

UTILIZATION OF ARCHIVES FOR RESEARCH

Guidelines for those beginning this work

*José Regalado Trota**

“The dates given by Don Bosco himself for the events of his boyhood are often mistaken”
(M. WIRTH, *Don Bosco and the Salesians*, 1987, 12)

1. Survey the field

Having selected a topic – or at least a general direction – to research on, one must find out if anything else about it or similar to it has already been published. This is not only to prevent duplication, but to see if there are new sources that may be helpful. Besides, there are many angles from which a topic may be written about, just as there are various methodologies with which to approach a problem. This phase of the research is generally known as ‘Survey of Literature’: that is, all published works having some bearing on your proposed work must be located and examined. Go through the bibliographies or sources cited in these works – and even the footnotes – and list down those of interest.

This in itself is already a tall order. Bear in mind that some of the books or articles you need might be out of print, or published in another language, or kept in a far away library, or replaced by a microfilm copy due to brittle pages. And remember, there are such things as ‘bibliographies of bibliographies’.

Of course, being a researcher means that published sources will not suffice. The more exciting search is in the archives, because you will be working with material that is one-of-a-kind and inaccessible to most people. Find out which archives are the most likely to carry the type of information that you need. Again, you must consider that some of these archives may be in another country; however remember that some archival material you may be needing may already have been transcribed and published, or quoted extensively in a journal, minimizing the accessibility gap.

Be open to other sources of research data such as photos, maps, videos, taped interviews, commemorative medals, and even inscriptions on monuments or bells. Look up eyewitnesses to the story you are writing about, or lo-

* Researcher, writer, and consultant on historic Philippine church art. He is affiliated with the Permanent Committee for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines.

cate their relatives or associates. Remember that they could be in possession of memorabilia, photo albums, and still more documents that would be invaluable to your research. The same could be said of churches, rectories, schools, and even museums, all highly potential storehouses of data.

If a number of sources or sites seem inaccessible, consider reconfiguring your topic. Put into the balance the amount of time you have. Prepare your own preliminary bibliography and list of sources and places to visit. Think out how you want your output – your story – to be organized. A good survey should help clarify the boundaries of your research. In fact, don't be surprised if your quest will be modified according to what is available and achievable. Don't be afraid to be specific; your research could bear a title such as "A brief history of the Salesian parish of Santa Cruz, Laguna, based on archival sources in Manila", or "The early years of the Salesians in such and such a place". [*illustrations # 1,2,3, 4,5: scenes of Santa Cruz church*].

2. Archival work

Archival work is special work. Here time slows down when you are in a hurry – be prepared that you will not be able to work on the day of your first appearance at the archive, because your application will have to be scrutinized; and time speeds up when you have most need of it – you have two more pages to go but the archive is closing for the day. Make sure to follow the rules of the archive you are in; many archives prohibit the use of any writing instrument except a pencil. Of course, if you are the archivist, or if you are working in an in-house archive, then conditions will be more advantageous; but chances are you will have to derive data from other archives as well. [*illustration # 6; first page of catalogue in Makati*].

In many archives, catalogues do not have exhaustive contents. Therefore one has to delve through many categories to find correlated items. Not a few times, the researcher will come across uncatalogued documents or material which seemingly may not belong to the folder; resist the temptation to rearrange the order and call the attention of the archivist first. Some collections in private hands may be uncatalogued at all, and the researcher will have to devise a rudimentary classification system in collaboration with the owner of the papers. Make duplicate copies of the improvised catalogue, one for the owner and one for yourself. [*illustration # 7: handwritten list of materials in Jagna, Bohol*].

Many archives – such as those of parishes in rural areas – are not equipped to handle reproduction services such as photocopying. Therefore come prepared to take notes with any number of sharpened pencils and a

notebook. You may use index cards, but these work best if you have a filing system for index cards. Another alternative would be to write on loose sheets of paper, which can be filed later on in folders and filing boxes. Strive to mark each card or sheet of paper with the following information: name of the archive from where you obtained the document, a locator number for the document, a one- or- two word name for the document itself, and the year of the document. This is so that if your papers and notes get mixed up – as they tend to do when you are writing your story – you will not waste much time rearranging them; this will also enable you – and researchers coming after you – to retrieve the original document quickly. To minimize effort, use abbreviations for frequently used sources, references, locations, etc.; write a list of these abbreviations on the first page of your notebook or paste the list on your wall so you won't forget their meaning.

