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KYLE ROBERTS

Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Recognition of the importance of Catholic contributions to the American story, increased intellectual control of collections, a commitment to professionalization, an openness to collaboration, and a willingness to embrace new technologies over the past twenty-five years has resulted in the better organization, description, preservation, and interpretation of Catholic archives than at any point in American Catholic history.

Catholic archival collections have, in turn, served as the basis for pathbreaking digital projects. New digital resources use online platforms to gather, make more discoverable, and better contextualize archival materials, often from a range of institutions. Projects as diverse as the Catholic Research Resources Portal and BishopAccountability.org have benefitted scholars and provided significant resources for the laity and religious alike. When innovative computational approaches and analyses are applied to these archival materials, new insights arise into various aspects of Catholic history, literature, and theology. Time will tell if these approaches continue to capture the imagination of scholars and students, or if new modes emerge.

It has been gratifying to have a front-row seat to these developments, first as a student of American religious history, then as a history professor and director of a research center at a Jesuit university, and most recently as the director of an independent religious library and archives. Writing this essay has been an opportunity to reflect, via

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Zoom interviews, with some friends who have contributed to this transformation. They represent just a fraction of the talented people who have worked in the archival and digital fields, and quickly it became clear this topic is worthy of a book length-study. While the voices of many are in my ears, all opinions and conclusions are my own.

Professionalization (and Consolidation) of the Archive

When *American Catholic Studies* began publishing in 1999, the uniqueness and importance of the holdings in Catholic archives were little in doubt, although questions persisted about whether and how those materials should be made accessible to those beyond the institutions and communities which collected them. The keepers of Catholic archives had begun to recognize that Catholic contributions to the American story would be left out of the histories being written if they did not provide access to relevant primary source materials. A generation of landmark social and cultural histories had already shown what can come by mining Catholic archives; the subsequent twenty-five years have further proven their value.

It is important to recognize that Catholic archives are as distinct as the individuals and corporate bodies they represent. The materials collected by dioceses, religious orders, academic institutions, parish churches, fraternal organizations, and hospitals vary greatly in content because they serve different functions. Strides have been made to open doors to researchers, although expectations of those researchers to have complete access remain a point of tension. A variety of concerns, ranging from the institutional to the legal, restrict access. One respondent noted that one of the richest Catholic archives for the study of American social history, Catholic Charities, is also one of the most difficult to gain access to by nature of the sensitive records it holds. Ultimately, most Catholic archives are private, corporate collections.

Given the diversity of types of archives within American Catholicism, it should come as no surprise that multiple organizations have emerged to support and provide guidance in the management, interpretation, and preservation of distinct institutional sources. The Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists traces its origins back to the 1974 and the Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious to 1990. Both host conferences, maintain websites, and embrace advocacy work. More recently, in 2023, efforts have been made to create an Archivists for Congregations of Male Religious professional group. The decline of male religious orders had not been as rapid as those of their female counterparts until lately, and they have generally had more resources to care for their archives.

Catholic archivists are clearly proud of the advances they have made. When a 2019 article detailing the results of a survey of archivists on the current state of Catholic archives suggested that institutions

had “seemed not to have flourished despite the archival proliferation of the 1980s and 1990s,” the president of the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists quickly clapped back.¹ She pointed to all the ways the association advocated for education, networking, and collaboration opportunities for its members through speaking engagements and workshops, conference presentations, publications, and more.²

Despite these advances, anxiety persists over the future of Catholic archives, heightened in no small part by the contraction of Catholic parishes, religious orders, and institutions. An especial urgency about the number of congregations of women religious coming to completion inspired the landmark *Envisioning the Future of Religious Archives* conference at Boston College in July 2018. This working conference brought together some of the most important players in the archives field “to identify issues and find solutions to preserve the records of religious communities, and to develop a plan for the future by proposing strategies and resources.”³ The subsequent white paper identified collaboration among religious organizations, education about the importance of Catholic archives, and advocacy to expand understanding and (ultimately) financial support as the most important objectives to ensure the futures of these archives.

