American Catholic archives, according to Boston Archdiocesan archivist James O'Toole in a recent article, are experiencing a "renaissance in progress." In fact, since the National Conference of Catholic Bishops urged dioceses, religious communities, and institutions to "inaugurate a nation-wide effort to preserve and organize all existing records and papers" in 1976, archival programs in many sees, motherhouses, and parishes throughout the country have been born again. The Boston Archdiocese, for example, utilizing seed money from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, built a strong internal program, secured a veteran professional archivist to direct it, and adapted its Chancery facility to house the records of the faithful in a safe, stable setting. The New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission, pursuing a very different approach, rescued hundreds of feet of moldy sacramental registers, insect-infested bishops' diaries, and faded, virtually illegible adoption records from a basement boiler room in an overcrowded Chancery Office in Downtown Newark, and transferred them to Seton Hall University, where students and scholars might leisurely peruse the documents in a more comfortable, hospitable environment.¹

These strategies do not exhaust Catholic record-keepers' solutions to their documentary dilemmas. Like their colleagues throughout the profession, Catholic archivists usually disagree, often develop "practical" seat-of-the-pants solutions for technical and theoretical problems, comprise a diverse mosaic of priests, women religious, and laypersons with a wide assortment of training, publish lots of newsletters but few monographs, and have managed to devise almost as many archival approaches as there exist dioceses. Despite their diversity, Catholic archivists have become conscious in recent years of (to use an SAA catchword) their professional affinity, and diocesan archivists now meet annually in conjunction with the
Society of American Archivists' conventions. They are taking steps to publicize their holdings—a guide to Boston's Archdiocesan Archives recently appeared, and a survey of Women's Religious records in the United States is available. They are hiring people to work in their repositories and advertising for them in professional journals—a perusal of recent SAA Employment Bulletins confirms that Detroit and Baltimore have hired new archivists, Boston recently employed an assistant, and the New Jersey Catholic Historical Records Commission has hired three Field Archivists under a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. And they are wrestling with many of the same issues which plague their brethren in businesses, historical societies, and universities.  

Though this article focuses on official Church records and archival programs at the diocesan level, the universe of Catholic documentation is much broader. Many records and personal papers relating to the history of the Church in America are found in the archives of religious communities of men and women at provincial offices, abbeys, and motherhouses; in the archives of Catholic universities such as Catholic University, Georgetown, Marquette, and Notre Dame with a broad range of collecting programs including "Catholic social action," and in secular historical agencies and repositories. These archival programs have developed markedly during the past decade. In particular, religious communities are employing professionally trained archivists, who are processing collections on a large scale and are making traditionally closed or inaccessible records available for scholarly research.

If Catholics have in fact escaped the archival ghetto, they still have a unique tradition which they can draw upon for methodological guidance, and which can liberate them from rigid records policies. When did Catholics begin establishing archives? Why did they consider their records valuable? Who used the records and for what purposes? What effect did Catholic historiographical trends have on religious repositories? How did all of these factors change over time, and what implications does this have for the future? An examination of the early words and deeds of Catholic bishops and chroniclers helps us place the current situation into an appropriate historical perspective and suggests some new approaches for some complex archival issues.

America's earliest Catholics thought very little about history or archives. When John Carroll was nominated as the new nation's first bishop in 1790, he served as the spiritual shepherd of a small, geographically dispersed flock centered mainly in Maryland and Pennsylvania. Though he fought and felt Protestant prejudice at many points throughout his long life, this well-connected prelate moved easily among Chesapeake aristocrats and sought to move
Catholics into a broad, consensual American mainstream. A supporter of the American Revolution, an advocate of an English language liturgy, an opponent of nationality-based parishes, and a believer in the election of bishops by the priests, Carroll also insisted on a native clergy loyal to American institutions. The Church's minimal bureaucratic structure generated relatively few records, and America's first bishop saw no need to construct a distinct Catholic history. Rather, Catholics should adapt their institutions to mirror and complement American republicanism, and their history should blend in with the national experience.  

By the 1840s, the Catholic hierarchy began expressing very different attitudes. Between 1840 and 1860, Irish and German immigrants began flocking into northeastern port cities in ever-increasing numbers, filling pews and collection plates, and exacting new spiritual and social demands on the Church's rudimentary administrative structure. These new Catholics carried a score of local religious traditions and practices across the Atlantic. Many could not speak English. A sizable percentage found unskilled, low-paying seasonal jobs in the mill towns and urban manufacturing centers now dotting the northeastern landscape. Religious leaders bemoaned the immigrants' mobility, fearing that the New World's urban, secular attractions might weaken their faith.