For example, AAM, 4A6, Sta Cruz 1956 would mean: the document was obtained from the Archdiocesan Archives of Manila, it was kept on Cabinet 4, shelf A, box 6; the document refers to the parish of Santa Cruz, and is dated 1956.

In going over a bundle of documents on the same topic, list down each document according to its location from top to bottom. (For now, do not be bothered if the documents are not arranged chronologically). Note down the sender and his address, the addressee and his address, and the date of the document. Take note that certain documents will have attachments, with their own senders, addressees, and dates. Try to make the list as skeletal as possible, resisting the temptation to detain yourself in reading the contents. When the list is finished, you will have a better grasp of the series of documents you are working with, and then you can decide which to read first. As you read, supply very brief descriptions for each document on the list.

Many of the documents you will handle may be handwritten letters, technically known as *holographs*. If they were written in the 19th century or earlier, than you should take time to figure out the penmanship or even study a little paleography; look out for abbreviations peculiar to the author's period or culture. The Spaniards for example, who were very elaborate in their greetings, used *Q.D.G.* (*Que Dios guarde*, may the Lord keep [him or her]), or *V.E.* (*Vuestra Excelencia*, Your Excellency). This would be akin to today's BTW (by the way), or FYI (for your information).

Many times, note-taking will have to be supplemented by entire sections or passages excerpted from a document. The sequence of events, such as in a narrative, or placement of words such as in a sermon, may necessitate copying *verbatim*. This is to provide a clear context, to facilitate understanding, of the passage in question; this is especially almost unavoidable when one is working with a document in a foreign language. In such cases an invaluable tool would be the laptop computer. This makes handcopying easier

and has the advantage of facilitating the immediate printing of your data. The laptop is also useful for tabulating data *in situ*. When typing away, don't forget you can use your own abbreviations for often-used words such as 'd' for '*de*', 'p' for '*para*', 'y' for '*iglesia*', or 'cp' for '*cura párroco*'.

While on the subject of foreign languages, be careful about taking down notes in your language what you are reading in a different language. Don't jump to translation conclusions just because a foreign word sounds like something else you know; *vicario foráneo* does not mean foreign vicar, but vicar forane. This sort of problem could be avoided by copying passages or texts verbatim.

3. Interfacing sources

When you feel you have gathered enough data, put all your sources and notes on the table and arrange them according to the pre-conceived outline mentioned in the beginning. If you don't have one, then try to classify them according to themes and see how they can be woven together. You can also arrange them chronologically, or according to regions, or according to personalities or institutions. Be very flexible; allow your data to guide you.

As you classify your *notes*, you will no doubt have many clusters each dealing with a specific topic. Examine the components of each cluster, checking out which are more valid or credible than the others. You are not unlike a detective unraveling evidence in a crime thriller. You will even find that there are different versions, such as drafts and translations, of the same document or evidence. Discrepancies in these versions may lead to more clues. In the Philippines, for example, there is always a confusion as to the 'first church' of a community; many take the year of evangelization as the same one for the construction of the present church. Investigation will reveal that, among other things, the church building was subject to such factors as shifting town locations, natural calamities, and the resources of the populace and parish priest.

Construct a timeline by arranging events chronologically, then fit in witnesses' testimonies. Look for patterns or recurring conditions in chains of events. Tabulate series of data in charts, tables or graphs. Such work has already been done by the former parish priest, a Salesian, of the parish in Mayapa, Laguna, in the outskirts of Manila. Graphs were maintained on church attendance, church collections, and partaking of the sacraments, for example; these were juxtaposed against the parishioners' cultural and economic calendar. Index cards were compiled for each of the children attending parochial school, with data on the student's family and spaces for his or her sacramental life. [*illustrations 8, 9, 10: Mayapa graphs and data*].

Match documents with other printed or graphic data. Look out for portraits of personalities who played important roles in your subject matter. Photographs of celebrations of holy mass, inaugurations, sacramental rites, church construction, calamities, funerals, etc. are always useful and should be gathered. Artists' sketches, illustrations, and paintings serve the same purpose. Maps may shed light on territorial boundaries, street or town names, commercial routes, physical features, and many other aspects. Population statistics, lists of donors, committee memberships, and even advertisements are also important sources; many of these can be gleaned from souvenir programs, missalettes, bulletins, prayerbooks, newspapers, calendars, almanacs, and yearbooks. Sometimes you may have to locate ordinary-looking papers like student papers, workshop accounts, or lists of tools which, while not exactly archival material, may be useful in reflecting conditions over a period of time. Don't forget that news clippings, mementos, and photos may have been left inserted in old books, recipe collections, bibles, or novenas. Continue fitting all of these in your timeline. [*illustrations # 12 - banner in Don Bosco Makati, 13 - besamano in Mandaluyong, 14 -400 years of Santa Cruz parish*].

