By Maria Mazzenga, Education Archivist, American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives at Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.

Digital archiving is now as central an issue in US Catholic archival institutions as was the urgency to preserve and process non-digital materials in the same institutions back in the second half of the twentieth century. The twentieth century saw a “renaissance” in Catholic archival organizing in the US, as historian and archivist James O’Toole labeled it, triggered largely by the 1974 US Bishops’ Committee for the Bicentennial publication, “A Document on Ecclesiastical Archives.” Here, the US bishops called for a “nationwide effort to preserve and organize all existing records and papers that can be found in chancery offices, general and provincial houses of religious orders, and institutions of our country.”

Catholic diocesan archives in the US, O’Toole’s main focus, had origins dating back to the founding of the various dioceses, with registers of Confirmations, Ordinations, and other records related to the work of the diocesan administrators dating back to colonial times in some cases. While there were some efforts to organize diocesan archives in the 1930s and 1940s, such activity was inconsistent. Since the 1970s such organization has proceeded rapidly. As O’Toole notes, grant money from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) spurred organization of records and the professionalization of archivists in religious orders and dioceses across the US. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists (ACDA) further reflected and encouraged professionalization within the Catholic archival community. Catholic institutions across the country organized materials for the appropriate levels of users within and outside of those institutions. Between 1974 and 1997 the number of dioceses with archivists or diocesan historians jumped from 20 to 100. The call of the US bishops to organize archival materials had in large part been answered.

No sooner had the recognition that Catholic institutions needed to keep their records in order set in, however, than archivists began to realize, quite helplessly at first, that a transformation in the field of archives generated by the digital revolution was in full swing. This shift from analog to digital technologies had, of course, been afoot since the invention of the transistor in the late 1940s. And computer technologies were generating digital data in substantial quantities since the 1970s. As it turns out, one of O’Toole’s critiques of the evolution of diocesan archival practices in the late 1990s portended a substantial problem that would grow to monumental proportions. Noting that systematic records management practices prevented lamentable gaps in documentation of the historical record, he pointed out that diocesan archives programs did “a good job of caring for the largely paper-based records of the past,” but then asked, “What are they to do with the records of the present and future which exist only in electronic form?” His “What are they to do” captures the mystification of the times. How did an archivist properly...
archive e-mails and an increasing amount of data from schools and hospitals stored only on computers, when the digital format itself was so new and relatively unfamiliar? There was no plan to capture such records, and in many cases there still are no plans on par with the excellent paper records archival organizing practices that had developed over hundreds of years. As far as Catholic digital records went, O’Toole noted in 1998 that such records had “exploded around all of us in the last decade,” and that “attention to them is necessary if critical evidence of diocesan administration and broader Catholic social life are to be preserved for the future.”

More than fifteen years after O’Toole’s cheerful but critically qualified assessment, few archivists laboring in Catholic institutions would claim that his question as to what to do with electronic records can be answered in any comprehensive way. To be sure, as Ben Goldman noted in 2011, US archival repositories in general are nowhere near having the proper storage of born-digital records problem licked. As the size of the digital universe grows larger, ignored or improperly stored electronic materials continue to disappear. John Treanor, Vice Chancellor for Archives and Records at the Archdiocese of Chicago and leading advocate for comprehensive electronic records management programs in Catholic institutions, continues to beat the drum for the development of such programs. Treanor, who first recognized the problem of preserving e-records in the late-1990s, takes an “if you build it they will come” approach. Working within his own archdiocese, he and his staff began putting in place electronic records capture systems in the last decade, training relevant stakeholders to regularly transfer records, and developing systems to preserve records that might have been lost by now. Put into place relatively early, Treanor’s electronic records program created an infrastructure for digital records to exist. He has worked with archivists in the Atlanta and New Orleans Archdioceses, among many others, to put such electronic records management systems in place. Emilie Leumas, Director of Archives and Records at the Archdiocese of New Orleans, began putting a comprehensive electronic records policy in place in 2007, making her institution another pioneering one in this area. In Managing Diocesan Archives and Records, Treanor, Leumas, and Audrey Newcomer note simply that electronic records management programs are “no longer optional.”

