

THE IMPORTANCE OF ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTATION AND THE STATE OF INDIAN SALESIAN ARCHIVES

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I have very little theoretical knowledge about archives, as I have done only a short course on *Archivistica* given by a certain Fr. Litva at the Gregorian University in Rome about 35 years ago. The course was not found to be very useful either! But I have some practical acquaintance with archives because of research in several large Roman archives for my earlier historical works, and research in the Salesian central archives in Rome and in the various Indian Salesian archives of medium and smaller size from 1992 to 1998, in view of writing a history of the Salesians in India.

When the history of a person or an institution or an event of the past is written for the first time or when someone wants to give a new interpretation or evaluation of a historical event or period, it becomes absolutely necessary to consult the original documentation preserved in archives. Only the archives contain direct, fundamental and indisputable sources, since the writings which are found there are not the result of a casual or arbitrary collection by an individual. The documentation of the archives forms and grows, so to say, automatically, as the daily result of the working of a public administration, of a religious institute, of a commercial enterprise etc.

Anyone who wants to write Salesian history will first of all go to consult the relevant Salesian archives. What does he hope to find there? He hopes to find all or at least many of the documents and papers pertaining to his topic and the contemporary correspondence which will give him much useful information. He also hopes that the the archives are kept in an orderly way and that there are aids, e.g. lists of files etc. which will help him to ask for the right files for consultation.

Among the wise recommendations left by Fr. Peter Ricaldone, vicar general of the congregation, at the end of his extraordinary visitation of Salesian India in 1927, we find also this one about provincial archives. He wanted that the provincial archives should give special importance to the chronicles of each house and to the general chronicle of the province. All information, especially those pertaining to the first years, should be diligently gathered, so that it would be possible to compile the history of the Salesian missions in India.

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Unfortunately in several provinces and houses they do not seem to write the chronicle, or write it in a very casual way. If you give the task of writing the chronicle to a cleric, he will not be able to write it properly, since he may not often know the decisions taken at the house council, the reasons why such decisions were taken etc. The result will be that most of the entries will be something like this: “Fr. X came to the house this morning. Fr. X left the house this evening.” It is clear that entries of this kind are not going to help the future historian very much! The chronicle should contain not merely information that the chronicler himself is able to provide, but include, as often as possible, relevant photographs and cuttings from newspapers and magazines about events which happened in the house. The best chronicle that I have seen is that of Archbishop’s House Shillong, begun enthusiastically by the first Salesian missionaries of Assam in 1921-22. Also the chronicle of Don Bosco Matunga was very well written as long as Fr. Austin Dehlert was the compiler.

A well-written chronicle is a precious thing. Hence it has to be preserved carefully. Unfortunately some are missing, perhaps stolen! At Don Bosco Panjim the first volume of the chronicle of the house is missing since 1996, the year of the golden jubilee of that house. I was told that on that occasion several journalists and newspaper-reporters went to the house to examine the chronicles and other papers pertaining to the beginnings of the house.

To be able to write the history of the Salesians in India up to the year 1951-52, I have consulted most of the older Salesian archives of this country, spending many months in some of the more important ones. The most important of these is the Madras (Chennai) provincial archives. Its exceptional importance arises from the fact that it holds not merely those papers and documents which are normally to be expected in provincial archives, but also many others which have gone there because of special reasons. Thus some of the papers pertaining to the two earliest houses in India (Tanjore and Mylapore) are found there. The important and voluminous correspondence of Archbishop Mathias between 1935 and 1965 with the Salesian superiors in Turin and with Salesians in all parts of India has also found its way to that archive, thanks to the good will of Bishop Carvalho who was the auxiliary and vicar general of Madras-Mylapore when Mgr. Mathias died. During the years 1935-65 Archbishop Mathias was undoubtedly the most important Salesian in India and hence he was consulted by very many Salesians and received information on every noteworthy happening. Also the superiors in Turin asked him for his opinion and views on important matters pertaining to India, and he himself took the trouble to write to them frequently. The files containing his correspondence are therefore of special interest to the historian of the Salesians in India.

As for the other usual files in the Madras archives, there are many that contain letters from the various houses to the provincials. Particularly numerous are the letters from Don Bosco Bombay (Matunga) and from Salesian House or Sacred Heart College Tirupattur, which was for many years the novitiate and philosophate, and later, the aspirantate of the Southern province. There are also very many letters from the Salesians who were in the internment camps during the Second World War. The files which hold the copies of letters from the provincials to the superiors and the replies of the latter to the provincials are naturally of great importance to the historian. The volumes in which the minutes of the provincial council meetings have been recorded are certainly helpful. Another point to be mentioned about the Madras archives is that the papers and chronicles of the two closed houses of Trivandrum and Nagercoil are there.

