

A Document on Ecclesiastical Archives

United States Catholic Conference
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In 1976 the Catholic Church in the United States will observe, along with the national Bicentennial, its own 411th year of continuous presence on the soil of our country. That long history, beginning with the founding of the town and parish of St. Augustine in 1565, and continuing through the establishment of the first American diocese, that of Baltimore, in 1789, down to the present, represents one of the most heroic, varied, productive, and inspiring chapters in the record of the nearly two millennia of Catholic Christianity. We American Catholics are justifiably proud, as the bicentennial year approaches, of the contributions of our forebears both to the mission of the Church and to the formation of the nation.

At the same time we regret that our Church's singular role in the development of our country has not been presented as fully as it deserves to be. Although books, monographs, articles, and essays on the subject of American Catholicism abound and many of them are of high scholarly and literary quality, church historians have still not penetrated to the heart of the peculiar American experience in all too many cases, because they have not had access to the pertinent documents of bishops, dioceses, religious orders, and institutions. The difficulty is not so much that such papers are not extant, although it is true, unfortunately, that in certain known cases large holdings of important documents have been destroyed because they were mistakenly judged to be "outdated" or "useless" or "trash." The problem is rather that in many places the papers which do exist in abundance have not yet been organized for presentation and research. Consequently, on the one hand, they are not easily accessible to church historians and, on the other, they are in danger of being lost, dispersed, or damaged through lack of proper care, fire or flood, or inadvertent disposal.

The Bicentennial has made all American Catholics more aware of their past and more conscious of their obligation to hand down to posterity the records of those accomplishments for the Church and the nation. American Catholics are a people with a tradition--apart from the Aboriginal Indians, the longest tradition in North America. The Church is an institution with a centuries-old reverence for official records. Yet American Catholics sometimes seem to be so concerned about the present that they neglect their duties to the past.

The Bicentennial is a most appropriate time to remind ourselves of this tradition of our Church and to inaugurate a nationwide effort to preserve and organize all existing records and papers that can be found in the chancery offices, general and provincial houses of religious orders, and institutions of our country. In a particular way we recommend to each of the residential bishops who have not yet done so that he appoint a properly qualified priest, religious man or woman, or lay person as diocesan archivist. Although the Code of Canon Law designates the chancellor as legal custodian of the archives (C.I.C., c. 372), as it also lays down the strict conditions under which documents are to be safeguarded (cc. 375.2, 376.1, 376.2, 377, 378), most chancellors, it

seems, do not have the time, amidst their own official duties, to undertake the highly detailed work of organizing archives. Nor, it must be added, do most chancellors and vice chancellors have the necessary background and training in archival science. The excellent organization of archives that has already been achieved by trained archivists in a few dioceses, religious orders, and institutions, however, provides a model for the rest.

In urging each bishop who does not already have a diocesan archivist to appoint one, even if that person could devote only one day a week to this work, we also propose that, for the benefit of those newly appointed, a brief training course be conducted by some of the archivists who have had long experience.

Finally, we express our sincere hope that the residential bishops may be disposed to grant access to the diocesan archives without undue limitations when properly accredited ecclesiastical historians request it. The past products of such research support, we believe, the contention that serious historians, even graduate students and doctoral candidates, have, with very rare exceptions, used such permission with honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect for the documents, and true Christian charity. Catholic historians have characteristically evinced a distinct pride in the persons and institutions of their Church of past generations, and, in our judgment, no bishop need fear that by opening his archives to scholarly examination, he will expose the Church's past to deliberate attempts at embarrassment. True, scandals and shortcomings may be uncovered, but in these matters we believe that it is still appropriate to follow the admonition of Pope Leo XIII, who in his letter on historical studies, *Saepenumero considerantes*, of August 18, 1883), quoting from Cicero, declared "that the first law of history is not to dare to utter falsehood; the second, not to fear to speak the truth; and, moreover, no room must be left for suspicion of partiality or prejudice."