

**Ministry of the Archivist: Sign of the Times
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Thank you for the invitation to be the opening speaker for your annual meeting. I have a passion for religious life and have made presentations to many groups of Sisters. It is always a pleasure and a learning experience. I have never, however, addressed the archivists!

When Sister Louise invited me to do this presentation, I began to think about what its theme would be. I am not an archivist, so I couldn't honestly contribute much to professionals in that field. But since my field is historical theology, I am grateful for the work people like you have done throughout the centuries. Since the late 60s, I have also done a great deal of work in the renewal of religious life for my own community and many others. Again, this work adds to my appreciation of all that archivists have done to preserve the founding stories and artifacts, the significant history of communities. (Because there are both congregational and provincial archives, I am using the word "community" to refer to both.) Recently, I was able to visit the traveling exhibit Women of Spirit at the Cincinnati museum. What struck me was the way the exhibit was arranged. It was the story of us rather than the complete story of any single community. The impact of the synergy of the story of us was tremendous. It was possible to tell such a magnificent story because people like you have been gifted with the charisms needed to carry out such important work.

Some of the work I've done through the years in the renewal of religious life has had to do with charism—the Spirit-filled dynamism of the founders and of the communities who followed them. A charism is a gift given for the sake

of the building up of the Body of Christ. Founders had a particular set of charisms associated with their call to be founders. The work of no founder, however—including Jesus—would have lasted without founding companions, without others who followed in their footsteps and kept the charism of the community alive. The charism of the community is not exactly the same as the charism of the founder. The charism of the community is actually a mosaic of charisms, gifts given to the members equipping them for the mission and vision of the founder. These multiple charisms of the members resonate, of course, with the founder's vision, but they also expand and enhance that gift. Throughout the history of the community, this resonance with the founder allows the community to continue to keep the mission alive and relevant in each age. This was the insight of Vatican II, calling us to renew our lives on the basis of three criteria: the founder's vision and spirit—which we learned to call charism; the Gospel; and the signs of the times. Plumbing these rich sources has proven indispensable to authentic renewal. Before they could complete the work of examining the founder's life, mission, and spirit, many—maybe most—communities had a lot of archival work to do. Without archives or without archives in accessible order, this work could not have been done. We have learned the truth of William Faulkner's words, "History is never dead; it is not even past." And of W. H. Auden, who said, "A[human being] is a history-making creature who can neither repeat his past nor leave it behind." And so, I settled on the title, "Ministry of the Archivist: Sign of the Times."

Following Vatican II, we no longer attached the word ministry exclusively to the word ordination. We now use the word widely—almost too widely. Realizing the danger of overusing a word and thus draining it of significance, I want to speak of the work you do as religious archivists in a way that will

allow you to see what you do as significant for your communities in ways you may not have thought of. Unfortunately but understandably, one at the end of her years in external ministry may find herself asked to be the archivist. Understandable, because the archives always need staffing. Unfortunate, however, for two reasons. One, it is a work that we haven't always understood or valued it as an internal ministry, and hadn't prepared people to do it. Two, it can feel somewhat less important or exciting than the work one did in the classroom, the hospital, the parish, the diocesan office. In the Kingdom of God, however, there are no meaningless tasks, when we see them through the eyes of faith.

As the word ministry grew familiar, we began to understand that all ministries are—in fact, must be—rooted in charisms. A charism is a strength or a talent seen through the eyes of faith as the Spirit's gift for building up the Body of Christ. Ministry is service, but for ministry to be effective in building up the Body of Christ, the minister must be equipped with particular gifts or strengths. These gifts are given like raw material at birth and are developed through experience, training, and education. To discern one's ministry requires first discerning one's gifts. (A person can be highly motivated but poorly equipped.) Just because one finds herself in the archivist's office later in life does not mean she has no gifts for it. A situation often brings out talents we did not know we had. It's never too late to develop the gifts one continues to discover in oneself. Remember: charisms are given for the sake of others. We must steward them, i.e., we must recognize them and make them available.

To reflect on the ministry of the archivist, let us begin by thinking about what an archivist is. The dictionary not too helpfully tells us that an archivist is one who takes care of archives. It also tells us that an archive is a

place or collection containing records, documents, or other materials of historical interest. With a bit more searching, we find the word 'archivist' related to the word 'curator,' which means a guardian, protector, one who guards or preserves something, a conservator, i.e., one in charge of maintaining or restoring valuable items. Of course you know all this, but it's important to know the starting point for talking about this ministry.

What exactly, then, does an archivist do? A good archivist does more than keep files and records. The archivist not only keeps alive the institutional memory of the community but in a certain way embodies it. Because of her/his continual involvement with the records, letters, artifacts, and other materials, the good archivist is able to offer information and clarification during meetings and discussions bearing not only on specifics of community history but also on visioning or decision-making. The archivist's daily work deepens her/his love and appreciation for the members of the community and for the community as a whole. This love and appreciation makes the archivist want the archives to be a living resource for the community rather than a hidden place full of material that is held so confidential as to be useless. The valued archivist, therefore, finds ways to bring the treasures in the archives to the attention of the community and the public.

