

## **Roman Catholic Archives in Latin America: *Status Quæstionis***

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The first Catholic missionaries arrived in what we now call Latin America in the early sixteenth century. After a couple of decades, a more stable parish and diocesan structure was gradually superimposed on the early missionary church organisation. At this early stage, it became increasingly important for the ministers of the church to keep track of the infants and adults who were baptised, the couples who were married, and the people who received communion or were buried. Thus there is a long tradition of ecclesiastical record keeping on the continent. On an international level, the General Council of Trent (1545-1563) decreed that parish priests should keep sacramental records, and during the latter part of the sixteenth century Spanish American synods reiterated these decisions. The local synods also included decrees on the necessity of well-ordered and well-locked diocesan archives. However, as is known from all parts of the world, law is one thing, and practise is often quite another.

Thus, though there are many well-kept ecclesiastical archives throughout Latin America, there are great local differences. In some places, church archives have been destroyed in uprisings or seized by anti-clerical governments. In other places, invaluable records have been damaged by humid climes or vermin, or perished due to lack of financial resources, interest, or archival competence. Much has, however, improved during the last decades and many archives have been ordered, described and thereby have become increasingly accessible to researchers.

The aim of this article is to give a brief overview of the current status of Roman Catholic archives in Latin America. It is an immense subject which hardly can be satisfactorily treated in a brief article. Here, I will therefore specifically focus on the case of Mexico. However, it should be indicated that the Mexican case is not entirely representative, as the current status of the Catholic archives there is better than in most other places in Latin America. It is, however, a good example of what can be done.

The ecclesiastical archives in Latin America and other parts of the Catholic world are influenced by guidelines and regulations of the Holy See. Therefore, it is pertinent to begin an overview of the Latin American situation with a brief analysis of some recent metropolitan texts that govern the church's universal archival policy.

## Vatican Regulations and Guidelines

The current Code of Canon Law (1983) includes a number of decrees on ecclesiastical archives (Can. 486-491). The decrees are found in a part of the Canon Law which deals with the diocesan curia. They thus focus specifically on the diocesan level, but in most cases they are also applicable to parish archives.<sup>1</sup> The opening paragraph states that "all documents which regard the diocese or parishes must be protected with greatest care" (Can. 486, § 1). It also asserts that in every bishopric there should be a "diocesan archive or record storage area" (486, § 2) and that inventories or catalogues should be kept to ensure easy access to the documentation (Can 486, § 3).

Canons 487-488 also deal with safety precautions. It is stated that the diocesan archives should be locked and that access only should be granted by the bishop, the moderator of the curia or the chancellor (Can. 487, § 1; Can. 488). The archives should, however, not be totally closed as it is stated that "interested parties have the right to obtain personally or through a proxy an authentic written copy or photocopy of documents which by their nature are public and which pertain to their personal status" (Can. 487, § 2). There are thus some signs of openness even in the Code of Canon Law. Canons 489-489 deal specifically with the secret archives which include classified files. Such documents should be kept apart from the open access documentation, preferably in a separate facility or at least in a locked armoire in the general archives.

Finally, however, Canon 491 has a broader scope. It establishes that the bishop should ensure that the historical archives within the territory of the diocese are diligently preserved and that inventories and catalogues are made in at least two copies. The bishop should take actions to make sure that a diocesan historical archive is established in the diocese, and that the

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<sup>1</sup> In the following, I have used the *Code of Canon Law, Latin-English edition*. Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983.

older documents are "diligently protected and systematically ordered in it". Apart from these six canons, the Code of Can Law includes one paragraph on the parish archives and the norms on sacramental records. Can. 535, § 4 states:

In each parish there is to be a storage area, or archive, in which the parochial registers are protected along with letters of bishops and other documents which are to be preserved for reason of necessity or advantage. The pastor is to take care that all of these things, which are to be inspected by the diocesan bishop or his delegate at the time of visitation or at some other opportune time, do not come into the hands of outsiders.

As has been shown, the Code of Canon Law includes a number of regulations on archives. However, they mainly treat current archives and secrecy, although the historical archives are briefly mentioned. Given the legal nature and scope of the Code, the canons do not reflect much on the role of archives in the life of the church and the cultural aspects of ecclesiastical archives.