Archivists have attempted a variety of unsatisfactory methods to preserve born-digital materials even as awareness of their historical and legal value increases. Storing unstructured data and electronic records on back-up tapes and hard drives is not a solution, as such material is neither properly managed nor preserved. And yet, electronic records are often involved in litigation and thus legally must be preserved. Finally, electronic records now constitute much of the current cultural and organizational memory of Catholic institutions. It is difficult to overstate the problem of non-preservation of these digital archival materials. We are endangering our consciousness as American Catholics with a lack of commitment to this problem. Recently one Catholic academic institution, for example, transitioned from compilation of hardcopy faculty activity reports to a digital format. The hardcopy records were preserved in the archives, but there were no programs for capture of those reports for the first year they were completed digitally. The digital records were later requested in a legal dispute, but they were not preserved and could thus not be accessed. The institution reactively put in a system of preserving the reports, but a year of the records were lost, apparently forever. Ideally, we do not want
legal requests to compel us to begin preserving our digital records. Surely it is time for the US bishops to issue another statement, this one on preserving electronic versions of our archives, forty years after the first publication helped trigger a flurry of fine organizational activity with respect to paper records in US Catholic archives.

One non-diocesan Catholic institution that is implementing an electronic records management program in a thoughtful way is Marquette University. One might use the words planning, collaboration and synergy to describe the successful start to their program. Amy Cooper Cary, Head of Special Collections and University Archives at Raynor Memorial Libraries, notes that she, administrators, and staff outlined the parameters of the Electronic Records Manager position very carefully. The program there “is ERM strictly as it applies to archives at this point—that is, determining materials with long term value that we want to save. This position does not apply to electronic records created through the registrar or similar entities—we don’t manage student records.” In emphasizing the Electronic Records Manager position as one rooted in the University Archives and focused on records of long term value, Cary notes that this “immediately differentiated it from the IT area, which tends to focus on workflow and technology.” She stressed that the position would “develop expertise in the ‘nuts and bolts’ aspects of ERM (ingest, access, disposition, destruction if necessary, and preservation) and would necessarily partner with the University Archivist to identify materials for acquisition.”

Hence, Cary skillfully sought to separate the Electronic Records Manager from the University Archivist (Michelle Sweetser) and the IT department, yet ensure that she, the new ERM, and IT collaborate with each other and with the rest of the university “in units” toward making the position work most effectively. She notes, “one thing that really helped was that the Dean of Libraries, Janice Wellburn, was able to effectively make our case for this position to the administration.” She “worked with the University Archivist to write a sound proposal, and the Dean was able to carry it forward. The establishment of this position in the libraries should be credited to the Dean and to the University Archivist as well. It was a team effort to clearly define the position, and ultimately it was the Dean who carried it forward.”

Katherine Blank was hired as Marquette’s new and first ERM in November 2013. Cary believes that “Teaming the University Archivist with the ERM allowed for both to benefit from the partnership—the ERM learns some of the basic work in the University Archives which then informs her work, and the University Archivist (who has cultivated deep knowledge of the organization and great contacts during her tenure so far) has the opportunity to collaborate on the path of developing a true electronic records program within the University Archives with the support of a colleague.” She believes “there’s synergy in pairing the positions!” For her part, Blank did indeed find herself learning of the University’s collections and conducting outreach to departments and colleagues across campus. Blank came to Marquette with an MLIS concentration in archival studies and a Master’s degree in History. She also served as a records manager previously, so she wasn’t completely new to the job. She finds most challenging the process of “planning how to preserve materials in various formats,” adding, “We have to figure out how to preserve material we receive on various physical media, the University’s website as well as websites for organizations affiliated with the university, e-mails, images from across the university, and other types of materials.” She recognizes that there is “no system that can do all of these things for us, so the challenge is to figure out creative, sustainable and affordable solutions.”

Marquette’s program presents a solid, thoughtful start by a Catholic academic institution to the electronic records management problem.

The management and preservation of born-digital records has, oddly enough, lagged behind efforts to digitize materials already existing in analog formats.

One might say that the idea of creating greater access to non-digital materials in Catholic archives has been emphasized at the expense of proper management of born-digital materials in emerging narratives of Catholic archives in the age of digitization. Several factors have caused this “putting of the cart ahead of the horse.” First, there is no consensus on best practices for electronic management systems for born-digital materials because these are relatively new systems of archival management. Older systems developed over hundreds of years of maintaining paper records. Additionally, as Treanor notes, the creation of electronic records management systems has been heavily influenced by those in the technology field who store information, rather than by information content managers. These two functions—storage and management—need to be teased out from each other and placed in their proper complementary relationship for archival staff in Catholic institutions to expertly design electronic records management systems for the twenty-first century. Marquette’s administrators recognize the distinctions. But such awareness tends to be exceptional. Even in the field of electronic records management itself, these two functions are often confused. Treanor, like Goldman surveying the archives field in general, points out that even as Catholic archival staff may be able to digitize the hard copy materials sitting on shelves, they are not spending enough time thinking about the massive amount of data being lost due to the lack of electronic records policies in their archives. Proper management of electronic records on the front end is certainly an imperative for the digital world if future researchers are going to be able to comprehend Catholicism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
As simple as it sounds, then, it bears noting that digitization of non-digital materials has proceeded much more rapidly in Catholic archives because the capturing of analog objects digitally is much more graspable by archivists than the capturing of digital objects via electronic records management tools. Hence digitization programs focused on creating greater access to existing archival materials has proceeded in a more forthright fashion than the creation of electronic records management programs. Additionally, of course, restrictions on public use of current and recent electronic records make them less attractive as digital objects for dissemination through the Internet.