The archivist can play a vital role in what we might call "internal recruitment," i.e., the archivist finds ways to deepen the love, appreciation, and attraction for the community in the hearts of the members. This means helping us appreciate the real story, the full story, the struggles and mistakes, and not just the already well-known reasons for pride. The past several decades, and especially the current one, have been times, perhaps, of a kind corporate doubt about religious life in general and about our particular communities. Knowing the substance of our story can activate

again our faith and hope. Our history covers many eras as bad as or worse than the one we are presently living. This internal recruitment is especially needed among our younger members, whose community lives have not been spent ordinarily among large numbers of older sisters or brothers—the traditional “story-tellers.” The archivist can do an essential work of linking the younger members to the elders.

These are just a few dimensions of the archivist ministry. If ministry requires charisms, it can be helpful, then, to reflect for a bit on what charisms to look for in an archivist. In ordinary language, we would speak of talents, strengths, and so on. When our talents and strengths are used in ministries that build up the Body of Christ, we see them through the eyes of faith as charisms, i.e., gifts of the Spirit. For dramatic contrast, we might say that Bernard Madoff had a talent for organization—but it certainly wasn’t a charism!

I’ve mentioned organization, and certainly this is a gift needed by the archivist. Organization and a sense for important detail—not just details. The archivist requires the gift of discipline, the ability to stay with a task and finish it—even though there may be no external deadline for doing so. If she’s an extrovert, the archivist needs to cultivate the ‘introvert’ potential of her personality to enable her to spend many hours without a lot of company or conversation. If she is a natural ‘introvert,’ she needs to cultivate the ‘extrovert’ potential of her personality to enable her to respond willingly to the ‘interruptions’ of being asked for help. The archivist must sometimes have the gift of teaching to equip her to teach people what the archives are and how to use and benefit from them. Among the charisms that equip one to be an archivist I would also name these:

- **Love for the community.** This might seem obvious. It's also true, however, although less obvious perhaps, that not every member loves the community in the same way, with the same quality. The archivist must have a personal love for the community and all that it represents, a passion for it. The archivist must also possess an objective love for the community, for its whole story, for all its members. The archivist doesn't hide "the rest of the story" when it isn't too glorious.
- **This kind of love, passion gives the archivist a companion gift of insight about the deeper meaning of archival material. Insight equips the archivist to understand the risks, the controversies reflected in letters, minutes, and journals. It helps the archivist connect material held in various files in ways that make facts meaningful.**
- **An archivist needs the gift of curiosity. She doesn't just look at the surface of the records. The archivist finds it useful to read histories of the various eras through which her community lived. She is curious about the ideas prevalent during the historical period in which the records were written, how these ideas affected the community, how the community might have responded or not.**
- **Curiosity is related to yet another gift, the gift of imagination. The valued community archivist can put herself in the shoes of those whose lives made up the substance of the community in each era. They are not just "people," they are her sisters, members of her religious family. Imagination is essential because archival work is not simply a science, it is also an art. Using imagination, the archivist is able to arrange materials and artifacts to produce something new,**

something beautiful that stirs the hearts and imaginations in turn of those who view them.

- **Finally, the archivist needs the gift of story-telling. This gift equips the archivist to find ways to bring history alive. Not only in oral presentations but also in visual displays of various kinds, the archivist can build on a theme and create a storyline that stirs interest, appreciation, perhaps even awe in the audience. In preparing for this presentation,**

I Googled the word “storytelling” and came across the idea of “organizational storytelling,” an emerging discipline in the fields of management, strategy, and organizational studies. Organizations are not story-free bureaucratic spaces; storytelling is an important organizational phenomenon in its own right. We all have stories that we tell again and again about our communities, so we already know this. It’s possible, however, that we don’t see the value of these stories, do not record them in some way, seeing them as ‘just’ stories. We may think of the archives as a place for accurate files of accurate facts. Stories, however, can open windows into the cultural, political, and emotional lives of organizations, allowing people to express deep and sometimes hidden or conflicting emotions. Consultants are seeing stories as vehicles for enhancing organizational communication, performance, and learning, as well as management of change. “Overall, when storytelling is skilful and authentic, it can be used to lead downwards, upwards, and sideways in a variety of hierarchical settings including organizations, schools, families [or communities]. It can be used to achieve a variety of purposes, including sparking action, communicating who you are, transmitting the brand, sharing

knowledge, getting collaboration, transmitting values, taming the grapevine or leading people into the future.”¹

I think these new insights into the significant value of storytelling give meaning to the part of my title that calls the ministry of the archivist “the sign of the times.” In her book *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson writes, “Storytelling is fundamental to the human search for meaning...The past empowers the present, and the groping footsteps leading to this present mark the pathways to the future.”

I hope these few words of mine will encourage you to keep growing in your ministry as an archivist. It is a huge task, and perhaps we need to see it as a collection of tasks, each part of it one dimension of the total “ministry of archivist.” Find joy in the work you do by probing the many gifts it holds for the life of the community. Your work does indeed empower our present and mark pathways to our future. And I for one am grateful.

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¹ “Organizational Storytelling,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organizational_storytelling