

The Vatican Archives Project: Description and Methodology

The guide published by Oxford press and the supplement published by the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan represents the first attempt to describe in a single work the totality of historical documentation that might properly be considered Vatican archives.



Although there are Vatican archival records in a number of repositories that have been included in this publication, this guide is designed primarily to provide useful information to English-speaking scholars who have an interest in using that portion of the papal archives housed in the Vatican Archives or Archivio Segreto Vaticano (ASV). As explained more fully below, it is the result of a project conducted by archivists and historians affiliated with the University of Michigan. The project, initiated at the request of the prefect of the ASV, focused on using modern computer database technology to present information in a standardized format on surviving documentation generated by the Holy See. This documentation is housed principally in the ASV but is also found in a variety of other repositories. This guide is, in essence, the final report of the results of this project. What follows is a complete printout of the database that was constructed.

The database structure used in compiling the information was predicated on principles that form the basis for the organization of the archives of most modern state bureaucracies (e.g., provenance). Fundamentally, that is, one cannot understand the true nature of archival material unless one understands the administrative divisions, functions, and processes of the organization that generated those archives. Thus, the conceptual framework for this guide is based on the organizational structure of the Holy See. Historically, the Holy See (also called the Apostolic See) has functioned in several different capacities, leading to a very complicated structure of congregations, commissions, offices, and so forth; it is the central government of the Roman Catholic church; it has functioned as a royal court; it served until 1870 as the civil government of the Papal States; it has functioned since 1929 as the civil government of Vatican City. Numerous offices have been established and abolished over the years to meet the needs of these different functions. This guide presents a brief history of each of these various offices and then links each office or agency to its extant records.

THE INITIAL PROJECT, 1989-1998

The idea for the Vatican Archives project arose from my own questions as a first-time user of the various sources in the index rooms of the ASV. At the invitation of the Prefect of the archives, Rev. Josef Metzler, OMI, and assisted by Msgr. Charles Burns of the archives staff, a group under the auspices of the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan was brought together to consider the applicability of standardized descriptive techniques to the existing access system at the Vatican Archives and to the access systems at related repositories holding Vatican archival material. The purpose of this project has been to make the organization of extant papal archives better understood among scholars whose primary language is English and to explore the use of computer-based technology to achieve this end.

A user normally begins using the ASV by visiting the index room of the archives, where there are three categories of finding aids that together are known as the numbered "indici" to the collections. First, there are the modern indici (numbered 1000 and above), which have been prepared over the past eighty years or so. These are modern access tools to most of the major series in the archives. They resemble modern provenance-based finding aids found in all major archives. Those in the ASV reflect extraordinary scholarship on the part of the archives staff and are exceptionally valuable tools. As noted in specific sections of this guide, there are some modern indici, not numbered, which for one reason or another are kept in reserve at the reference desk.

Second, there are indici (numbered up to 999) that were, for the most part, prepared prior to the opening of the archives for research in 1881. These fall into two subcategories. (1) There are several summary registers and inventories that were selected by the ASV staff and pulled from the stacks and placed in the Index Room to serve users as indici to the collections. In most cases these particular indici were prepared at the same time as the records themselves and were designed for administrative retrieval of particular records series. Written in diverse hands and often of unpredictable format, these can be much more difficult to use. Because there have been many changes in the archives over the years, most notably the losses during the Napoleonic era, many of these older indices are inaccurate with regard to the current contents and organization of the record series they purport to describe. However, these may provide the only evidence of documents that no longer exist. (2) There are some early inventories of documents prepared by early archivists. Particularly important are those that list the contents of the original cabinets or *armaria* of the ASV.

Third, there are a variety of specialized indices that are not provenance-based but rather reflect the interests or the energies of a particular archivist in relation to particular documents or subjects. The most important of these is the *Schedario Garampi*, prepared in the late eighteenth century by Giuseppe Garampi, which presents a sometimes chronological listing of select documents in the "miscellaneous cabinets" of the archives. There are many others as well. These specialized indexes rarely indicate indexing criteria nor do they indicate if they cover all or part of a series.

