

The Archival Spirit

July 2019

From the Chair

Greetings, Everyone:

The past year has been fairly tumultuous from where I sit. The closure of three nearby small colleges has caused no small amount of anxiety, as does the uncertain future of the rapidly shrinking religious order for which I am archivist. Internal upheaval within my own college has brought about more uncertainty than normal. We have a new president and other senior administrators, and my boss of 13 years is moving on. My assistant is going as well, leaving me as a lone arranger once again. Change is clearly hitting home, and the archives is not quite the refuge I have come to expect.

Making sense of change and chaos is never easy, but for those of us responsible for documenting such changes, it is important to be right on top of things while remembering to care for ourselves as well. We must be ready to document decline while possibly experiencing it. We must try to capture the charm of our communities as the communities themselves fade away. How do we plan for this? What steps do we need to take to ensure the continuance of the essence of our organizations even after our organizations cease to exist, or change drastically? Answering any of these is difficult enough. Doing so while we ourselves are experiencing the upheaval makes for some heavy days; days in which I am thankful for the profession and for peers.

Turning to our professional colleagues and organizations such as ARCS are surely a part of any attempt to handle the changes and chaos in front of us. Being a part of a profession is one of the best tools we have to manage the unexpected. Professional standards and the core knowledge gained during formal education allows us to act with intent instead of simply reacting to events. Formal scholarship can certainly inform our actions, but sometimes we need an informal space too. I often find that informal space during things like the ARCS section meeting, where I can relax a bit and bounce ideas off like-minded colleagues.

Hopefully, at least some of you will be able to attend SAA in Austin this August. Attend the formal events, drink in the scholarly discussions. But take a few moments to linger in the informal space as well, allowing yourself to appreciate the comfort of colleagues. See you there.

Elizabeth B. Scott
2018-2019 ARCS Chair
Archivist, Saint Michael's College
Colchester, Vermont

Table of Contents

1

Letter from the Chair

2

Boston College Establishes Catholic Religious Archives Repository

Boston College Conference Working Paper Committee Named

3

Uncharted Territory



Deanna Marie Carr, BVM, discusses responses to change in religious archives, providing commentary from Sister Joan Chittister, OSB (pictured above) and others.

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Boston College Establishes Catholic Religious Archives Repository

MICHAEL J. BURNS, Boston College
CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS

Boston College has established a Catholic Religious Archives Repository to assist in the collection, preservation, and study of institutional records and documents belonging to Catholic religious orders and congregations in the United States and Canada. The repository will be part of the University's library system, and will be guided by an advisory committee of archivists and faculty associated with Boston College.

After materials have been evaluated, accepted, and processed, they will be available for use by students and scholars seeking to learn about the contributions of religious communities of men and women to the Catholic Church, Catholic life, and the wider culture.

In July 2018, Boston College hosted a conference entitled "Envisioning the Future of Catholic Religious Archives," which brought together 165 archivists, historians, and leaders of religious communities to consider ways of ensuring that archival holdings of various religious orders and congregations would be maintained and available to future generations. The decision to launch the Catholic Religious Archives Repository was made as a result of the conference.

"Catholic religious communities have made enormous contributions to Catholicism in the United States and Canada and to society at large," said University Librarian Thomas B. Wall. "In education, health care, social policy, and service to the poor, men and women religious have played an invaluable role. Their archives provide evidence of dedication, commitment, and impact, and must be maintained to enrich historical understanding of the influence these religious congregations have had on the Church and American society."

Religious orders and congregations interested in information about the Catholic Religious Archives Repository at Boston College should contact Michael J. Burns, Special Assistant for Jesuit and Catholic Collections, Boston College Archives, at Michael.Burns.7@bc.edu or at 617/552-8846.



Boston College Conference Working Paper Committee Named

MALACHY MCCARTHY, Claretian Missionaries Archives
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The working paper committee of the Boston College conference, "Envisioning the Future of Catholic Religious Archives," has been formed. Malachy McCarthy of the Claretian Missionaries Archives and Carol Coburn of Avila University will serve as co-chairs. Other members of the committee include Michael Burns of Boston College, Chris Doan of the Archdiocese of San Francisco Archives, Sister Ginger Downey of Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sisters, Jennifer Halloran of the Maryknoll Mission Archives, David Horn of Boston College, and Ellen Pierce, an archival consultant.

The task of the committee will be to outline a future direction for preserving Catholic religious archives and distribute a working paper that can be used by religious communities. This paper will reflect the issues highlighted in the presented papers as well as information obtained in the initial survey, application process, notes taken from the breakout sessions, and conference evaluations.

