

## **Ecclesiastical Archives: A Source for History and a History of Sources. A project on Public History Teaching**

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### **Introduction**

#### **Ecclesiastical Archives**

Church cultural assets include, referring to the definition of Pope John Paul II at the 1995 Plenary assembly, “first and foremost, the artistic heritages of painting, sculpture, architecture, mosaics and music, placed at the service of the Church's mission. To these must be added the book heritage contained in ecclesiastical libraries and the historical documents kept in the archives of ecclesial communities. Finally, this includes literary, theatrical and cinematographic works produced by the mass media” (John Paul II, 1995, pp. 561-562). These include ecclesiastical archives, institutes present in all dioceses, which store various documentary material within them. Ecclesiastical and religious archives are undoubtedly among the richest and most important archival sources in the country. Ecclesiastical and religious archives are those that reflect the multifaceted activity of the Catholic Church: diocesan archives, archives of bishop's refectories, capitular archives, parish archives, archives of confraternities, monastery archives, archives of religious congregations, sanctuary archives, seminary archives, archives of ecclesiastical courts, private archives of clergy and religious. The core of ecclesiastical organization is the diocese, headed by the bishop. Episcopal sees also organize their own chancellery and therefore an archive. Diocesan archives comprise first and foremost the archives of the bishop's curia, i.e. produced by the bishop's office. and other types of archives that have been brought into the diocesan archives

for various reasons through donations, suppressions, and payments. In 1983, with the promulgation of the new Code of canon law, provision was made for the establishment of diocesan historical archives, which would contain the historical archives of the bishop's curia or chancery, the metropolitan chapter, the bishop's refectory or the cathedral vestry. From a simple nucleus of writings deriving from the episcopal curial administration, however, the diocesan historical archive was conceived, in fact, as a concentration and custodian institution, in order to safeguard and protect the archival complexes of other ecclesiastical bodies as well.

The pontiffs' attention to the sources is constant: a series of initiatives and measures has taken place since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a succession of circulars for the preservation and use of ecclesiastical archives. In fact, since the last century, the need to know and census the heritage of the Catholic Church, including mainly its artistic, archival and book heritage, has been an ever-increasing need. Especially after the Second Vatican Council, the Holy See was the first to initiate such a work. The cultural perspective of the Catholic Church began to evolve: new impetus was given to the work of valorizing and protecting ecclesiastical cultural assets. Locally, the task was entrusted entirely to the dioceses and local communities of consecrated life, which, in agreement with the offices of the regional Bishops' Conferences and the National Office for Ecclesiastical cultural heritage and religious buildings<sup>1</sup>, started a process of census and valorization of their cultural heritage. Before the intervention of the Italian Bishops' Conference<sup>2</sup>, the management of ecclesiastical cultural assets on Italian territory was subject to the various provisions of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia which, before and after the Second Vatican Council, had continued to issue special instructions. Following the revision of the Lateran Concordat on 11 February 1929 (Law n. 121 of 25 March 1985; Law n. 206 of 20 May 1985) signed by cardinal A. Casaroli and Bettino Craxi, article 30 excluded any interference by the State in the management of assets belonging to ecclesiastical bodies, and therefore also in archives, so that the archival superintendencies were never able to effectively exercise any supervisory role. Finally, the circular of cardinal Giovanni Mercati (1866-1957) (Vian, 2009) of 1 November 1942 ordered a census of the archival and bibliographic heritage of all Italian dioceses (*Enchiridion*, 1966). Pope John XXIII expressed in the *Motu Proprio* 'Pastoral solicitude':

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<sup>1</sup> National Office for Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage and Worship Buildings (henceforth UNBCE).

<sup>2</sup> Italian Bishops' Conference (henceforth CEI).

Both the precious deposits of ancient documents and the modern papers of current archives bear witness to the life and works of the Church, and together they form a unique, essential and irreplaceable documentation, which is destined above all to serve the Church herself, and deserves to be preserved also for the benefit of historical studies. It is therefore right that these archives should be properly administered by the persons and bodies responsible for them, to whom they are and, in principle, should remain entrusted. (Ioannes XXIII, p. 997).