Another important group of access tools are various published works in many languages that explore a particular dimension of the archives. These publications fall into a number of categories. First, there are the major studies of particular records series in the archives such as Katterbach on the supplications, Hoberg on the Rota, or Pasztor on the Fondo Moderno. Second, there are the major national guides that highlight documents in a variety of series that cover a specific country, done under a variety of auspices. These point to specific material of a particular national interest. Third, there are many editions of particular documents or sets of documents. These are directed in some cases toward analysis and publication of specific items or more general descriptions of major documents relating to a particular subject area. Some of these items are in the index room of the ASV or in a separate room in the ASV devoted to related printed works.

As noted above, proper administrative practice required the development of inventories and indexes to record series. These access tools were created at the same time as the

documents themselves. Many of these are located in the stacks as part of the records series to which they pertain and are not considered by the ASV to be official "indici." These particular indici were created to facilitate administrative retrieval. These can be a chronological listing of items received or an alphabetical listing by correspondent or diocese. In some cases this kind of material has been pulled from the stacks and placed in the Index Room for the convenience of researchers. The protocol books for the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars and those for the Fondo Moderno of the Secretariat of State are examples. These are in the Index Room but are not part of the numbered indici.

A researcher who arrives at the ASV is presented with an array of items designed to provide access to specific archival material. While a list of the indici is available, there has been no overall schema readily apparent to the user to give that user a sense of the entire archives and how the various levels or groups of finding aids fit. At that most general level of inquiry, that of a general inventory, a standardized system assembled via a structured database seemed to hold the greatest potential for organizing and presenting relevant information. A structure would be designed to receive information on the ASV and then to receive information on Vatican materials located in other Vatican and related repositories.

The University of Michigan group approached the problem rooted in a fundamental sense of what in fact an archival collection is. This basic idea was stated best in a report of the Association of Canadian Archivists:

Archives are chiefly the non-current substantive records of the institutions or individuals they document. Administrative records are created in the first instance to serve a specific purpose. Once that purpose has been accomplished, they may have a secondary value as reference material, and later historical source material. Their usefulness is enhanced if the relationship to the original transaction remains apparent.

It was this latter relationship that was particularly difficult to determine in the current access system at the ASV. In order to realize the full potential of the finding aids in the ASV, it seemed essential to clearly present to the user the essence of this fundamental relationship between the Vatican as an organization and the documents that it had generated over a period of a thousand years. Because of the diversity of subject matter covered in the records of the ASV, a thorough subject guide would be extremely difficult to achieve in a reasonable amount of time. Therefore, the relationships between the function of the office, the activities devised to carry out that function, and the records that result, are of critical importance toward an understanding of the nature of the material. Thus, if a user understands the role of an agency and the activities of its offices, one can anticipate the range of subject matter covered in its activities.

Published guides have been the traditional vehicle through which this relationship has been presented. IS Comprehensive guides to the ASV do exist but none of these is nearly complete nor is any specifically or completely based on the fundamental relationship between the organization and the records generated. The staff of the Bentley Library at the University of Michigan designed a provenance-based system that would answer the following three basic questions:

1. what is the Vatican and what administrative agencies have formed the organization of the Vatican over time? ,
2. which of those agencies have deposited records in the archives and which have not?, and
3. for those records that have been deposited in the archives, what are the characteristics of the record series and what sorts of finding guides exist both within the archives collection and outside it?

The responses to these not insignificant questions would then be assembled into a computer database. At this point the idea of using the computer was less important than a clear sense of the relationships to be described and the level of description to be attained. It was therefore essential to define a specific layer of description to be done, to be sure that all

materials in the various archival collections were visited, and then to be completely consistent in all work subsequently done. This consistency, which is essential to any guide, becomes vital to an electronic-based system.

The project that resulted from this proposition has been divided into two phases. The first was designed to build the basic structure of the database to include every record series housed in the ASV and related repositories. This was successfully completed in the spring of 1991. The second phase was designed to enhance the descriptive structure in a way that would provide some analysis of various dimensions of the archival holdings. This phase was completed in 1995.



