

# The Archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth

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*The following are revised talks given to the Perth Regional Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists, 20 September 1983. Unlike the other major churches in Western Australia, the Catholic Church maintains its own archives. Close co-operation with the Battye Library, however, ensures a policy based on firm archival principles.*

## **1. Historical Background by Father Bourke**

The Archives are housed in the Cathedral Presbytery, which faces Victoria Square, a few blocks east of the centre of Perth. The main part of the building was erected by the Benedictine monks, under the supervision of Bishop Salvado, in 1852, to be the Bishop's Palace. In 1938, Archbishop Prendiville, a superb administrator, added this eastern extension to house the administrative offices and the second storey chapter-hall, which have their entrance in Victoria Avenue. The Archives are located on the second storey and comprise an office, a strong room, and an upper room for the housing of newspapers, mainly the *WA Catholic Record*. The spacious room which was once the chapter-hall, is used by the staff of the Archives for various tasks.

The first official archivist was Fr Sean Moynihan, who was appointed by Archbishop Prendiville in 1961. He was a journalist of note, with a keen eye for a good story. His charm of manner soon won for him a large circle of friends. He was very generous of his own time and trouble in the assistance he gave to research students and undergraduates. On his death in 1970, Fr Eugene Perez was archivist for a short time, and then Fr Martin Newbold, who had retired from active parochial work because of poor health. The latter was a very painstaking and accurate historian. He died at the age of forty nine in 1977. From that time, Sister Raphael of the Mercy Convent, Victoria Square, carried the burden as acting archivist, until the appointment of the present writer in July 1982.

The present archivist is assisted, at least part-time, by Sisters Raphael and Margaret Mary of the Mercy Convent, Sister Justina, the archivist of the Sisters of St John of God, and Mrs Valerie Casey.

It has become necessary to formulate a policy for the archives of the archdiocese of Perth. We have been aided very considerably in this by visits to the various archives in Perth, and by discussions with professional archivists. The key to our policy is to realise the essential function of our archives, which is to assist the administration, and the organisation that is the Catholic Archdiocese of Perth. This does not preclude giving assistance to other organisations and to private individuals, but since our resources in personnel are so limited, we can attend to private requests only when we have fulfilled our main tasks for the organisation. As a general rule, we are unable to attend to genealogical enquiries; experience has shown that we would rapidly be overwhelmed, and would have to neglect our essential functions, even the proper organising of the archives themselves. We generally advise such enquirers other sources of information, especially of the Office of the Registrar-General.

The bulk of the material in the custody of our archives is archival within the limits of a strict definition. At the same time, we have much which is not, strictly speaking, archival. It was important for us to realise the distinction between these different types of material, since they do not call for the same type of control. We had many objects which more properly belonged to a museum. Now that a museum has been established in the old building across the street which was the original cathedral, the archives has been relieved of responsibility for such objects. There is also a modest collection of books dealing with the history of Western Australia and we hope some day there will be enough to allow us to call this a library. Another acquisition is a set of bound volumes of the *West Australian Catholic Record* going back to 1874 (with a few gaps). I consider this our most valuable instrument of research. Obviously, rules for access to all this printed material will be different from those necessary for archival documents.

We have recently begun to acquire collections of private papers, generally from the clergy. We hope that we will build up a reputation for trustworthiness, and that people will entrust their papers to us instead of destroying them, as has too often happened. We also have the ambition to build up a section of taped oral history; this, however, would require more personnel — and properly trained at that — that we now have at our disposal.

In short, we are like most archivists — happy as the day is long! Except that for us, as for other archivists, the day is never long enough.

## 2. The experiences of a Caretaker Archivist by Sister M. Raphael

From mid 1977 until late 1982 I acted as archivist for the Perth archdiocese. Originally, I was asked to hold the fort for about one year until the newly appointed archivist, Father Holohan, returned from postgraduate studies in the United States. However, the latter so distinguished himself at Fordham University that, on his return to Perth, he was appointed Director of Religious Education for the Catholic schools — a major assignment. So, I occupied his chair while anxiously and hopefully awaiting his successor. My academic background — degrees in Arts and Education from the University of Western Australia — did not prepare me for archival work. My forty odd years in secondary education, with involvement on the side in a wide variety of extra curricular activities, gave me a limited association with the adult population. My religious training, with its strong emphasis on serving people, did not prepare me to say “no” to the avalanche of requests that confronted me in that era of the family tree fever.

