

Native American Boarding Schools and Religious Archives: A Brief Resource Guide

In response to requests from the CMSM and LCWR for guidance on how they might address the issue of Native American Boarding Schools, particularly their members' historical involvement as reflected in their archival collections, the ACWR and Catholic Native Boarding School Accountability and Healing Project are recommending this resource guide for your consideration:

THE ROLE OF ARCHIVES IN TRUTH AND HEALING

In the 19th and 20th centuries, many Catholic dioceses and religious communities cooperated with the United States government's Indian Boarding School Policy by operating and staffing dozens of Native American boarding schools across the country. While religious involvement in the schools often came from good intentions, the impact of the policy has been widely recognized as one of cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma. As part of their active process of healing, Native communities seek access to information about the schools attended by their relatives, some of which can be found in the archival holdings of religious communities and dioceses.

In 2021, the US Department of the Interior announced an investigation into the history of these schools and the roles played by government and other entities in their functioning. The USCCB has urged diocesan bishops to cooperate with the investigation and, if they haven't already, to start building relationships with their local tribal nations. Religious institutions would do well to search their own archives for information on boarding schools, not only to be able to cooperate with the government, but also to proactively contribute to a much-needed process of truth and healing in our Church and nation.

DATA SOVEREIGNTY

A robust discussion presently exists over rights to data and access to information: *data sovereignty* is a concept revolving around the legal and ethical questions of information ownership. Does the data belong to the Native community from which data was collected, or the institute who collected it? In our quest for healing, religious institutions might consider how they can best serve as vehicles for the just redistribution and appropriate sharing of data. More information about data sovereignty may be found here:

<https://nativeland.info/about/data-sovereignty/>



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USEFUL LINKS

Archivists for
Congregations of
Women Religious

www.archivistsacwr.org

The Role of Archives in
Truth and Healing
Webinar Series

[archivistsacwr.org/
truthandhealing](http://archivistsacwr.org/truthandhealing)

Association of Catholic
Diocesan Archivists
(ACDA)

diocesanarchivists.org

"Managing Diocesan
Archives and Records: A
Guide for Bishops,
Chancellors, and
Archivists," a
publication of the ACDA

[diocesanarchivists.org/?
page_id=472](http://diocesanarchivists.org/?page_id=472)

USCCB Subcommittee
on Native American
Affairs

[www.usccb.org/
committees/native-
american-affairs](http://www.usccb.org/committees/native-american-affairs)

"Bishops encourage
cooperation to address
church's past in tribal
schools," *NCR* article

[www.ncronline.org/
news/justice/bishops-
encourage-cooperation-
address-churchs-past-
tribal-schools](http://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/bishops-encourage-cooperation-address-churchs-past-tribal-schools)

The National Native
American Boarding
School Healing Coalition
2020 List of Schools
Found by State

[boardingschoolhealing.o
rg/education/resources/](http://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/resources/)

WHERE TO BEGIN: FIRST STEPS

Determine whether your community holds archives related to your operation of or other involvement with Native American boarding schools. Your archivist should be able to help you with this. Key records to look for are annual or monthly mission reports, government contracts, house annals, attendance ledgers, faculty & student lists, correspondence with the chancery or civil or Native officials.

Begin to organize basic facts about the school(s) with which you were involved: *How long was this school open? How many students attended this school across its existence? What kinds of records do you hold? What is the status of those records? Where are they?*

Determine what kind of records your community is unwilling to share (e.g., personnel records). Be clear about why not. The goal is to be as transparent as possible while respecting both the community and the tribal nations' privacy needs.

As early in the process as possible, reach out to the tribal nation(s) impacted by the school(s) with which your community was involved to build relationships and to determine proper protocols.

Most tribal nations have a Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) responsible for the archival records for their communities and may serve as the initial point of contact for non-Native agencies. If there is no THPO, contact the tribal government. Ask who would be the best person to work with. Let them know that your community has records regarding a boarding school that members of their community attended, and that you

want to make sure these records can eventually be accessed by families. Commit to involving them in each step of the process.

Create a "finding aid" - an inventory or catalog - of the relevant records. Depending on the scope of your collection, a brief summary of the collection as a whole, or summaries of each file folder, would be helpful. (Contact ACWR for guidance on how to do this.)

Work with the Native community to determine what records can and should be shared, the manner by which they are shared (such as in an online format or in person), what records are sensitive and should be restricted, what cultural protocols should be kept in mind, and the interpretive lens through which records can be read.