The institutional Church responded by creating new dioceses, establishing nationality-based parishes, and importing religious orders from Europe to staff rapidly multiplying institutions. Bishops, who bore the burden of administering these expanding, diversified operations, placed a new emphasis on recordkeeping. Small Chancery bureaucracies developed to manage diocesan finances, maintain order and deference among the priests, and insure that the good word spread to every corner of the diocese. Bishops mandated annual reports from every pastor which described in minute detail the spiritual and financial condition of every parish. They codified the keeping of accurate sacramental registers and books of receipts and expenditures in diocesan statutes, and began maintaining their own episcopal diaries, which recorded significant events during their administrations. Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley of Newark went so far as to order each pastor to obtain "a good, strongly-bound Blank-Book" to record trustee minutes and warned that "habitual or willful neglect" of good recordkeeping "will be considered a sufficient cause for the removal of any pastor."

Of course, episcopal edict did not insure clerical compliance. Parish priests retained considerable administrative autonomy and recordkeeping practices frequently reflected personality quirks rather than bureaucratic mandate. Personal and parish property often became intermingled, and priests occasionally carried church
records to their changing pastoral assignments. Thus, for example, a mid-nineteenth century baptismal register for St. James Church in Newark begins with an account of “monies recd. for Church at Middletown point” near the New Jersey shore. When bishops attempted to obtain information concerning churches under their jurisdiction they usually discovered a distressing documentary apathy. Bishop Michael Corrigan, for example, consulted Philadelphia’s Chancellor in 1879 to gather information concerning Catholic settlements in Pleasant Mills and Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, and received a disheartening reply. “Search among the Archives did not enlighten me a whit in regard to the history of the missions” complained the Chancellor. Indeed, he admitted, “I cannot dignify by the name of Archives what remains in our hands to tell our own history of the early part of the century.” At the local level, bookkeeping problems appeared even worse. Bayley recognized this deficiency during the 1840s, while attempting to unravel a financial scandal at Roundout, New York. A perusal of the trustee records revealed that “they have been kept as such accounts are usually kept in matters of Catholic Church building . . . pencil orders, paying in the streets, at the quarry, around the foundation is the usual practice, and is not calculated to bring out a set of [regular] books.”

Still, mid-nineteenth century bishops did begin paying more attention to their archives. A few even decided to write their own histories. At the very moment that American Catholicism was becoming an urban, immigrant church, and that Protestant nativists were challenging their Catholic neighbors in the press and on the streets, some ecclesiastics looked back to a simpler, somewhat idealized past. Native-born Catholic convert James Roosevelt Bayley, for example, authored a short history of Catholicity in early New York, penned a laudatory episcopal biography of the first bishop of Vincennes, and generally venerated the pre-immigrant Church that was quickly passing out of existence. Early Catholic historians also became significant manuscript collectors. Again, Bayley accumulated a substantial collection of Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton’s letters, retained possession of notebooks, letters, and manuscript fragments of New York’s first resident bishop, and permanently borrowed the personal papers of Bishop Simon Gabriel Brute of Vincennes. Excepting a few half-hearted notes from Brute’s successor in the 1860s requesting that Bayley return these latter papers, few dioceses bothered about the loss of dusty, old non-current documents. Administering the present, not preserving the past, occupied the attentions and energies of most. The few who wished to dabble in the past were given free reign to do so, manuscripts became alienated from dioceses, and custody of significant collections fell into private hands.
Between 1880 and 1920, the Catholic Church experienced another major spurt of growth. Once again, immigrants provided the principal stimulus. As second-generation Irish and German Catholics now dominated the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Italians, Poles, Slavs, Ukrainians, and other southern and eastern European immigrants swelled the ranks of the laity. Dioceses mushroomed into full-blown bureaucracies. Separate school offices now directed and coordinated educational endeavors. Social welfare efforts moved out of individual parishes and into centrally administered diocesan agencies. Chancery offices moved into more spacious quarters and supported growing administrative and clerical staffs. New ethnic parishes grew everywhere, finances became more complicated, and the Church hierarchy confronted a more pressing informational crisis. As the bureaucracy swelled, so did its records.\(^8\)

