

To Search and Investigate
Report of an Amateur Historical Sleuth
(Sources for the history of the Catholic Church in Canada)

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Reliable history is not just something you write “out of your own head,” or “on your own say-so,” or solely on the support of picturesque traditions “that existed before you were born,” or on the unsupported authority of “the oldest inhabitant, who ought to know, and who had it from his grandfather, who lived to the age of one hundred and three.” Such traditions may be quite trustworthy, but my point is that the historian should endeavour to find other evidence to prove them so. Statements depending solely on the historian’s assertions can ordinarily have value only if the events he reports have come under his personal observation.

Nearly forty years ago I began, as a hobby, the gathering of data for the publication of a little book which would contain a series, chronologically arranged, of skeleton biographies of all the missionaries and other priests who worked within the territory that is now the Diocese of Antigonish. Our late bishop assigned me a decade ago to the full-time task of attempting to write a history of the diocese, and our present bishop has graciously directed me to continue the work. The projected book of biographies has not got into print, but the work done on it, in odd minutes of recreation, was, I like to think, a useful preparation for the more difficult task which I am now trying to finish. Such work got me into the habit, from the beginning, of recording the source of every tiniest bit of information I found. It is irksome and time-consuming to stop always and make a record of these sources, but the practice is rewarding and, of course, vitally necessary.¹

¹ Getting the information is one thing; saving it and making it quickly available for further use is another and at least an equally important thing. I wrote my bits of information on hundreds of 5-by-3 cards, or rather pieces of heavy paper cut to that size for me by a printer. The heavy paper, I find, has two advantages over the card, in that it is more adaptable to the typewriter platen, and that it takes up less space in a filing cabinet. Today, of course, you can buy ready-cut cards that are quite thin. When I had a largish supply of the 5-by-3 cards made out I began to transfer their accumulated data to other files. I used a 6-by-4 card for each priest and a filing folder for each parish or institution or other post to which a priest might be assigned, and I made out other cards of this size for lay people and religious whose names needed to be recorded. Using a typewriter with a 12-inch type-face, I found the 6-by-4 card large enough for my purpose, but others may prefer to use an 8-by-5 card, for the advantage of its extra writing space. The legal size of folder, I think, is better than

The writer of a diocesan history might reasonably expect to find a sufficient supply of information on his subject in the official records kept in three places—in Rome, and in the diocesan archives, and in the vaults of parish houses. Let me tell you what measure of success I had in each of these hunting grounds.

Before setting out alone on a historical quest it is well to prepare a questionnaire and a list of names (and addresses) of authorities who may be able to supply the answers desired. On my way to Rome I visited Scotland and Ireland looking for information. I was granted gracious interviews by priests of five ecclesiastical institutions in these two countries, and I had the advantage of visiting many of the places from which most of our immigrants came.

The happy hunter who hurries with breathless haste to visit Vatican City and the encircling city of Rome should bring with him proper letters of certification and an official request for permission to work in the Archives of Propaganda Fide, documents which he will present to the Cardinal Prefect of the Propaganda through the general archivist of that congregation. He goes to these archives because they contain all the records of missionary countries, and Canada was rated as a missionary country until 1908. He will not be allowed to see all of the historical material kept there, because of a wise rule which veils the records of the past one hundred years. For any exemption from this rule a special reason, supported by a very special recommendation, is required. Since almost none of the official records is in English, the delver will feel happy if he has at least a working knowledge of Latin, Italian and French. If he cannot speak Italian with reasonable fluency he will find French a very useful substitute, at least when he is communicating with Vatican officials who come from the north of Italy. Unless changes have been made within the past decade, the researcher will bemoan the absence of an up-to-date card-system or detailed index to the material he must see. This reflection is intended as a criticism, not of the Propaganda officials, but of ourselves who have not provided the money with which a systematic indexing could be effected. The officials there, clerical and lay,

the business size, since it obviates the necessity of folding papers that are between eleven and fourteen inches long.