If born-digital materials in today’s Catholic archival institutions have a long way to go before such materials are properly managed, so do programs involving digitization of non-digital materials for greater public access. A 2011 Survey of Digitized Rare Catholica among North American Catholic college, university, and seminary libraries conducted by Patricia Lawton, Marta Deyrup, and Martha Loesch revealed that 67% of such institutions have not yet digitized their Catholic resources. Most of the surveyed institutions lacked the resources necessary to embark on their own digitization programs. The major barriers to digitization were lack of money, lack of staff, and lack of time. Most of the surveyed institutions, moreover, did not have an institutional repository to hold digital materials, nor a digital specialist dedicated to digital projects.

And yet, the demand for such digital materials clearly exists. The Survey of Digitized Rare Catholica notes that among those institutions that do have digitized materials, 68% claim they are used by faculty, individuals outside the institution, undergraduates, and staff. Moreover, such institutions offered the surveyors lists of rare materials eligible for digitization, should the resources become available. The authors note that “despite the fact that many of the institutions possess viable, unique Catholic resources that would benefit the Catholic research community, most have not been digitized and may not be in the near future due to lack of funding, staffing, or the facilities to carry out digitization projects.”

One might be inclined to argue that if, indeed, important historical materials illuminative of American Catholic life are not made available online, researchers will simply continue to visit the physical repositories housing those materials. Timothy Meagher, a historian and archivist at The Catholic University of America, argues against following such logic. A scholar of Irish-American history, Meagher recently recounted a research tale wherein he reviewed another scholar’s cited sources in a study of Irish Americans. He noticed that the author repeatedly cited the Pittsburgh Catholic in a particular work and grew troubled that the heavy use of that particular newspaper may have been due to the fact that it was one of the few digitized Catholic newspapers available online. As Meagher notes, “If the importance of Catholics in American history is going to be recognized” in future generations, “we are going to have to digitize our materials. If you’re not on the web you’re invisible.” This goes for everyone — scholars, and historians who are more familiar with historical research included Meagher notes.

In addition to serving as a professor in Catholic University’s Department of History, Meagher directs the institution in which I serve as education archivist, the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, also based at The Catholic University of America. Our institution offers an example of the early formalization of archives in Catholic academic institutions. We began collecting unofficially when faculty left materials such as fossils or objects used for instruction to the university. By the 1930s faculty such as Monsignor Francis Haas, a social scientist intensely interested in labor issues, began gathering materials related to the history of American Catholics and labor. After the Second World War, historian John Tracy Ellis, a faculty member in the school’s Department of History and a tireless promoter of archiving Catholic records and manuscripts, became concerned that records related to the history of the American Catholic people were being lost. Ellis and several other faculty at CUA established the Department of Archives and Manuscripts (renamed the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives in 2002) in 1949 with the aim of serving as the institutional memory of the school and as a repository for materials related to the documentary heritage of the American Catholic people. As such, our institution has come to specialize in the collecting of records related to national Catholic institutions such as those of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) and the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), though we also carry the papers of significant twentieth-century Catholic thinkers, such as Monsignor John A. Ryan and Monsignor George Higgins. CUA began collecting archival materials in a formal way somewhat earlier than other academic institutions, but historian James Edwards of the University of Notre Dame also saw that such materials needed collecting early on, and began acquiring materials related to American Catholicism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His work helped make Notre Dame a major archive for American Catholicism. Though Marquette University did not establish its archival program until 1961, it too has a range of excellent collections illuminative of the American Catholic experience; many of these materials are available online.

