1. The Bundeskonferenz (National Conference) on Church Archives in Germany

“Archives are ‘places of the memory of the Christian community’”; so states the letter of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church of 2 February 1997.\(^1\) This programmatic reference to the fundamental Roman document on the nature of Church archives initiates the preamble to the current bylaws of the Bundeskonferenz der kirchlichen Archive in Deutschland (National Conference of Church Archives in Germany; hereafter Bundeskonferenz). The Bundeskonferenz is the umbrella organization for all Catholic archives in Germany.\(^2\) It has existed in its current form since 1983 and dates back to the “Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Bistumsarchive” (Working Group of Diocesan Archives) first founded in 1953.

The Bundeskonferenz’s assignment is to deal, in subsidiary form, with fundamental archival and practical questions, and thereby provide expert assistance to the
diocesan bishops in preserving and administering their written records in accordance with legal requirements. The archives of the (arch)dioceses have been organized into the Bundeskonferenz at a supra-regional level and, at the regional level (e.g. corresponding to Church provinces), into provincial conferences. Both conferences serve the goal of a comprehensive mutual exchange of information and coordination in all matters pertaining to Church archives and the registration of records (including the administration of current written records). They also advise the religious orders, Catholic associations, and the supra-diocesan institutions on all related questions. In addition, the Bundeskonferenz conducts initial and continuing training for employees of the Church archives and registries. Working within the framework of Church bylaws on archives and registries, the Bundeskonferenz prepares drafts of ordinances on the preservation and administration of Church archives and registries in Germany for the German Bishops’ Conference.

The Bundeskonferenz consists of 27 diocesan archivists, or their representatives, and a chairperson whom they elect. Advisory members include three representatives of the episcopal ordinariates’ or general vicariates’ registries, two participants from the Working Group of the Religious Orders’ Archives (AGOA), and a representative of the Archive of Catholic Associations and Supra-Diocesan Institutions (AGAUE). There are around 150 members in the AGOA and 50 in the AGAUE, including the Caritas association archives, the archives of the “Misereor” and “Adveniat” relief agencies, and other institutions. The Bundeskonferenz convenes once a year in revolving locations. In addition, provincial conferences involving the appropriate diocesan archives are held annually in each of the seven German Church provinces.

2. Legal Foundations

The legal foundation for Church archival efforts in Germany are the texts drafted by the Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference prepared and published on 31 July 1998 in the form of a so-called working aid (Arbeitshilfe, Nr. 142). This includes the bylaws of the Codex iuris canonici (CIC) on Church archive work, the letter from the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church on “The Pastoral

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5 Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 41-43.
Function of Church Archives” of 2 February 1997\(^6\), the “Directive on the Safeguarding and Use of the Archives of the Catholic Church,”\(^7\) as well as several supplementary regulations. On the basis of a 1988 decision by the Bishops’ Conference, this “Church Archive Directive” (Kirchliche Archivordnung, KAO) was implemented by every diocesan bishop in the course of the years 1989-1990. It also applies to the archives of those religious orders and Church associations that are institutes of diocesan right. For those orders governed by papal right, there is a separate version that was adopted by the German Religious Superiors’ Conference (Deutsche Ordensoberenkonferenz, DOK). In the meantime, a new version of the KAO is being prepared. The Church in Germany thereby achieved a unified archival law even before the 1997 Roman circular made it a requirement to do so (2.4).

3. Current Challenges

The Church archives in Germany are by no means static institutions but are subject to the ongoing changes in human and societal circumstances.\(^8\) If there was ever a time when they were “islands of the blessed” in the stream of permanent structural change, that is certainly no longer the case today. Of course, archiving sources of information and making them available for use continue to be traditional core archival services. Yet the most recent years, in particular, have thrown up new challenges for German church archives and archivists.\(^9\) It is these challenges that I would now like to examine, keeping my remarks the necessarily brief and always with a view to the directives in the circular letter “The Pastoral Functions of Church Archives.”