The new immigration also renewed conflict among Churchmen. Assimilationists among the hierarchy, fearing new outbreaks of nativism and scornful of the persistence of foreign traditions in America, preached practical coexistence with and accommodation to the dominant national environment in tones reminiscent of John Carroll. Others sensed a fundamental tension between the Roman religion and American society. These clerics argued that Catholics needed separate institutions to retain their cultural identity and halt spiritual declension. After a series of conflicts and controversies in the 1890s, the separatists generally gained the upper hand and shaped the future course of Catholicism. Nowhere was their influence more evident than in the area of Catholic history.\(^9\)

Around the turn of the century, as dioceses and parishes approached significant anniversaries, bishops and pastors commissioned reliable members of the faithful to immortalize their accomplishments in history books. Newark's fiftieth anniversary in 1903, for example, prompted Bishop John J. O'Connor to characterize the previous half-century as "a glorious record . . . of apostolic zeal, of unswerving fidelity, of sublime devotion" and to praise the "almost incredible achievements" of former diocesan bishops. O'Connor secured a Morristown pastor to write a monumental history of the Catholic Church and produce a "piece of literature that will make the Catholics of the State of New Jersey proud of their religion." Incidentally, the diocese hoped to reap other benefits from this publication as well. Proceeds were to be deposited in a New Cathedral Fund and, hopefully, add "very materially to the finances" of the diocese. While the stacks of volumes reposing in diocesan offices to this day document the book's commercial drawbacks, it did create a common historical mythology for the diverse, heterogeneous parishioners attending early twentieth century Sunday masses.\(^10\)
Throughout the nation, Catholic history was to serve a similar purpose. One historian has chronicled the emergence of a "Church and School Triumphant" tradition in the writings of such historians as John Gilmary Shea and James A. Burns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These writings chronicled the "triumphant progress of the Catholic Church in the face of incredible obstacles." Institutional growth demonstrated God's Providence and his earthly preferences. Celebrating their Americanism, uncritical in tone, rigorously documenting quantitative growth, and usually constructed within a narrow institutional framework, the parochial polemics written during this time moved Catholic history decidedly outside the American historiographical mainstream.11

If Catholic history was to be written for Catholics, it would also be written by Catholics. Catholic historians institutionalized their separation by creating distinct organizations. An American Catholic Historical Society was founded in Philadelphia in 1884 to collect historical materials, publish significant primary sources, and encourage research into Catholic history. A United States Catholic Historical Society was established in New York shortly thereafter for broadly similar purposes. By 1915, a Catholic Historical Review offered Catholic historians an additional outlet for their scholarship.12

And these Catholic historians took their mission very seriously. Peter Guilday warned fellow chroniclers as late as 1935 that "it goes without saying that not one word, not one line that might give scandal to anyone should ever be written . . . the responsibility involved should not be assumed by the writer alone. This is a matter which requires the judgement of his superiors." A relative handful received episcopal sanction to examine parochial archives. Henry Browne characterized Catholic institutional archives as "in good measure family secrets" in 1951, and twenty-five years later Richard Julianni observed that access to parish records still depended primarily on "the specific agreement and relationship between the researcher and the pastor."13

Though bishops bestowed their blessings and placed their nihil imprimaturs on some historical efforts between 1890 and 1920, few took any active interest in preserving Catholic records. Paradoxically, this period—which witnessed with beginnings of a Catholic historical renaissance—coincided with a dark age of records neglect. While episcopal authorities recognized that the Catholic laity needed a history, they rarely connected the writing of that history with the need to preserve Catholic primary sources. Thus, the early twentieth century became a period of great carelessness in the administration of institutional records. A long litany of archival atrocities—including broken custody, alienation of records from
dioceses and parishes, and indiscriminate trashing of already decaying materials—has been documented by several historians and archivists.\(^{14}\)

It remained for a few interested individuals to salvage what they could. Foremost among the concerned Catholics of the period was Notre Dame University’s librarian James Farnam Edwards. Dreaming of a National Catholic Archives at South Bend, he began aggressively acquiring materials from enthusiastic private donors and dour ecclesiastical officials alike. Edwards badgered, cajoled, and courted prominent Catholics to obtain access to their manuscripts and commitments concerning their disposition. Consistent with the historiographical trends of the period, he concentrated primarily on gathering manuscripts from members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, papers from the first families of American Catholicism, and official diocesan records from obliging institutions.

