The Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle: Documenting the Church in Western Washington
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Past

Valuable records of the Catholic church, which it will be impossible to replace, were destroyed by fire which gutted the residence of Bishop Edward O’Dea at 710 Terry avenue this morning. The fire was caused by a defective flue and had its origins adjacent to the room in which the records were kept. For some weeks, Father J. T. Murphy, secretary to the bishop, had been engaged in transcribing the records of the diocese . . . But as it was, the old and new copies of the important papers were kept in one room, and all of them were either completely destroyed or seriously damaged and defaced . . . The money loss is estimated at $4,000. (Spokane Spokesman Review, October 8, 1903)

The fire occurred on October 3, 1903, and the story may strike a familiar chord with anyone who uses or has custody of historical materials. However, there are conflicting reports of the loss. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer headlined “Bishop O’Dea’s House Burned--Church Records are Safe” and noted that “In the room where Father Murphy was working some of the records were damaged, but these have all been transcribed.” (October 4, 1903) Current archival holdings reflect a reality that lies somewhere between these extremes. Clearly records had been saved, including several letterbooks of the first Bishop, Augustine Magloire Alexander Blanchet (1850-1879). But many records spanning Bishop Junger’s episcopate (1879-1895) are not found in the archives, indicating their possible loss in the fire.

The fire presented the third bishop of the diocese, O’Dea (1896-1932), with the task of recapturing part of the diocesan historical identity. Bishop O’Dea had an extraordinary memory, and relied heavily on that gift to manage the diocese and to begin reconstructing diocesan records. After 1904, Msgr. Theodore Ryan, Chancellor, assured the creation and organization of materials regarding the official activities of the diocese; archival holdings relating to these transitional years indicate a renewed effort in managing diocesan records. In addition, Rev. William Metz, pastor of St. Mary Parish, Seattle,
was appointed one of the first historians of the diocese. His published works include a history of his parish and articles in the 1913 Catholic Encyclopedia. Several years later, the 1917 Code of Canon Law included regulations requiring the creation and maintenance of diocesan archives, thus providing legal and institutional support to Bishop O’Dea’s efforts.

In 1933, Gerald Shaughnessy became the fourth bishop of the diocese, and brought a bureaucratic order to the records of the diocese. He created a filing system and a range of record groups that were used exclusively until 1975. Under this system, documents, photographs, memorabilia, etc., were assigned a specific record group number based on subject or office. For instance, “100” was assigned to records from the Vatican, “200” assigned to supradiocesan records, “700” assigned to parish records, and “800” assigned to clergy. This system furnished the structural framework for all archival holdings, and lends itself quite readily to relational constructs that provide the parameters for broader access by users. Bishop Shaughnessy also gathered standardized historical materials during the 1940s, such as reports, correspondence, photographs and other memorabilia, concerning the parishes and missions of the diocese. The Bishop promoted the use of the archives by students and staff of the local seminary, as well from the Jesuit Seattle University. The relationship with Seattle University lasted through the early 1960s and produced a remarkable group of Master’s theses relating to various topics of diocesan history; early missionaries, women religious, charities, hospitals and schools for example.

The archives is indebted to the work of local historian Rev. Joseph Delannoy. During the episcopates of O’Dea and Shaughnessy, Delannoy was responsible for tracking diocesan and religious clergy, and clarifying scarce or inaccurate statistics and records. Delannoy also transcribed a major portion of early missionary correspondence. His commentary on the transcriptions placed many of the letters in historical or archival context. For instance, the following are his notes regarding a letter from Blanchet regarding the status of a certain Oblate missionary in the 1860s: “... Afterwards he is found working in the diocese. But whether he was ever incorporated or not, is another question. The matter came up later if I remember well. Certainly this letter is not found in the first two volumes [of letterbooks] I have. There may be another volume of letters . . . .Where are the letters before that time? . . . .Perhaps here or there we may find some extra correspondence.” Not only are these observations invaluable to the researcher, but to the archivist, “Delannoy’s Notes” are maps to hidden or lost records.

