

# STARTING A RELIGIOUS CONGREGATION ARCHIVES: ADMINISTRATIVE FORMULAS FOR BETTER OR WORSE

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In the past five years or so, there has been a great increase in the number of religious congregation archives and archivists in the United States. Though this is a laudable development in itself, it has not been without serious problems which, if they are not solved soon, may eventually undermine the movement. One obvious sign of difficulty is the presence of different archivists from the same congregation year after year at professional meetings. The high rate of turnover and the constant starting over from scratch are surface indicators of deeper problems that demand attention.

It should be noted at the outset that what follows is partly autobiographical, but not entirely. The text draws also on the experiences of other religious archivists in the hope that this collective experience will help others to identify some of the landmarks and pitfalls along the way through what for many is still a *terra incognita*. In addition, these remarks are offered to help cultivate some patience on the part of those who are desperate to use religious archives and cannot understand the disarray.

Most congregations developed with their eyes on the present. The future was deemed unplanable and the past was relegated to the farthest corners of the attic. Now that we are finally concerned with our past, nobody remembers which corner of the attic conceals the records we need. Thus, in recent years many congregations have been plunged into the current of events that lead to creation of an archives as administrators speak of "doing something about" the records. The result in many cases has been a headlong and often haphazard dash into an archives project, with varied outcomes.

The word "archives" comes easily to the religious mind because most religious constitutions stated that the administrative secretary was to be in charge of the archives. However, this meant only the current files in most cases, and they were usually kept securely locked. Thus, "archives" became synonymous with "vault," that *terra sancta* in or near the major superior's office. Holy poverty kept most of us from giving space to useless old papers, so the good secretary was the one who kept outdated material from cluttering up the vault. Hence, boxes accumulated in the attic. But, being in the attic, they were not considered part of the archives (the vault), and they were forgotten as one secretary replaced another. Because the archives was traditionally the secretary's domain, it is not surprising that the first person now collared for the archivist's job is usually an administrative secretary, who is then sent off to an archives workshop (if she is lucky; some are not). It is at this stage that Murphy's Law often goes into effect, and everything that can go wrong does.

The scenario is familiar to many. The secretary goes to her workshop, only to find that she cannot be secretary and archivist at the same time, and most seem to remain secretaries. So the superiors begin the search for an archivist, on a path strewn with bogs and pitfalls. For example, few seem to see the archivist's job as a permanent one; rather, they think she only needs to put the attic in order and that will be that. Neither does it seem to be a full time job; often the overburdened secretary, a librarian, or a bookkeeper will be asked to "do the archives" on a time available basis. A third problem is that superiors are loathe to ask a young religious to trade the missions for boxes of old papers in the attic, and the young seem equally reluctant. Besides, it seems appropriate that the archivist should be someone who has lived through the community's history and knows it by experience. Thus, after the secretary has given up, the next recruits tapped are the retired. Occasionally the retired recruit turns out to be perfect for the job, but not because she is elderly and has lived the community's history. In less fortunate congregations, the search for an archivist may take several years of trial and error, and the attrition rate is dreadful.

At this point, let us consider Euper's Law, Section 1:

The congregation's archives will make better progress if the superiors are the *first* to take the archives workshop, and that workshop should be aimed at superiors rather than at archivists.

If Euper's Law had been enacted years ago, many of today's archives-related problems in religious congregations would have been prevented. Some congregations might have hired a professional archivist, rather than have tried to retread a sister. Some might have contracted with an existing archives rather than go to the expense of establishing their own. The rest might have selected a good candidate for the job at the outset and had her properly trained. All of them would have known what they were getting into when they said, "We need to do something about our records." But, since Euper's Law was not enacted years ago, let us review the consequences.

Once the archivist has been found, she must receive training, and this seems to be one of the most severe problems religious archivists face today. Perhaps because of our long tradition of sending untrained postulants out to work in the confidence that God would provide, some still think they should be able to launch into any new project with nothing but trust in the Lord. Whatever the reason, a disproportionate number of religious archivists seem to be needlessly struggling along like pioneers through an uncharted wilderness, unaware that standard procedures exist and that training resources are available.

Two areas are essential to the training of the religious archivist. The first involves practices common to all archival work: appraisal, arrangement and description, finding aids, preservation, and reference service. There is no substitute for simply going to an established archives and learning the job by working under the supervision of a professional archivist for a substantial period of time. Questions that never come to mind during a panel discussion will emerge in droves as one tackles a pile of papers, and those questions can be asked and answered on the spot.