In more recent years, however, the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church, led by Archbishop Francesco Marchisano, has issued a number of documents on the cultural heritage of the Church. This Commission was established in 1993, substituting the Pontifical Commission for the Conservation of the Artistic Patrimony of the Church, which in its turn was created in 1988 within the Congregation for the Clergy. The new Pontifical Commission's area of competence is the artistic and historical heritage of the church, including works of arts, historical documents, and books. The commission works in collaboration with the local churches throughout the world to promote a greater awareness of the cultural heritage of the church.<sup>2</sup>

On February 2, 1997, the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church published a circular letter particularly devoted to ecclesiastical archives, called *La Funzione Pastorale degli Archivi Ecclesiastici* [The pastoral function of the Ecclesiastical Archives]. Originally published in Italian it was later translated into other languages.<sup>3</sup> The circular letter,

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<sup>2</sup> Pedro Rubio Merino *Archística eclesiástica. Nociones básicas*. Seville: Guadalquivir Ediciones, 1999:189, cf. [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

<sup>3</sup> I have used the original Italian edition, Pontificia Commissione per i beni Culturali della Chiesa, Lettera circolare, *La funzione pastorale degli archivi ecclesiastici*, 2 febbraio 1997 (The Vatican City, 1997).

destined to all bishops in the Roman Catholic Church, includes some theological reflections on the place of archives in the church, which could be seen as steps towards a veritable theology of archives. But the letter also includes some concrete guidelines for the administration of archives, which should be implemented and applied in the local church.

In the circular letter, the Commission initially asserts that all the cultural goods of the church, including archival records, contain nothing less than the memory of the works of the Church, the witness of the church members, and the continual quests of the believers. The archival documents record the paths followed by the Church throughout the centuries, from its foundation by Christ until today. Thus, according to the Commission the written documents manifest the continuity of Christ's Church through history and the Church believes that these documents can reveal traces of Christ's works throughout history for the salvation of mankind. The transmission of the cultural patrimony includes memories of the Church's ongoing evangelization through for example parish records. According to the Commission, the ecclesiastical records have a pastoral and pedagogical function that enables the ministers and the believers to learn from history and better adapt to current situations. (Chapter 1, § 1-3).

The archives of the Church are made up of unique materials produced by people and events in the past. Church archives may include records by the Pope and the Roman Curia, but also by bishops, clergy, missionaries, religious orders and lay organisations, etc. (Ch. 2; Ch. 3, § 1). According to the Commission, the ecclesiastical archives are not only important for the current and future church members; they are part of the universal cultural heritage, and could and should therefore be used by researchers regardless of their confessional stand (Ch. 4, § 1).

As mentioned earlier, the circular letter also includes rather concrete guidelines about the practical aspects of church archives. The Commission, however, clearly points out that these guidelines need to be adapted to the context of the local churches. The bishops' conferences throughout the Catholic world are therefore asked to adopt relevant guidelines for the archival work in their respective provinces. Following the Code of Canon Law, the circular letter points out some basic guiding principles for the local ecclesiastical archives. They need to be adequately conserved, safely and carefully kept, and systematically organised and catalogued (Ch. 3, § 1-3).

In their letter, the Commission makes a distinction between historical and current archives. The distinction is, however, not absolute. It is clearly indicated that utmost care should not only be reserved for older archival material, but be extended to current archives, which of course are the historical archives of tomorrow. According to the Commission, the episcopal conferences should therefore remind the administrators of the diocese and the parish clergy of the importance of the archives as a part of the cultural heritage of the church and as a part of the ongoing evangelization. The Commission wants to promote the education of professionals who can take care of the ecclesiastical archives, preferably trained archivists. It also wants to promote the foundation of national Associations for Church Archivists (Ch. 2, § 1-5).

Moving to the archival facilities, the Commission gives some general remarks on the appropriate conditions for storage of the unique written patrimony, as regards to temperature, lighting, humidity, but also on the current use of writing materials. The Commission also underscores the importance of safe archival repositories, so that the written material is protected against e.g. fire, theft and vermin. (Ch. 3, § 2)

The funds in the ecclesiastical archives should be ordered according to the so-called principle of provenance. This general principle implies that one should not mix records from different producers of records. For example, records emanating from two parishes or two monasteries should normally not be mixed, but be kept apart. Moreover, the principle implies that the archivist as far as possible should respect the principle of original order within the respective archives (Ch. 3, § 3). According to the Commission, improved accessibility should be considered an important goal for Catholic archival institutions. Therefore, the making of different finding aids, guides, catalogues and inventories should be given priority. Moreover, the microfilming and scanning of important documents should be considered to improve security and access. When the archives are ordered, national and foreign scholars should be invited to do research in the repositories. Interest in the historical records among the general public could also be increased by exhibits and cultural initiatives. In complying with these means towards improved accessibility and openness, according to the Commission, the ecclesiastical archives may become the "tabernacles of memory" as they are intended (Ch. 4, § 4-5).