Present

The Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle is located at the Chancery in two environmentally controlled vaults equipped with a modern fire suppressant system. At the present time, the archivist and assistant archivist are responsible for reference, processing, arranging and describing, and

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making available for use over 2300 linear feet of inactive and historical records, and an additional 150 linear feet of books and pamphlets. Archival holdings date from 1838 to the present, with the bulk dates falling between 1933-1975. The records illustrate the growth and development of the institutional church in Western Washington, and reflect the work of the Catholic hierarchy in this region. Demographic and sacramental records share space with parish and school records, central agency records, as well as records of prior bishops, men and women religious, clergy, records of Catholic institutions and organizations, records of the local Catholic newspaper, and photographs, scrapbooks, artifacts and other realia. The archdiocesan archives has not, to date, accessioned personal papers of bishops, clergy, or women religious. The archives is also responsible for active records management and the creation and implementation of policies and retention schedules for all current records of the central agencies, regardless of format. Policies and procedures are in place regarding use, duplication, and access to the archival materials as well.

One of the primary functions of the archdiocesan archives is to support the bishop and his administration. However, only 15 percent of individuals who have used the archives in recent years are chancery employees. This apparent contradiction may be explained in part by the proliferation of electronic records, which has led to the localized management of information; that is, data necessary for daily operations is more easily retrieved in electronic format than from paper-based documents. The archival records that have been accessed by central agency employees are generally used to provide historical context for current initiatives and future program proposals.

Another vital function of the archives is to support the parishes, faith communities and schools of the archdiocese. 25 percent of the users represent these institutions. As can be expected, some of the most frequently accessed materials belong to the parish record group. These records include correspondence, clippings, and annual reports, as well as photographs and memorabilia, relating to the history of nearly 200 parishes, faith communities and schools in Western Washington. Of particular note is the “Parish History Questionnaire” sent to all existing faith communities by Bishop Shaughnessy in 1942. The responses to the questionnaire, as well as the photographs of the parish plant and a brief narrative history, provide the backbone of the parish collection. The thoroughness of the survey questions resulted in information regarding the beginnings of the parish, the school and staff, demographic changes, and the condition of the surrounding community, and institutions. The importance of education and the existence and purpose of lay organizations to parish life is also highlighted by the Shaughnessy surveys. Parish records offer the researcher a chance to examine issues such as the changing role of pastor, the nature of parish life and community in this region, the relationship between government and religion, and the character of the missionary effort in the Pacific Northwest.

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Sacramental records are essential to the vitality of the archdiocesan archives; nearly half of the archives patrons are genealogists, family historians, or individuals taking another step in their sacramental life. Early or fragile sacramental registers of nearly 200 parishes and mission stations in the archdiocese, and spanning the years 1838-1960, have been centralized in accord with a recently implemented sacramental records program. In addition to these parish registers, the archives also manages the sacramental registers of Oblate and other missionary priests (1848-1892), such as Casimir Chirouse, OMI; Pascal Ricard, OMI; Modeste Demers; JBA Brouillet; and Francis Norbert Blanchet (later bishop of Oregon City). More than half of the information in the missionary registers refers to Native Americans, and in particular, members of the Coast Salish tribes. These registers have been used to a great extent by researchers representing particular tribes seeking to establish federal treaty rights or by individual Native Americans seeking tribal membership. These records do much to establish the necessary "blood quantum" of individuals for official recognition and enrollment. These registers prove useful on other levels as well. The information covers a period of time that includes the fur trade, first white settlements, Indian treaties (1854-55), a brief territorial war, and initial reservation settlements. These records can be used to document off-reservation settlements; illustrate kinship and intra and inter-marriage patterns; determine village size and membership; trace the development of the missionary church; and track demographic and cultural changes. Aside from providing detailed family histories, these records chronicle the persistence of culture and its adaptation during a time of tremendous social and cultural transformation, and therefore assist many local Indian tribes in reclaiming their heritage. Sacramental data may also be used for corporate demographic studies, documenting the development of minority or ethnic populations; documenting immigration and settlement patterns; tracking local or regional demographic shifts.

The archdiocesan archives has become even more energized by the 1997 circular letter *The Pastoral Function of Church Archives* by the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church. This circular has combined the guiding principles of historical tradition, historical documentation, and evangelism in order to motivate the collection and use of archival materials on the university, diocesan and parish levels: "Thus, Church archives deserve attention both for their historical as well as their spiritual meaning. They enable us to understand the intrinsic tie between these two aspects in the life of the Church." (*The Pastoral Function of Church Archives*, pg. 14.)