His methods are revealed in a letter to a somewhat pompous Jersey City pastor, who had received the honorific title Archon of Heliopolis. Lamenting that the “the diaries you have kept since your return to Europe are claimed by your nephew,” Edwards pronounced this development a “calamity.” Rather, the papers should be transferred to Notre Dame, “where they will be sacredly preserved for posterity . . . every scrap of information concerning your grace should be preserved . . . your biography will be written . . . it will be a model of its kind, a classic.” Finally, pulling out all the stops, Edwards informed this potential donor that “you ought to be a Cardinal . . . I have heard it said you would not accept a Cardinal’s Hat because of the restrictions around a personage holding that dignity.”\(^{15}\) Ultimately, Edwards succeeded with this individual, and a number of other important Catholics as well. Undeniably, he built the most significant Catholic archives in America, saved many records from neglect and destruction, and insured Notre Dame’s position as the center of American Catholic scholarship. While many contemporaries and some future archivists attacked him for pirating manuscripts and alienating administrative records from their creating institutions, his elite-based collecting policies (typical of the time) also limited his institution’s scope in significant ways.

As this sketchy historical review reveals, Catholic diocesan records often ended up where they did because of a particular individual’s interest, an accidental turn of events, or an unofficial policy of benign neglect. Diocesan administrators considered Catholic records a house-keeping nuisance and rarely consulted them. A handful of officially sanctioned Catholic historians utilized them to construct episcopal biographies and diocesan chronicles, but most historians neither knew of the records’ existence or cared to penetrate the ecclesiastical fortresses housing them.
Today, Catholic archivists confront a very different world. Catholics have suburbanized and made significant economic strides. They have exerted a tremendous influence on American culture, while having been profoundly shaped by it in turn. No longer the immigrant church, Catholicism now represents a widely shared experience for a very broad spectrum of the American population. Historians are examining and interpreting this transformation from a very different perspective. Jay Dolan has urged Catholic historians to write their histories “from the level of the street and not just from the level of the bishop’s desk.” A feeling has emerged that Catholics no longer need celebratory, laudatory works to bind them together, but rather hard-nosed monographs which critically explore their past and dissect its failures as well as successes.¹⁶

Placing Church experiences into a broader social context requires that historians begin asking some very different questions. Where did America’s Catholics come from? What sort of communities did they create or recreate in the New World? What role did ritual and tradition play in easing their adjustments to urban industrial life? Did religious observance decline under the strains of urbanization, industrialization, and constant geographic mobility? What role did Catholic schools have in assimilating children into American life, or in separating them from their native-born peers? Did Church and school serve as important social control mechanisms? If so, how? Who went to Catholic Schools? Why? How did the experiences of Catholic students differ from their public school counterparts? The answers to these and a score of similar questions will not be found in celebratory historical works of the 1860s or the narrowly conceived monographs of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Nor will they be found in the bishop’s papers which Catholic archivists have carefully collected, calendared, and catalogued over the years. In the past, Catholic archives have been organized and structured to conveniently service certain interests—diocesan administrators assembling information, native-born bishops reflecting on a simpler past, clerical authorities seeking to discover a common heritage for a remarkably diverse people, and Catholic historians writing for their peers and sponsors. Now, diocesan archivists face new challenges, are consulted by different constituencies, and are confronted with scholarly questions their traditional repositories are not prepared to answer. Catholic scholars are expanding the scope of their studies at the same time that social, labor, and ethnic historians are beginning to examine seriously the nature and impact of the Church in society. Both groups are writing thoughtful social history. Unfortunately, the burden of the Catholic archival past has left archivists ill-equipped to deal with the demands of social scientists and humanistic scholars. At the very moment that many
bishops have expressed a greater, more widespread willingness to allow researchers into their diocesan archives, these repositories appear lacking in the diversity and scope of documentation which practitioners of the new social history demand.

How can today’s Catholic archivists remedy this situation and transform their facilities into vital social science laboratories operating on the frontiers of humanistic scholarship? Part of the answer, I believe, lies in centralization and in professional archivists defining broader responsibilities for their institutions. In fact, many of the building blocks necessary to construct a new Catholic history have survived. Sacramental registers, student roll books, social welfare case files, and benevolent and fraternal organization records—all constitute valuable tools for the social historian of the 1980s. Diocesan archivists can play a critical role in aggressively seeking out such materials, removing them from the frequently physically dangerous church lofts and rectory basements which usually serve as makeshift repositories, and bringing them under bibliographic control to increase their accessibility. Rather than narrowly defining their responsibilities as preserving only the documents generated by the Chancery Office bureaucracy, diocesan archivists must consciously attempt to document a broad spectrum of Church life and experience, and insure that a wide range of clerical and lay activity is available for analysis.