You should, of course, have filing cabinets that will provide space adequate to your present and future needs. It took me some time to realize that a good system of filing is useless without a slavish observance of both parts of the old adage, "A place for everything and everything in its place." The latter part is the harder, and I had to train myself painfully to put things promptly where they belong and especially to put them back there after temporarily removing them. By the way, it is wise to use only one place-marker in a filing drawer. The reason is that if more than one is used at one time there is danger that cards may be replaced in wrong places and thus become virtually lost. Needless to say, also, it is a very unwise practice to use an "active" filing card as a temporary bookmark.

are characterized by an old-world urbanity and Christian kindness that truly warm the heart of the historical hunter who has come from afar.

The general classification of the Propaganda documents with which a Canadian will want to work bears the Italian equivalent of the title, "North America, Canada, etc." It is divided into five chief parts, whose titles could be translated as: (1) Reports of adjudged cases; (2) Documents referred to committees; (3) Original documents brought before general meetings; (4) Letters and decisions of the Sacred Congregation and notes from the Secretary; and (5) Business interviews granted by His Holiness the Pope. In these fields the student must first find the items he wants, taking his own notes as he goes along. If he wants copies of documents he makes a list of their titles and of the places in which they are to be found and submits it to the General Archivist, who, after studying it and revising it where necessary, will pass it along to the official photographer (in 1954 a layman on the staff of the Agenzia Fides). With pleasing and surprising promptness the latter will deliver his finished prints, expertly done, and give you a receipt for your payment, at the very moderate price of 200 lire each, which, in 1954, had the Canadian equivalent of 32 or 33 cents. I was disappointed at being unable to get microfilming done in the Propaganda archives, but I later appreciated the convenience of reading from the excellent photographs I had obtained there. By the way, they were real photographs, not photostatic copies. Formerly a fee was charged for the use of the archives, but now a modest notice tells the researcher that any donation he is able to make will be welcomed for the assistance of the foreign missions. So much, then, for what I found in Rome.

The next of the treasuries of information I have mentioned is the diocesan chancery. For the missionary period, to most of us, that means the Archives of the Archdiocese of Quebec. There the painstaking work of many priests throughout three centuries has resulted in the meticulous order and system in which the archival material is kept and the happily extensive card-system whereby the documents are indexed. If you have at least a moderately organized idea of what you are looking for, you will probably come away with a wealth of material – on microfilm, if you wish, through the facilities of Laval University and the kind co-operation of the Archbishop's gracious archivists. To begin work you go to the Archbishop's residence, ask there for the chancellor or the assistant archivist and present to him a letter of introduction from your bishop and the latter's request that you be permitted to work in the archives. In Quebec the one-hundred-year rule concerning recent records is strictly observed.

This is a good point at which to attempt a brief answer to the question, "What do diocesan archives contain?" The simplest answer is, of course, "ecclesiastical records." The subject matter of these records will be basically the same in all dioceses, but the manner of cataloguing and storing the records may vary from diocese to diocese. The archdiocesan archives of

Quebec may well serve as a pattern for others, and it is therefore useful to learn of their contents and the way in which these contents are stored. For a detailed and instructive report on these archives we have only to see the paper read by the late Abbé Ivanhoë Caron before the French section of our Association at the second annual meeting and printed in the Association's report for the year 1934-1935.

If you have read Abbé Caron's study you may remember that the material of the Quebec archdiocesan archives is organized into about ten classes, whose titles could be put into English as: Autograph letters written by the bishops of Quebec; Certified copies of letters written (from 1788) by the bishops of Quebec; Official records of episcopal administration;² Register of petitions; Register and portfolio of the old chapter of Quebec; Letters received; Records of pastoral visits; Financial records; Manuscripts of Indian languages; and Copies of documents from Paris and from Rome concerning Canada and Louisiana from 1659 to 1763.