**Future**

The year 2000 will be a time for celebrating the Jubilee Year. It will also be a time for celebrating the sesquicentennial of the Archdiocese of Seattle. Once again, students and interns from local schools such as the University of
Washington, Seattle University, and Pacific Lutheran University are utilizing records from or working in the archives. Scholarly use of the archives continues to grow, and archival programs focus on outreach. The archives, along with the Seattle Archdiocesan Historical Commission, has outlined long term goals in terms of planning and programs intended for the sesquicentennial based upon a commitment to develop research opportunities and broader interest in the history of Catholicism in the Northwest.

Plans for the sesquicentennial include the creation of traveling exhibits, a lecture series, and historical publications. Several projects related to sesquicentennial goals have already been implemented and include a history curriculum project and a letterbook translation project. The goal of the curriculum project is to create curriculum and lesson plans using primary source materials in order to incorporate Catholic Northwest history into the social studies and religion classes of archdiocesan schools. The project is coordinated by the archives and the Catholic schools department. The Archivist, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, and ten primary and secondary teachers form the committee responsible for the creation and implementation of the curriculum, lesson plans, and resource packet.

An ongoing program associated with the curriculum initiative is an artifact traveling trunk. Utilizing artifacts from the archives, the trunk contains pre-Vatican II vestments, liturgical objects, and episcopal vesture. The trunk assists students in understanding the use and meaning of various aspects of Catholic material culture. The examination of vestments as symbolic garments challenges students to think historically about the development of church vesture and make connections to their use in the present. A trunk of devotional objects is being planned for late 1998. Promoting the archives through the use of its holdings—and in this particular case, artifacts—is extremely beneficial for the archives as well as for the teachers and students in local Catholic schools.

Another sesquicentennial objective is the translation and publication of three letterbooks (1846-1867) of Bishop Augustine Magloire Alexander Blanchet. The letterbooks are written primarily in French and Latin. They are fragile, fading, and rarely accessed by researchers, not only because of their condition, but because few researchers are able to use non-English records. The project involves an Associate Professor of French, an Associate Professor of Religion specializing in American religious history, and the archdiocesan archivist. The final product will be heavily annotated, and contain translators’ notes, archivists’ notes, and historians’ notes. In addition to making these vital and formative records accessible, the publication of the letterbooks volumes will assure the preservation of the original.

A fourth sesquicentennial objective is the publication of a guide to the archives. The majority of archival holdings have been processed, but there are few finding aids. In order to make the records more accessible to researchers, the archives staff will be concentrating on the database conversion of new and
existing inventories and guides, and the publication of a guide to the archives in paper and electronic formats in the year 2000. The guide will mitigate any future disasters that might occur; will inform researchers and scholars of the breadth of archival holdings; and will ensure increased use of the materials. Steps have been and are being taken to assure that a newspaper will never again report the loss of church records. One hundred fifty years of the history of the archdiocese continues to be documented and the historical identity rediscovered. The Jubilee Year will mark the beginning of documenting the next 150 years for the Archdiocese of Seattle and adding to its heritage.

Notes from Msgr. Doogan regarding the Archives

Father Delannoy was the second historian. Shaughnessy liked him. All of the “Delannoy Notes” were taken while he was chaplain at the CSJP’s hospital. Delannoy did not like to come to the Chancery – he did not work here. Presumably the notes he made were off-site and sent or brought here. Delannoy saw O’Dea and Shaughnessy consecrated. He was very knowledgeable but did not like organization.

Bishop Shaughnessy didn’t like history because it continued the mistake that Seattle was the “child” of Walla Walla. Bishop Blanchet submitted the cities of Colville, Nesqually, Victoria, and Walla Walla as dioceses.

Msgr. John Tracy Ellis was here for one summer in 1961. He was a friend of Rev. John Sullivan, SS. No one knows what he was researching. Father Power was responsible for letting Fr. Schoenberg, SJ, into the archives.

He appointed Fr. Dougherty (1934?) (who taught at St. Edward Seminary) as Vice Chancellor in charge of the archives. Thus the 50-year tradition of the Vice Chancellor being the archivist began. Cornelius Power was also the Vice Chancellor/Archivist at some point. Msgr. Doogan was chancellor/archivist, and shared responsibility of the archives with two successive Vice Chancellors: Harvey McIntyre was Vice Chancellor/archivist; Don Espen was Vice Chancellor/archivist. Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly would review parish files to get the sense of the community and history of the parish.