## Archives of the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America

Particularly during the decade that has passed since the publication of the circular letter in 1997, many ecclesiastical archives throughout Latin America have indeed moved towards greater openness and accessibility. A rapidly growing number of guides and catalogues covering ecclesiastical archives have been published in recent years, sometimes edited by the Church itself, but most often in co-operation with civil institutions, public archives or universities.<sup>4</sup> As a clear illustration of this fact, data on 5,800 finding aids (catalogues, guides, inventories) on Latin American archival records is now readily available through the constantly updated web page of the Instituto de Cultura, Fundación Mapfre in Madrid. Of these finding aids about ten percent, or almost six hundred, deal with ecclesiastical archival institutions *sensu stricto*.<sup>5</sup>

Of the ecclesiastical archives in the Roman Catholic Church, the most obvious are those on the diocesan level and on the parish level. Apart from these two types of archives, one could mention the archives of the cathedral chapters, monasteries, religious orders and seminaries, etc. The term "church archives" or "ecclesiastical archives" is, however, not without its ambiguities. Not all Roman Catholic archives are currently kept in archival institutions pertaining to the church. Given the close ties between the Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown during the colonial times, many of the records that were sent from church representatives in Spanish America to the mother country ended up in the archives of the royal administration in Spain, now mainly kept in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Los archivos de América Latina. Informe experto de la Fundación Histórica Tavera*. Madrid: Fundación Tavera and Banco Mundial, 2000 includes an overview of the status of more than a thousand archival institutions throughout Latin America.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.portalmapfretavera.com/consulta/busqueda.cmd>. For printed bibliographies, cf. Sylvia L. Hilton and Ignacio González Casanovas, *Fuentes manuscritas para la historia de Iberoamérica. Guía de instrumentos de investigación*. Madrid: Fundación Mapfre América and Instituto Histórico Tavera, 1995 and Sylvia L. Hilton and Ignacio González Casanovas, *Fuentes manuscritas para la historia de Iberoamérica. Guía de instrumentos de investigación. Suplemento*. Madrid: Fundación Mapfre América and Instituto Histórico Tavera, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Parts of the repositories of the Archivo General de Indias were digitalized between 1986 and 1997. When the project ended, 11 million pages or some 12 per cent of the archive had been scanned. Currently, these images are available through the web page of the Archivos Españoles en Red (AER): <http://aer.mcu.es/sgae/>

Moreover, other materials have been extracted from the ecclesiastical archives in Latin America during the anticlerical periods in the mid-nineteenth century or later and ended up in state archives, libraries and sometimes in private collections abroad.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Mexican Case**

In the following, I will highlight some of the many projects that have been initiated in Mexico to improve the accessibility of ecclesiastical archives. Though by no means complete, the study will hopefully illustrate the great wealth of Mexican church archives and the great improvements made in recent years.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Diocesan Level*

The diocesan archives often include a multitude of documentation. In the case of Mexico they are often in three major sections. The first section is known as *Gobierno*, which can include the bishop's and the vicar general's correspondence, duplicates of parish sacramental records, registers of priests, files on candidates for ordination, lists of Holy Orders, and records on seminars, chaplaincies, testaments, religious lay brotherhoods, etc. The second section which is called *Justicia* consists of the records of the *provisor*, the highest ecclesiastical judge in the diocese and includes both civil and criminal processes as well as matrimonial cases. The third main section of a diocesan archive is often known as *Sagrada Mitra* includes documents on economic aspects of the administration of the diocese and visitation records.<sup>9</sup>

Mexico has currently more than eighty dioceses and archdioceses, some of them erected during the first decades of the Spanish presence, while many

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<sup>7</sup> That was for example the case with some of the most important records of the colonial Mexican church, the acts of the first three provincial councils in 1555, 1565, and 1585, which were extracted from the cathedral archives in Mexico City in the early 1860s, bought by a private collector and now found in a U.S. research library, cf. Magnus Lundberg "Las actas de los tres primeros concilios mexicanos: Historia diplomática y estudio de su itinerario", *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia*, 15 (2006): 259-268.