Students of the history of the Church in the parts of Canada outside the Archdiocese of Quebec will be particularly interested in three of these classifications and will find in them a wealth of information. For data about the ordination of priests they will consult the register I have called the Official records of episcopal administration. In this register the entries certifying the reception of First Tonsure give the names of the parents of the subject, the date of his birth, the parish in which he was baptized, and the diocese to which he belonged. The two other classifications are the Letters received, and the Certified copies of the letters written by the bishops of Quebec.

As would be expected, there is a natural integration between the two registers of letters. Letters were received from many sources, but the researcher will find no section of the correspondence more important or more interesting than the interchange of letters between the missionaries and their bishop. The missionaries concerned were Quebec diocesan priests working in North America and chiefly in the territory of the present nation of Canada. Almost all of the newly ordained priests did three or more years of missionary work in remote districts before being given appointments in the region of the present Province of Quebec, and they were encouraged to write often to their bishop and give him every bit of news that could be of use. These letters include many from priests who later became pioneer bishops, such as O'Donell, Burke, MacEachern, Fraser, Dollard, MacDonell, Provencher, Power. It may be of interest to note that when new dioceses were formed they were given from the Quebec archives the early records that concerned their new territory.

² The French title, "Registres d'Insinuation," has a good Latin origin and has nothing to do with innuendoes.

The tone of archival correspondence is more sombre than cheerful, but this fact should surprise no one. It was Monsignor Arthur Maheux who pointed out that conditions are normal when everything is going well, but that saying so or repeating the fact makes tiresome reading; and so the pastors and missionaries reported to the bishops the things that went awry and rarely mentioned the good that was being done. The historical writer should therefore use prudent discernment in his treatment of archival material, lest he fall into the error of forming a false impression, first in his own mind and then in the minds of his readers.

Consultation of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Quebec has been greatly facilitated by the publication of painstaking analyses made by two Quebec priests, working separately. In 1935 the late Monsignor Benoit-Philippe Garneau completed an index of all the names of persons mentioned in the archives, and began the work of indexing the placenames and the subjects dealt with. The late Abbé Ivanhoë Caron, while assistant archivist of the Province of Quebec, brought to completion another work which is of wide scope and great utility. From 1927 to 1939 he published in the annual reports of the provincial archives of Quebec a series of inventories of the correspondence of the Quebec bishops from 1760 to 1840. A valuable characteristic of these inventories is that they give brief synopses of the letters. It was Abbé Caron's intention to publish also inventories of the correspondence of the vicars general and of the Quebec missionaries who worked in the Canadian west and in the United States, but his work was interrupted by his death on 1 October 1941. The same sort of inventory has been used by the Abbé Louis-Adélarde Desrosiers for the correspondence of the first two bishops of Montreal. This series began in the report of the Quebec provincial archivist for the year 1941-1942 and continued until at least the report for 1956-1957. Also, in the report of 1947-1948, Abbé Desrosiers published inventories of the correspondence of five Quebec vicars general covering the years 1761 to 1816.

The report of the papers read in 1959 before the French section of our Association contains a perspicuous review by Monsignor Maheux of the work done in the field of the history of the Church in Canada. He lists all of the inventories published up to that year in the reports of the Quebec provincial archivist and states that Catholic material is contained also in the reports of the Public Archives of Canada for the years 1926, 1928, 1931, 1932, 1933 and 1935. He calls attention to the chronology made by Frère Achille ("Guy Laviolette"), and he ends by giving his own discerning analysis of the work done by members of our Association during its first quarter-century.

Before I leave the topic of such analytic studies, I would direct the attention particularly of non-members to the work done by Dr. Lucien Brault in preparing a comprehensive index to the transactions of our Association

during the years 1933-1958. This volume was published by our Association in 1960 and should be of great assistance to all students of Canadian history.

On the principle of leaving unturned no metaphorical stone which may possibly be hiding a very real historical fact, the researcher will remember to seek archival hospitality in neighbouring dioceses and in any others which may possess letters or other papers concerning his own. Students who are interested particularly in the history of old *Acadie* will find a very extensive collection of *Acadiana* in the archives of St. Joseph's University, Moncton, New Brunswick. This collection was assembled by the Holy Cross Fathers, mainly though the zealous exertions of Father René Baudry, C.S.C., who went to France a number of times and there copied everything that has any bearing on his subject.