3.1. Professionalization and Cooperation

The “employment of qualified personnel” specified by the circular (2.5)\(^10\) is an indispensable requirement of contemporary times if one intends to guarantee that the

\(^6\) Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 9-37.
\(^7\) Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 47-52. – Cf. Amtsblatt für das Erzbistum München und Freising Nr. 6, 13.2.1989, p. 126-130.
\(^9\) Pfister, Neue Aufgaben kirchlicher Archive, p. 709-723. – Pfister, Der Einsatz externer und temporärer Kräfte in einem Dözesanarchiv am Beispiel des Archivs des Erzbistums München und Freising, p. 69-84.
\(^10\) Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 26-27.
activities of church archives accord with generally accepted standards of the archival profession. In this regard, much has occurred in Germany in recent years: of the 27 diocesan archives, 21 are now directed by qualified staff who have received several years of state-directed training as archivists. Paired with the increasing shortage of priests, this development has resulted in only one of the diocesan archives still being run by a priest, with two led by professionally qualified deacons, and the remainder by lay specialists, five of whom are women.

Guaranteeing a high professional standard requires close cooperation not only with state archives -- as called for by the Roman circular (2.3)\textsuperscript{11} -- but also collaboration across the boundaries of all archive sectors, which in Germany naturally means ecumenical cooperation with the Protestant church archives. That includes participation in general archival associations. The Association of German Archivists (Verein Deutscher Archivarinnen und Archivare), for example, includes a separate group for “Church archives.”\textsuperscript{12} With 180 members, it is the third largest occupational group within the association and drafts agenda items of its own for the annual German Archive Congress (Deutscher Archivtag). All of this also serves the aim of attracting the appropriate public recognition for the work of church archives.

3.2. Enhancing Usefulness Internally and Externally

Today, archives have to act as “market-oriented” service institutions that meet the needs of the Church administration, scholars, and the public, orient their work to the needs and desires of potential users, and make the most attractive offers possible.\textsuperscript{13} Church archives have to meet a diverse set of expectations: from the bishop and the cathedral chapter, administrative agencies, the media, education and cultural institutions, and researchers.

First, the demands from within the Church’s offices: an increasingly central task for the diocesan archives in this context is pre-archival work, which functions as a bridge between ongoing administrative efforts and the archive. The administration of written records -- even in the electronic form of the “document management system,” which

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[11]{Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 23-24.}
\footnotetext[12]{http://www.vda.archiv.net/fachgruppen/fachgruppe-3-kirchliche-archive.html (28.11.2013).}
\footnotetext[13]{Pfister, Neue Aufgaben kirchlicher Archive, p. 709-723. – Pfister, Der Einsatz externer und temporärer Kräfte in einem Diözesanarchiv am Beispiel des Archivs des Erzbistums München und Freising, p. 69-84.}
\end{footnotes}
has now been adopted in most German ordinariates -- may not be effected without the participation of the archivists. This includes regulations governing the progression of correspondence (from its arrival in the mail to the point when it is made available to the archive), the development of filing plans, as well as the conception of electronic processing systems. The guideline for this process is ensuring the understandability of Church administrative activity. In a number of German dioceses, the ongoing administration of correspondence and the archive are under common management. The Roman circular letter also takes into account the entirety of record administration, discussing not only the historical archive but also the so-called archive for current affairs (2.2).

Beyond this, the outwardly oriented activities of the archivist -- public relations, historical education, evaluative efforts -- are also indispensable components of church archive work. The Roman circular discusses this subject matter under the headings “cultural formation” (4.4) and “promotion of historical research” (4.5). Today, it is a self-evident task for archival collections not only to be maintained in an organized fashion but also presented to an interested public in order to educate in the use of archival materials. Historical education efforts in archives -- also known in German as Archivpädagogik -- must become more diverse and embrace new forms of communication. One example is archive tours aimed at entirely different kinds of groups. Introducing school pupils to archival materials can occur through visits by

14 Pfister, Neue Aufgaben kirchlicher Archive, p. 709-723. – Pfister, Der Einsatz externer und temporärer Kräfte in einem Diözesanarchiv am Beispiel des Archivs des Erzbistums München und Freising, p. 69-84.
15 Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 22-23.
17 Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 34-35.
archivists to schools and, even better, through instruction that takes place in the archives themselves and utilizes original archival materials. University students and instructors can be engaged in the same way. “Instructive exhibitions of documents” address a broad public, which thereby can come into contact with original archival materials, often for the first time. An excellent opportunity for such “initial contacts” is the Day of the Archives, which has taken place regularly since 2001 and in which numerous church archives participate. Finally, the Internet offers wholly new possibilities to publicize the offerings of church archives without any constraints of time or space.

