

PRESERVING OUR STORY

By Patricia Wittberg, S.C.

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As numerous historians have noted, the history of religious institutes in Western Catholicism has been cyclical, with extensive and rapid initial growth followed by a century or more of stability and subsequent decay.

The foundation and decline phases of each cycle pose particular challenges for historians and archivists. During the foundation period, the charismatic leader and the first members of a new religious order are often too preoccupied with issues of spreading the message to new recruits, dealing with often suspicious Church leaders, and simply surviving financially to worry about preserving an archive of their activities. In the decline period, there may not be sufficient personnel or funds to maintain existing archives. And if an order disintegrates completely, its records may simply be discarded.

We are in a decline period today in North America and Western Europe. In the United States, the number of sisters has declined by almost three-fourths from its peak of 180,000 in 1966; the number of brothers has declined by more than three-fourths, and the

number of religious priests by half.¹ Since the number of religious orders or congregations has declined more slowly than the number of individual religious, the average size of each order has shrunk—often drastically.

In addition, religious have largely withdrawn from their educational, healthcare, and social work institutions. Each of these organizations may have its own archives, but its current administrator may not think to share the contents with a former community sponsor. These organizations may also be in danger of dissolving or merging with another institution: as a result of the declining U.S. birth rate, for example, Catholic colleges will compete for a smaller pool of potential students in the future, and many will have to close. Hospitals are joining large, multi-state systems. What happens to the archives of a Mercy college or a Franciscan hospital when it no longer exists as a separate entity?

Still another change is the ethnic composition of religious orders today. International orders report that the majority of their newer members come from their

¹ According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the number of sisters in the U. S. in 1965 was 179, 954, the number of brothers was 12,271, and the number of religious order priests was 22,707. Today, there are 45,605 sisters, 4,007

brothers, and 11,424 religious order priests. For more information, visit <https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>.


African or South Asian provinces; U.S.-based orders which had established small missions overseas now find that their members from these areas outnumber the Americans. Eventually, religious from these other cultures will move into the leadership of their communities, and they may not share Western priorities in terms of organizing or preserving archives. In addition, the archives of religious institutes headquartered in Asia, Latin America, or Africa will be less accessible to Western scholars.

All of this, of course, has implications for historians. Finances for training a religious sister or brother archivist to modern standards—not to mention for hiring a professional lay archivist—may not be available to a small and declining community. When formerly separate provinces or religious communities merge, it is often difficult to bring together and systematize their archives—especially if each of the former provinces’ archivists had different ways of cataloging things. Merging archives and systematizing their contents requires a considerable investment of time and money—neither of which may be available in the long term. Unsustainable merging projects may end up being abandoned halfway through, rendering entire collections inaccessible. Finally, the archives of communities that completely disappear may be deposited with the local diocese or sent to a central repository. Due to the shortages of personnel and finances that possibly accompanied the last years of these communities, their archives may not be in a very organized condition when they arrive.

Still another issue arises at the *beginning* of an institute’s life cycle. Since 1965, at least 200 new religious communities have been founded in the United States, and over 40 in

Canada (Rocca 2010; Van Lier 1996). Of the U.S. ones, close to half of those that were present in 1998 now no longer exist, and many others probably disintegrated in the 1970s and 1980s before CARA began tracking them (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2017). Most of the new religious communities that remain are quite small: the median number of their full members is ten, and only five have more than sixty full members. Few, if any, operate any institutions which they themselves own or sponsor.

Again, this has implications for any archives these communities may have or develop. With half of them having a membership of ten or fewer, it is unlikely that they have



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made any provision for the collection and preservation of a coherent archive. Since almost one-half of new foundations disband within a few years, some new communities’ founding material may not be saved at all.

The story of religious life is important for both the Church and the larger society to know, and the preservation of community archives is essential to telling this story. This is especially important in the case of women religious. In recent decades, the mainstream media has largely depicted women religious inaccurately (Sabine 2013), and neither Catholics nor the public at large see many sisters in real life to counteract this image. *If we do not tell our own story, we will lose control of it.* Without the stories of women religious in professional and Church leadership positions, the only ecclesial

leadership role in Catholicism which is visible to the general public is the ordained priesthood—restricted to males. Outside observers thus assume that the Church allows only subservient roles for half of its members. This has already had profoundly negative results. Young adult women in North America, Western Europe, and Australia who were raised Catholic are *less* likely than young adult males to remain in the Church, *less* likely to attend Mass regularly, and *less* likely to be doctrinally orthodox (D’Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013:90–92; Wittberg 2012). Fewer women want a Church wedding or baptism for their babies (Gray 2018). This is the first time in centuries that this has been true—and it is not true for young adult women in other Christian denominations, or in other parts of the Catholic world. Similarly, religious life and the priesthood was once the main way that working class and immigrant male Catholics could attain a professional career. If the story of male religious orders is not told, the Church may be less appealing to the new generation of working class immigrants from Africa and Latin America.

A story of North American Catholicism that does not include—and prominently highlight—*all* the varieties of leadership in Catholicism is partial and incomplete, and a danger to the Church’s very survival here and now. The archives of women’s and men’s religious orders are essential for telling this story, and we are in grave danger of losing them to decay, disorganization, and sheer indifference.