Such a commitment will frequently involve moving outside the Church’s formal institutional structure. Rather than merely documenting religious consumers’ lives as seen through the eyes of parish priests, schoolteachers, and caseworkers, archivists must seek out—indeed, even create—documents which allow the laity to speak. Oral history interviews can fulfill this mission. Home movies which record sacramental ceremonies and ethno-religious festivals offer another underutilized source.

Church archivists must also remain sensitive to contemporary religious trends and shifts. Hispanics, for example, now populate many inner city parishes. How has their experience differed from other immigrant groups? Have they developed a distinctive form of Roman Catholicism by blending their own traditional rites, ceremonies, and rituals with Church-sanctioned forms of worship? The oral sources for constructing a history of post-World War II immigration in America clearly exist. Archivists must aggressively seek out and exploit them. Black Catholicism and the Church’s attempts to convert non-whites in the urban north constitutes another particularly significant contemporary topic. During the 1970s, many Catholics experienced a charismatic reawakening. Oral and visual sources provide especially important insight into this aspect of the faith.
Constructing collections which adequately document the breadth and scope of religious life can strain conventional approaches and budgets. If individual dioceses cannot afford or choose not to build and staff substantial central manuscript repositories, alternatives exist. Placing materials on deposit at already existing repositories appears a very sensible step. College and university archives offer especially suitable environments. They usually provide a wide range of support services, including secondary reference collections, microfilm and fiche reader-printers, microfilming equipment, photo-processors, media equipment, and exhibit space, which increase the collection's utility and encourage its analysis by scholars. Academic environments also offer a corps of eager graduate students anxious to work with the collections, utilize the sources to enrich their understanding of the past, and contribute to professional scholarship. They further provide a familiar, comfortable working environment for visiting scholars, who might set foot only with the greatest trepidation into a bishop's office. Historical societies, it should be noted, can, under the right circumstances, offer many of these same advantages.

Other approaches can also produce similar effects. Regional repositories, for example, created by several sees in a particular province, constitute another possible solution. Dioceses can thus pool their resources, bringing together a wide range of scholarly sources in a single, centrally-planned location. Such cooperative ventures can cut archival costs for the participants, insure that uniform access policies govern the use of all records, and ease researcher burdens significantly. They might also stimulate other cost-sharing efforts between dioceses in the areas of publication, common data bases, and public outreach programs.

These thoughts, it should be noted, proceed from a single assumption and a single conviction. If Catholic diocesan archives have, in the past, been created and structured to service several somewhat narrow constituencies, they can best serve the future by responding to and by, in fact, leading one very important group they have too often excluded from their considerations. By committing themselves to humanistic scholarship, archivists make a substantial, invaluable contribution to all of their more immediate users—the bishops, the men and women religious, and the laity. To accomplish this, they must think creatively, remain open to novel archival approaches, and structure their repositories so that their documents accurately reflect Catholic life and their collections are open for analysis. In practice, this means bringing significant local records together in professionally-staffed diocesan, regional, or state-wide repositories which scholars will visit and utilize. It may mean cooperative, cost-sharing projects, perhaps in conjunction with existing Catholic
archives and historical agencies. It could mean the creation of national data bases to aid researchers and contributions to local and regional data base projects. It certainly means a more creative and humanistic archival approach than most diocesan curators—indeed, a more profoundly humanistic approach than most curators in general—have heretofore practiced.

FOOTNOTES


5. See James Roosevelt Bayley, "Rules for the Administration of Churches that have no Trustees," Circular, 1 November 1853; Circular to all pastors, 22 February 1865; Circular to all pastors, 12 December 1865, James Roosevelt Bayley Papers, Archives of the Archdiocese of Newark at Seton Hall University [hereinafter cited as AAN].


12. *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*. Volume I, 1884-86 offers discussion concerning the establishment of this institution; page 14 quotes a letter from John Gilmary Shea, who "informed us that the United States Catholic Historical Society was about to be organized" in New York. The *Catholic Historical Review* began publication in April 1915.