The later sections of the Madras archives (i.e. from about 1965 onwards) seem to be in order, but much of the earlier parts are in a state of confusion, probably because the provincial house was shifted several times from one part of Madras to another, and nobody took the trouble of putting the files in order after they were transported. In fact, when I went to consult the archives, I had to spend several days searching through two or three cupboards filled with old and dusty files in total disorder, to sort out those which I would need to consult. Those files which were sorted out are now in some kind of order, but the rest are still in the same confusion as before.

The next most important archives which I have consulted is that of the Salesian province of Calcutta. Since that province is the direct successor of the *visitatoria* of India, established in 1923, and of the province of India, set up in 1926-27, one would expect its archives to be even richer than that of Madras; but actually it is not so, because it does not contain papers prior to 1934. Till that year the prefect apostolic of Assam and the superior/provincial of India was one and the same person, namely Mgr. Mathias, who had his office in Shillong. It was only after he was made bishop of Shillong in 1934 and Fr. Vincent Scuderi became the provincial of North India, that the provincial came to have a separate office of his own. The papers prior to 1934 are in the archiepiscopal archives of Shillong.

The Calcutta archives contain the important correspondence between the provincials and the various superiors in Turin, the ordinary letters from the houses, the letters of interned confreres to the provincial, some papers regarding certain controversies in the internment camp, and much information regarding the houses of Saharanpur and Mandalay which were eventually closed. The detailed chronicle of Mandalay written by Fr. Anthony Alessi gives very interesting information, especially about the period when Burma (Myanmar) was under Japanese occupation. There are also some letters and

documents from mission stations like Bhorpara, Shimulia, Khulna and Jessore, which remained on the other side of the line of demarcation when Bengal was divided between India and Pakistan in 1947. A certain amount of information is also available regarding the house of C.O.P. (the Catholic Orphan Press) which was later closed.

The provincial archives of Calcutta are relatively in good order. What is even more important is that, when Fr. Francis Alencherry (the present provincial) was provincial secretary in the years from 1979 to 1982, he drew up a very practical method for classifying the material in the archives. His successors only needed to follow that method of classification in order to keep the archives in good order. In fact, when I was making use of the Calcutta archives in the summer months of 1996, I had no difficulty in suggesting to the then-secretary the numbers that should be given to some of the unclassified files which I had consulted. The existence of order among the files, however, does not mean that they are free from dust and dirt! My first job after picking up a file was to dust the outside of it and then each of the pages inside. In general, our archives need to devise a way for keeping out dust or at least for removing it from time to time.

The archiepiscopal archives of Shillong is a rich mine of information for the history of the Salesians in North-east India, and to some extent even in other parts of India. The most valuable of the items which I read through is the rich and detailed chronicle of the Assam mission in many large volumes, begun enthusiastically by Fr. Paul Bonardi in 1921-22 and continued faithfully by other equally dedicated persons. For many years it was not merely the chronicle of the Assam mission, but the chronicle of Salesian work in India.

When I went to consult the Shillong archives in 1998, I was happy to find that it was better housed than when I had made use of it in 1992. During the earlier visit the archives were in one of the side-rooms on the top of the cathedral and in a somewhat neglected condition. Now the archivist material has been brought down to one of the new rooms of Archbishop's House. But even now the material is rather crammed.

Besides the above-mentioned three major archives, a number of lesser ones were also consulted during the course of my research for the history of the Salesians in India. The following may be mentioned: in North India the archives of Don Bosco Shillong, St. John Bosco Shrine Cherrapunji, Provincial House Guwahati, Salesian College Sonada, Don Bosco Liluah, Bishop's House Krishnagar and Don Bosco Krishnagar; in South India the archives of Don Bosco Matunga (Mumbai), Don Bosco Panjim, Sacred Heart Seminary Poonamallee, Our Lady of Refuge Chennai, St. Francis Xavier's Parish Chennai, Sacred Heart College Tirupattur, The Retreat Yercaud, and Mount Don Bosco Kotagiri.

For the period up to 1952 the chronicles of the following houses are fairly complete: Don Bosco Shillong, Salesian College Sonada, Don Bosco Liluah, Don Bosco Krishnagar, Don Bosco Matunga, Sacred Heart Seminary Poonamallee and The Retreat Yercaud. Though there is nothing much in the archives of Sacred Heart College Mawlai, the Documentation Centre of the college contains much that is useful for the historian. The archives of Bishop's House Krishnagar should normally have been a major source of information; but since papers are missing from many files, not much could be obtained from there. Again, no papers or documents or chronicles pertaining to the important former house of Don Bosco Vellore could be found in any of the present Salesian institutions of that town or in Bishop's House Vellore.