

Preserving the Past, Building for the Future:
the working paper from the
2018 Boston College Archive Conference

The Roman Catholic Church is undergoing a transformative period as society is changing and influencing the viability of Church structures. During the formative years of American life, religious institutes laid the foundation of an extensive educational and charitable network. Reaching every area, religious sisters and brothers ministered to communities in need, establishing services where few or none were available. The historical record of these accomplishments is in jeopardy as many religious institutes face completion or downsizing. In order to preserve these contributions to the United States and Canada, a group of committed religious leaders, archivists and historians planned a working conference in July, 2018.

Convened and sponsored by Boston College, “Envisioning the Future of Catholic Religious Archives,” tapped into the resources and expertise of some of the most important players in preserving, evaluating, and communicating the lives, work and legacy of religious congregations. The tasks of the working conference were to identify issues and solutions to preserve the records of religious communities, and to develop a plan for the future by proposing strategies and resources, so that the stories and contributions of religious institutes may be understood and valued by scholars and society at large.

This paper synthesizes the ideas, discussions and possible methodologies that surfaced during the conference. They will help shape the way forward for Catholic religious communities as they work to preserve their rich documentary history ensuring that it will be available for present and future scholars who will tell their stories to the world.

Primary Principles

Participants at the Boston College conference were eager to share their opinions about how to save Catholic religious archives collections for future generations. Although the prognosis for their survival may be dire, the vitality of religious community records reflects the idealism and hope that buoyed religious men and women of the past. Ironically, archives serves to move the conversation forward. With legacy to guide us, the words and actions of our forbearers serve as beacons for future decisions. It is the integrity and value of

community archival records that reveal a community's distinctive heritage. Realistically, the archives serve as the stewards of the community's contribution to society.

Three interrelated principles: collaboration, education, and advocacy reflected the thinking of the participants. These interdependent objectives are necessary to identify, preserve, and make accessible these valuable records.

Collaboration

The preservation of Catholic religious archives demands a unified response from all constituencies with a vested interest in their longevity. Collaboration is necessary because no single institution can undertake the task alone. Cooperative planning and shared solutions allow religious institutes to face the challenges together. This radical approach must be presented on the macro- and micro- levels fostering discussions within the community, archival profession, and scholarly conferences. Each constituency has a role to play in saving these records. Only through an informed discussion can proper decisions be made to assure that these materials are protected.

Education

Education is vital to inform leadership, archivists, and scholars about the importance of these materials. Personal networking, sharing experiences among colleagues, and participating in webinars, workshops, conferences, or formal classes, provides a range of opportunities to resolve problems. Well-designed programs invigorate and support this endeavor.

Critical to this effort is the creation of a shared website and listerv where individuals can obtain information about numerous solutions to save religious collections. This digital platform will allow individuals to raise areas of concern and find assistance. Eventually this can lead to the formation of independent working groups dedicated to solve specific issues. Only through a mediated community dialogue can possible answers be found.

Advocacy

Advocacy provides these collections credence, broader understanding, and financial support. Once organized collections are publicized and made accessible, their value is assured, and the move to developing sustainable repositories becomes possible.

For the local religious institute, advocacy begins the process of organizing and sharing these resources with their community and those they serve. Initially, religious leaders and archivists can publicize their holdings in a variety of ways. Individual profiles of members,

ministry history and influence, and opportunities to work with other historical agencies, educational institutions, and community groups provide a way to underscore community rootedness in society. Scholarly use of archival collections contextualizes a community's contribution in light of history, and serves as an independent voice to emphasize a religious institute's impact on society. Currently the task is to build a strong foundation where good archival programs can be initiated, improved, and used.

First Steps

Catholic religious leaders, archivists and scholars, can no longer remain passive about the ongoing preservation of the historical records entrusted to our care. The Boston College conference served as a vehicle to begin the discussion and resulted in many communities seeking counsel to address the problem. The advice of experienced archivists and scholars in developing a professional archival program is indispensable. Archival consultants or volunteer evaluation teams can recommend a course of action to resolve archival concerns. We recommend that communities searching for solutions visit other religious archive operations and send personnel to volunteer at existing repositories. This provides an immediate understanding of the tasks, responsibilities, and benefits of a professionally managed archive. . Additionally, communities may want to consider the efficiencies and advantages of working together to develop collaborative archives centered on a charism or region.