The second area of required training may be unique to religious archivists. It is the skill demanded when the new archivist must begin to administer large doses of reality therapy, which can be painful for all concerned. She has learned, and will have to break the news, that the archives cannot remain in the attic and vault, that many old record-handling practices should be changed, that the archives will need space and money, and that the job will last forever. To the authorities, all of this comes as a severe shock. As they see major plans unfolding, they hint that what they really had in mind was someone to see if there was anything important in the attic. They tremble to see this simple notion getting out of hand, and the archivist may find herself having to sell her

bosses on the very job they hired her to undertake. Most lay archivists probably look for jobs where they exist and do not try to justify archives to those who do not want them. Particularly if people have taken a vow of poverty, it is hard to ask for acid-free boxes for old papers when every active sister is trying to support herself and two aged infirm ones on a nun's stipend. Particularly if people have a commitment of service to the poor, it is hard to commit a full-time position to caring for old papers when we are daily reminded that millions of people are starving or oppressed and the missions seem the proper place to be. A number of other religious particulars have made it very difficult for many of us to apply our training. We tend to return from workshops as "born-again archivists" to a land of archival agnostics, and we have to quote a lot of chapters and verses to get our projects off the ground. It is at the specifically religious archives workshop that the archivist is most likely to learn how to convert her superiors. It is at these workshops that religious archivists can share strategies and make valuable contacts for the future.

Although it is ideal to have both kinds of preparation, most religious archivists get only a workshop or two before heading for the attic, so they are not fully equipped to deal with the major areas of concern that await them. Few sisters know how to prevent a return of the box-in-the-attic syndrome in the future. A brief meditation on these boxes should convince the archivist that if she addresses herself only to them, by the time she finishes there will be a vast new supply of boxes in the attic, and the congregation's successive archivists will perpetually be eons behind in their work. Further, the records that accumulate will be spotty (because people keep throwing things away), disordered (because people re-use the file folders and send the papers to the archives loose), and falling apart (from poor quality materials and poor environment). The papers now in the attic may be fifty years old and yellow, but fifty years from now today's papers may be nothing but dust. It is important, then, to plan the future of today's records by means of records scheduling.

Basically, archival records scheduling involves inventorying the records to find out what materials are created, which ones should eventually go to the archives, and when they can be transferred there. Orthodox records managers have devised some standard records inventory forms that theoretically should be a boon to the institutional archivist. In fact, though, the typical form is a nightmare of pernicious

minutiae for which nobody in the congregation has time. The archivist can devise a very simple form that supplies the basic information of series identification, how long a set of files is considered active, whether the material is sensitive, and when it can be transferred. The new religious archivist should learn about scheduling, and should be prepared to deal with the numerous difficulties involved in what amounts to a whole new way of life for the records-makers in their offices. It will take time to establish the system—not because of anyone's ill will, but because it is so new to many of the people who are accustomed to simply throwing things away when they need more space. However, patience is rewarded. The archives will grow by design, not chance, and the archivist will have a documented basis to plan for future needs in supplies, equipment, space, and personnel. Scheduling may cause a lot of headaches at the start, but it is necessary, even for a small provincial or institutional archives. No matter how small the system is, personnel face the problem of deciding what to do with paper when they no longer need it, and often it goes straight into the incinerator. Without a controlled accessioning system, the archives will forever be at the mercy of each individual's idea of what should be preserved. The archivist will receive loads of sentimental souvenirs and casual comments like "We just cleaned out the files last week; boy, what a bonfire!"

The scheduling job and the boxes in the attic can take a lot of time, but the religious archivist must recognize that not all archival materials are in the attic and the offices. Treasures may be scattered all over the congregation, in convent attics and sister's trunks. The buckshot approach, letting the sisters know that the archives is collecting historical materials, may be most effective here. An article in the congregation's newsletter and visits to the houses help. The buckshot approach is bound to draw a tremendous catch of junk, but nearly every batch of junk contains something valuable. Regardless of its value, every contribution should be acknowledged by a personal thank-you note with a little fervorino about the importance of preserving our heritage. Invariably, the thank-you note will draw more contributions, and they improve as time goes by. The congregation should establish a policy which stipulates that when a sister dies, any papers found in her possession will be sent to the archives. There are always some nonarchival items to hand out as mementi, but the archivist should have first choice.