One outcome of the Boston College conference was the founding of the Archival Resources for Catholic Collections (archivalrcc.org) working group in 2020. This vibrant organization of Catholic leaders, archivists, and scholars has created a robust series of virtual programming. Its regular webinars provide professional advice on the best care for religious records, offer educational opportunities to assist in the development of professionally run archives, and supply a centralized forum for knowledge and resource sharing. The pandemic likely shaped their decision to go virtual; their work is a lifeline for many.

Another outcome has been the recognition that many orders and institutions will no longer be able to maintain their own archives in the short term, never mind indefinitely. Plans need to be made to avoid collections being lost. Three options have been promoted for the disposition of archives, particularly among religious orders:

Consolidation, typically based on charism, has been the most favored approach. Proponents stress that an archival program must be

1. Youngok Choi and Emily Nilson. “The Current Status of Catholic Archives,” *The American Archivist* 82:1 (Spring/Summer 2019), 108.

2. Katy Lockard, “Forum,” *The American Archivist* 83:2 (Fall/Winter 2020), 450.

3. “Preserving the Past, Building for the Future: The Working Paper from the 2018 Boston College Archive Conference” (2019), available at <https://catholicarchives.bc.edu/wp-content/uploads/Working-Papers-FINAL-LETTER-FORMAT-December-17-2019.pdf>.

grounded in an understanding of the religious motivation of the individuals and community represented within. Only then can the collection be effectively managed and made useful to future users. A leading example of the consolidation model is the Jesuit Archive & Research Center in St. Louis. In 2014, provincial leadership began to discuss the possibility of uniting the archives of all the provinces in the United States. Their goal was to have a central repository that chronicled their history and assisted with ongoing governance. They tasked David Miros, who was already directing a consolidated archives for several provinces in the central United States and the Jesuit Conference, with the project. Four years later, a new state-of-the-art, purpose-built facility opened adjacent to Saint Louis University. It houses the collective memory of the Jesuit conference and seventeen past and current administrative provinces of the Society in the United States.⁴ Other examples of consolidated archives include the Sisters of Mercy Heritage Center in Belmont, North Carolina; the Sisters of St. Joseph in Cleveland; and the National Archives of the Marianist Province of the United States in San Antonio. Consolidated archives are valued for gathering the records related to an order's ministry in North America and makes them available for leadership, the larger global community, and interested laity.

More recently, the concept of the collaborative regional archive has gained in favor. In this model, various archives come together to share administrative and storage resources, but each retains exclusive management of their archival collections. This model has the benefit of ensuring that intellectual control of the collections remains in the hands of staff working directly for the originating institution, while sharing staff to maintain the infrastructure of the archive. The Chicago Archive Collaborative (CAC), begun in 2007, has captured the imaginations of those interested in this approach. Located in downtown Chicago, the CAC holds the records of the Claretian Missionaries Archives USA-Canada Province, the Archives of the North American Province of the Cenacle, and the Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. Collaborative regional archives are not without their problems, which include housing collections that might use different cataloguing systems, ensuring the needs of different institutions being met, and the challenge of what happens when a participating archive is no longer able to fund and manage its professional staff.

The third, and often the least favored option, is transfer to a third-party institution. Now, this might be the only viable option for institutions and religious orders without the financial means for the other two choices. In a 2020 survey concerning the future of religious archives,

4. David Miros, untitled talk, Center for Research on Global Catholicism, 5 November 2021.

Mary Grace Kosta found that the perceived benefits of moving a collection into a public repository, such as a university, city, provincial, or county archives, included more access for historians and other scholars, improved storage of the collections, greater scope for outreach, and “the satisfaction in knowing the heritage would be preserved for posterity.” Yet skeptics fear the integrity of collections will be compromised outside the control of religious leadership and hands of an archival staff fluent in its charism.⁵ This fear of allowing those outside the fold to steward Catholic collections is telling and has much to say about the American Catholic experience.