We will keep you posted about the progress of the committee and will share with you a paper that addresses your needs for future decision-making. Thank you for your constant support and interested participation in helping this critical process to continue.

For those who have not been able to view the conference presentations, please consult: <https://catholicarchives.bc.edu>.

Uncharted Territory

DEANNA MARIE CARR, BVM

Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

MOUNT CARMEL, DUBUQUE, IOWA

“When I walk out onto a stage I don’t hear the applause. The applause speaks of the past. I am intent on the future!” ~ Jerry Seinfeld

CHOREOGRAPHING CHANGE

Each day with the passage of the seasons we become more immersed in 2019. We awaken each morning to a shock of developments at home and abroad that call into question our rootedness in Gospel values, our sense of direction, our very grasp of truth. Like Seinfeld, when we step out onto life’s stage in 2019, we aren’t seeking applause. Though we remember with profound gratitude much that the past has held, we, too, are intent on what the future will almost certainly require. This may be one of the reasons why some of those currently choreographing the disposition of Catholic and other religious archives may feel somewhat ambivalent, even apprehensive, about their charge.

For a dozen or more years, those responsible for religious archives in general, and for the archives of communities of women and men religious in particular, have met informally over coffee, sat down with other travelers in boarding areas of crowded airports, or engaged with colleagues between sessions at archival conferences, to test the waters. Whether exchanged among members of a council or committee, among contemporaries with similar histories, or among acquaintances thrown together by chance, the issues surrounding the closure of religious archives can easily enter uncharted territory.

- **What words do we use to describe the culture, mindset, and mission of our religious archives?**
- **Do we regard these archives as a sacred trust or as a worrisome burden?**
- **Are we merely going through the motions or are we honestly, painstakingly exploring the lives of founders and the founding documents in an effort to discern an emerging mission?**

- **Have we sufficient awareness of the strength, significance, value, and potential of our calling, our charisma, and our archival collections?**
- **Do the holdings of our religious archives stand alone, or do they complement, enhance or complete those of neighboring archives?**
- **Are our religious archives part of a shared geography, history, spirituality, or legacy?**
- **With whom will decisions to maintain or to make other provision for these archives rest? To what end might we labor to maintain them?**
- **Who are the “stakeholders” to be taken into account? To whom are decision-makers vis-à-vis archives accountable, in time? In eternity?**
- **Are we “coming to completion” as a people of faith, or are we facing a new frontier? If we suspect the latter as some religious groups do, what will this great new challenge require?**

A GLOBAL REALITY

The disposition of religious archives is becoming a full-fledged preoccupation on the global stage among those who create agendas for prestigious gatherings from Washington D.C. to Boston to Dublin, Ireland. In March 2017, Catholic University of America hosted the third in a series on “The Fate of Religious Order Archives.” Three months later, University College, Dublin, invited archivists, scholars and stakeholders to consider “The Future for Sources and Records: Considerations for Religious Orders.” In July 2018, after doing its due diligence throughout eighteen months of planning, Boston College convened “Envisioning the Future of Catholic Religious Archives: A Working Conference.”

Writing in *Archival Outlook*, a publication of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), Malachy R. McCarthy, Claretian Missionaries Archives United States and Canada, described the scope of the Boston meeting which drew “165 individuals from 27 states as well as Canada, Ireland, Scotland and Italy.” The breakdown of those participating included 102 archivists, 35 scholars in various fields and 28 religious leaders. McCarthy notes that as a result of...

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(continued from page 3)

...the conference a white paper is anticipated for circulation in 2019. The goal: to create and share a strategic plan; a plan we look forward to reviewing.

As urban populations shift, and as communities of women and men religious grow older and fewer in number, property is often repurposed or sold to provide for the needs of the remaining members. Indeed, the archives may be the last tenant remaining on campuses that once housed hundreds of congregants, women and men intent on life and mission.