<sup>8</sup> For a general overview of Mexican historical archives, cf. Lino Gómez Canedo, *Archivos Históricos de México*. Con advertencia y notas de Ernesto de la Torre Villar. Madrid: Fundación Histórica Tavera, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Rubio Merino 1999:106-126.

have been recently founded.<sup>10</sup> The historical archive of the archdiocese of Mexico – the Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México – is a good example of a well-ordered ecclesiastical archive. At present, the archive has published three voluminous guides covering all the documentation from the first half of the sixteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century. The first volume covers the colonial period (1532-1821) and describes 9.428 individual records. The second tome covers the years 1821-1862, that is, from the Mexican independence to the French invasion, whereas the third and most recently published guide covers the prolonged archiepiscopacy of Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos (1863-1891).<sup>11</sup> One of the other old dioceses, Valladolid (now Morelia) is also an excellent printed catalogue, and serves as a three-volume guide prepared for its Archivo Capitular de Administración Diocesana. This guide covers individual records from the sixteenth century until 1870.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Chapter Level*

The Cathedral Chapter was constituted by a number of clerics who were involved in solemn liturgical cult, prayer, study and teaching in a cathedral church. The chapter archives often include a large variety of documentation, at least in the bigger cathedral churches. They include the documents of the *secretariato*, including the acts of the cathedral chapter, but also correspondence, collections of papal bulls sent to the cathedral, etc. The *majordomo* files include records on the economic administration of the cathedral and the *fábrica* files deal with the construction of the cathedral church, the pieces of art, and donations. There is most often a great number of documents that deal with altar and choir service, chaplaincies, scholarships, pious works, etc.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Brief notes on various diocesan archives are found in Gomez Canedo 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Gustavo Watson Marrón, Gilberto González Merlo, Berenise Bravo Rubio, Marco Antonio Perez Iturbe. *Guía de documentos novohispanos del Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México*. Mexico City: Arquidiócesis Primada de México, Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México, 2002; *Guía de documentos del archivo histórico del Arzobispado de México: del primer imperio de la república liberal 1821-1862* Mexico City: Arquidiócesis Primada de México, Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México, 2004; and *Guía del Archivo Episcopal de Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, 1863-1891*, Mexico City: Arquidiócesis Primada de México, Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Oscar Mazin Gomez (dir.) *Archivo Capitular de Administración Diocesana, Valladolid, Morelia, Catálogo*. Zamora. El Colegio de Michoacán, Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, 3 vols., 1991-2002.

<sup>13</sup> Rubio Merino 1999:83-106.

A detailed two-volume guide of the archives of the chapter of the metropolitan cathedral of Mexico has recently been published. This guide includes almost 2,000 volumes, which are divided into 38 document groups and cover the activities of the chapter from 1527 to 1982.<sup>14</sup> Another two-volume guide has recently been prepared for the Cathedral Chapter of Valladolid (Morelia) that covers data on records from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Parish Level***

The most important part of the parish archives contains sacramental records (baptisms, confirmations, matrimones, and burials). The traditional parish archives sometimes have a series on the construction and maintenance of the parish church. Documents on the gathering of tithes, visitation books, lists of yearly communions and confessions, documents on lay brotherhoods, patronages and pious works are sometimes also found in parish archives.<sup>16</sup>

As in many other parts of the world, the Church of Latter Day Saints has realized a very extensive microfilming project in Mexico. Currently, copies of some 122,000 microfilm reels are available at the Mexican National Archives, where they have been deposited by the Mexican Academy of Genealogy and Heraldry. The microfilms facilitated by the Mormons include parish records from more than a thousand parishes throughout Mexico, including books on baptisms, matrimones, and deaths. Sometimes other types of parish records are reproduced. From around 75 of these parishes, records are available from the sixteenth century onwards, and the first microfilmed book includes baptism records from as early as the 1530s, that is about a decade after the Spanish conquest. Though very extensive, the Mormon microfilming project was by no means complete and parish records are still often only available in the local parishes, most often in the parish office or in the curate's home.

In 1996, the Fundación Histórica Tavera published a guide to Mexican parish archives. It contains brief information on individual repositories and

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<sup>14</sup> Oscar Mazin Gomez (dir.) *Archivo del Cabildo Catedral Metropolitano*. 2 vols. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, Centro de Estudios de Historia de México, CONDUMEX, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> María Isabel Sánchez Maldonado et al., *Guía del Archivo Capitular del Cabildo Catedral de Morelia*. 2 vols. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2004-2005.