Scout for tangible memorabilia to complement your timeline. Were commemorative medals cast? What about trophies, badges, watches, caps, pennants, banners, posters, souvenir items, cigars, buttons, ballpens, gifts, plates, stamps? This is like searching for the 'murder weapon'. Don't be surprised that as you collect material such as these, you are contributing to the formation of a museum. Slowly, you are recreating the ambience of the periods you are working on. [*illustrations # 15, 16, 17: Santa Cruz photo panels*].

Visit the sites of the events chronicled in your timeline. Are the monuments, buildings, playing fields, or churches familiar to the characters in your timeline still standing? How has the skyline changed? Take photographs of these places and compare them with earlier photos, paintings or illustrations. While in the field – *including visiting other countries* – search for inscriptions on monuments, obelisks, tombstones, streetsigns, or bells, for further material. In the Philippines, an old marker commemorates the spot where the first mass was said in this country; however a number of scholars doubt this claim and more research is needed. Of interest to Filipinos in Madras is the stone crest formerly crowning one of the entrances to the old walled city of Intramuros; it ended up in the museum in Fort St George, brought by the British after they left Manila in 1764, after two years of occupation [*illustrations # 18, 19: bells in Manaoag, Pangasinan; 20: 18th century beam in Mandaluyong; 21, historical marker in Santa Cruz; 22: date inscribed on Sta Cruz church*].

Look for data in other recorded forms such as videos, taped interviews or television programs, or reel recordings. You may have some difficulty

looking for equipment to play reel recordings or gramophone records. Search for eyewitnesses or other persons with corroborative material who may still be alive and available for interviews.

Be on the lookout for intangible heritage: for example, songs, devotions, jokes, stories, gestures, traditions, ways of doing things and especially technical skills which attest to Salesian presence in a community.

Interface all of this material in your timeline, and see how each one corroborates, supplements, or negates the other. You will also be in a better position to recreate the situations or contexts in which the historic personalities you are studying found themselves. It will be a very sobering experience.

4. Presentation of data

The timeline as assembled above gives you a grand overview of your research output. Now you have to settle down to figure out how to put it in writing. How you will develop your story will depend on the objectives of your research in the first place. Be clear of why you are writing, and let this guide you in balancing the sections. In our case, I would suggest a guideline something like, “God’s grace among men through the Salesians”. Remember that all our research can be worked out in such a way as to further the ‘new evangelization’ spoken of so many times in the circular letters of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church.

I would assume that most of us would be writing to win more souls. Today’s reader is pressed for time, and confronted with a multitude of other matters to read. Therefore he would appreciate texts written in a forthright, matter-of-fact manner; in simple language, avoiding long sentences, convoluted structures, or terms you would have to look up in a dictionary; and in a friendly, easy style, not overly moralizing or just subtly so. As a lay person, I look forward to religious books akin to “Computers for dummies” or “Opera for people who hate operas”. And, I think this is the particular charism of the Salesians. [*illustration # 23: Fr Nesty’s article on the 50 years of San Ildefonso Parish*].

Pepper the text with illustrations, textual or graphic, to spice up the reading. Avoid masses of detailed data; these can be isolated from the main paragraphs as so-called ‘boxed texts’. They can also be presented at the end of the work as appendices. For possible inclusion in this section as well would be transcriptions of documents or their translations, tables, charts, transcripts of interviews, catalogues or inventories, and so forth.

Write so that others may follow your tracks. Acknowledge your sources of data in the footnotes or an essay; explain your methodology, how you as-

sembled your work. Always provide a full bibliography, especially if your topic is relatively unknown or controversial. Separate published from unpublished sources, and list down other sources of data such as memorabilia, interviews, etc. Acknowledge the help of other people and institutions. Your opus should not be so much a show of intellect as a convincing one, replete with proofs as shown in your sources of data. Hopefully, others will be inspired to continue in your direction.

5. No work is really finished

The writer must be humble and accept the limits of his research capabilities, sources of data, and theoretical expertise. He must realize that though his data may be impeccable, yet these could be flawed. As Don Bosco's biographer, Morand Wirth, noted, "The dates given by Don Bosco himself for the events of his boyhood are often mistaken" (*Don Bosco and the Salesians*, 1987, 12).

Knowing this, future writers should also have the humility to avoid being overly critical of the works of their predecessors. Our work should open doors and build bridges; we are just stepping stones.

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