Save Our Catholic History!

By Rev. Augustine J. Curley, O.S.B.

If you have read any books or articles on New Jersey Catholic history, whether histories of the various dioceses, histories of institutions, or biographies of New Jersey Catholic figures, you probably realize how much these studies depend on the use of primary sources. Many of us on the New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission have heard horror stories of significant records being stored in boiler rooms or insect-infested basements. We would like to identify records—related to Catholic parishes, institutions, or individuals—that are not being stored properly, or that need restoration.

What can you do to help? The first step would be to see that all records are put in a place where they are out of danger from dampness, insect infestation, or the like. The next step would be to make a list of the records, making note of those needing particular attention because of their condition. Do not attempt to repair them yourself. Often commonly used repair methods do more harm than good. Send a copy of this list to the Commission. We can help you assess what needs to be done, help find a conservator (if major restoration is called for), and help you set up a proper space for the storage of these records.

This should not be limited to what would be considered the “important” records, such as sacramental records or parish census records, but includes all other types of records that would help to flesh out the story of the Catholic Church in New Jersey, not only the institutional Church, but the lives of ordinary—and sometimes not so ordinary—Catholics who were resident in the Garden State. Sick call registers can have telling entries that give a flavor of the Church at a particular period in history. (One register we know of includes an entry by a young priest who had given the last rites to a man who had died. He was careful to note that the man died of a heart attack “while in the process of eating a hot dog on Friday.”) Perhaps the pastor or the principal of the school kept a diary. There might be significant correspondence between parishioners and pastor about a certain controversy in the parish.

Perhaps your parish or institution can set up an archives and history committee, to be responsible for the safekeeping of the records and for gathering other records that might be in private hands. Many families have old parish reports or brochures from parish events they might be willing to contribute to a parish or institutional archives.

If you would like to have someone from the Commission help you to assess your records, and make suggestions about the steps you should take, please contact us, and we will have someone contact you to set up an appointment.

Contact the Executive Director, Alan Delozier, by e-mail at Alan.Delozier@shu.edu, and he will arrange to have one of the members of the Commission work with you.