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Documenting Marian Devotion

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Documenting Marian Devotion

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The first six months of 2020 have been marked by upheaval and uncertainty and many individuals are relying on their faith to cope with stress. [The Marian Library](#) at the University of Dayton is a special library that serves as a center of scholarship on the Blessed Virgin Mary and also documents diverse expressions of popular Marian devotion. Common in the Marian Library's collections are materials and artifacts that illustrate appeals to Mary for intercession in healing and protection from danger. This includes pamphlets of prayers to various titles of Our Lady, vials of holy water from the Lourdes Shrine in France, or ex-votos left at Marian shrines to heal an illness. With the coronavirus pandemic, the Marian Library began a two-part project to collect these same types of materials that aligned with our mission to document Marian devotion.



The Marian Library has been utilizing [Archive-It](#), a subscription-based web-archiving tool, since 2015 to archive select websites and social media. Like all electronic content, content on the Internet is ephemeral and in danger of disappearing if someone does not actively work to archive it. In early March, an undergraduate class titled Narratives of Medicine, visited the Marian Library to learn about the connection between medicine and healing at the Lourdes Shrine in France. When discussing the baths that host thousands of visitors annually who seek healing, several students wondered what would happen to the baths in light of coronavirus. At the time it was not yet declared a pandemic and was only beginning to gain media attention in the United States. After the class, I discovered an article

that stated the baths were closed. The Lourdes Shrine website, however, still claimed that the "pilgrimage season is not in question." This page would later be updated and that notice removed as countries in Europe implemented lockdown measures. This makes sense as the shrine wants to provide the most timely information to its potential visitors, but it also means that when new content to the site is added, previous notices or headlines may be overwritten.

To find relevant web content to archive, I created a Google alert for "Virgin Mary and coronavirus" and "Virgin Mary and COVID-19." This sends daily digests to my email of content across the Internet featuring those keywords. I then select which content would fit within our collecting scope, and add the URL's to be captured in Archive-It. [The Marian Library Web Clippings collection](#) is a digital equivalent to a newspaper clipping file. Through this process we have learned the varied ways individuals and groups have expressed devotion to Mary, and added some of the findings to a dedicated [website](#). For example, several countries have flown statues of the Virgin Mary over their land in an effort to gain protection.

The second part of the Marian Library project asked community members to consider donating materials (both physical items when the library reopens, and electronic) that documented their Marian devotion during the coronavirus pandemic. A [post](#) was written for the Marian Library blog, and shared via a campus newsletter with faculty, staff, students, and alumni. It can be difficult for people to understand how things that may seem routine or mundane to them, may actually be a valuable resource for understanding Marian devotion. Several stories and images have been donated, including an image of face masks featuring Our Lady of Guadalupe that were made and donated to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.



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Many other institutions are collecting material about COVID-19 from their communities in similar ways. The Society of American Archivists Web Archiving Section [compiled a spreadsheet](#) of the ways that different archival organizations are archiving web content, and [Documenting the Now](#) started a [crowdsourced document](#) where institutions can add the ways they are documenting or collecting material.

Inside the Redemptorist Archives

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“Your work must be so interesting—all the history!” How many of us, at dinner parties or the corner bar (pre-COVID!), get this reaction from those we meet for the first time? These exclamations are certainly true of the Redemptorist Archives, which house both the Baltimore and Denver Province archives, conveniently located in Philadelphia.

The collections comprise a specialized library, including one of the largest holdings of material on the Shroud of Turin, as well as documents, artwork, film, photographs, textiles, and 3-D objects of various kinds—both sacred and profane. Redemptorists have been in the United States since 1832 and they have been collecting and storing items ever since. Beginning in December 2015, they have been housed in a Smithsonian-grade facility, with an ample reading room, and an exhibit area that allows us to highlight some of the “interesting history” from our collections. Assembled in anticipation of Archive Month Philly—the regions’ annual October celebration of all things archival—the present exhibit is titled “Pulling Back the Curtain: Portraits of Redemptorist Life,” which will be on display through 2020. It is a sampler of the formation experience, missionary activity, and specialized ministries of Redemptorists from the nineteenth century to the present. Among those featured in the exhibit is Brother William Roberts, who pioneered a ministry to gay clergy beginning in the 1970s.

Prior to their transfer to Philadelphia, the materials were divided between separate repositories for the two main American provinces – the Baltimore and Denver Provinces, which cover the Eastern and Western regions of the United States. By consolidating the archives under one roof, the Redemptorists were able to house the materials in state-of-the-art facilities and improve records management across the provinces.



Above: Redemptorist Archives exhibit room.

The archive’s library holdings—nearly 30,000 volumes—are now a special area of concern. There is no catalogue for it and we aim to fix that through the development of an online library management system. To that end, the archive has added Ms. Brittnee Worthy, a stand-out graduate from Simmons University, who began in June 2019, shortly after graduation. In addition to assuming responsibilities as the assistant archivist, her job has been to vet the vendors for the archives’ new system, which we hope will be compatible with a future archives management system as well. Our expectations for this project were severely curtailed by the advance of corona virus and the subsequent havoc it has played with the stock market. The Redemptorists’ endowment have been affected by this and so many elements of the project have been placed on hold. Eventually, the development of a catalog promises to make more accessible many of the items that are unique to the United States. The prospect of linking with the Catholic Research Resource Alliance is also part of our planning.

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