

Society of African Missions - Secretaries and archives

The topic we are addressing today is records management. In the previous meeting I presented to you some goals of your work as SMA Secretary, emphasizing, however, that each person could, in dialogue with the other people involved, identify his own personal way of working. This “personal way of work” cannot be used for records management.

The archives, as we all well know, it is a reality that precedes us, that concerns us in the present and that will be delivered in the future. And because there are so many people involved, we "must adapt our way of work in the way the archives work."

For this reason, Congregations generally prepare a policy, or a working tool, that contains concrete directions on how to manage the current and historical archive. In case this is not already in use for your Congregation, I encourage you to start working now on a common document that can help not only you today, but also those who will be charged with this service in the future.

The first step is to focus our attention on the values that guide us to manage archives. We already know that it is a challenging and sometimes frustrating activity, but it is also essential in the life of the Congregation.

I ask now Francis Rozario to read for us a short part of the Circular Letter written by the *Pontifical Commission For The Cultural Patrimony Of The Church* that describes “*The Pastoral Function Of Church Archives*”

In the mind of the Church, *archives are places of memory of the Christian community and storehouses of culture for the new evangelization.*

As places of memory archives must systematically gather all the data making up the articulated history of the Church community so that what has been done, the results obtained, including omissions and errors, may be properly evaluated.

A well-documented and unprejudiced study of its own past makes the Church more “expert in humanity” because it reveals the historical richness which lies behind it and also allows her to identify herself with her essential, continuing and varied mission of inculturation and acculturation.

Borrowing an apt image from the school of Chartres, we can consider ourselves as giants if we foster an awareness of resting on the shoulders of generations that have preceded us in the name of the one faith. Indeed historical sources trace the Church’s action in an uninterrupted path of continuity. This begins with Christ’s message, goes through the writings of the first apostolic communities and all the ecclesial communities which follow unto our present day. It provides a series of images, which document the process of evangelization of each particular church as well as the universal Church. Since, providentially, adverse historical circumstances have not destroyed the memory of major events, we must make a special effort to protect and appreciate surviving documents in order to use them in the *hic et nunc* of the Church.

In terms of specific content, archives preserve the sources describing the historical development of the ecclesial community as well as those relating to the liturgical, sacramental, educational, and charitable activities which the clergy, religious, and lay members of the Church have carried out throughout the centuries up to the present day. Often they preserve documents regarding the achievements of these individuals as well as

documents regarding the juridical relationship between communities, institutions, and individuals.

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc_com_pcchc_19970202_archivi-ecclesiastici_en.html

Certainly, the Pontifical Commission refers to the whole Church, but as a Congregation within the Church, we are called to care for the archives with the same values and principles.

In the case of Religious Congregations, archives collect, stores, and preserves the relevant material made by or received by the Congregation.

These records usually reflect:

- the internal development of the Congregation,
- how the Congregation conducts its affairs as a corporation or legal entity in the world,
- the individual and personal lives of the Congregation's membership,
- the life and events in the Congregation, and
- the people the Congregation served and continues to serve in its ministries.

Because the archives are a source of valuable information, they are not limited to official papers; rather the archives contains everything which helps to preserve the sense of history, spirit, and charism of the Congregation.

Records may be have different value. We can have:

1. **Permanent records** contain information of historic or enduring value. They often document the canonical, legal and spiritual functions and responsibilities of the Congregation.
2. **Temporary or short-term records** do not have long-term or enduring value. They are destroyed after a specified time period.
3. **Active or current records** are used on a regular basis and/or are needed to conduct the day-to-day operation of the Congregation, Province, ministries, local communities, etc. Active records are usually kept in their office of creation.
4. **Inactive or noncurrent records** are no longer needed to conduct the day-to-day operation of the Congregation, ministries, local communities or other entity. They are usually kept at the Congregational Historical Archives.

With this value distinction in mind, Congregations generally refer to two types of archives:

- **The current archive:** where we keep the active documents and the temporary (at least for a beginning period).
- **The historical archive:** where we keep the permanent documents, the inactive records and the temporary files (if they are not needed for the current life).

As secretaries at the local level, you will be called upon to work primarily on the current archives. This means:

- **Maintain an orderly and accurate current archive**, containing both material in electronic and paper form;

- **Periodically do an evaluation of the documents** in the local archive, distinguish those records that have permanent value from those of short term value, but re needed for the ordinary work of the Congregation.
- **Establish an orderly and regular means of disposal** of non-permanent records; and
- **Send materials that have permanent value to the congregational historical archives**, for their preservation.