If your own diocese is much more than a century old you should be able to obtain from its archives the information you need covering at least the years that are not too recent. The Roman principle governing the release of such information is outlined in Canon 384 of the Code of Canon Law, which can be put into English as follows:

To those whom the matter concerns³ permission can be granted to examine in the parochial and diocesan archives all documents except those which are to be kept secret; and, at the expense of the petitioner, legal copies may be asked for and obtained.

The regulations decreed by legitimate ecclesiastical authority must be observed by diocesan chancellors, pastors and other custodians of archives when allowing documents to be seen and when making out and issuing copies. In doubtful cases the local ordinary is to be consulted.

The regulations referred to in this canon are those which should be found in the acts and decrees of the most recent synod of the diocese. Among them, a regulation of practical import to the non-curial clergy is the answer to the question as to whether or not the right to examine or copy parochial or diocesan records is to be granted without qualification to custodians of libraries or archives, or to government officials in general. Since the pertinent legislation may vary from diocese to diocese, you may wish to consider this answer during the discussion period. For instance, in the synodal decrees of the Archdiocese of Ottawa one of the many directives concerning archives reads:

³ The clause, "Documenta ... fit cuilibet cuius intersit inspiciendi potestas" has been translated by a famous canonist as, "The documents... shall be free for inspection to anyone interested"; and in a revised edition of his handbook as, "The documents ... may be inspected by anyone who has an interest in them." There are other experts who give less ambiguous translations of the words "cuius intersit."

The Parish Priest is the official and responsible custodian of the parish archives. He must not permit any document to be removed from the rectory without the written permission of the Ordinary. All consulting of documents that are not secret by their nature, or by law, must be done in the rectory, with the permission and under the supervision of the Parish Priest, by those who have reason to have access to them.

May I here express the hope that this Association may very soon be able to study the question of formulating a standardized method of keeping and cataloguing historical records in our diocesan archives, our parish houses, and our colleges and other ecclesiastical institutions. The results of such a study would be invaluable, especially to institutions which are planning the erection of libraries or other buildings for the housing of important records.

Thirdly, we come to the vaults, or archives, of our parish houses. Like the Roman and the diocesan archives, they should be fireproof; but the historical sleuth will shudder many a time as he visits a parochial residence where the saintly pastor has put, and continues to put, an undue strain on the vigilance of the Holy Ghost. Every parish should have a series of books to preserve its history, but it is unfortunate that not in every parish is the series complete. The prescribed books include not only the census book and the registers of baptisms, confirmations, marriages and deaths, but also the announcement book, the Mass register and several other financial books. In many dioceses the pastor must keep a chronicle of important parochial events, and in some dioceses he is required also to record such historical data on a special page of the annual report he sends to the bishop.

We sometimes criticize the gentlemen of the press for not giving expected publicity to events that happen in our parishes, but often we have only ourselves to blame. We should establish a reliable means of furnishing the press with reports of such events, and we should make sure that the accounts we supply are correct in their details. If they are correct they will be a valuable record for our parochial and diocesan historians.

We should take great care in writing and reading dates, especially those that occur at the end of a year or at the beginning of another. An example of an error that can, and does, occur is this: "On 2 January 1962 I baptized Sempronius, born 31 December 1962..." Abbreviated names are often a trap to the reader, such as the writing of "Jas." and "Jos." for "James" and "Joseph"; and figures are sometimes blurred in print, or, worse still, written in error. Press clippings, especially those taken from newspapers, can be maddeningly inconclusive by their omission of the year of publication, and for this reason the collector should take the time to mark them properly when removing them from the publication in which he found them.