Meagher’s interest in the digitization of Catholic archival materials extends back over a decade and is an extension of his broader interest in generating greater access to archival materials. As the director of the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, he and associate
archivist W. John Shepherd encouraged the use of digital technology as soon as it became feasible to do so. Our offices have worked with the University’s technological services staff on storage of electronic records and we do carry some born-digital records as well, though we, like so many Catholic academic institutional archives, are still in the process of developing a policy for intake of collections that are primarily digital.

In line with our mission to promote scholarly and public understanding of the records of the documentary and artifactual heritage of the American Catholic people, our staff has worked to create access to digitized collections since 2002. “Digitized collections” here means collections of digitally reproduced materials supported by basic descriptive metadata but no interpretive textual material as one would see, for example, in online exhibits or online educational sites. Since 2002 we have posted fifteen collections online. We select collections for digitization based on researcher interest and fragility of collection, though again, our collaborations are important in making collections available. One of the first collections selected for digitization was that of the Fenian Brotherhood, which is both in fragile condition and heavily used. This collection is one of our more popular online collections.

We also have a nearly complete run of the Catholic comic book, Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact, published by Pflaum from 1946 to 1972. Used for decades in parochial schools across the country, Treasure Chest saw more heavy use online than in our physical archive. The most accessed of our online collections, Treasure Chest presents an instance of digitization generating access and in turn generating demand. These collections, as well as others, have been made available through our participation in the Washington Research Library Consortium, a local partnership of libraries providing cost-effective access to shared information resources, services, and expertise. Our collaboration with local libraries allows, among other things, access to expertise and shared server space that make a variety of digitization projects economically reasonable for us.

As professional teaching historians in addition to archivists, both Meagher and I are interested in making primary sources in US Catholic history widely available to educators. In the late 1990s Meagher secured a grant from the Our Sunday Visitor Institute to create educational packets for Catholic school educators using materials from our archive. As one of the staff hired to create the packets, I worked to select documents and add supporting background text, chronologies and introductions to primary sources that had not yet been widely seen by teachers, and therefore required some contextualization before use in the classroom. Though we began creating these packets in 1997, by 2002 we realized that we could achieve wider dissemination if we posted them online. By 2006 we had created the American Catholic History Classroom, a free primary-source site featuring a range of materials related to the American Catholic experience. The site consists of hundreds of documents, photos and audio clips organized by topic and supported by a variety of teaching resources. Our sites focus on Catholics and labor, living wage issues,
industrialization, race and ethnicity, and Christian-Jewish relations, among other topics. Much of our archival material represents the national Catholic experience, so our educational sites reflect that aspect of US Catholic life. Our target group has been high school teachers and students, though we have users and contributors in the university community too.

Making these materials available now is extremely important for American Catholic education for many reasons, in addition to Meagher’s comment on digitization, “if it’s not on the web it doesn’t exist.” Throughout most of the twentieth century, most Catholic high schools used history textbooks created by Catholic publishers. These texts were careful to situate Catholic historical events in the broader scope of history. Social, cultural, educational, and demographic changes of the 1960s and 1970s rendered the Catholic history textbooks of years past outdated, yet Catholic publishers chose not to revise history texts in ways that would attract a changing Catholic educational community. Rather than replace the older texts with updated versions that continued to highlight the Catholic experience, the Catholic schools began adopting the American history texts used in secular schools. The result is that most Catholic high school students learn very little about Catholic history in the context of broader United States history. One way to address the lacunae is to introduce primary documents in Catholic history into the Catholic high school history classroom. The project strives to make such documents and other teaching materials available to the broader Catholic educational community, with the aim of making it easier to incorporate Catholic history into the broader national experience.

The American Catholic History Classroom is a collaborative project, and I would argue that for most Catholic archival institutions, substantial digitization projects would best be taken on collaboratively. Indeed, the Survey of Digitized Rare Catholica notes that as of 2011, 84% of the survey respondents were not collaborating with other colleges, universities and seminaries on digital Catholic projects, while 47% expressed some interest in such collaboration, and 32% were definitely interested.