The first phase of the project was launched in the fall of 1989. Two members of the University of Michigan project staff spent eleven months at the Vatican surveying the entire holdings of the ASV and creating a hierarchical structure for recording the information. At the same time two other staff members worked in Ann Arbor to research the evolution of the administrative functions of the Holy See from the medieval period through the twentieth century. The system then devised (essentially modern descriptive archival methods) links a sense of the Holy See as an organization with the records produced by that organization over time. This approach then required the preparation of two separate databases that eventually were linked. This work then provided the model for subsequent work at the Archives of the Propaganda Fide, the Archives of the Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro, the Archivio di Stato di Roma, Trinity College, the Archives Nationales, and the Bibliotheque Nationale.

At one level, the staff prepared histories of each department or agency of the Holy See that were identifiable through standard sources on the history of the papacy and of the church. More than 450 agencies that functioned between the years 800 and 1960 were identified. While the histories for the most part have been drawn from general secondary sources, in those cases where the agency was particularly important or unusually complicated, the staff consulted the original bulls to clarify function, purpose and organizational evolution. The emphasis in the agency histories is on function and competencies. Archival access is based on the assumption that if a user understands the function of an agency, the method of its operation, and the types of documents it generates, then that user can predict what sort of topics might be covered in those records. There exists an enormous body of scholarship on the history of the agencies of the Holy See, particularly for the Roman Curia. To digest and present the various interpretations of the role and function of the important agencies of the Holy See was far beyond the scope of this project. The histories presented in this guide are essentially official histories drawn from the documents that have authorized the creation or the refinement of a particular office. Users of this guide should be aware that the official documents do not always reflect or

indicate the full history of a particular era in the evolution of an office. Users are encouraged to probe the broader corpus of research on the history of those particular divisions that are of interest. Some bibliographic pointers exist within the histories of the more complex agencies. However, those citations are by no means exhaustive.

At a second level, the project staff at the Vatican worked through every shelf in the ASV to identify specific record series. These are clearly identifiable units composed of related material usually generated by a single organizational entity and usually as a result of a specific function or transaction. Our challenge was to make a census of the holdings of the archives using standardized descriptive fields. Because of the vastness of the task we emphasized only general descriptive attributes and did not emphasize the content of the particular series. In the ASV approximately eleven hundred series were identified. To assemble the information the project staff then entered basic descriptive data in USMARC-AMC format for each of the record series (United States Machine Readable Cataloging-Archival and Manuscripts Control-note that with the integration of formats the term AMC is no longer used). The basic USMARC record for an archival record series includes the following types of information: (1) name of the organization generating the particular record series, (2) name of the particular record series, (3) the inclusive dates of the series, (4) bulk in linear meters, (5) basic information on the way the series is organized, (6) information on the scope and content of the material in the series, (7) the existence of any finding aids or indexes to the particular series, and (8) various index terms.

In 1991, this database was loaded into the archives and manuscripts section of the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), the principal database of the Research Libraries Group, located in Mountain View, California, to assist scholars who have an interest in locating historical documentation generated by the Holy See. The information regarding the ASV contained in this guide has been available to scholars through the RLIN network since 1991. Although some additions and corrections continue to be made, it is very important to note that no provision has been made for the maintenance of this database. The condition and definition of the series that constitute the holdings of the various repositories continue to evolve. The ASV itself will likely at some point develop a system of description that will be detailed and current. Because of this inevitable evolution, some of the specific data in the RLIN version will need to be withdrawn.

At this point, the database is available at most major research libraries in the United States and selected European libraries. The best point of entry is to call up the master record (ID VA TV878-A), which explains the structure of the information in RLIN. The database offers the following advantages to users who wish to explore this information: (1) it is possible to explore the links and cross references in a more direct way; (2) the relationship between the record series and the agencies that generated those series is presented in a more layered hierarchy; (3) it is possible to limit searches by a specific date or a specific set of inclusive dates; (4) there is the possibility for limited subject and geographical based searches; and (5) there is the limited possibility for form and genre searching. At this writing, scholars are best advised to consult the database with the assistance of a reference librarian. However, it is possible to obtain individual request accounts for the RLIN network. Researchers interested in such accounts should consult a librarian at an RLG member institution.

The database and now this guide will assist users of the various archives in determining what agencies of the Holy See existed over time, which of those agencies generated records that survive today in the ASV and elsewhere, what kinds of records were generated, and how best to locate material in a particular record series through existing published and unpublished finding aids.