We must therefore encourage more professional historians and social scientists to study religious life. This means that the archives have to be accessible and easy to use—and that academics have to be aware of the rich data they contain. I do not have

the knowledge or the background to discuss how this might be done. What I have been asked to do here is to summarize the results of three questionnaires—of archivists, of the leaders of various religious orders, and of historians or other scholars—conducted in October 2017 for this conference of Catholic religious archivists convening in the summer of 2018. These included both open-ended and fixed-choice questions on the problems and opportunities currently faced by the respondents.

In all three surveys, the most frequent issues raised concerned managing and digitizing collections. Digitization issues were the most frequently mentioned by both the archivists and the leaders, and the third most commonly mentioned by the scholars.

— We have started digitizing the collection to preserve the information, but also making some available online. I think people underestimate the cost in time and money that are involved in these types of projects. (archivist)

— The major issue facing all archival repositories is digitization. Increasingly, research is being done remotely. Can religious archival repositories afford the time and expense of digitization? (historian)

The second-most important issue for the archivists and the leadership was the merging of archives or their removal to a centralized location. Linked to this issue was a concern, voiced by approximately 10 percent of all three groups, about what would happen if a religious community ceased to exist, or declined to such an extent that they could no longer maintain their archives.

— We would like more information about storing archives after completion, or after the majority of present members are deceased and the newer members are so few in numbers that archives may not be meaningful as they regroup around the charism. (leader)

— We are one province of an international congregation; our U.S. Province is in the “autumn” of its existence. We need to determine what to keep of our present archival material; documentation and artifacts; how and where these will be preserved, stored, managed, etc. as our numbers and properties face diminishment. (archivist)

Some 70 percent of the leadership and archivist respondents said that their communities were facing downsizing, merger, or completion, but barely half said that their communities had a management plan that anticipated these changes.

Another important issue involved the dilemmas researchers face in trying to access the archival holdings. The scholars and the archivists mentioned the need to have guides or maps that could be useful in locating information, while the leadership was more likely to be concerned over how to preserve confidentiality.

— As monasteries and communities “die in place,” how will scholars find where resources/deposits are located? How will they make sense of the deposits? We need a ROAD MAP for future scholars. (archivist)

— Confidentiality, planned and regular removal of certain types of confidential documents. (leader)

Less commonly raised, but still important, was how to recruit and update professional archivists and how to recruit, train and supervise volunteers. Also mentioned was the dilemma of whether to hire a professional lay archivist, who might not be familiar with the history of the community, as compared with assigning a sister or brother, who might be less professionally trained and already over-committed with other responsibilities, to the task.

— Many archivists for religious congregations have little to no training and are not able to master the technological savvy required for today’s work and for the future. Many are in their seventh, eighth, or ninth decade of life and, although they hold the institutional memory, they are not going to be able to master an electronic content management system or capitalize on other technological advancements in the field. (archivist)

— I am early in my work in the archives. I offered to get into this work as the sister in charge is 95 years of age but a walking encyclopedia of archivist knowledge. I have a part-time job with the university and another job in the community in addition to my archivist work. Keeping our heads above water as we strive to continue our community archives is an important issue. (archivist)

Many of the archivists and historians also complained of a shortage of space and insufficient staffing, as well as obtaining sufficient leadership support. The issue of engaging leadership seems unlikely to ameliorate in the future, since several respondents also mentioned the difficulty of

getting younger, newer members interested in preserving archival material:

— I would like to have younger members of the community be more interested in learning our history and being more involved in contributing materials voluntarily to the archives. (archivist)

— Leadership needs to not only be familiar with what archives do and how they function, they have to provide a mandate to make the archive integral to the institute's government. So much is lost without the backing of superiors. (historian)

Conclusions

The story of the Catholic Church is complex, with multiple voices and perspectives. In numerous times and places, Catholicism, through its religious orders, has:

- *offered opportunities* otherwise unavailable for women (or for working class men) to use their talents and exercise leadership in the larger society;
- *served as the voice* of those who had none, speaking out against the maltreatment of oppressed groups;
- *discovered and highlighted new social needs*, often living and working among the poor or working-class and establishing institutions and services to meet their needs;
- *created breathtaking works of art and music*; and
- *discovered new horizons*, both scientifically and geographically.

And it continues to do so today. To allow Catholicism to be reduced by a less informed and frequently unsympathetic popular media to a caricature—misogynistic, hide-bound, scientifically ignorant, and intolerant—is a betrayal of its mission to preach the Good News, yet this is the image many people have of the Church. Who would want to join—or remain in—such an organization? Most Millennials are therefore either former or cultural Catholics, unlikely to pass Catholicism on to their children.

I believe this is literally an existential crisis for Catholicism in North America. If we lose our ability to tell our story, if we allow the history of Catholicism to be forgotten as these archives molder in dusty or mildewed boxes, then something very precious will be lost. I am not an archivist, but I am a sociologist, and I say that what you are here to discuss *and act upon* is quite simply the most important issue facing Catholicism today.

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*Image: Patricia Wittberg, S.C., speaks to more than 150 participants at the July 2018 conference *Envisioning the Future of Catholic Religious Archives*.*

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