

The Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto

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On 17 December 1841, Pope Gregory XVI issued a Papal Bull to divide from the Diocese of Kingston all parts of Upper Canada west of Newcastle. Michael Power, a Nova Scotian, became the bishop of this new ecclesiastical see (1841-1847), the Diocese of Toronto. In 1841, the diocese ministered to approximately thirty thousand Roman Catholics. Its monumental jurisdiction in 1841 became over the years a more manageable entity through subdivision and the later establishment of other Ontario dioceses. Today its Roman Catholic population is estimated at 1.2 million persons within an ecclesiastical see of thirteen thousand square kilometers. Recorded statistics give only the bare essence of the development of the Roman Catholic church in English Canada. As it is the second oldest Roman Catholic diocese in Ontario, the papers of the bishops of the Diocese of Toronto maintained in the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto (ARCAT) reflect the religious, social, and political character of early Upper Canada.

It is really the characteristic personalities of the bishops which give flavour to the growth of Roman Catholicism in Toronto. Prior to 1841, Alexander Macdonell, Bishop of the Diocese of Kingston since 1826, sent missionary clergy to minister to all populated areas in the frontier of Upper Canada. St. Paul's Catholic Church in York, Toronto's first Roman Catholic parish, was established in 1822. As leader of a large group of loyal and patriotic citizens in Upper Canada, Macdonell received the honour of a seat in the Legislative Council of Upper Canada in 1831. Sir John Colborne, Lieutenant Governor, supplemented the offer with a grant of £900 to assist in the construction of Roman Catholic churches and chapels. Macdonell remained a member until his death in 1840.¹

Upon his appointment as Bishop of Toronto, Power erected the foundations of the Roman Catholic church in Toronto today. He established a hierarchical administration for his clergy, persuaded religious orders to settle and minister, and searched ardently for clergy, a difficult task in a frontier diocese. His view of the diocese is reflected in a letter sent in 1842 to Bishop Kinsella of Ossory, Ireland:

My diocese is mostly inhabited by Irishmen dispersed over an immense tract of land bounded on all sides by the Great Lakes. Every day our steamer boats bring in new reinforcements from the mother country. I have but twenty clergymen throughout the whole country.²

In 1847, the typhus epidemic among Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine was rampant among the fever sheds set up for the victims. Fear of the contagious disease sent most able men scurrying into the safety of their homes. Bishop Power and six of his priests, along with John Elmsley, a prominent Toronto Roman Catholic, and John Strachan, the Anglican Bishop of Toronto, all tended to the typhoid victims imprisoned in the sheds along the wharves.³ As a result, Bishop Power himself fell victim to typhoid and died on 1 October 1847. The construction of St. Michael's Cathedral and the Bishop's Palace in 1847 symbolized the faith and vision exhibited by Power during his short tenure.

The bishops who succeeded Power concentrated their efforts to deal with key issues that developed during their episcopates. Be it Roman Catholic education, Protestant-Catholic troubles among Irish immigrants, economic depression, or ethnic immigration into the diocese, all issues became part of diocesan mandates. The resulting decisions and policies influenced a growing Roman Catholic population. Today's historical research depends on the preservation and availability of records describing diocesan administration as evidence of the church and its work.

A Roman Catholic diocesan archives falls under the authority of the Chancellor, "whose principal task is, unless particular law determines otherwise, to see to it that the acts of the curia are gathered, arranged and safeguarded in the archive of the curia." (Canon 482 §.1) Since the 1970s, this responsibility has been delegated to a full-time archivist. Prior to that time, various Chancery staff members were responsible for the documents, but archival administration was limited. There was early recognition of the importance of the church's history in Toronto. Rev. Edward Kelly, a diocesan priest, was appointed Diocesan Historian by Archbishop McGuigan in July 1935. His research on the subject of clergy biographies, stored in the archives, is a valuable resource still being used today. In the 1950s and 1960s, a Chancery secretary often dealt with the many requests for historical information. Parish histories were often indebted to the secretary's untiring efforts to transcribe and interpret historically important documents. In 1969, Archbishop Philip Pocock appointed Rev. Gordon Bean, the librarian of St. Augustine's Seminary, as Archdiocesan Archivist. The archival repository was rearranged with the intent of better serving the Chancery's own reference needs and of making available to historians a great deal of primary material regarding the Roman Catholic church in southern Ontario. Canon law served as the ruling hand in determining the work emphasis for the archivist. The 1983 code of canon law states the following concerning diocesan archives:

Can 486 §1. All documents concerning the diocese or parishes must be kept with the greatest of care.

§2. In each curia there is to be established in a safe a diocesan archive where documents and writings concerning both the spiritual and the temporal affairs of the diocese are to be properly filed and carefully kept under lock and key.

§3. An inventory or catalogue is to be made of documents kept in the archive, with a short synopsis of each document.

The archives' most valuable collection is the bishops' papers which represent diocesan administrations. What has survived over the years is merely a sampling which has been

catalogued at the item level. Material relating to parishes, institutions, and religious orders has been separated from the bishops' papers in order to provide a clearer understanding of these administrations. Major subject areas spanning more than one bishop's administration will also be found in separate series, e.g., St. Catharines' Diocese; Education 1914-1961; St. Augustine's Seminary. Material from 1826 to 1841 predating the creation of the Diocese of Toronto is found among the Macdonell papers. Alexander Macdonell's papers as first Bishop of Kingston and Upper Canada can be found in the Kingston and Toronto archives, each collection complementing the other. A complete set is available on microfilm through the Archives of Ontario.