In regard to archival publications, in my view the aim should not be exhaustive investigation of a given collection but rather to identify research opportunities through case studies that serve as examples and to stimulate further scholarship by putting out editions of foundational texts. Participation in scholarly conferences serves the same end.

Such public relations efforts can also boost the value of the Church archive in the eyes of diocesan decision-makers and thereby have a positive impact on financial efforts. 

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and personnel support, an evermore important consideration in an age of tightening economic constraints.

3.3. Updating: Church Archives and Contemporary History

Contemporary relevance is important for the archives. People living today require knowledge about the past for their lives in the present and future. According to the circular letter “The Pastoral Function of Church Archives,” the mandate of church archives includes the promotion of historical research (4.5).\(^{23}\) This, in turn, encompasses what is known as contemporary (or recent) history (Zeitgeschichte), in particular. For one thing, the overwhelming mass of archival materials is from the 20th century. For another, contemporary history is by now the largest sub-field within historical scholarship and extends into the 1970s. And the church history that is worth researching did not end with the 19th century either; I mention only the Second Vatican Council\(^{24}\) and the processes of change that followed it.

It can be said that in Germany, in particular, the public image of archives is determined to a remarkable extent by their contemporary-historical functions. This applies to the handling of records from the Nazi period\(^{25}\), as well as the opening of East Germany’s Stasi files. Other examples include releasing files for the compensation of former forced laborers\(^{26}\), as well as coming to terms with cases of sexual abuse. In all these matters, the Church, and especially Church archives, are in great demand.


Fear of “disclosure” should not induce archivists to keep their collections closed. A refusal can damage the reputation of the Church more seriously than any findings of critical scholarship. By contrast, an open and serious engagement with issues of contemporary history that may at first appear thorny will be acknowledged even by that part of the public that is critical of the Church. Consequently, the guiding principle of archive work can only be “The truth will set you free.”

Church archive legislation in Germany privileges contemporary-historical research. The Church’s archival regulations do specify retention periods: in normal cases, 40 years after the files were closed; for personal correspondence, however, at least 30 years after the death of the person involved; and for official episcopal files and the personal papers of bishops, 60 years.\(^\text{27}\) It is, however, possible that a diocesan bishop will grant special permission to use still-blocked archival materials in substantiated cases of scholarly research.\(^\text{28}\)

4. An Example

To conclude my remarks, I would like to give an example that illuminates the overall situation of German church archives today. On the occasion of the upcoming 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, I sent -- in my capacity as chairman of the Bundeskonferenz of Church Archives in Germany -- a survey in the year 2011 to the 27 diocesan archives and selected other Church archives. The goal was an analysis of the current state of archival holdings on Vatican II. The results have been in since the fall of 2012; they constitute a synopsis of all available collections of sources on the Council, with a view to type, volume, state of indexing, and accessibility.\(^\text{29}\)

\(^{27}\) Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 50-51. 
\(^{28}\) Die pastorale Funktion der kirchlichen Archive, p. 51. 
In summary, one can conclude that in the ten years since the last survey on the state of German Church archives, a marked improvement in standards, as well as in the indexing and accessibility of the Vatican II collections, has taken place.\textsuperscript{30} It is no longer standard practice to grant only individual researchers privileged access on the basis of personal acquaintance; instead, access to files in diocesan archives has been regulated on the comprehensible basis of archival law.

I presented the most important findings of the survey last October at the international conference “Il Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II alla luce degli archivi dei Padri Conciliari” organized by the Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche and the Pontifical Lateran University. The complete summary has since been made available on the Bundeskonferenz homepage (http://www.kirchliche-archive.de). I hope very much that this publication will alert researchers in Germany and across the globe to the presence of these important files and invigorate scholarship on the Council.

In that event, the German Church archives would have realized the mandate of the circular letter from Rome to preserve and enliven “the memory of the Church.”