The Pontifical Commission for the cultural heritage of the Church<sup>3</sup> subsequently sent a circular letter on *The pastoral function of church archives* on 2 February 1997 (Pontifical Commission for the cultural heritage of the Church, 1997) in which it stated that:

As cultural heritage, archives are offered first and foremost for the enjoyment of the community that produced them, but with the passage of time they take on a universal destination, becoming the heritage of all humanity. The material deposited cannot in fact be closed to those who can take advantage of it to learn about the history of the Christian people, its religious, civil, cultural and social events. (Enchiridion, 2002, p. 333).

It represents a cornerstone of ecclesiastical archival doctrine, the centrality of archives in the life of the Catholic community and the Church is enshrined by the Holy See in the document, which states that:

In the *mens* of the Church, archives are places of memory of Christian communities and cultural factors for the new evangelization. They are therefore a cultural asset of primary importance, whose peculiarity consists in recording the path taken by the Church over the centuries in the individual realities that make it up. As places of memory, they must systematically collect all the data with which the articulated history of ecclesial communities is written, in order to offer the possibility of a congruous evaluation of what has been done, the results obtained, the omissions and errors. (Enchiridion, 2002, pp. 312-313) (Palese, 2014).

The letter begins with an *excursus* retracing the main stages of the development of ecclesiastical archives, stating that the Church is interested in documents because it is “interested in their pastoral valorization and consequently in the protection of what it has produced to express and implement its mission” (Pontificia, 1997, p. 312). The evangelizing function of church archives from the perspective of a new pastoral care of the Church's

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<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church (henceforth Pontifical Commission).

cultural heritage (Marchisano, 2002). The letter mentions the basic concepts of ecclesiastical archives and emphasizes the project to be carried out in each diocese. Therefore, a reflection was initiated on the identification of useful strategies to promote the preservation and use of historical ecclesiastical archives. On one hand, the role of preserving the millenary heritage preserved in ecclesiastical archives was consolidated, and on the other hand, that the quantity and quality of ecclesiastical documentation preserved today cannot be underestimated.

### **Italian Bishops' Conference and Ministry of Culture**

The CEI and the current Ministry of Culture<sup>4</sup> entered into negotiations in 1987 that fully implemented the mutual cooperation for the safeguard, inventory, valorization and enjoyment of the Church's cultural assets, provided for in Article 12 of the text revising the Lateran Concordat of 18 February 1984 between Italy and the Holy See. Article 12 stated that:

The Holy See and the Italian Republic, in their respective orders, shall cooperate for the protection of the historical and artistic heritage. In order to harmonize the application of Italian law with religious requirements, the competent bodies of the two Parties shall agree on appropriate provisions for the safeguarding, valorization and enjoyment of cultural assets of religious interest belonging to ecclesiastical bodies and institutions. The preservation and consultation of archives of historical interest and the libraries of the same bodies and institutions shall be favoured and facilitated on the basis of agreements between the competent bodies of the two Parties. (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1985, p. 530).

This led to the signing of the 1996 Agreement. On 13 September 1996, the president of the CEI, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and the Minister for Cultural, H.E. Walter Veltroni, signed the understanding for the protection of ecclesiastical cultural property (Intesa, 1996). The agreement came into force with presidential decree n. 571 of 26 September 1996 (Execution, 1996) and with a decree of the president of the CEI on 29 October of the same year (Decree, 1996). With the signing of the Agreement, the cooperation between State and Church in this matter was consolidated. The Pontifical Commission subsequently sent a circular letter (Pontifical, 1997). On 1 January 1999, the Holy See issued provisions following the 1996 understanding between the CEI and the MIC (Disposizioni, 1999). The agreement on ecclesiastical libraries and archives, was then sanctioned between the current MIC and the

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Culture (henceforth MIC).