The exception might be the recent spate of Catholic colleges and universities developing plans to accept archives. Santa Clara University, St. Mary’s College in Notre Dame, and, coming out of the 2018 conference, Boston College have all signaled their interest in being repositories for the collections of women religious. I will return to these in my conclusion. The archival needs of dioceses, educational institutions, associations, hospitals, and the like may well suggest other models.

Expanding Accessibility Through Digital Resources

Nothing has been more transformative in Catholic scholarship over the past twenty-five years than the advent of digital resources and scholarship. As we come out the other side of a pandemic which required so many archives to suspend public operations, we are experiencing more than ever the expectation that primary source materials are available digitally.

Development of the internet played a key role in this transformation and Catholic institutions stood at the forefront of this work. In 1993, Georgetown University pioneered *The Labyrinth: Resources for Medieval Studies*, which billed itself as “the first website in the world in the humanities.” This groundbreaking project gathered free resources related to medieval studies c. AD 500–1500 and organized them by topic. It expanded greatly who could participate in scholarly conversations to those with family duties, are contingent, or work at resource-poor institutions. Thirty years later, the site had been deprecated and archived by the university library.⁶ As one of the longest-lasting humanities websites, the example of the *Labyrinth* suggests the comparatively short lifespan of digital resources compared to brick-and-mortar ones. (Especially when we remember that Catholics can claim to have invented the idea of the archive in monasteries over a millennium ago!)

5. Mary Grace Kosta, “What Do We Do With the Archives? The Future of Religious Archives” (2020), available at <https://archivalrcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/What-do-we-do-FINAL-MK-2.pdf>

6. <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1061738>.

One of the best examples over the past twenty-five years of the potential for collaborative digital archives, as well as the challenges of sustainability, is the Catholic Research Resources Alliance. CRRA, as it was known, launched in 2008 as a membership alliance of institutions committed to creating enduring access to Catholic resources in America. The impetus for the project originated at least a decade earlier among library professionals at Catholic universities who felt Catholic material in their collections all too often remained overlooked. The group eventually alighted on the idea of creating a virtual library of *Catholica* with the goal of exposing content and finding aids from across many institutions and putting them online. A “Portal” composed of bibliographic records from dozens of institutions ultimately included thousands of records, most of them derived from the records of the holding libraries and archives. The CRRA’s Catholic News Archive quickly eclipsed the success of the Portal, however. Begun with the ambitious goal of digitizing all extant Catholic newspapers in North America, the project has grown exponentially: from 30,000 pages when it first launched publicly in 2016 to almost 800,000 pages today. Many of these newspapers were not to be found in the leading bibliographies of American newspapers and even fewer had any of their collections digitized. CRRA opened a massive trove of materials for a broad range of users.⁷

Other projects have similarly seen the value of gathering materials together, often from disparate sources, with the intention to spur new knowledge creation. Some of the most important examples of these projects document and investigate the difficult histories of American Catholic history which have been the subject of research and, in some cases, litigation, over the past few decades. BishopAccountability.org launched its initial website in June 2003 to provide information on the Catholic bishops of the United States and their role in the sexual abuse crisis. Over the next two decades, the site has grown into the largest public library of information on the clergy sex abuse crisis. It gathers in one place “documents, survivor witness, investigative reports, and media coverage.” It also does, according to the website, “basic research on abuser histories and church management” and “maintain[s] definitive databases of persons accused in the United States, Argentina, Chile, and Ireland, with other databases in development.” These materials have been actively used by survivors, the media, and scholars.⁸ The Slavery, History, Memory and Reconciliation Project (SHMR) sought to uncover the histories of enslavement by the Jesuit Order in the United

7. Jennifer Younger, Sara B. Baron, Stephen J. Connaghan, and Patricia Lawton, “The Story of the Catholic Research Resources Alliance: Vision, Mission, and the Power of Membership,” *Journal of Library Administration* 63, no. 5 (2023): 700-713.