There are other sources of information at the parish level. Religious communities carefully record their annals, though primarily as private writings not intended for publication. But the items therein recorded often

concern also the life of the parish, and a transcription of such items can usually be obtained by a proper approach to the proper official of the community concerned. Diaries kept by reliable persons, clerical, religious or lay, can contain information useful for a diocesan history. The local antiquarian, often the oldest inhabitant, should be approached, always with respect for his age and knowledge, but also with caution about the correctness of the data thus supplied. Because of a long-standing (and usually well-deserved) reputation as an authority, he will sometimes be painfully surprised if any of his statements is shown to be less than infallibly correct. Extreme caution should be exercised if the local historian is rated also as a good story-teller.

Then there are the local traditions, many of them firmly rooted, and some of them so long established as to have taken a stereotyped form. At least some of them may be wholly true, but there are undoubtedly others which have been greatly coloured and distorted in the course of their transmission from a hoary past. If the historian cites a tradition without support from other sources, he should make this point clear to his readers. Data supplied by near relatives or close friends of deceased priests and lay people may impress the historian as dependable if he is satisfied that the deponents are not prejudiced in favour of (or against) the deceased. The historian can usually depend upon the correctness of notations made by priests in their *ordos*, or breviaries or other clerical books.

Ordinarily, though not always, priests are consistent in their manner of spelling and signing their own names. The historical detective should show courtesy enough to quote the names as their owners signed them, and not in a way intended to bolster any of his own preconceived notions. If parochial registers have been posted up with ordinary regularity they will usually reveal the sequence of the pastors who served the parish in question. The searcher should study not only the register of baptisms but also those of confirmations, marriages and deaths. He should make a list, with dates, of all the names of priests which occur, and later attempt to establish which of the priests were the pastors and which were the regular or casual assistants.

Names and dates appearing on mural tablets and on cemetery monuments are usually correct, but no more correct than the information supplied by the persons who composed the texts inscribed on such memorials. It is a prevalent custom, but an unwise one, to think that a statement is true simply because it has appeared in print or been carved in stone; and there immediately returns to your memory the Johnsonian quip, "In lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon his oath." Nevertheless the searcher for historical truth will not neglect the tiring task of visiting all the cemeteries in his diocese and copying the inscriptions which can be of assistance to him in his work. Before moving from one place of research to another he should check the copies he has made, or, better still, have them

proofread by another. Since he has probably met mistakes of many sorts in his exploring pilgrimage, he may be tempted to think that the saying, "To err is human," applies only to others and not to himself. He will find, too, that a portable tape recorder quickly earns its cost. It is a fast fact-gatherer and is very convenient because it can be used in out-of-the-way places (including some libraries and archives) where electric current is not easily available.

The diocesan historian should diligently comb the pages of the files of his diocesan newspaper, if he is fortunate enough to have access to such files and he should also read other Catholic papers which might contain references to his diocese. When possible also, he should look for Catholic material in the files of secular newspapers, and of Catholic magazines that may still be appearing, or may have flourished for a time, in his diocese. A common practice, too, has been that of issuing booklets to commemorate various anniversaries, in the history of parishes. These booklets are usually valuable, but the student should keep in mind the fact that they are generally eulogistic in tone and tend to omit the mention of less happy phases of parochial and sacerdotal history. On the other hand parish bulletins have a manifest value in their reports of events which have currently taken place. Also, it should be unnecessary to say that the historian, in his study of any publication, will avoid the pitfall of accepting a future announcement as a record of an accomplished fact.

The writer of a diocesan history should read as many works as possible about the territory of his diocese, including secular histories, histories of other religious denominations, and histories, complete or partial, put out by Catholics. Most of these works will contain bibliographies, all of which should be carefully studied since they sometimes indicate sources of information hitherto unknown to the researcher. The secular and the non-Catholic publications will often supply needed dates and facts, in addition to giving the views of their writers concerning the Catholic Church.