In time, the growth of a cadre of committed archivists could evolve into a community to assist religious institutes. The broadening of archival repositories expands professional applications of organizing and describing these collections, and benefits everyone. Along with the involvement of scholars, this shared knowledge base displayed on a website could improve the quality of Catholic religious archive collections.

Shared Challenges

In-kind support can only begin the process to manage archives. Communities facing the challenges of caring for their elderly members and managing property, do not have the financial resources needed to resolve these archival challenges. A team of religious leaders and archivists must articulate the importance of saving these collections and locating funding to support this effort. A media strategy must be formulated that can be shared on a local,

regional, and national level. Grant writing workshops would offer religious institutes the means to seek alternative funding.

Clarification regarding access to sensitive archival material needs to be addressed so that religious institutes understand the privacy of these documents.

Likewise, training and guidelines for a professionally trained archivist not familiar with religious collections needs to be cultivated. As guardians of the community's soul and charism, the religious archivist exercises a sacred trust for current and deceased members.

Finally, an appreciation of the ramifications of an archival digital program needs to be put in context. Some believe the establishment of a digital archive allows the community to discard its physical materials. However, digitization is costly and not used for preservation. Currently, it is common that fragile materials or those requiring outdated equipment, be digitized.

Repositories

Sustainability of these collections is the foremost consideration for communities that do not have the financial resources to provide long-term support of these materials. Clear guidelines need to be established among those institutions offering to permanently house these archives. The development of a national or regional network of repositories sharing a cooperative vision affords communities the ability to safeguard these records. These centers promote the archival values of preservation, access, and use of these materials for future generations.

Resource Sharing

A variety of institutions and communities play a critical role in developing common solutions to assist institutes to preserve their collections. The creation of working groups tasked with developing resources pertaining to specific aspects of archival management would provide a strong foundation on which to build or refine viable archival programs.

Possible working groups could include:

- Creation of Directory of Catholic Religious Archives
- Appraisal Guidelines
- Descriptive Practices/Taxonomy

- Reference and Access Policies
- Integration of Artifacts
- Management of digital collections
- Continuing Education and training of archivists working with Catholic collections
- Repository Guidelines
- Catholic research website that is both informational and subject based

Working groups could share materials on the website.

Continuing the Discussion

The Boston College Conference successfully initiated an open discussion about the future management of Catholic religious archives. The enthusiasm generated shows potential for the development of a corpus of committed leaders, archivists, and scholars to shepherd the path forward.

The establishment of charism-based or regional affinity groups composed of religious leaders, archivists, and scholars could become a unique approach to assist each other. Utilizing information found on the proposed website, these groups could profit by being part of a larger discussion. A community-based approach is the most effective way to address this archival challenge.

Building upon regional participation, periodic conferences can update interested parties about the future development of Catholic religious archival practices. Similar to the Boston College conference, personal interaction among participants is essential. Future meetings would also introduce communities that are just beginning the process.

We cannot discount the international and creedal implications of the Boston College meeting and its successor conferences. The challenge to preserve the lived religious experience has no borders and the work accomplished in the United States impacts other faith communities and traditions, and other countries.

A Formal Organization

Acknowledging the complexity of the issues facing religious institutions, we realize that a formal structure provides guidance to direct the movement. A legal corporation would afford a necessary governing body to oversee the different aspects of the preservation

program and serve as an ombudsman for all institutes. By securing a 501C3, the governing body can receive foundation grants and allocate monies to struggling communities. Funding could apply to professional advice or providing the necessary resources to prepare collections for transfer. As an organization composed of volunteers, the association remains true to its primary goal to save the record of men and women religious in the United States and Canada.

Conclusion

The Boston College conference initiated a pertinent discussion of preserving the Catholic religious record in the United States and Canada. We hope that this promising meeting promotes a wider discussion among all constituencies and lead to viable and practical solutions to preserve the legacy of the religious men and women.

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