Whether a by-product of informal sharing, or of global and interfaith exchange, comments can reveal much not only about the situation at hand but also about an isolated leader or a religious group seeking to build consensus. Once again, one is apt to hear a spectrum of thought:

- **In this era of divestment, archives are part and parcel of what we must be prepared to give up. We are about relinquishing remnants of a distant past.**
- **We are called to humility. If God knows of our history, our fidelity, that's all that matters.**
- **In the past, when our membership was younger, we frequently engaged in ambitious institutional ministries. In the present we find ourselves exploring more modest options.**
- **To extend the life of our religious community by preserving archives would require that money be spent on old records and past accomplishments rather than on the health and well-being of the faithful remnant.**
- **In the grand scheme of things: demographics, demographics, demographics!**

CONSEQUENCES

In April, 2013, Joan Chittister, OSB (pictured at right), spoke at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference in Erie, PA. In her talk, Chittister reflected on a quote from *St. Benedict*, a book co-authored by Dom Stephan Hilpisch and Leonard von Matt. "The Benedictine nuns



did not make Benedictine history," says Hilpisch. "This [Benedictine history] is not women's work." Exploring the consequences of such thinking, Chittister noted with regret:

To this day, as women Benedictines, we know nothing of our histories, our great leaders, our dreams, our devastations or our centuries-old learnings about what it means to be either spiritual or alive as independent spiritual women. We know only that [we] were there – and gone – made invisible.

Going on to explain that because of the convictions of Hilpisch and undoubtedly many others, hundreds of years of history evaporated, Chittister laments: "Not one archive from a woman's community . . . was kept. Not one." She continues: "An entire subculture of women was simply allowed to vanish from human sight and thought: their experiences ignored, their wisdom demeaned, their contribution buried with them."

When denominations or religious communities fall victim to the discouragement and paralysis that may set in due to a loss of membership or a reversal of fortune, archives can become a casualty; can be viewed as collateral damage. Malachy McCarthy quotes Jane Kenamore, SAA Fellow and archival consultant: "This is not a 'Catholic' problem, but an issue that involves all archivists and social historians," denominational leaders and leaders of diverse faith communities. In current conferences and conversations focused on the future of religious archives we must be clear. We are not talking about obsolete paperwork closed up in a rusty drum and stashed in a leaky garden shed. Much more is at stake.

FEATS OF ARCHIVAL AGILITY

Fortunately, in many instances today's denominational leaders, leaders of communities of women and men and professional archivists are devising and testing ways of collaborating to make rich heritages accessible to future generations. Religious repositories are sometimes proving to be particularly adept at sharing ideas, staffs and even work space. The SAA has accurately dubbed some such partnerships, "Feats of Archival Agility!"

(continued on page 5)

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Perhaps for the first time in history, religious archives are being viewed as a vital aspect of ministry, as a vehicle for evangelization and service, and as a meeting place for interfaith and intergenerational conversation and enlightenment. Here and there the “Chief Memory Officer” of a faith community is approaching an architect seeking help in designing a place where women and men who may have been quiet and understated in life can emerge as outspoken and even eloquent in death. Thanks to technology and networking, creative pastors plan for a time when religious archives can be utilized, researched and critiqued by authors, poets, musicians, historians and other scholars.¹ They envision an interdisciplinary quest, a gathering of kindred spirits to catch glimpses into what once was and to find the courage to cross the threshold into what is emerging from seeds planted long ago.

It remains to be seen how, once the dust settles, the decisions of these times will be judged by history. Some religious archives will undoubtedly fade away due to natural causes. Some will inevitably fall victim to religious prejudice, gender bias, the violence of war, terrorism, or genocide. Some religious archives will sadly perish due to self-inflicted wounds.

Times of unparalleled change can also be times of unparalleled opportunity. Thanks to the religious convictions of ordinary women and men, the growing awareness of viable options, the array of advances in technology there is room for a multiplicity of plans. What once seemed to be the inevitable trip from divestment to a loading dock – and frequently – anonymity, is yielding to healthy diversity among religious repositories.

David Bracken, Diocese of Limerick, scheduled speaker at a May, 2019, conference at Ushaw College, Durham, chose an intriguing focus for his presentation: “The Pastoral Function of the Archivist: Minister of Memory and Hope in a Time of Uncertainty.”² With Bracken – and, yes, with Seinfeld too – let us ponder and act upon the possibilities. Let us listen intently to the future speaking in the exigencies of the times!

Notes:

¹ In the Catholic tradition, RCIA candidates have long found food for thought and prayer in archival collections of dioceses and parishes. Candidates for Religious Life have similarly found archives of communities a place of meditation and inspiration.

² See, also, “The Pastoral Function of Church Archives: A Reflection on the Theological, Juridical and Pastoral Context of Roman Catholic Diocesan Archives,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2017): 60-71, and “A History of Irish Catholic Diocesan Collections Through a Limerick Lens,” *Archivium Hibernicum* (forthcoming).

Image credit: special thanks to Susan Doubet, OSB, for providing a recent photograph of Sister Joan Chittister for use in this article.

