



VATICAN - "STONES, SOUNDS, COLOURS OF THE HOUSE OF GOD: Ecclesiastical Archives (1) Bishop Mauro Piacenza

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - To use an image, in my opinion appropriate, an ecclesiastical archive can be compared to a family photograph album. It is an album which speaks of our history and although it refers to the past it speaks about us. It is rather a complex album, difficult to read and therefore needs people who have the key. The album is somewhat fragile, it needs care and must be safeguarded with love. Ecclesiastical archives represent in fact the memory of a Particular Church and they are a collection of material which is usually unique. These documents narrate the joys and woes of the individual ecclesiastical institutions and Christian communities.

Although the archives are specifically for the «care of souls», the actual content generally gives an eloquent glimpse of civil life. Consequently ecclesiastical archives represent a cultural treasure of primary value for both the Christian community and the civil community, who can find therein important pages of history which usually involve the larger part of the local people.

Archivistic documentation, a cultural treasure: To define the concept of the cultural heritage in the «mens» of the Church, we should explain in what it consists: «first of all the patrimony of painting, sculpture, architecture, mosaics and music, put at the service of the mission of the Church. To these we should then add the wealth of books contained in ecclesiastical libraries and the historical documents preserved in the archives of the ecclesial communities. Finally, the concept includes literary, theatrical and cinematographic works produced by the mass media» (John Paul II, speech to Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, 12 October 1995).

Then it is necessary to clarify its finality, it is :«destined for the promotion of man and in the ecclesial context assume special significance since ordered to evangelisation, worship and charity» (John Paul II, message to participants at 2nd Plenary of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, 25 September 1997). In particular «archives, especially ecclesiastical archives, preserve not only traces of human events, they also lead to meditation on the work of divine Providence in history, so that documents they contain become the visible memory of evangelisation and an authentic pastoral instrument» (ibid.).

This perspective was articulated also in a circular letter issued by the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church on «The Pastoral Function of Ecclesiastical Archives» [FPAC] 2 February 1997. The Letter addressed to diocesan Ordinaries of the whole world, underlined the ecclesial importance of handing on documentary heritage; it outlined elements for a project of management encouraging relations of collaboration with civil bodies; it underlined the need to preserve the papers of memory; the importance of valorising documentary heritage for the historical culture and for the mission of the Church.

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