Work with the tribal nation(s) involved to establish a process for determining wider access to records. Boarding school records are not only about you and your community; they are very much about Indigenous people and their history. It is important to respect their right to determine who gets to research and share their story. Religious communities should work with tribal nations to create bodies of approval that determine research access. Many tribal nations will already have established Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) for this purpose.

—*This guidance summarizes insights from Maka Black Elk, Executive Director for Truth and Healing at the Jesuit Red Cloud Indian School and board member of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS).*

LEADERSHIP & ARCHIVAL RELATIONS

1 *Forge a stronger relationship between the archives department & leadership. In religious communities, as decisions are discussed about the future of the congregation & its patrimony, archivists and leaders should make a concerted effort to work together to preserve the community's records.*

Open the channels of communication. Put "Archives" on your monthly meeting agenda. Archivists, consider how you might better support leadership & the ongoing initiatives of the community or diocese. Leaders, including the archivist in a conversation may open the doors to new ideas and projects.

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3 *Embrace external interest in your community or diocesan history and archives. Scholars, genealogists, constituents, former and ongoing ministries, Catholics, and many others have interests in your collections. Catholic orders and dioceses have often tended to the needs of marginalized groups; the history and experiences of many underrepresented populations are present in religious archives. Catholic history is social history, religious history, regional history, and the Church's history!*

Archives is a specialized field that entails professional preparation and ongoing education. Consider supporting your archivists participation in professional organizations like the Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious (ACWR) and the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists (ACDA), and their conferences. Show an interest in the information they bring back from those meetings.

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By preserving and sharing the stories of Catholics past and present, archivists are your partners in ministry and help ensure the long-term preservation of your community's charism and diocese's legacy. Consider the archivist a vital part of your strategic planning team.



MEDIA RELATIONS

If your institute has records pertaining to its past or current involvement in Native American Boarding Schools, having a communications policy in place will be helpful. Again, consultation with the archivist will be useful. How will your communications director or your leadership team reply to inquiries? Will you refer the reporter to the archive? Your response may be dependent upon the knowledge you have about your archival holdings.

If you know that the archive has material that bears upon a reporter's question, you may be in a better position to craft a reply. Never lie! If you don't know, say so and offer to call the reporter back with additional information. Also, don't be afraid to ask why the reporter is asking. Bear in mind, you can't control every story! That doesn't mean you should refuse to talk about your community or diocese's history.

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RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES AND CANON LAW

Canonically, diocesan archives have very broad rules that also apply to “general and provincial archives” of religious institutes of men and women. Documents concerning the diocese or parish—or religious institute—must be kept “with the greatest of care”: established in a safe location, filed in an orderly fashion, and locked. Inventories or catalogs called “finding aids” are to be made of the documents, with short synopses or summaries of the files.

The canonical regulations for curial archives refer to three types of archives—those for general documents concerning spiritual and temporal affairs; secret [restricted] archives; and historical archives. Practical considerations and current standards for effective records management play a role in determining access and organization strategies. Canon law provides useful guidance for how records can be arranged and accessed.

BALANCING ACCESS AND CONFIDENTIALITY

While confidentiality applies to many items in the archives of religious institutes, which are private, the purpose of most records kept there is to bring the story of the past exercise of the charism into the light of the present, whether the resulting historical narrative is favorable or not. There may also be situations where a person seeks access to archival material to which they have a right. Canon law provides that *persons have the right to receive, personally or by proxy, an authentic written or photostatic copy of documents which are of their nature public, and which concern their own personal status* (c. 487, §2). Examples of such documents include sacramental records, appointments to ecclesiastical offices, dispensations, etc. Religious institutes should include in their policies which records are considered “by their nature public” and those that “pertain to personal status.”

In determining whether an institute’s record should be considered confidential (not accessible to the public), embargoed for a set period, or “open access” (accessible to the public without restriction), an **archives access policy** should be developed.

Some institutes have an open access policy with exceptions. In many institutes, the personnel files of members of the institute are often seen as privileged and not open for research. The archivist, then, is frequently in the position of gatekeeper between the institute—with its legitimate privacy concerns—and the interests of a researcher.

With respect to granting researchers access to archival files containing material on Native American boarding schools, consultation with both the institute’s archivist and with the tribal nations involved is essential. In this case, the institute’s archives access policy should be developed in collaboration with the relevant tribal nation(s).