8. <https://www.bishop-accountability.org/>

States. An initiative of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States, SHMR created a significant database of material documenting enslavement within the Jesuit Order. Their work vastly expanded upon the extant scholarship of slaveholding, especially in the Missouri Province, revealing scores of enslaved people previously forgotten. The database created out of that project is not publicly accessible, but some reconstructed histories of enslaved people and their families can be found on the SHMR website.⁹

These are just a handful of the creative digital projects undertaken over the past twenty-five years. Yet the ongoing challenge for digital projects remains funding. The Portal suffered from a lack of financial resources to support member libraries adding material (especially archival) and competition for resources with the News Archive (which eventually won out). The pandemic exacerbated the crisis: institutional and library budgets were cut, revenues were lost on the hosting service they had pioneered, and leadership retired. In 2023, a new pathway emerged when CRRA dissolved, and its assets were transferred to Atla (formerly the American Theological Library Association). Access to its primary projects is ensured, although now under non-Catholic leadership.¹⁰

Conclusion: A New Kind of Archival Arrangement

Two primary questions hang over any consideration of archival and digital project development over the next twenty-five years: Can these efforts be sustained? Will these efforts have been enough? As we witness an unprecedented shift in American Catholicism—the demographic collapse of religious orders bringing record numbers to completion, declining attendance at worship (and the need to liquidate valuable properties for financial resources) leading to the closing and consolidation of parishes, and the changing landscape of American higher education which has pushed many small Catholic colleges out of business—makes both questions imperative and ultimately difficult to answer.

One place where many are looking with hope are the colleges and universities creating archives. By early 2025, Boston College hopes to break ground on a state-of-the-art facility to support its efforts to collect, preserve, and make available the archives of orders of women religious coming to completion. Commitment to this initiative—the Catholic Religious Archives (CRA)—originated with the *Envisioning the Future of Religious Archives* conference back in 2018. Anticipation has been running high to see what would come of this plan over the

9. <https://www.jesuits.org/our-work/shmr/>

10. <https://www.atla.com/learning-engagement/crra/>

past several years. University Librarian Thomas Wall admits that the creation of this archive has been very much an iterative process, with significant learning and tailoring the infrastructure as the team went. The initiative has by all accounts received a positive response from the congregations of women religious expected to contribute collections: the structure may be one-quarter full when it opens.

Particularly exciting about this project is the way it envisions merging traditional archival needs and practices with a robust digital scholarship program centered on the education of students at a Catholic university. The Boston College Libraries have long been involved in digital archives, digital production, and digital humanities work across the school.¹¹ The vision for the CRA is to combine a seamless discovery layer that surfaces the rich collections in the archives, a commitment to digitization and sharing of materials in an open-source environment, support of digital scholarship derived from these collections, and integration into the curriculum, allowing students to work with these collections firsthand. Wall shared that twenty percent of BC students are already learning from special collections in their classes. The team is embracing a capacious vision that seeks to reject building another silo of collections but rather seems to encourage collaboration beyond the university.

Is this the future of Catholic archives? The educator in me finds this vision to be immensely alluring. It cares for at-risk collections while also taking active steps to invite users into the archives to uncover the stories they contain. The scholar in me, likewise, is excited for resources which combine what CRRA sought to do (and partially accomplished): surfacing rich materials and making them available through digitization. Yet, the administrator in me finds it all a bit daunting. To be frank, BC can undertake such an ambitious project because it is a wealthy, mission-based institution with leadership who are inclined to support this program (both the university president and the provost are trained historians). Most archives will not have an institution with the resources or inclination to support a similar arrangement.

Regardless, the future author reflecting on archives and digital resources for *American Catholic Studies*' fiftieth anniversary issue is likely to be surveying a very different landscape. Given the increasing downsizing of all aspects of the Catholic institutional world, the short lifecycles of digital projects, and the ongoing advances in online platforms, standards, and methodologies, the future holds great uncertainty but also great opportunity for innovation.

11. <https://ds.bc.edu/>