president of the CEI on 18 April 2000: *Agreement concerning the preservation and consultation of archives of historical interest and of the libraries of ecclesiastical bodies and institutions* (Intesa, 2000); enacted into Italian law by Presidential Decree n. 189 on 16 May 2000 (Execution, 2000), addresses the preservation and consultation of archives of historical interest and libraries and promulgated in the canonical system by decree of the president of the CEI on the following 10 July. It consists of ten articles. It lists the general principles, the autonomous interventions both in the church and in the Italian State, and in the last part the collaborative interventions between the two bodies. The first part of the agreement is entirely dedicated to archives of historical interest; after setting out some general principles, it deals with interventions by the Catholic Church, interventions by the state, and interventions in collaboration between the Catholic Church and the state (Intesa, 2000). Following the enactment of the Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code (Code, 2004), a subsequent agreement of 26 January 2005 (Intesa, 2005) was stipulated concerning the protection of cultural assets of religious interest belonging to ecclesiastical bodies and institutions, implemented by Presidential Decree n. 78 of 4 February 2005 (Execution, 2005). On 15 September 2006, the Pontifical Commission issued a further circular letter on the *Inventory of the Cultural Assets of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* (Pontifical, 2006). In the practical guidelines the inventory of the cultural assets themselves is always identified as preliminary and indispensable for the proper work of juridical protection, preservation from unlawful theft, alienation, and expropriation of material.

### **BEWEB and the National Archives System**

On 10 March 2015 don Stefano Russo and Marina Giannetto, director of the Central Institute for Archives<sup>5</sup>, signed an agreement (Convention, 2015) to ensure the exchange and updating between Beweb<sup>6</sup> and the National Archival System<sup>7</sup>. The aim is to offer the documentary heritage preserved in church archives to a wide audience, not only specialists, by adopting common methodologies and sharing: procedures, best practices, models and working environments to conduct archival description and reorganization activities; tools to enhance the archival resources kept in cultural institutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Central Institute for Archives (henceforth ICAR).

<sup>6</sup> CEI, BeWeB Portal, Church Assets on the Web (henceforth Beweb).

<sup>7</sup> National Archives System (henceforth SAN).

## **Birth and Start-Up of the Cei Ar Project**

The project Cei Ar<sup>8</sup> on the ecclesiastical archives of the CEI was launched in 2004 and presented in Rome on 4 June, proposed by UNBCE. The project arose from the need to start a census of the archival heritage through an appropriate and *ad hoc* computer tool for the ecclesiastical archival reality (D'Agnelli et al., 2006). It came into force after the collaboration agreement signed between the State and the Catholic Church in 2000, for the inventory of the documentary and archival heritage. It allows communication with the computer system of the Archival Superintendence Offices (Siusa) and with the SAN, in charge of the general Directorate for archives.

Cei Ar was created as a software derivative of Ariadne, the programme that was considered most suitable for archival reality in the 2000s. The programme, conceived and structured by Hyperborea<sup>9</sup>, was created on the initiative and under the coordination of UNBCE, and offers ecclesiastical archivists a series of computer tools for the processing and description of documentation. Making archival sources consultable and usable is an indispensable prerequisite for the consultation of any archive. The intervention on church-owned archives aims to contribute to the use, consultation and valorization of the documentary heritage, as well as to the preservation and protection of archival materials in a uniform way in all Italian dioceses, in collaboration with the Mic. Moreover, the inventory of diocesan archives and ecclesiastical archives in general represents a fundamental tool for pastoral action for the diocese and each religious body. The possibility of publishing the result of one's work online and updating it on the Beweb portal gives the archives enormous visibility also at international level and allows both specialized and non-specialized users to access it remotely. Ecclesiastical archives have been frequented for many years almost exclusively by specialized users and local historians; by joining this large-scale project, fruition and sharing represent a very important step. In the field of archival heritage, UNBCE handles institutional relations with the Mic, the Archives General Management, ICAR and the relevant authorities in the area.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. CEI, *Progetto archivi ecclesiastici*, cf. <https://bce.chiesacattolica.it/progetto-archivi-ecclesiastici/>. For a more in-depth look at the CEI, project I refer to the following citations in the bibliography: (Bongarzone, 2013), (D'Agnelli, 2013), (D'Agnelli, 2012), (D'Agnelli et al., 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hyperborea, <https://www.hyperborea.com/>

## **Cei Ar and Beweb**

BeWeB - *Beni ecclesiastici in web*<sup>10</sup>, is a platform that makes visible the work of systematic census of the historical and artistic, architectural, archival and book heritage carried out by Italian dioceses and ecclesiastical cultural institutes on the assets they own. It is also the place to facilitate, through in-depth thematic studies, the sharing of resources and news, the understanding and reading of ecclesiastical heritage by a wide public and not only by specialists. The irreplaceable service that the network offers, the possibility of the continuous updating of data and their full availability, are the cornerstone of Beweb. Being able to know in real time what is happening in the institutes makes it possible to always be in contact with a wider audience.