I can divide my five years into five periods:

- Co-operation and minor exploitation.
- Frustration.
- Enlightenment, a moment of truth.
- Framing of a policy.
- Action and resistance.

The first period was marked by requests from the family tree enthusiasts. These involved hours and hours of searching — sometimes up to thirty hours for one request. The mushroom growth of parish historical societies, with the accompanying celebration of jubilees brought its crop of enthusiasts eager to know all about the origins of the parishes and the lives of the parish priests concerned. In addition, there were requests from postgraduate students and others from universities and colleges of advanced education who were working on theses and publications on such topics as:

- Early Catholic schools run by lay people.
- Italian migration.
- Catholic involvement in post-World War 11 migration.
- Father Vincent McNabb and the Aborigines.
- The History of the diocese of Broome.
- The contributions of Bishop Gibney and Mother Ursula Frayne to education.
- The story of the Fenians.

Then came the Ned Kelly fever in 1981 which brought a request from a Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University, the author of a book on this controversial character. No story of Ned Kelly is complete without an account of Bishop Gibney's heroism in entering the burning

building at Glenrowan to bring spiritual help to the bushrangers.

Requests from the Sorbonne and from Brussels kept me busy finding the answers to question about the Irish born, French educated Bishop Brady. Besides all this, the various religious orders busily researching their history, were asking many questions.

At the end of this period the spectre of frustration began to disturb my days. It was then that another visitor arrived. It was Father Bourke, then engaged in writing his book on the work of his congregation, the Vincentians in Australia. The Archives has some very interesting material on the missionary journeys of these Fathers who accompanied Bishop Gibney in the visitation of his vast diocese in the last decade of the 19th century. A gleam of hope was at last visible. Perhaps the awaited successor had arrived. With this gleam of hope came an illuminating moment of truth and the beginning of a new direction. I began to ask myself some pertinent questions and to hear some revealing answers:

- Why am I here in the Archives? Clearly it is primarily to serve the administration.
- Was I asked to be a voluntary research worker? No indeed.
- To what extent have I served the administration? Very little.

Faced with these revealing answers I lost no time in planning a future policy which would require immediate action and firm resistance.

I would concentrate on:—

- Co-operating with all requests from the administration, the Church
- getting intellectual control of the archival holdings
- classifying and indexing as much material as possible
- producing some simple finding aids
- patronising a large “hard basket” for all requests unconnected with my primary function
- developing the courage to say “NO”

The implementation of this policy was made easy by the arrival of some very competent and generous helpers. Sister Margaret Mary, rich in experience as a teacher in both government and Catholic schools, was invaluable in setting and achieving goals of recording and classifying information. Mrs Valerie Casey, with her library experience and artistic talents, gave generously of her time and advice.

Other events also helped. Sister Felicitas Powers, a professional Archivist from the United States, visited Australia and conducted short seminars in each capital city. The foundation of the Australian Society of Archivists, with its regional branch in Perth pointed to a bright and meaningful future.

Much encouraged, we began our campaign. We classified and indexed

everything we could lay our hands on — official historical papers, unpublished manuscripts, miscellaneous research findings of the first archivist, the late Fr Moynihan, the unfinished work of the second archivist, Fr Newbold whose early death left many plans incomplete.

All this activity and the working out of the “NO” policy ushered in an era of unpopularity. But the end result was good. Our association with the Battye Library helped bring us to the Promised Land. In common with the archivists of the other Churches, we co-operated with Mrs Rica Erickson in supplying material from Baptismal and Marriage Registers for the period 1843-1896. The availability of this information at the Battye Library is very helpful to people interested in building up their family trees. Incidentally, it saves the Church much time and expense in answering requests.

The support and advice received from Miss Medcalf and her staff has enriched and broadened our vision. Because of opportunities made available we have discovered much of the early and forgotten history of the Order of Mercy in Western Australia, especially our early involvement with aboriginal girls of school age.

We are often forced by circumstances to operate in situations for which our training and former experience have not fully prepared us. This has been the lot of not a few archivists. All of these, I am sure, would concur with me offering the following advice:

- Begin by getting priorities right — see to the task for which you have been appointed.
- Get intellectual control of holdings as soon as possible.
- Classify the main series of material.
- Build up a collection of finding aids.
- Dare to say “NO” temporarily so that greater future service will be given.
- Value your vital role of preserving the records and stories of the past for the enjoyment and benefit of future generations.