In order to accomplish the core of this work, the prefect of the ASV extended to the project staff the extraordinary privilege of access to the stacks of the ASV. The logic of the placement of material on the shelves of the stacks proved particularly helpful in reconstructing the relationships required in the dual-tiered database. The stacks of the ASV

contain nearly 20 linear kilometers of records dating from about 850 through to the late twentieth century (materials generated after 1922 are closed to research). As has been noted, the archival holdings of the congregation "de Propaganda Fide" and of the Fabbrica di San Pietro lie outside the ASV. Because of the particular historical importance of these two offices, their holdings were incorporated into the structure of the database at the same level as applied to the ASV. Project staff were given access to the stacks of these repositories as well. At the archives of the Propaganda Fide, however, access to unprocessed material was limited.

Also, because of the importance of the Papal States to the Holy See, the project staff incorporated existing descriptive information on the holdings of the Archivio di Stato di Roma that pertain to the government of the Papal States up until their demise as an arm of the Holy See in 1870. Citations used to describe records from the Archivio di Stato come from the Archivio di Stato di Roma section, by Edvige Aleandri Barletta and Carla Lodolini Tupputi, of the *Guida Generale degli Archivi di Stato Italiano*, edited by Piero D'Angiolini and Claudio Pavone (Rome, 1986). The project staff is grateful to the Italian Ministry of Cultural Affairs (Beni culturali) for permission to quote extensively from this guide for this purpose. A second phase of the project was devoted to specific analytical work. This work focused on three particularly complex areas. First, the traditional application of the USMARC format simply notes whether or not finding aids exist. Because of the complex structure of extant inventories, protocol books and traditional indices at the ASV, the decision was made to include extensive analytical work on the nature of existing finding aids. Second, because the nature of records in the archives is not always clear from the title, work was done to present some sense of the scope and content of select records series. Third, many aspects of the ASV have been studied intensively by scholars around the world since it was opened for research in 1881. As a result, there is a huge bibliography that addresses particular aspects of one or another records series. We were able to identify a considerable selection of the relevant titles. The selection focuses on books and articles which have specific information on the organization or the content of particular series. The *Bibliografia dell' Archivio Vaticano* (6 vols.) provides the most comprehensive bibliographic overview of scholarship which draws from the holdings of the ASV.²⁶ However, a truly definitive bibliography would be difficult to assemble.

THE SUPPLEMENTAL PROJECT, 2002-2004

In 1997 as the guide, *Vatican Archives, An Inventory and Guide to Historical Documents of the Holy See* (Oxford University Press, 1998) hereafter referred to as the Guide, went to press, it was announced by the Holy See that the historical archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) would be open in 1998 for research for the first time since the founding of the Congregation in 1542. In the Guide, the contents of this archive could only be a matter of speculation. See 3.1.26.1. In 2002, Mons. Alejandro Cifres, Director of the Archives, gave permission to do an inventory of its holdings in a format consistent with the other repositories included in the Guide. This supplement is the result of that work. In addition to the administrative records of the CDF as currently defined, The CDF archives holds the records of two predecessor congregations:

1. The Holy Office, called the Suprema Sacra Congregatio Romanae et Universalis Inquisitionis until 1908 and
2. the Sacra Congregatio pro Indice Librorum Prohibitorum whose functions were absorbed into the Holy Office in 1917.

These branches of the organization of the Holy See formed in the wake of the Council of Trent were concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy. The records in the archives include, but by no means are limited to, the administration of the counter-reformation Inquisition and the procedures for compiling the Index of Forbidden Books. The CDF archives also contains the entire archive of the agency of the Holy Office in Siena. These records of one subordinate office were transferred to the CDF archives in 1911. The series is noted at the end of this

supplement. Though the CDF archives has been closed, some records of the congregation and its predecessors found their way to other repositories. These were noted in the Guide and are only given brief reference in this supplement.

The information on the records series in the archives is presented in the original format of the Guide. The preparation of the supplement is a part of the Vatican Archives Project of the University of Michigan that is described in the Guide pp. xxiv-xxxiv. This project was predicated on the idea that, properly constructed, a guide could present an integrated sense of totality of the corpus of documentation that is properly the archives of the Holy See, though those archives are spread among a variety of institutions both within and beyond the current jurisdiction of the Holy See.