## **Ecclesiastical Archives as Sources for Educational Research**

The archives are inserted in the territorial reality on which a plurality of different archives co-exist, nevertheless unified by belonging to a single local church (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2002-2003), becoming a point of reference structure and service for the territory on which they gravitate. Among the mass of documentation preserved in them, some in particular lend themselves to history teaching workshop projects. What expression of documentary memory can be the object of integration with the school world, can it bring students closer to historical research? In local churches, which archival memory can be the object of such integration? Before answering these questions, let us introduce a reflection on historical sources and didactics.

Alongside institutions such as libraries and museums, the archive represents a repository of collective memory, a place where the historical identity of the community is constructed (Ceccariglia, 2010); in this perspective, it holds a function in defining the role of education as a tool for didactics, not only as the mere transmission of content, but as a process of constructing tools and activating specific technical-mental operations, and this both at the level of learning and teaching, i.e. at the level of everyday didactic practice, and at the level of the continuous training of teachers, of history teachers in particular (Pitocco, 1985, p. 25). The educational value of research into sources (Ceccariglia, 2010), can be distinguished between education on archives and teaching archives. In the first meaning,

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<sup>10</sup> See [https://beweb.chiesacattolica.it/?l=it\\_IT](https://beweb.chiesacattolica.it/?l=it_IT)

meant as promoting knowledge of the preservation institution, in the second meaning, it aims to penetrate through research itineraries by reproducing techniques of historical work from sources. "Memory and identity," wrote an American historian, "are two of the most frequently used terms in contemporary public and private discourse" (Gillis, 1994, p. 3, quoted in Vitali, 2004, p. 339). The new approach linked to a recent diffusion of a new way of understanding historical research is the one proposed by the school born around the French journal *Annales* and its promoters and founders such as Marc Bloch, Jacques Le Goff, Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel. History is placed at the centre of a renewal of disciplines related to man (Osbat, 2003, p. 18). Marc Bloch, speaking of a history book, asserted that it must make one "hungry to learn and above all to search" (Bloch, 1987, p. 8).

The presence of church archives in the local territory can be considered a unique and historically founded representation. The dialogue with the local territory is based on the concentration and the permanence on the territory combined with the preservation service and, above all, on the integration service that it performs on the territory on which it subsists. The papers of diocesan archives, in most cases, are preserved in the same places of production - bishoprics, seminaries, cathedral chapters, etc. - and have been increased over the centuries in historical continuity; in fact, documents are frequently preserved in the locations where they were created as deeds. This specific union with the territory is evident in some specific types of documents, such as the archives of parishes (in those that have kept the same name, enlarged or extinct), in the archives of confraternities, in the archives of mutual aid associations of educational and welfare initiatives (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2002-2003, p. 238). The structure of the diocesan archival system encourages a horizontal reading of these recurring series, focusing on the writing methods or recurring forms adopted after the prescriptions of the Tridentine Council. Diocesan systems can be integrated into the school world through guidance and an approach to the sources for a public history. The school system, through a cultural project that allows sharing, integration and interoperability on several levels, can benefit from the plurality of memories stored in the archives. Local history can be reconstructed by investigating the sources preserved in archives, it can be understood as close to each student as documents can become an integral part of personal and local history. Archival institutions basically preserve a shared memory, since there is awareness that an ecclesiastical archive is a cultural asset of the church community and a



