



The Future of Catholic Religious Archives

A NEW APPROACH TO PRESERVING COLLECTIONS

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What do you do when the records of a shrinking community—a community that historically has provided services to every level of society—are in jeopardy? Such is the case for the records of many religious communities affected by completion or mergers. This concern became the center of *Envisioning the Future of Catholic Religious Archives*, a working conference that took place July 11–13, 2018, at Boston College. The conference brought together religious leaders, archivists, historians, and scholars to begin the discussion of preserving and making accessible religious communities' endangered collections.

Historical Records in Crisis

What appears to be a simple task is complicated in religious archives by the Roman Catholic Church's two-tiered organizational structure. On one tier, the Vatican, local bishops, and diocesan clergy oversee the doctrinal, moral, and financial resources of the Church. On another tier are the men's and women's religious communities, who work collaboratively with hierarchy and clergy but are independent in responding to the needs of the communities they serve.

These religious communities established the largest private educational system in the United States and a network of hospitals and clinics that provided care for all, especially the indigent, and often in places where medical facilities were sparse. These men and women also created a variety of charitable institutions and services: orphanages, housing, nursing homes, adult and child services,

immigrant adjustment, and care for the vulnerable.

The historical collections of these congregations are essential for a broader understanding of United States history. They are one of the primary sources for documenting the urban working-class experience, immigrant assimilation, gender identity, and the formation of ethnic leadership. Because of the autonomy that these religious organizations possessed, they responded quickly to neighborhood concerns and became spokespersons for the communities they served. By living in the locality and providing an identifiable and stable institutional anchor, they gained a unique perspective of what was happening around them.

Today these religious communities—as well as their records—are in crisis as vocations have declined, ministries have become independent of the founding group, and the attraction to enter religious life has diminished. Communities that relied on education, charitable, or health-related work that attracted individuals to join and provided

stable employment are lost because of the independence, sale, or closure of these facilities. At its height in 1966, there were 181,421 religious women; by 2014 there were only 49,883. Religious men fared a similar fate: In 1970, there were 40,886 active religious men; by 2015, this number had dropped to 17,791. As these communities face completion or mergers to continue on, preservation of their important historical records becomes of lesser concern.

Laying Foundations for Discussion

With this in mind, Boston College invited stakeholders who desire that these records be preserved to actively participate in a discussion to save these collections. The working conference targeted three groups affected by the loss of these resources: religious leaders who are charged with safeguarding the community legacy; archivists, either lay or religious, who understand the breadth of the collections; and historians and scholars from varied fields who mine these sources.

The goal of the conference was to identify issues facing religious communities and learn about different options available to preserve collections. The three-day conference invited the three groups to interact with one another, creating a unique forum for beginning to resolve their preservation concerns.

An advisory committee of 15 members representing the three groups provided



Ambulance drivers and medical interns outside of the Alexian Brothers' Hospital, circa 1920. Courtesy of the Alexian Brothers Provincial Archives, Elk Grove Village, IL.

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input into the conference format. The 18-month planning process was enhanced by an initial survey of all three groups and an application process to participate. From this process, the conference program evolved into four sessions and two break-out periods.

The conference gathered 165 individuals from 27 states as well as from Canada, Ireland, Scotland, and Italy. Archivists made up the majority of attendees with 102 present, in addition to 35 scholars and 28 religious leaders.

Panel presentations raised four questions about religious communities and our archives: Why are we here? What do we know? How do we transmit *charism* (theology) to the future? What are our options? After each presentation, participants shared thoughts in small groups. These lively discussions were summarized and, along with the presentations and evaluations, will be formed into a white paper, which will be circulated from January to July 2019. From this larger discussion, we hope to create a national strategic plan that will be shared with the Catholic Church's national leadership. (For those who could not attend the conference but would still like to participate in the white paper discussion, video of the main presentations can be found at <https://catholicarchives.bc.edu>.)

First Steps Toward the Future

Participants found the meeting to be a valuable experience. Mary Kenney, director of the National Marianist Archives commented: "Personally, the conference offered me access to professionals who will serve as resources for my own work. We are now all reading from the same script and with confidence can move forward in preserving and making accessible the documentation of our shared past."

SAA Fellow and archival consultant Jane Kenamore summarized the thoughts of many: "The conference was a first step toward a plan to preserve the records. Will the records go to university archives, regional or national religious repositories, or smaller consolidated provincial archives? I hope the conference and this article begin to raise the consciousness of professional archivists throughout the nation. This is not a 'Catholic' problem, but an issue that involves all archivists and social historians. We must save the records that have heretofore been underutilized and are now endangered."

As the San Francisco Archdiocesan archivist, Chris Doan affirmed the importance of the meeting: "Listening to the different perspectives and having an opportunity to discuss these issues beyond the confines of my own



Small group session at the *Envisioning the Future of Catholic Religious Archives* conference. Courtesy of Kate Edrington.

professional sphere enabled me to become better informed about the challenges facing religious leadership. These illuminating exchanges convinced me that the best way to move forward is through collaboration and mentoring opportunities and that the conference's model of engaging leadership, archivists, and historians is the most effective way to accomplish this."

We hope that religious leadership conferences, archival groups, and associations interested in the use and preservation of Catholic historical resources will continue the discussion on how best to save these records. The working paper committee will keep SAA updated on the progress of this venture.

By including the stakeholders together, the conference format provided an alternative means to gain support for endangered collections. This first step will open up other avenues for discussion, by means of the white paper, to save these invaluable materials. ■

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(Stephanie Mihalik)

If you're a student or early career professional, I can't recommend the SAA Mentoring Program enough. Even if you already live in a big city, work for a large institution, or have a large professional network, you could benefit from the Mentoring Program. Ask for a mentor (or mentee) outside of your area and get a different perspective on the field! Once you're matched, plan on regular conversations with your mentor to keep each other up-to-date—Deb and I talk on the phone every four to six weeks and email regularly.

In high school, I was given the advice that you get out what you put in. This holds true to mentoring. Be prepared to share what's going on in your work and ask for advice. You'll definitely see the reward! ■

(Deborah Torres)

and SAA in Washington, DC. The highlight from the past year as mentor was finally meeting Stephanie in person at the conference after months of speaking on the phone!

For anyone considering becoming a mentor, I have three pieces of advice based on my experience:

- 1) A year goes by very fast, but you have the option of extending your commitment with your mentee.
- 2) Long distance can be overcome by having a regular, agreed-upon, check-in schedule.
- 3) You will not regret the time you spent serving as a mentor! ■

Interested in mentoring or being mentored? Visit <https://www2.archivists.org/membership/mentoring> to learn more.