STEP I - Maintain an orderly and accurate current archive

In order to do a good job you need to refer to a **Classification Plan (Title Book)**.

It is the set of logical entries hierarchically structured and articulated in levels established on the basis of the functions and subjects within the authority's competence.

The Title Book is the basic logical grid on which to erect any document management information system.

As SMA Congregation you already have a Title Book prepared for congregational historical archives. I suggest that you refer on this document to develop a set of criteria to use for the current archives that can help you in your daily work.

It is good practice for the same criteria to be used for both electronic and paper archives. It is a matter of creating a series of folders and subfolders, within which documents are then neatly enshrined.

Having a written procedure in organizing files helps to find the logical thread again even after time has passed.

The criteria you use must be SHARED (or at least known and used regularly) by the other people you work with. Better still if there is a common reference for the whole congregation. This will help not only the current collaboration, but will also be a great help to those who will take over the role of secretary after you.

Each file produced or received will be properly named. You can tag the file including:

- Date
- Summary of the content
- Keyword (Eg. name of the person)
- Draft/Revision/Final (you can use just the capital letter D – R – F)
- Any other useful information

Suggestion: Use hyphen instead of space.

An example could be: Mar-2023_Vow-Request_Peter-Smith_F

Step II – Appraisal of the files

The purpose of appraisal is to determine the value of a record in order to know how long and where to retain it. Each records series should be appraised applying some criteria:

- **Administrative value:** Records that document the establishment of policy and operations. Policy records are generally retained permanently. Operations records are usually considered short-term.
- **Legal value:** Records having legal value generally document legal or property rights of individuals or of the entity that created or maintained the records.

- **Fiscal value:** Records having fiscal value usually relate to financial transactions and normally have a short-term retention. Records documenting fiscal policy may have permanent value.
- **Congregational value:** Records related to the life of the Congregation, their members and Ministries, usually are retained permanently, because they have historical value. They provide documentation on the origins, organization, development, functions, activities, and events, of the originating entity, and/or provide information on associated persons, subjects, and events.
- **Sacramental value:** Records documenting the administration of sacraments to the Faithful are always retained permanently.

Other factors could be considered. For example records having intrinsic value should be retained permanently because of their artistic qualities; age; unique or curious features; value for use in exhibits; or association with significant events, people, places, things or events. Commissions, appointments, handwritten documents often have intrinsic value.

As SMA Secretary will find that many records have more than one value.

After all records have been appraised, a retention period is established and assigned to each records series. These information are usually inset in the **Record Retention Schedule**.

STEP III - Establish an orderly and regular means of disposal of non-permanent records

In an orderly and regular manner, files that have temporary value should be destroyed.

This is generally done based on two elements:

- In archiving, all intermediate files produced in the preparation of the document should be deleted, retaining only the final version. There are some very special cases -- for example, in the revision of Regulations or Constitutions -- that it may be useful to keep the different revisions of the document. However, these are very special situations. In general, it is important that only documents in their final version are kept in the permanent archives. If there are later versions they should be clearly indicated in the name of the file, as well as within the document itself.
- According to the Retention Schedule defined at the Congregational level. For example, tax documents should generally retained only for a certain period of time (in Italy it is 10 years).

STEP IV: Send materials that have permanent value to the Congregational Historical Archives

Finally, the permanent records must be send to the Congregational Historical Archives for their preservation.

It is also necessary to define in what formats documents should be stored:

- Electronic format only,
- Both, in electronic and paper format,
- In original paper format (e.g. documents with handwritten signatures).

At this time I will not go into the details of how the congregational historical archives should be established and preserved, which would require a separate meeting. This is a responsibility entrusted generally to the congregational archivist who will certainly have the necessary preparation.

I will conclude our meeting with some practical notes:

- I am aware that work for the archive is often monotonous and frustrating. That's why I recommend that from the very beginning you **establish a way of work that allows you to operate efficiently and effectively**. That is what I have tried to describe to you.
- **Clearly define in your calendar days to devote to evaluating files** and properly storing or deleting them. (For example, one day every 6/8 weeks). Don't accumulate too much work because you then risk forgetting the contents of the files and will have to spend much more time reviewing each document thoroughly.
Please, don't wait until the end of your term to do the file evaluation work. It will become a lot of work and you risk doing it badly.
- As much as possible try to **establish common way of work for the whole congregation**. This certainly relates to the Title Book and Record Retention Schedule, but also to a worksheet for file identification or other useful information.