We have collaborated with multiple institutions, Catholic and non-Catholic, to create our educational sites and our digital collection sites. Our sites are themed, so such collaborations are useful in the sense that a themed site is more likely to draw materials from multiple repositories to comprehensively cover its topic. For example, one of our sites, “Catholic Patriotism on Trial: The Oregon School Case” addresses the Oregon School Case of the 1920s, where voters attempted to abolish parochial schools in the state via the “Compulsory School Law” which would have forced children under 16 years old to attend public schools. The US Catholic bishops were heavily involved in contesting the law, but documents and images essential to illuminating the significance of its passage and nullification by the Supreme Court are held by the Portland Historical Society. Hence it was important to work with staff there on getting quality copies and copyright permissions for use on the site. Similarly, we worked with the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center for a website on Thomas Wyatt Turner and the Federated Colored Catholics for documents related to Turner, a prominent African American Catholic civil rights activist of the twentieth century. We are continuing our collaboration on these sites, and are currently working
with scholars to make our first site on women religious available. Another element of the collaboration is the use of the Omeka open source platform, which we adopted two years ago. The Omeka platform, developed at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, was developed specifically for the display of library, museum, and archives materials and has served our basic needs well.20

Other institutions are embarking on such collaborative projects more frequently in just the past few years. Some of these projects are taking place at opportune moments and with considerable and warranted urgency. Women’s religious orders, for example, staffed thousands of schools, health care institutions, orphanages, and charitable organizations throughout US history. Thirty-two thousand women entered religious life between 1958 and 1962, but the numbers of women leaving religious life tripled between 1965 and 1970, and have never since reached their post-World War II era peak. Accompanying this decline is the consolidation of their houses, and the potential loss of records as orders trim down or close their archives altogether.21 Avila University in Kansas City, Missouri, however, under the leadership of Carol Coburn, Professor of American Religious Studies and Women’s History and library staff there, have undertaken to gather archival material and publications of the school’s founding order, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondolet. But the school is also committed to preserving records of other religious orders as well, with future plans to digitize some of those materials. 22

Conclusions: Moving Forward

Several institutions, such as the Archdiocese of Chicago Archives under the leadership of John Treanor; the Archdiocese of New Orleans under the direction of Emilie Leumas; and Marquette University Libraries under Janice Wellburn, Amy Cooper Cary, and Katherine Blank, have and are addressing the problem of electronic records management directly. Hopefully, more Catholic archival institutions will follow their lead and embrace the brave new world of digital archivy. Such projects as the Catholic Newspapers Program, managed by Lawton and Younger, is
made possible by a collaboration of librarians, scholars, and archivists across North America. The collaboration and the work of individuals across the country is reminiscent of the convergence of archivists in the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists in 1982. Having been involved in such collaborations for more than a decade, the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives plans to continue its leadership and progress in this area. Shepherd, who has served as our primary collection processor for more than two decades, has also been involved closely with digitization activities here for the past decade. He has focused especially on working to supervise and/or create collection guides or online finding aids for all of our online collections. This program envisions digitization of unique archival materials by whatever means available and necessary (in-house scanners, borrowed equipment, collaborating with other institutions, or vendor services) to scan, store, and make available online as many records and collections as possible.

Continued cooperation among archivists in a range of projects involving both management of digital records and digitization projects will ensure that Catholic archival materials survive the brave new digital age of the twenty-first century.

Dr. Maria Mazzenga is education archivist at the American The Catholic History Research Center and University Archives at Catholic University of America, where she manages educational programs related to the American Catholic experience. In addition to preparing archives-based educational presentations aimed at both the University community and the general public, she manages the American Catholic History Classroom, a website featuring more than 150 primary documents and educational materials on topics such as Catholics and race, education, industrialization, politics, and Catholic-Jewish relations. In addition to her archival work, Mazzenga also teaches US History and Library Science, and serves as assistant director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at Catholic University.

Endnotes
2 Ibid.
3 O’Toole, “Diocesan Archives,” 12.
6 Ibid.
7 Personal e-mail communication with Amy Cooper Cary, May 6, 2014.
8 Personal e-mail communication with Amy Cooper Cary, May 7, 2014.
9 Personal e-mail communication with Katherine Blank, May 6, 2014.
10 On the history of the development of archival practices, see James M. O’Toole and Richard J. Cox, Understanding Archives and Manuscripts (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), esp. chapter 2; Goldman, “Bringing the Gap,” 13. Treanor’s remarks on the state of electronic records management can be heard on video of the session “What to Digitize? How to Digitize?” at the Catholic Archives in the Digital Age Conference, October 9, 2013, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. Available on youtube.com: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NP0gQBD8MtI=843.
14 Meagher has been advocating digitization of Catholic archival materials since 2002; See, “Crossing the Digital Divide, Alone and Together.” His more recent remarks on the importance of digitization of Catholic materials can be heard on video of the session “What to Digitize? How to Digitize?” at the Catholic Archives in the Digital Age Conference, October 9, 2013, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. Available on youtube.com: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NP0gQBD8MtI=843.
18 Mazzenga, “The American Catholic History Classroom Project”; “Toward More Catholic History in Our Schools.”