The Church is a supernatural society of living men and women, and, like other societies, it has its code of rules, its ceremonial observances and its executive officers. A well balanced history of a diocese should tell, then, not only of the clergy, but also of the laity and of the liturgy. The diocesan historian must look for material that will help him describe the social and liturgical achievements of the faithful, not only in parochial and diocesan endeavours, but also in professional life, in the many wage-earning employments and in the public life of our nation. To help him find the facts for this important phase of his story he will naturally consult the files of the alumni and alumnae associations of our educational institutions, the minute-books of lay societies, the histories of our labour unions and other writings dealing with the economic, sociological and public life of our people.

When the historical searcher and investigator has become conversant

with at least the broad lines of his projected story he will find it a rewarding experience to pay visits, long or short as his need for study demands, to the Public Archives of Canada, in Ottawa, and to the archives of the province (or provinces) in which his diocese is situated. The archivists and their assistants will welcome him, particularly if he shows that he is not totally ignorant of the subject on which he wishes them to furnish him working material. He will try also to visit the older seminaries where many of the early priests of his diocese studied. He will want to mention also the natives of his diocese who became priests of other dioceses, and the men and women who joined religious orders or other religious communities. The names of many of these voluntary exiles can be obtained from the parishes of their origin, and the list can be supplemented and completed by seeking the kind help of the diocesan or religious officials of the places to which the local natives went to work.

The compilation of lists of priests can be assisted by the use of annual directories, religious and secular, such as the old Quebec Almanack, *Le Canada Ecclésiastique*, Kenedy's Official Catholic Directory, Dunigan's American Catholic Almanac, The Metropolitan Catholic Almanac, Sadlier's Catholic Almanac and *Ordo*, Hoffmann's Catholic Directory, regional Catholic directories published either annually or at irregular intervals, and secular almanacs containing clergy lists. In the secular publications the historian will look also for the names of Catholics who are listed among the professional people and the public officials or are otherwise outstanding in their community and nation.

One or two observations about the use of the almanacs and directories may be helpful. First, the clergy lists they contain were compiled probably towards the end of the year preceding the year which appears on the cover and in the title of the publication. Sometimes the exact date of compilation can be determined from internal evidence. Sometimes, too, a clergy list is merely the printer's repetition of a previous list, and if so is quite useless. Errors in names and in spelling and in dates are sometimes glaringly patent. In brief, these lists require very close study before any item from them can be cited as authoritative. There are times, however, when such an item can prove to be happily conclusive.

Many a time useful data can be found in the official records of a province or of a country by examining such things as old maps, petitions for grants of land, and the records of the registries of births and deaths, of deeds, and of probate. The researcher should be prepared to pay the fees which the law establishes for the use of the services of some of these offices.

Prudence dictates that the researcher take common-sense steps to protect the historical material he has in his possession. It is not difficult to get

information about the precautions that should be taken against fire;⁴ but you should also protect your assembled material from losses that can arise from human hazards. Never lend any of your material to anybody. Make a proper mention of the material in your will, so that the portion of it you wish to bequeath to your diocese, as well as the portion which already belongs to the diocese, may be safely kept in the diocesan archives and thus continue to be used for the purposes for which you assembled it.

Before ending, may I express the hope that, during the discussion period which is to follow, those of you who have had technical training in the subject on which I have spoken will give us the benefit of your candid criticisms, and that all of you will express your views and thus help to formulate and adopt a resolution of concerted action for the efficient care of our archival material.

⁴ At one time I had all of my filing cards microfilmed. The cards are in one of the filing cabinets in my den, but the microfilm is kept in a fireproof room in another building. I make carbon copies of my typewritten material and keep them in the same fireproof room. My typewritten material is kept in two sets of loose-leaf binders, the second set being for the carbon copies. The content of the material includes my copies and translations of all the source material I obtained from various places, and the system of arrangement in the binders is chronological. Experience has taught me two points about the preservation of the loose leaves (1) seven-ring binders are more expensive than the three-ring sort, but they are far better; (2) care should be taken not to cram the binder with too many leaves. In other words, it is more economical in the long run to buy good binders and enough of them.