heritage of history and memory of the entire civil community (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2001-2002, p. 118). This awareness is based on a broader debate on the value of cultural heritage. Archives are intended as institutions of preservation, a place of study and research, but also of promotion, valorization and cultural advancement. The concept of historical memory in its specific meaning is defined as memory for the history of the territory (Zanni Rosiello, 1987). The ecclesiastical archive is therefore configured as an institute in which sources can be investigated in relation to the entities that produced them, in close relationship with the territory. From this point of view, diocesan archives are so closely linked and rooted in the local reality, offering a direct and unique reading of the history of the place in which they lived. The direct retrieval of the sources, but especially with the documents, made the students protagonists who come into direct contact with the original source of historical information, aware that in their daily *modus operandi* they are certainly closer to computerized and non-traditional sources. Approaching the sources is the basis of the history workshop, i.e. the complex and inevitable partiality of historiographic synthesis<sup>11</sup>. Teachers and pupils turn to archives, prompted by the debate on the role of local history in history teaching. It is included vertically in general history, but above all in laboratory activities by extending it to all those sources that exist on the territory itself, i.e. architectural, ethnological, historical-artistic, naturalistic, landscape, bibliographical and archival sources. The new perspective is to go beyond a manualistic knowledge of a chronological and manualistic history, far from an effective perception of the relationship between the present and the past, all this by questioning the new types of sources and archives (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2001-2002, p. 129). Therefore, archives close to the communities are involved, offering information that can be observed and studied at first hand in the archives of one's own community. This type of documentation is preserved in those immense granaries of history, constituted by parish archives with their precious canonical registers and in the often-connected archives of welfare structures, education, ancient and modern cooperative associations (Zito, 2001).

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<sup>11</sup> For in-depth studies on the issues concerning the use of traditional archival sources and the interaction with teaching, I refer to the following citations in the bibliography: (Bongarzone, 2013), (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2001-2002), (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2001), (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2000), (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2000, Archilab), (Cavazzana Romanelli, 1980), (Cavazzana Romanelli et al, 2014), (Cavazzana Romanelli et al., 2004), (Ceccariglia, 2010), (Mattozzi, 2000), (Orsi, 1992), (Osbat, 2003), (Pitocco, 1985), (Vitali, 2004), (Zanni Rosiello, 1987), (Zito, 2001).

### **Project. At Archive School**

A project was implemented (De Ceglia, 2015), for the identification of forms of reception and integration in an archive of a student audience, creating an *ad hoc* initiative at the diocesan archive “Arcivescovo Giovanni” in Trani, specifically aimed at training research in the diocesan archive, entitled “A Scuola di Archivio”. The archive can be considered as the first and proper research laboratory (Mordenti, 1985, p. 57). The archivists were called upon to present a cultural proposal not to the usual specialized researchers, but to secondary school students. This workshop stemmed from the need to combine the usual activities of visiting church archives and libraries with a deeper interaction that could make the students become the protagonists of a real research carried out by themselves. The world of primary and secondary education in the field of history didactics had shown a willingness to integrate direct customized experiences on the research of archive sources. The idea was to organize the didactics of ecclesiastical sources starting from parish funds, a fund that allows students first to directly interrogate archive sources, so that they can construct a research itinerary. After showing what kind of documentary sources make up a parish archive, the materials, annotations, rubrics, they moved on to describe what was written down and forms used and then reiterated over the centuries. The students were asked to start drawing up a family tree where the student himself is the centre, the starting point. Followed by his parents with their dates of birth and marriage, and the names of both paternal and maternal grandparents and their dates of birth, marriage and death. The research, in fact, had already started prior to these activities, as the family had been involved in the research of these sources and then went on to browse through the documents stored on some family shelves. The students took it in turns to consult archive sources to complete their family tree by going backwards. Approaching archive papers cultivates the desire to recognize oneself in a particular past, to feel it as one's own past (Vitali, 2004, p. 351). Reading the sources prepares one for autobiographical, genealogical, and local history investigations, which are indispensable for getting to know the past as that of one's own family, one's own country, one's own village, that of one's own community or one's own group.

