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THE MARQUETTE INITIATIVE
Saving Catholic Archives of the Indian Americas

Those of you from North America may be aware of the Marquette University's reputation in the field of basketball. You might also be aware of the University's namesake, Jacques Marquette (1637-1675), a French Catholic missionary and Jesuit priest who lived among the aboriginal Indian peoples during the 17th century and with Louis Jolliet was one of the first Europeans to explore the Mississippi River. Today, I would like to bring to your attention another field important to Marquette University - the archiving of the "at risk" Indian mission heritage in the Americas.

Since 1975, Marquette University has developed an "archival niche" in preserving and providing access to information on the Catholic Church and its relationships with the Indians of the Americas. The Catholic story is an ongoing one of epic proportions. It is a 500-year-old saga of spreading the Gospel across the Americas and it is a struggle for promoting peace and justice, cultural accommodation, and the development of indigenous Christian faith communities. Unfortunately, we have found that in many areas only meager amounts of original documentation exist today. Oftentimes only limited attention was given to record creation, and frequently, many materials that were produced were not preserved. Much of what has survived remains endangered or inaccessible in spite of the growing number of archival programs in Catholic dioceses and religious orders and the growing popularity of information on Native Americans among researchers.

With its centralized bureaucracy, dedicated religious orders, and access to substantial financial resources, the Catholic Church has been able to maintain evangelization programs on an extraordinary scale. Moreover, a number of its missionaries, especially Jesuits, have had classical education and linguistic training which enabled them to create extensive writings on indigenous life and languages, especially as these related to the Church and interaction with officials of Church and state.

Mindful of its mission as a Catholic university and recognizing the value and preservation needs of Catholic records relating to Native American peoples, the Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives has made a commitment to preserving this unique heritage. During the past 20 years, Marquette has been honored by
being entrusted with the acquisition and care for a significant portion of
the Columbian legacy - about one million pages of material in 25 collec-
tions which together document 350 years of native evangelization in
North America. We believe that our holdings now comprise one of the
largest archives of Catholic Indian mission records in the Americas and
that we are one of the largest such repositories in the developed world.

In assuming this responsibility, Marquette provides ongoing com-
plementary reference service to donors as well as facilitating scholarly
research which, in turn, informs the public through publications and mu-
seum exhibits. In addition, Marquette actively promotes collaboration
with other organizations in the preservation and servicing of archives for
mutual benefit. Of particular interest is saving notable collections from
throughout the Americas that are "at risk" and otherwise might not sur-
vive without intervention. To accomplish these goals, Marquette utilizes a
combination of established and innovative strategies from the conven-
tional acquisition of original documents to preservation copying and oral
history. To undertake these programs, Marquette must augment its regular
resources with funding from foundations and private sources. Conse-
quently, the establishment of new commitments is contingent upon our
ability to secure added funding.

I would now like to share with you a story that illustrates a typical
problem that confounds church archivists from time to time - How do we
document some of the seemingly elusive elements of the evangelization
story? Once upon a time there was a ghost at an ancient and venerable
Jesuit establishment called Holy Rosary Mission, which is located among
the Lakota Sioux, the same native people who were featured in the award
winning movie "Dances with Wolves." This ghost was from an old nun
who had fond memories of the mission. She had been blessed with a long
and productive life of service to the Church and most of it was devoted to
teaching generations of young native children, which she had loved to do.
So, she was a very friendly ghost.

Then one day, a photographer happened to come by. This photo-
grapher, I think, was taking shots as part of a tourism promotional project,
and he got real excited about taking a picture of this ghost he had heard so
much about from some of the tribal elders. This ghost at the mission, he
thought, had the potential for starting a whole new tourist attraction, and
that it could grow into something like the popular Mount Rushmore
Memorial, the nearby mountain with four sculptured heads of distin-
guished past United States presidents.