<sup>16</sup> Rubio Merino 1999:53-83.

illustrates the wealth of documentation that can be found in parishes throughout Mexico and that has only been used by researchers to a very limited degree.<sup>17</sup> The guide was just part of a project that was initiated by the Mexican National Archives in 1977 in order to make an inventory of ecclesiastical archives in Mexico and in particular of parish archives. The original scope of the inventory was enormous – 75 dioceses and more than 5,000 parishes. As a result of the project more than 1,500 parish archives were inscribed in the National Register of Ecclesiastical Archives (*Registro Nacional de Archivos Eclesiásticos*) until 1987. The National Register includes brief notes on the various types of records that are found in respective parish archive, while indicating the number of volumes and the years that the volumes cover.<sup>18</sup> Apart from this general register, in later years, the National Archives and other institutions have published a number of monograph guides, which contain more detailed information on individual parish archives.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, from 2003 onwards, the ADABI – the Consejo Directivo de Apoyo al Desarrollo de Archivos y Bibliotecas de México – has supported a large number of short-time archival projects for the ordering and description of archives. The main objective of the ADABI projects is to contribute to “the diffusion on inventories, guides, and catalogues; the improvement of access; and the professional formation of the people who

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<sup>17</sup> Jorge Garibay Álvarez *Guía de fuentes documentales parroquiales de México*, Madrid: Fundación Histórica Tavera, 1996, cf. Gómez Canedo 1997 for more information on individual archives.

<sup>18</sup> Garibay Álvarez 1996: 12-19. A manual for the organisation of parish archives was also published as a part of the project, cf. Jorge Garibay Alvarez et al. *Manual para la organización de los archivos parroquiales de México*. Mexico City: AGN 1987.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Raul Vargas, *Cátalogo del Archivo de la Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol de Silao, Gto. (1594-1977)*. Mexico City: INAH, 1977; Agustín Churruga & Manual Sakanassi *El Archivo histórico Matheo (Archivo Parroquial de Parras)*, 1989; María Teresa Jarquín, *Guía del Archivo General de Metepec*. Zinacantepeque: El Colegio Mexiquense, 1991; Jesús Mendoza Muñoz, *Inventario del Archivo de la Parroquia de San Pedro y San Pablo de Cadereyta, Qro.* Mexico City: AGN 2002; Lilia Isabel López Ferman, *Archivo Histórico de La Parroquia de San Pablo Apetatitlán. Diócesis de Tlaxcala*, Mexico City: AGN, 2002; Elisa Garzón Balbuena, *Inventario general del Archivo Parroquial de San Juan Bautista Acatlán*, Mexico City: AGN, 2003; *Archivo Histórico Parroquial Santo Domingo de Guzmán. Arquidiócesis Primada de México*, Mexico City: AGN, 2003; *Archivos Históricos Parroquiales Decanato de Oriente Arquidiócesis de Oaxaca*, Mexico City: AGN, 2003; and Patricia Sanabria Vargas, *Archivo Histórico del Ex Convento Franciscano y Parroquia El Sagrario. Tulancingo, Hgo.(1585-1899)*, Mexico City: AGN, 2003.

guard these repositories".<sup>20</sup> The projects include a great number of ecclesiastical archives, particularly on the parish level. In most cases, the finished monograph guides, inventories or catalogues on parish records have been published in the ADABI series "Colección inventarios".<sup>21</sup>

### *Church archives in the Mexican National Archives*

The Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Mexico's National Archives, includes records from the colonial era until today. In the late 1850s and the early 1860s, the Mexican government under President Benito Juárez brought large amounts of ecclesiastical records from e.g. dioceses, cathedral chapters, convents, and the Inquisition, to include them in the National Archives. The material in AGN is divided into 322 documental groups. Most of this immense collection is catalogued, and part of the catalogues is now available through the on-line database, Argena III, where researchers now can obtain information on some 700.000 individual records.<sup>22</sup>

Major ecclesiastical document groups in the AGN include the Bienes nacionales – "National goods" (1936 volumes), which constitute a very diverse collection of ecclesiastical records, though particularly devoted to convents and chaplaincies, 1540-1867. Another major document group includes the highly interesting files of the Mexican Inquisition, 1522-1819 (1555 volumes). The much consulted inquisition files are among the document groups that have recently been scanned and are now available