Other types of documentation involved in this project were the states of souls, *status animarum*, which are registers containing personal and religious data of parish communities. This documentation is compiled or updated annually, usually on the occasion of the visit

made by the priest to the homes of parishioners for the Easter blessing. The register records the devotees according to family *nuclei* or *foci*, meant not as the natural family, i.e. made up of all the individuals united by kinship ties, rather as a community which includes those who have joined the family for other reasons, usually economic, work or sharing a house. Starting with the head of the family, each individual's name and surname, age, the relationship that binds him or her to the family unit, and his or her condition with respect to the sacraments of confirmation, confession, communion, or possible fulfillment of the Easter obligation are generally recorded. The documentary type lends itself to local topographical studies, registry and economic studies, etc.

The archive and its documents play a fundamental role in the reconstruction of personal or collective memory. The particularity of these documentary types in diocesan archives has contributed to the process of democratization of memory (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2001-2002, p. 133); whereas in the past it has been prerogative of a restricted section of society and for the exclusive use of the aristocratic classes. This research also evoked emotional and affective feelings in the students as they read the names of loved ones who were no longer with them in their daily lives. What is at stake in this research is actually the relationship between the living and the dead, or rather the encounter of the living with their dead (Vitali, 2004, p. 356). A reading of the archive through these filters also contributes to attributing to it that significance of guarantee of permanence and link between generations, which constitutes the other face of the archive as an instrument of memory-identity (Vitali, 2004, p. 356). Vitali continues (pp. 356-357) saying that their value lies in their ability to restore, in their very physical material appearance, the idea of a past that lives in the present: the merit of archives, wrote Lévi Strauss, is to bring me into contact with pure historicity ... [They] give a physical existence to history, since only in archives is the contradiction of an accomplished past and a present that survives it overcome" (Strauss, 1964, p. 262, cited in Vitali, 2004, pp. 356-357).

## Conclusions

It is not possible to describe hereby and explore all present and past projects that have been dealing with the teaching of history in archive sources. One of the teaching experiences I intend to mention on archive sources can be represented by the *Piccoli archivi crescono*

project (Cavazzana Romanelli, 2000, p. 60). In the field of ecclesiastical archives, an exemplary experience in the teaching of history was the one carried out by the historical archive of the Patriarchate of Venice (Cavazzana Romanelli et al., 2004). It would be desirable to have a complete census of all projects implemented or underway on this type of archive in order to establish a validated project of history teaching in ecclesiastical archives. In this way, the archive comes out of its own walls that sometimes delineate a divide between a general public and the public of specialists who usually frequent it, because if the world of libraries is more familiar to students, the archive is seen as a dusty and distant reality, and it is instead desirable to make them understand the importance, uniqueness and preciousness of this institution. From this point of view, the most productive experiences are those of encounters between school and archive; this could also be considered as a test of method (Cavazzana Romanelli, 1980).

The archive has been defined as a reservoir of memory or a place of memory “within ... that memory, which not only accumulates information and knowledge, but also forges identity and a sense of belonging, archives find themselves charged with evocative power - rich in affective resonances and for the most part almost unknown until now - that transforms them into repositories, not so much of memory-tool ... and memory-source ..., but of a memory of identity that has to do with what individuals and communities believe or propose to be” (Vitali, 2004, p. 353). This process, as Vitali states, has two sides: the first attributes a symbolic meaning to the archive as a material object; the second considers archives as fragments of the past to be incorporated into the self-representation of the self, as individuals or as a collectivity (Vitali, 2004, pp. 353-354). The first reading, as memory and identity, considers them as sources of elaboration and personal or family memories, with genealogical or related research, such as the search for the history of one's municipality, village or home (Vitali, 2004, pp. 353-354), granting everyone that right to a history of one's own family, which was once the privilege of the wealthy classes. Genealogical research is then the way to implement that right and archives are its instrument (Vitali, 2004, p. 355). The ultimate goal is to train young people with a historical culture, at the basis of which is the visibility of cultural assets, which are the foundation of the production of historical knowledge; it means training future citizens who are more aware of appreciating their cultural value. There is no

historical knowledge that is not indebted to the intellectuals who work behind the archives.  
(Mattozzi, 2000, p. 36).



Pupils of the “A scuola d'archivio” project at the “Giustina Rocca” public middle school in Trani, in collaboration with the Archdiocese of Trani, Office for Sacred Art and cultural heritage at the diocesan archive “Arcivescovo Giovanni” in Trani.



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## Biography

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