During the past decade, the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto (ARCAT) has achieved intellectual control over a vast proportion of its holdings. The arrangement, description, and indexing of its many collections has established ARCAT as an important research centre for Roman Catholic historians. The task of describing and indexing the documents stored in ARCAT is a meticulous process. University students from a variety of academic backgrounds have been hired over the years to assist the Archivist in the cataloguing of documents, often at the item level. Each ARCAT collection is divided into subject series and arranged in chronological order by the Archivist. Once the arrangement has been completed, the students catalogue the records contained in the subject series by following established guidelines. A computer then processes the students' written entries to create a variety of finding aids. The result of the cataloguing programme has been the creation of an index card catalogue containing chronological and subject cards, as well as an official finding aid for each collection. An attempt has been made to standardize and control the subject headings being created through the development of an in-house name authority file. Recently, a move has been made away from itemized cataloguing towards descriptive inventories of more recent collections using a standardized format. The following list of finding aids is the result of ARCAT's cataloguing programme, most of which has been created with the assistance of the summer student programme:

The records of Bishop Alexander Macdonell, first Bishop of Kingston (1826-1841), and the records of the first eight bishops who administered the Diocese of Toronto from 1841 to 1961.

The records of diocesan institutions such as St. Augustine's Seminary and Archdiocesan Cemeteries.

The records of Roman Catholic organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and the Catholic Women's League.

The records of all diocesan parishes.

The records of the religious orders within the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Toronto.

The records of Roman Catholic schools, colleges and universities.

The records pertaining to the Toronto Secretariat of the Canadian Papal Visit which took place in September 1984.

The diocesan archives maintains a photograph collection which consists of approximately ten thousand images. Most of the photos date from the twentieth

century, but the collection does include some very good nineteenth-century clergy photographs. The emphasis of the collection in the past has been on church property and personnel. The photographs are arranged by subject, and there is a general finding aid. The maintenance and preservation of non-textual records, such as textiles, artifacts, rare books, and religious medals, is part of the archives' mandate. This role, somewhat unorthodox in the archival world, plays an important part in assuring the availability to researchers of the entire history of the Archdiocese of Toronto.

Preservation microfilming has been used for a number of years as a security measure for some collections. Sacramental registers for all the parishes in the Archdiocese are available on microfilm up to 1983 for diocesan research requests. The Mormon church also obtained permission to microfilm diocesan registers up to 1910 for genealogical research. The archives is responsible for the microfilming of all registers and carries out this mandate every five to seven years. The finding aid for these records has been a useful reference tool for church officials and genealogists.

Along with carrying out many long-term projects, the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto fulfils many research requests in the course of its normal daily activity. Requests from Chancery officials or parish priests range from information required for sacramental documents to major projects such as the publishing of parish or institutional histories. An example is the work for the Diocesan Historical Department in providing primary sources and information needed in the publication of histories on such topics as St. Augustine's Seminary or St. Michael's Cathedral. About two hundred researchers use the archives' facilities during a year, each receiving space, professional advice, and the necessary primary sources to assist in the completion of his or her task. The archives also answers written requests, both genealogical and academic, as part of its mandate. The archives has carried out small outreach activities in order to inform users of its services, policies, and holdings. Small displays in the Chancery office have exposed interested persons to our archival holdings. Brochures outlining proper archival specifications have informed and assisted parish priests in the management of their parish archives. The education of existing and potential users in the policies and procedures of the archives is becoming one of ARCAT's more important activities.

Having achieved intellectual control over most of its holdings, the archives is ready to pursue new activities. In order to meet important conservation, space, and research requirements, the archives hopes to microfilm early bishops' papers, Marriage Tribunal records, and other documents. The archives hopes to become more involved with diocesan offices and parishes in the management of the records of parishes, schools, and other Roman Catholic or diocesan institutions, an important activity.

With the realization that past and present clergy are an important part of the history of the Archdiocese, the archives is beginning to gather biographical information on diocesan clergy. Roman Catholic historians have already done much work in this area, but more research is needed to create a comprehensive biographical outline of the priests who served the Archdiocese of Toronto. During the next few years, the archives staff will collect biographical information which will be entered into a computer programme for arrangement and analysis. It is hoped that completion of this project will provide a publication which will contain the biographies of most of the clergy. Since requests pertaining to historical information on diocesan clergy are the most frequent, a publication of this nature would be very useful to future research needs.

The archives will be involved in some of the activities which will commemorate the 150th anniversary of the creation of the Archdiocese of Toronto on 17 December 1991. The Archdiocese of Toronto, the Canadian Catholic Historical Association, and St. Michael's College will be sponsoring an historical conference to be held at St. Michael's College in June 1990. The conference will bring together scholars who will present papers on various topics pertaining to the history of the Archdiocese. Much of the research for these papers has been or will be conducted in ARCAT. The archives plans to organize displays of archival material which best exemplify the history of the Archdiocese. In the course of the next two years, the archives will assist or carry out activities which will be part of the anniversary celebrations.

Over the years, the Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto has been able to identify, preserve, and make available the Toronto Archdiocesan records which have enduring value. The use of archival techniques, supported by canon law and church tradition, has created a modern Roman Catholic diocesan archives prepared to meet the challenges of the 1990s.

Notes

- 1 Louis J. Flynn, *Built on a Rock. The Story of the Roman Catholic Church in Kingston 1826-1976.* (Kingston, 1976) p. 22.
- 2 ARCAT, Letterbook Collection, LB02.007.
- 3 Murray Nicolson, "Michael Power, First Bishop of Toronto, 1842-1847," in Canadian Catholic Historical Association, *Historical Studies* 54 (1987), p. 37.