Once the archivist has collected records, implemented scheduling procedures, and involved the congregation in her work, she must confront the records that have accumulated. Although processing is included in archival training, many religious archivists seem to learn little about conservation techniques. While the rest of the congregation imagines her as a sort of office clerk surrounded by file cabinets, the archivist soon realizes that the archives really is more like a hospital, where she must administer therapeutic baths and medicated vapors, mend lacerations, purge parasites, do reconstructive surgery, and devise orthotic appliances in the hope of saving the poor stragglers that arrived in critical condition. Sometimes earlier treatment efforts were botched, and the archivist must treat the results of someone else's malpractice. These things do not wait until the new archivist has learned all about her job; they emerge the minute she opens the first box in the attic. Let us return, then, to Euper's Law, Section 2:

The chances of success increase and the experiences of catastrophic frustration decrease in direct proportion to the amount of training the new archivist has in "the techniques that every archivist should know."

These techniques have been identified by conservator George M. Cunha as cleaning, deacidifying, mending, and reinforcement.<sup>1</sup> An initial archives workshop may have touched on conservation, but that was just a beginning. The archivist should plan to read a lot of books and attend many workshops where conservation and restoration are discussed, because it does little good to have the records on hand if they are in unusable condition, or soon will be. The corollary to Euper's Law, Section 2, is equally important:

The archivist should educate her congregation in good records care practices in order to reduce the unintentional damage done to the records before they are sent to the archives.

A newsletter and educational slide program are helpful in this regard. There is, of course, one primary purpose for all this activity: service. A religious archivist who, like myself, was a retread and had to make up for decades of her community's neglect of records, admonished several years ago that the archives should be kept strictly closed until all records were in order. This may have worked in her situation, but it

probably does not have much of a chance in most congregations. The minute the word of the archives goes out, the questions begin to roll in. Inquirers need the history of their parish for the jubilee book, a pithy quotation from the foundress for a brochure, and pounds of data for a new project, and they think the archivist's job is to do their research. Then, confusing the archivist with the computer, they request the current job descriptions of all the sisters west of the Kittatinnies. Four agencies decide that this is the time to survey women's or religious records, and the archivist is on the mailing list of everyone who is doing a comprehensive guide and wants a copy of hers before she even has one. Countless individuals are doing their family tree and had a relative in the congregation. If she is really typical, all of this is happening in the centennial year and she is expected to produce the history of the congregation, a photo exhibit, and a museum of artifacts used by the foundresses. And there she stands in her attic. Even the appropriate requests bring their share of frustration when all the information is needed yesterday. Most people can sympathize with one who is struggling to catch up after a vacation, but hardly anyone can understand that the archivist is already 102 years behind in her work the day she starts.

The beginning archivist, then, must deal not only with the records, but also with educating the congregation about archival services. It simply is not possible to tell everyone the archives is closed until all records are organized. If she considers today's records as tomorrow's archival accessions, the archives will never be finished. Service is part of the act from the start. On the other hand, the archivist cannot let herself become so involved in service that she has no time to advance the archives. In the early stages, service may have to be limited, with guidelines defining what can and cannot be done for people. To this end, a policy manual should be written that outlines the collecting policy, services provided, and any conditions or limitations that must be imposed. It is better to set everyone straight at the outset than to set bad precedents that will have to be reversed later.

The mere mention of the word "personnel" can easily precipitate a case of schizophrenia. When the religious archivist discovers what is in the attic, she comes to realize that she alone will be the curator of archives, manuscripts, photographs, bound volumes, sound recordings, motion pictures, business records, micrographics, ephemera, and the museum, and that she will be the assistant,

cataloguer, typist, conservator, and housekeeping staff as well. The religious archivist usually must become knowledgeable in all the areas in which the pros in large shops can specialize. For any job that does not require specialized training (and some that do), volunteers are a necessity. They can do all kinds of time-consuming chores and most of the typing, sparing the archivist for more demanding work. However, the archivist still must be familiar with all areas in order to train and supervise the volunteers.

Of course, the most important member of the archives staff is the archivist herself. If she has learned her job well, she knows it is a specialized field with its own body of knowledge and skills. Yet in some congregations the archivist is just one more member of the general labor pool. After several years of experience and training, she may be transferred to teach third grade in Succasunna. This brings us to Euper's Law, Section 3:

Thou shalt not lightly transfer thy archivist.

This brings us more or less full circle. We began with the problem of finding an archivist and end with the problem of keeping her. Doubtless there are many other issues that arise to challenge the modern religious congregation that is struggling to maintain its present works and is ambivalent at best about the archives. One can only hope that the experience of today's religious archivists may be helpful in this time of growing awareness that we cannot afford to forget who we are and where we came from, and that to remember requires a full-time, fully committed effort.

## FOOTNOTE

1. George M. Cunha, "Where to Do it? A Panel Discussion on Regional, State, and In-House Conservation Centers," comments presented at a symposium on "Preserving Your Historical Records," Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, October 21, 1978.