Partners With Passion for the Archives

Nadia Nasr
Hello everyone, and thank you for the opportunity to be here. My name is Nadia Nasr, and I’m the Head of Archives & Special Collections at Santa Clara University. As you already know, your archives are now at their new home, in our vault on the lower level of the Library/Learning Commons, as of this past August, 2019. I’m so pleased to be here with you today, joining you in the celebration of your legacy, past, present, and future.

Presented on November 7, 2019 to the Sisters of the Holy Family for at their event, Celebrating Our Legacy: Past, Present, and Future, held at the conference center of the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose in Fremont, California.
Speaking of the past, by show of hands, how many of you are familiar with the recently circulated video “300 Years of Sister History”? Unless there is time and interest later this afternoon, I’m not going to replay it now, but I will recap a few of the highlights that speak to my presentation today.

As you may recall, this was the first in a 5 part series of videos entitled Beyond the Habit, co-produced by America Media and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate to tell the stories of women religious in the United States. As the narrator, the late journalist Cokie Roberts describes these pioneering women as forces of nature; savvy business women and creative problem solvers who shared their faith in often daunting circumstances while serving on the margins of American society. Although many of these pioneering women have gone on to their reward in Heaven, their stories remain in the congregational archives of women religious.
Although their stories endure in the archives, many of these archives are at risk of being lost. In “300 Years of Sister History” we learned that in 1965 there were approximately 180,000 women religious; today, there are less than 50,000 and, as congregations prepare for closure, the stories contained in the archives of those closing congregations are at risk of going untold or being permanently lost. This is particularly the case for congregations like the Sisters of the Holy Family, which doesn’t have another province of their order, community with the same heritage, or institution they’ve founded with which to merge their collections. Until almost exactly two years ago, when I first met with Sr. Elaine, Sr. Michaela, and Patty McCloy on November 20, 2017, we would have counted your archives among those at risk of being permanently lost. On that day two years ago we began the conversations that brought me here today to provide you with an update on our archives-centered partnership.
Why is this partnership so important?

I don’t wish to presume that I could articulate all the reasons why it matters to you that the Sisters of the Holy Family Archives have a home at SCU; however, in relation to the theme of this afternoon, celebrating your legacy, I would like to share with you why this project matters so much to me and to the University.
For almost 150 years the Sisters have been caring for the poor and needy, especially families, in service to God. Your archives tell your stories; they tell the stories of your wise, visionary, and fearless founders who recognized the needs of families and children in post-Gold Rush San Francisco; the stories of sisters who answered God’s call to go to Alaska, Hawai’i, Nevada, and Texas, often unsure of what they would do or where they would live. We believe these stories matter.
Among many ministries, the Sisters of the Holy Family has cared for and served the mentally and developmentally disabled, daring to recognize their ability to perceive God’s love when others dismissed that possibility. You have ministered to numerous immigrant, minority, or marginalized populations, including the Khmhu people, Mexican Americans, and native Hawaiians, to name a few, making connections and building community. Your archives tell the stories not only of the many Sisters who worked with these groups but also the stories of numerous marginalized and underrepresented communities whose stories typically haven’t made it into the archival record. We believe these stories matter.
As stated in “300 Years of Sister History,” since the first Ursilines arrived in New Orleans in 1727, women religious have played an integral role in building the Catholic Church in America. Despite their contributions, both to the Church and to society at large, women have traditionally been overlooked in the archival record, or figured only in the periphery at best; even more overlooked are the voices of minorities and marginalized communities. Joined with the stories of other congregations, the your archives tell the stories of the hundreds of thousands of women who joined religious institutes and cared for multitudes in service to God. We believe these stories matter.