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.adabi.org.mx/adabi.htm>

<sup>21</sup> The following ecclesiastical archive projects have been funded between 2003 and 2006. In most cases, inventories have already been published. *2003*: Archdiocese of Mexico, VII Vicaría Episcopal; Archdiocese of Mexico, VIII Vicaría Episcopal; Diocese of Tlapa, parish of Malinaltepec; Archdiocese of Puebla, four parishes; *2004*: Archdiocese of Puebla, parish of El Sagrario Metropolitano; Diocese of Guanajuato, Parish of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad; Diocese of Guanajuato, Basilica Colegiata de Nuestra Señora; Diocese of Guanajuato, Parish of San José de Santiago; Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa, Diocesan archives; Parish of Santa Clara de Asís, Michoacán; Diocese of Huajuapán de León, five parish archives; Monastery of Santa Catalina de Siena, Puebla; Archdiocese of Mexico, Sagrario Metropolitano; *2005*: Archbishopric of Mexico, ex-convent of San Bernardino de Siena; Diocese of Tacámbaro, six parish archives; Diocese of Huajuapán de León, ten parish archives; Diocese of Puebla, six parish archives; *2006*: Diocese of Tacámbaro, parish archives; Diocese of Huajuapán de León, parish archives; Diocese of Puebla, parish archives; Diocese of Orizaba, parish archives. (See <http://www.adabi.org.mx/proyectos.htm>)

<sup>22</sup> The Argena III is found on the AGN's web page, <http://www.agn.gob.mx>

digitally at the AGN.<sup>23</sup> Church-related material is, however, also included in a number of other document groups in the AGN, such as Archbishops and bishops, 1664-1819 (19 volumes); Chaplancies, 1609-1860, (30 volumes); Regular and secular clergy, 1569-1826, (218 volumes); Brotherhoods 1538-1855, (19 volumes); Tithes, 1545-1821, (22 volumes); Jesuits, 1584-1822, (266 volumes); Missions, 1621-1835, (28 volumes); Temples and convents, 1576-1865, (251 volumes); and Ecclesiastical justice, 1696-1857, (488 volumes).<sup>24</sup>

## **Concluding Remarks**

This article has been an attempt to summarize some recent efforts to improve the accessibility of Roman Catholic archives in Latin America, with particular attention to Mexico. The analysis of the Mexican case has been set against a background of recent Vatican regulations and guidelines on archival matters. Through a number of important and highly ambitious projects, and the minute and indefatigable work of archivists and ecclesiastics, researchers now have access to many more guides and catalogues than just a decade ago. The presence of such finding aids is often a prerequisite for research into archival material.

From a researcher's point of view, improved access to more ecclesiastical archives will hopefully modify the traditional historiography of the Latin American church. Hopefully, researchers will now to a greater extent be able to take into account the ordinary parishioners and parish priests. But the improved access to church archives will probably also contribute to a deeper understanding of the lives and works of the ecclesiastical elites, i.e. the bishops and the members of the cathedral chapters, and shed light on the Spanish American cathedral churches as centres of religious cult, education, and culture.

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<sup>23</sup> The general guide of the AGN is available on <http://www.agn.gob.mx/archivos/inicio.html>

<sup>24</sup> Cf. <http://www.agn.gob.mx/archivos/inicio.html>

**RESUMÉ EN FRANÇAIS**

## **Les archives catholiques romaines en Amérique Latine: "Status Quæstionis"**

La situation des archives catholiques romaines en Amérique Latine constitue un sujet vaste qui ne peut être traité avec satisfaction dans ce seul article. L'auteur donne un bref aperçu de la situation actuelle d'une région où les premiers missionnaires sont arrivés à la seizième siècle. Les archives issues de leur histoire depuis la création des premières paroisses ont été détruites dans certains endroits, soit par des gouvernements anti-cléricaux ou par l'humidité et les insectes.

A l'instar de tout le patrimoine artistique de l'Eglise catholique, ces archives sont gérées selon les directives du Saint Siège (Droit Canon avec des décrets) qui soulignent les conditions de conservation (grande attention, et beaucoup de reconstruction) à tous les niveaux. Mais, une ouverture a été observée au cours des années 1990, notamment par la lettre circulaire de la Commission pontificale de conservation du patrimoine artistique (1997). Plusieurs archives ecclésiastiques sont devenues accessibles. Ainsi, beaucoup de projets ont été initiés tant au niveau des diocèses, des chapitres que des paroisses, au Mexique où plusieurs documents ecclésiastiques ont été inclus dans le groupe des « Biens nationaux » régis par les archives nationales du pays.

Pour la recherche, l'auteur conclut que l'accès à plusieurs archives ecclésiastiques modifiera certainement la traditionnelle historiographie de l'Eglise catholique en Amérique Latine.



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