area where many of those doing the work do not have professional training or education. Diocesan archives can benefit from their materials gaining greater exposure, as researchers working with a private institution's repository might find out about resources at the diocesan level that they were not aware existed. For instance, the Catholic Research Resources Alliance hosts "the Catholic Portal," a searchable database of Catholic materials, and provides some technical support for members to contribute their holdings.¹⁶ Outside partners also can benefit from these partnerships;

¹⁶ See <http://www.catholicresearch.net/>.

they gain access to materials that their patrons, students, and faculty might find useful, strengthening their own collections and reputations.

An unexpected finding of this survey was the number of diocesan archives that provide online sacramental record request forms and/or guidelines for use. The records request forms, often embedded as an online form but sometimes a PDF or other separate file, walked patrons through the process of requesting sacramental records. These kinds of forms were found on over a quarter of the websites surveyed; guidelines for visiting the archives or requesting records were found in nearly as many sites. Although these numbers may sound low compared to the total number of diocesan archives, they are five times higher than the number of archives with online finding aids. These forms show an awareness of the repositories' user groups: the number of genealogists using diocesan archives as part of their research is increasingly large, and shows no signs of changing.¹⁷

Although this survey confirmed the previous assumptions that Catholic diocesan archives are lagging behind their peers at university and private archives in providing online access to collections, it still leaves questions unanswered from the previous citation survey by Slater and Hoelscher. For instance, how are historians discovering Catholic diocesan archives when online finding aids or digital collections are not available to guide them to these materials? An opportunity for future researchers would be to survey historians in this subfield and collect qualitative data about their information-seeking behaviors.

Conclusion:

This case study—looking at the narrow field of American Catholic diocesan archives—poses important questions for all archival repositories. In the era where patrons expect instantaneous answers to all of their questions, how are we meeting that demand? Are we answering patrons' demands at the most basic levels:

- Do we have a web presence?
- Online contact information?
- Access to finding aids or catalogs from our website?

When the answer to any of these basic questions is no, then we have identified an opportunity to easily improve the accessibility of our collections.

Lessons can also be learned from what Catholic diocesan archives are doing well. Identifying genealogists as a primary user group allows these repositories to use their limited online resources to the greatest impact. Although we typically think of digital collections and online finding aids as the only access points of value, providing forms and information for requesting sacramental records likely serves a greater number of potential patrons than an online finding aid would. All libraries and archives could look at their user groups and their information needs; by identifying these needs and how they can be met, it might be possible to better use limited resources if our target groups have non-traditional information needs.

Much has been written in pastoral letters and other directives from Catholic Church leaders about the importance of preserving Church history to support the evangelical work of the Church.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Virginia Humling, *U.S. Catholic Sources: a Diocesan Research Guide for Family Historians* (Orem: Ancestry, 1995).

Church offices could use archival materials in publicity efforts, while new materials, scholarship about the Church history can fuel or inform evangelization. Church history, when accessible through archives, could provide valuable information for the Church's current pastoral efforts.

The Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church once wrote that “To protect a book, encourage reading it...is thus for the Church an activity very close to—if not to say one with—her evangelizing mission.”¹⁸ As stewards of Church history, we should endeavor to make it more readily available in today's on-demand digital world.

¹⁸ Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church, “Ecclesiastical Libraries and Their Role in the Mission of the Church,” *The Holy See*, March 19, 1994, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc_com_pcchc_19940319_biblioteche-ecclesiastiche_en.html.