All of these stories matter, and they’re the kinds of stories that live in your archives. We preserve them not only because we realize they are important, but also because we are conscious of the fact that one day the people (including me) who know the stories of the Sisters of the Holy Family and the people they served will be gone. But the Sisters of the Holy Family Archives will endure, and SCU is committed to preserving and telling the stories of your community and thousands of other women who have educated, advocated, innovated, healed, and evangelized in service to others. We are honored to be entrusted with stewarding such an
important legacy. We steward this legacy not only to celebrate and remember, but also to contribute to something bigger than ourselves.
Historically, little has been written about the work of women religious in the United States or, worse, bishops often took credit for what anonymous sisters had done. The history of women religious has not been respected as a topic of research, and I imagine that has contributed significantly to why my own earliest impressions of nuns are based on the Disney variety of Maria and her mother superior in The Sound of Music, or Sister Bertrille in the sitcom The Flying Nun. In recent decades, since the formation in 1988 of the Conference on the History of Women Religious, a collaboration between the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Cushwa Center at the University of Notre Dame, scholars and archivists from the fields of history, religious studies, women’s studies, and sociology have been working to discover and preserve the historical record of vowed women from the middle ages to the present, and to integrate their stories into the larger narratives of their times and places. Many of these scholars use collections like the Sisters of the Holy Family Archives in order to do this research.
At the University, among our own institutional records, we seek to balance our male-centric archival collections: Jesuits have long taught at and administered Santa Clara University since its founding in 1851; women didn’t officially matriculate as students until 1961; and although women religious serve on faculty, their work is largely absent from our archival record. With this in mind, and conscious of broader efforts to increase the visibility of the work of sisters, we have initiated a new collecting focus at Santa Clara University. Your archives now form part of a core group of collections centered on women in theology, including women religious and lay women in the church. We debuted our flagship collection, the professional papers of Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., with a spring exhibition that featured at the opening reception of the 2016 Conference on the History of Women Religious. In 2018, we executed a gift agreement that designates SCU as the future home of the archives of the Sky-Arch Hermitage, the St. Albans, ME, home of a canonical hermitess since 1994. Shortly thereafter we received the publications of the Catholic Women’s Network, a Bay Area organization founded in 1988 by Graduate Program in Pastoral Ministries alumna Arlene Goetze to support women’s spirituality and personal growth. These collections, in concert with your archives, reflect the many facets of women’s spirituality and contributions to the Church in
the Bay Area and beyond. We have great respect for the history of women religious and through our collaborative efforts we seek to discover and preserve the historical record of vowed and lay women in Western America, and to integrate their stories into the larger narratives of the history and evolution of the Bay Area, California, and the West.
What have we done so far with the Sisters of the Holy Family Archives?
Earlier this year, your archives traveled nearly 3,000 miles for a 7-month sojourn in Rockville, Maryland.
We partnered with History Associates who dedicated two full-time staff and one intern from the library school at the University of Maryland College Park to prepare your archives for use by researchers. They transferred materials into acid-free folders and painstakingly labeled each one, in pencil, with its contents. They refiled material that got separated from their original locations. They put photographs into individual polyester sleeves to protect them from the fingerprints of future researchers. And at the end of all of this they prepared six inventories documenting the over 300 boxes that consist of the Sisters of the Holy Family Archives. And then they painstakingly labeled each of the 300 boxes before shipping them back to SCU where we store the Archives in our temperature and humidity controlled vault.
Now that your archives have come home to SCU our work is only just beginning. With the physical collections came over 50,000 images that we will be working to make available online. While we know the collections are here, we need to reach out to our campus community to increase awareness of the archives and their availability for research. We have plans to actively use the archives.
How will we use these collections?
Each academic year we collaborate with faculty to teach approximately 45 class sessions with an average of 700 students who are using our archival and special collections materials. We anticipate use of your archives and our other collections centered on women in theology and the Church by students and researchers from a variety of academic disciplines, including religious studies, women’s and gender studies, education, history, and the social sciences, to name just a few. We will be looking for ways to collaborate with SCU’s Graduate Program in Pastoral Ministries, whose students serve in parishes, education, diocesan offices and non-profits in a variety of roles, including as catechists (especially those directing programs for children), directors of religious education, retreat leaders, hospital chaplains, and students preparing for doctoral work.
Looking ahead a few years, in 2022 you will be celebrating the 150th anniversary of your founding. That summer we envision mounting an exhibition in our gallery that celebrates your legacy of caring and at which time we anticipate more formally announcing a program statement in support of archival collaborations with women religious congregations in the West. We’re not yet certain if we should call this partnership a joint archives, a research center, both, or something else entirely. We are also looking beyond acquiring other collections toward a more expansive definition of a collaborative archives program that offers a variety of services made possible through the Sisters of the Holy Family endowment. These services could include archives management consultations; advice on conserving and preserving materials; grants for archival supplies; digitization services or digital collections hosting; creating a web platform that centralizes collection information for researchers in one interface; or some other need we’ve not yet anticipated.
We recognize we will need the help of a person or persons who know the collections and the stories they contain, and have extended an invitation to Sr. Michaela not only to continue her research in the archives but also to hold office hours. Through office hours she will be able to engage in 1:1 interactions with researchers and we hope to benefit from her knowledge by facilitating those interactions. You’re welcome to come do your own research, or visit the collections, as well! And in about a year or so, when we begin gearing up for the 150th anniversary exhibition, we will seek your input: What stories do we most need to tell? What is the best way to commemorate you and honor your legacy? How do we demonstrate good stewardship of the resources you have put at our disposal for the benefit of the Sisters of the Holy Family and similar women religious congregations? These are your stories; we are the custodians of your stories.
I’m not 100% certain what the future will hold but I am inspired the following passage from Sr. Elaine’s 1995 Eucharistic Liturgy, included in your 125th anniversary book, *A Legacy of Caring*. I have taken some license to make a few modifications to fit my presentation, but overall stayed true to her original words.
[We] treasure [your] history. It inspires [us], but I believe we are being called to walk into the terror of new [partnerships and collaborations] and all that it will cost us. We are called to begin writing something new [...]. It can’t be done by one, a small group or a leadership team, so [these] words [about partnership] are reassuring.

‘A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up because your partner is depending on you.’

I am more convinced than ever that we have [and will continue to have] what we need to move into the future. The gifts are present [and we recognize and affirm them].

May we be partners filled with passion for the [archives], partners that are flexible, and partners filled with the excitement of the opportunities we have before us.
I am so grateful to you, the members of the Sisters of the Holy Family congregation, for your tremendous show of faith in A&SC and in Santa Clara University. I appreciate your willingness to partner with us. I thank you for welcoming me into your community, and for entrusting SCU with your legacy. We will keep your stories alive.
Questions?

Sources consulted:


