

Change Comes to The Eternal City: Vatican Librarian Leapfrogs into 21st Century

WILLIAM BUTTS

It's been more than three decades since, as a sophomore attending Loyola University of Chicago's campus in Rome, I mounted a crowd-control barricade in St. Peter's Square, raised an arm in dramatic greeting and shouted "Papa!" as John Paul II's Fiat Popemobile approached -- and he matched my gesture in return.

Minutes before, I'd stood amidst the crush of Loyolans to shake the pontiff's hand. After the Pope's vehicle finished circling the square and the crowd was dispersing, he stood off to one side, surrounded by some men in suits and a few officials. I slipped under a barricade and walked over, standing a few yards away as he answered reporter's questions in Italian and security paid me no attention. Try that today and you'd find yourself flat on the ground in seconds, a Swiss Guard knee in your back and the taste of cobblestone in your mouth. (Not that security was nonexistent in Rome: M16-toting soldiers were the first thing that greeted me at Fiumicino Airport, for the Italian left-wing terrorist group the Red Brigade was active at this time and had just kidnapped an American Army general.)

But this took place a couple of months before Turkish nationalist Mehmet Ali Agca shot John Paul II four times near the very same spot -- two decades before the 9/11 attack forever

changed big city security worldwide. While much of the world had to rush from the 20th into the 21st century practically overnight, the Roman Catholic Church still had many centuries' worth of Old-World ways about her. Vatican City had to pick her way around ancient, medieval and Renaissance buildings, structures, piazzas, fountains and of course St. Peter's Basilica that cram her 109 acres and figure out how to mesh this atmosphere with cold, hard *metal*: metal detectors, military Hummers, high-power machine guns, a maze of barricades. Modern security measures are plenty in evidence -- but Rome's la dolce vita survives still.

The Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana (Vatican Apostolic Library - "the Vat" to insiders) and Archivio Segreta Vaticana (Vatican Secret Archives) have a reputation as impenetrable fortresses. Want to meet the Pope? No problem: Attend the open morning mass held every Wednesday. You will see him and have a fighting chance to press some Francis flesh for a millisecond as the Popemobile makes the rounds of St. Peter's Square. Want to get into the Vatican Library or Archives? Well... prepare to present some serious scholarly chops, and well in advance. Don't think a letter from a professor will open doors as it once did. The process is rigorous. If you're one of the few thousand researchers annually allowed into the Library (roughly one thousand at the Archives) the specific materials you require will be brought to your study table. No such thing as "browsing the stacks." And if you're a journalist or media person, just hope you don't have a deadline looming.

The Head Librarian of the Library, who is also the Head Archivist of the Archives, sat down with me recently in his office for a candid, far-ranging discussion of these two institutions. After obtaining advance clearance, I enter at the Via di Porta Angelica and pass security, surrendering passports and getting clip-on visitor passes. We wander the football field-sized Belvedere Courtyard, empty but for employee vehicles -- it's a workaday Tuesday morning, after all. A few contradictory directions later the La Galatea entrance appears and just inside its doors the well-known

statue of the controversial early theologian St. Hippolytus of Rome, a 3rd century piece unearthed just outside Rome in the 16th century.

Sister Gabriella the translator escorts us down handsome if sparsely decorated corridors, pausing at a large wooden door that opens directly into a spacious, elegantly appointed office. Archbishop Jean-Louis Bruguès comes around a neat, orderly desk to welcome us. At age 74 the French-born Dominican monsignor appears fit and trim, the large silver cross about his neck starkly contrasting the immaculate black of his clerical waistcoat. His hair may be greying but it's not thinning; he projects vigor, energy, purpose. We settle in at a baroque seating arrangement and exchange pleasantries. It turns out His Excellency understands English quite well, but converses in it little, preferring Italian. No matter: Sister Gabriella's English is near impeccable; her twelve years at a Franciscan convent in Connecticut obliterated any trace of an Italian accent. Bruguès speaks in tones as measured and articulate as they are as fluid and lively.

Bruguès heads up two robust institutions, each with its own hierarchy. The Library and Archives each have their own prefects and vice-prefects to manage day-to-day affairs, while dozens of librarians, cataloguers, conservators, technicians and other staff perform all those duties necessary to keep functioning collections of eye-popping depth and breadth.

Some crowd-pleasing numbers: The Library contains about 42 miles of shelving which decades ago reportedly held well over two million *catalogued* items. Those "items" break down into more than 1.6 million books, 180,000 manuscripts, 8600 incunabula, 330,000 medals and coins, 150,000 drawings, engravings and prints, 150,000 photographs, numerous artifacts both sacred (in the *museo sacro*) and secular (in the *museo profane*). Its oldest documents date back to the first century. Bruguès predecessor Leonard Boyle called it "an academic center in the best humanist tradition," and indeed it houses not only theology but liberal arts and sciences: Science, law, history and philosophy are well represented in every

language imaginable, as are special niches such as music history and East Asian literature and languages. The Archives reportedly contain 53 miles of shelving housing 150,000 items organized into more than 650 subject areas – millions of pages of documents, much of it bound into large volumes. The bound catalogue alone fills 35,000 volumes – that’s a *selective*, not exhaustive, listing. Its oldest document dates back to the eighth century. There are also schools of library science and paleography, conservation and digitizing laboratories and much more. (Little known to the public is that the Vatican Library was actually a trailblazer in the late 19th century when the developing fields of library science and book and document conservation were in their infancy.)

Bruguès downplays the Vatican, though, pointing out that “There is Paris and London and Washington, also very important.” In terms of sheer size, it’s true that the Bibliotheque national de France’s 40 million items, the British Museum’s 174 million items and the Library of Congress’s 164 million items dwarf the Vatican’s collections – indeed, the Vatican Library and Archives don’t even make the list of the top twenty largest libraries in the world. Rankings of the *best* libraries in the world, however, place it near the top of that rarified list.

Before digging into the single hot-button issue that drives so much of what Archbishop Bruguès does, I ask how he got into that hot seat – whether being the 47th librarian of a library dating back to 1501 and the 41st archivist of an archive dating back to 1609 weighs heavily on him.

As with every question, Bruguès pauses and reflects before answering, like the seasoned academic he is. “Before coming here, Pope Benedict XVI named me as the Secretary for the Congregation for Catholic Education, so the relationship between me and Pope Benedict (and Cardinal Ratzinger before) is of a long date. We have been relating for more than twenty years, because we were on the International Theological Commission. For me, when I was named to that Congregation, my work was pretty easy because I had been

a professor at universities in France and Switzerland for more than thirty years.

“When my mandate as Secretary ended, the Pope’s secretary asked me: ‘We have two free spots -- in the Library or the Congregation for Family.’ The answer was very easy: ‘None of them. I don’t like either of them.’ After a couple months Pope Benedict called me and said, ‘If you don’t choose either of these places, I will choose it for you.’ Before his election Pope Benedict actually would have longed to be the Librarian and Archivist here, and so since then he was elected Pope and couldn’t, he wanted to realize his own dream through me.

But he didn’t say anything about the content of this dream. My main effort has been to try to find out what the dream of Pope Benedict was and to realize it in time. . . . this responsibility has not been a heavy responsibility for me.” Apparently Bruguès has not only reconciled himself to his position, but learned that his bookish nature makes him well suited to the task and he handles pressure with ease. He sounds like a happy man who loves what he does.

As for the nuts and bolts of his daily routine, Bruguès appears to thrive on challenge and variety. “For me, as I come to work, it’s really kind of like it’s a feast in the sense that it’s a very passionate work and so I like that.”

He elaborates, “In the morning I work here and it’s a regular office. I get a lot of correspondence and sometimes it’s a mountain of letters. In the morning I work in doing the correspondence but also in meeting many people. Morning is for appointments mainly, and then in the afternoon I usually come back here for meeting groups to show around the Library and to explain what the Library is about. The Library, and also the Archives...In order not to create any jealousy I do one day at the Library and one day at the Archives. . . . it’s administrative work, naturally, but also it’s very much a work of personal contact, of relationships.”

Bruguès also represents the public face of the Vatican Library and Archives. “I travel at least once a month for a week for the



Bill Butts meets with Archbishop and Archivist Jean-Louis Bruguès. *Courtesy of Julian W. Garcia.*

library,” he notes. “When I travel, I usually go after an invitation from a government or cultural institutions -- any kind of public place and other places or institutional associations that are preparing for an exhibit, for example. The Library participates each year in from twelve to nineteen international exhibits. So even though the Library might seem a static place with a static work, actually my life is very dynamic as I’m traveling all over the world.”

Occasionally Bruguès finds himself in a position unusual for an academic librarian. When dignitaries visit the Vatican and are given a behind-the-scenes tour of the Library and Archives, as did Prince Charles and Camilla recently, it’s often Bruguès who plays host. “Two years ago,” he recalls, “I was invited to Russia, to Moscow, to organize an exhibit, which was the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, which had just taken place. . . . the Russian government did not put the emphasis on the communist revolution, but on the Romanov family. They did this wonderful exhibit on the

relationship between the Romanov family and the Holy See from 1613 to 1916. When I was invited, I also went for the opening of the exhibit with a letter from the Secretary of State welcoming this exhibit. Then the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia came and so I found myself being an actor in front of a forest of channels and t.v.” He chuckles at this rock star memory.

If the Vatican Library and Archives have a 21st century mission statement, it could be summed up in one word: *Accessibility*. Much of Bruguès’ work – in fact, much of the Library and Archives activity these days – appears driven by an overdue realization that if the Library and Archives are to not just survive, but thrive, they have to give the appearance of relevance and accessibility. It’s as if a papal edict were handed down.

Part of the Archives’ image problem is purely linguistic. It’s unfortunate that when the Secret Archives were named the word “segreto,” from the Latin “secretus,” meant “private,” “separate” or “apart” as well as “secret.” Like any large organization, business or institution, the Archives purpose is to house the Holy See’s confidential in-house records: Internal communications, papal correspondence, state papers, financial records – many of them going back hundreds of years. (Emails? “Basically, because the Archives also keeps all of the correspondence between the Nunciatures and the Holy See right now it’s impossible to keep all of them,” Bruguès admits. “There has to be some kind of a screening to see which are the most important ones to keep.”) Add to that a policy of not releasing documents less than 75 years old plus a few other exclusions and rumors are sure to follow.

Calling anything “secret” begs conspiracy theorists to latch on and let imaginations run wild. There used to be those who believed, for instance, that the Vatican was behind the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. After all, wasn’t John Surratt, accomplice of John Wilkes Booth and son of soon-to-be-hung Mary Surratt, first tracked down months after the assassination working in the Vatican as a Pontifical Zouave or “Swiss Guard”? This latter fact actually

occurred (he soon escaped and made a beeline for Egypt) – but the closed nature of the Vatican Archives helped fuel such wild conjecture. The relationship between Pope Pius XI (1922-39) and the Third Reich likewise caused rumors of collaboration to swirl, but the release of many of those documents in recent years quelled much of the controversy.

In 2012, on the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Archives -- coincidentally the year of Bruguès' appointment – the Vatican hosted a landmark exhibit at the Capitoline Museums in Rome. Titled *Lux in Arcana: The Vatican Secret Archives Reveals Itself*, this exhibit of roughly one hundred items marked a huge departure for the famously publicity-shy institution. Recall, if you will, the best museum exhibition you've ever visited. Then recall the single showpiece item that many attended in order to see. Now imagine *one hundred items* of the caliber of that single showpiece. . . and you can begin to appreciate the *abbondanza* of *Lux in Arcana*.

The exhibit proved an immense triumph, introducing the public to treasures well-known and obscure. Vatican watchers hope it paves the way for more of the same in the future, though Bruguès cautions that “The Archives, because of the limited personnel, does not have the same ability to organize or to participate in international exhibits such as the *Lux in Arcana* exhibition in Rome.” The mile and a half from the Archives to the Capitoline Museums they could manage, but to bring it 4,500 miles to the United States or elsewhere wasn't in the budget. Accessibility is sure to remain an issue for fiscal and other reasons for some time to come, though, and change comes slowly – which is why one *Atlantic* article recently called the Archives “one of the most useless” because of inaccessibility.

Another issue confronting the Archives is the serious logjam of material awaiting cataloguing – an issue that faces almost every archive or special collections department and most antiquarian booksellers. After all, it wasn't until 2001 that a 60-foot long, 700-year-old manuscript known as the “Chinon Parchment” was rediscovered in a drawer of miscellaneous manuscripts. In this

intriguing document Pope Clement V absolved the controversial Knights Templar of their many supposed sins – ironic that this enormous piece should come to light just before Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* with its Knights Templar content caused a furor.

Here’s where computer technology helps speed things up, though. “Definitely there is authentic progress in the sense that when I was studying there were card catalogues and it was much more time consuming,” says Bruguès. “The cataloguing is really one of the main works of the Library and the personnel that is involved in it is working very hard at it, but we cannot say that we have catalogued *everything* – either in the Library or at the Archives.”

Even with computer wizardry there will likely always be a backlog. “For example, in the Archives on the third floor there are tables full of records and archives from the Roman families of the 1700s that haven’t been able to be opened and catalogued because of the lack of personnel... there are still probably treasures both in the Archives and the Library that we still don’t know.” One recent instance involved “the German-English composer Handel. He was here in Rome for two years with a noble family and he was supposed to do a composition a week. And so, the family left with the Archives all the production of these two years. Just as an example, in February there was a concert here of some of this music that was found – that is the first interpretation after two and a half centuries.”

Closely related to this issue is the perennial problem that all bibliophiles face – lack of space. In 1980 new underground storage space was added to the Archives. Bruguès elaborates, “We have built a bunker that basically can resist an atomic bombing. But we don’t want to try that, naturally. We went three floors underground but because of the weight and the length of the basilica we cannot dig any more down in the floor.” The subject comes up often when he speaks. “We have asked the governor of the Vatican city-state... to give us more space to put the Library’s books.”

Unlike the Archives, the Vatican Library has never had quite the reputation for unapproachability that haunts the Archives. In 1993 the Library held an exhibition at the Library of Congress nearly as spectacular as *Lux in Arcana*, the well-received *Rome Reborn: The Vatican Library and Renaissance Culture*. Bruguès clearly welcomes more of this openness. “We’re really counting on you to do this!” he laughs, for the U.S. would play a large role in making this happen.

“We have been able to start a fruitful relationship with many institutions in the United States,” he explains. “One of them, for example, is the famous University of Notre Dame... A couple of years ago we had organized, both by the university and us, a symposium together with an exhibit of some material that came from the Library to the University of Notre Dame where directors and other scholars from all over the United States participated. So, we’re really happy and try to really look at many of the proposals that might come from the United States.” The 2016 exhibit *The Promise of the Vatican Library* was the first of what will be a series of joint research projects to introduce an American audience to the Vatican Library.

Bruguès views the U.S. as critical to his vision of a more open and visible Vatican Library. “We started probably two or three years ago to really approach especially the American public, which is very” – he searches for just the right word – “not only nice but also *generous*, I would say – to make known really what is the treasure here in order for them to have support.” He goes on, “All of the times that I have been in the United States I really have liked very much and cherished very much the American culture... So, my dream... is to build more bridges between the Holy See and the United States.”

Accessibility in the internet age really means one thing: Digitization. “We have embarked on an adventure – which is the adventure of digitization,” Bruguès remarks, and the excitement in his voice is unmistakable. “The two advantages of the digitizations

are on one part conservation and on the other side is to make available the treasure that is here to a much larger group of people... our richness is in the antique manuscripts. We have about one hundred thousand manuscripts, antique manuscripts, and so naturally the biggest, the greatest effort of the Library is toward the manuscripts. We have decided to digitize only the manuscripts and not the printed books.”

From 2007 to 2010 the Library reluctantly closed its doors for a massive renovation, to the dismay of scholars needing to research there. Carpenters, plasterers and others plying their craft amidst working researchers wasn't working. But 2014 brought the announcement that that Library would digitize 3,000 manuscripts within four years. Bruguès happily notes that “Up to now we actually are up to fifteen thousand digitized manuscripts... There are in the Library ninety to one hundred thousand manuscripts, so we have a long road ahead. The digitization actually has the effect of opening up the Library to the outside world, but at the same time it kind of changed the idea of many people that here was kept everything secret and only accessible to some people. So that has changed.”

As for talk of another 79,000 of the Library's manuscripts being digitized after that, Bruguès comments: “Maybe a little bit more, but we're in the process...what has happened and is still happening is that sometimes states or particular governments ask for the digitization of special manuscripts that are more important to their culture or their country. And so, we receive economic support... to digitize them... We go back and forth with what their request is and what we can do with the efforts of the personnel that we have and the amount of economic support that we have.”

The Japanese have entered the picture here in a big way in making ultra-high-tech digitization available to the Library. “We... have very, very interesting relationships with some Japanese companies. For example, two years ago we signed a very important contract with a Japanese company for scanners that actually allow

us to do the digitization, respecting the particularity of the books. And also, the price actually – they picked that up” – funding valued “at nineteen million Euros. So now my look is going on two sides: One eye to Japan and the left side to America.” As for how the digitization is actually performed, “we received a gift to purchase the scanner and then our personnel are trained by the Japanese company to perform the digitization.”

The equalization of access, however, is what most pleases Bruguès. “With the digitization,” he beams, “we actually are able to reach a much more let’s say normal audience than before when just the scholars or people who are particularly studying some particular things would come here for consultation. And with the digitization, we are able to reach a greater public. In this sense we can say that digitization represents a more democratic procedure.” For the book and manuscript purists, on the other hand, a digital image cannot suffice. “Often, for example, in the Archives, there is a necessity to see the original document.”

In addition to digitization, accessibility also means simply letting in non-scholars. Tours of the Library and Archives for journalists are notoriously rare and often met with a refusal “because the Library is open to scholars and therefore it is not possible to disturb them.” Which brings up the fundraising opportunities that public access might bring with it. Bruguès is quick to point out that “the Vatican is not a rich entity... we cannot wait or expect from the Vatican the economic support that is needed both in the Library and the Archives... we have embarked on a project to develop an office for fundraising.”

The Holy See’s true wealth is much contested. Some sources maintain that the Vatican’s wealth numbers in the many billions; others maintain its wealth is far less than most think and is exceeded by many American universities, with most of its assets tied up in art and antiquities. Whichever the case, the Vatican is close-mouthed about it and little is known of the Library and Archives budget.

So why not offer for a fee an occasional guided tour of the

Library and Archives? To increase accessibility, offer access. Bruguès notes that digitization brings with it “a negative effect... many of the scholars who used to come here for consultation now can just sit at home and look at those things online – and therefore the number of scholars that are coming to consult the manuscripts and the books are decreased” – all the more reason why discreet, well-timed tours will *not* disturb scholars. Qualified, controlled limited access would go a long way toward dispelling myths and improving public relations – not to mention raising much-needed funds.

Perhaps Bruguès’ calming demeanor but forceful manner suggest that Pope Benedict XVI named him Head Librarian and Archivist because he saw him as a “closer” of sorts – someone who gets things done. As the Vatican struggles to remain relevant in the 21st century, Bruguès appears on the cusp of pushing through technical advances that have been decades in the making. It may seem baby steps, but the Library and Archives are many hundreds of years old and the Holy See two millennia. “The Library represents the cultural memory of the Church and the Archives represents the historic memory of the Church,” he proclaims solemnly.

No discussion with Bruguès would be complete without mention of the most famous depiction of the Secret Archives – that found in Dan Brown’s 2000 thriller *Angels and Demons* and its 2009 Tom Hanks film version. If you’re one of those few who experienced neither, there’s a scene in which symbologist Robert Langdon sneaks into the Archives to locate a rarer-than-rare (and fictional) Galileo Galilei title. He finds the Galileo archive in a high-tech “giant transparent cube,” a hermetically-sealed glass “diaphanous vault” with oxygen thinned to minimize oxidants.

The problem is this: The Vatican Archives contains no state-of-the-art bulletproof pods and never has. Its precious volumes are stored on pedestrian steel shelves surrounded by old-fashioned, climate-controlled air. “Naturally for many years the Library has been very attentive to all of the climate conditions, temperatures, etc., etc., which is a very important thing,” he assures me.



The *Registra Supplication*, one of the Vatican Secret Archives' more than 600 *fonds* or subject collections. *Courtesy of the Archivio Segreto Vaticano.*

But it clearly irks Bruguès, a serious scholar committed to thorough research, that the novelist chose not to depict the Archives accurately. “One of the disconcerting things is that, because I write books” -- here he appears flustered for a moment – “Dan Brown never really came here and really never checked out the historical part.” He bristles subtly. “He made a fortune, a lot of money, on fiction that was actually not checked through historically.” Subject closed.

I picture Bruguès, surrounded daily by extraordinary treasures, becoming attached to certain legendary Vatican artifacts: The transcript of Galileo’s heresy trial... Henry VIII’s saucy love letters to Anne Boleyn... Michelangelo’s letters dunning the Vatican for Sistine Chapel payment... the Codex Vaticanus, the oldest surviving text of the Greek Bible... in other words, all those things that make my heart go *thumpety*. But Bruguès names neither book nor manuscript as his favorite. “The main thing in the Library is the famous Sistine Hall, which is the library of the 1500s. Because on the left side there are all the libraries of the

world. There is the adventure of human reason. On the right side there all the ecumenical councils, the first ones. On that side we have the adventure of religious faith. Because of how it has been put” – here he raises one hand, then the other, over and over, like a scale seeking balance – “one library, one council, one library, one council, on and on. The whole two walls really represent that dialogue between faith and reason that we cherish now but is well represented then in 1585.”

Does the public truly understand the purpose and function of the Vatican Library and Archives? “It all depends basically on the sensitivity of the public to memory. If the public does not really have, does not *cherish*, memory, then there is no role of the Archives or the Library in their society. When the public is richer in their sensitivity to culture -- not necessarily rich economically, but has that sensibility - then the Library and the Archives have a role to play.”



Bill Butts, Archivist Bruguès, and the translator, Sister Gabriella examine artifacts in the Office of the Archivist. *Courtesy of Julian W. Garcia.*



Sistine Hall at the Vatican Library. *Courtesy of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.*

For someone as well versed in the past of his two institutions as is Bruguès, he focuses his vision on the future. As for the Library and Archives future, he is keenly aware that “Youth, especially in Western cultures, have a shrinking training and exposure to history or to anything classic. So, history has become really a subject that is not very important. For example, in the Muslim countries their youth is much more sensitive and trained in what is their history and the memory that they have to keep. Therefore, the capacity of the population to really embark or look to the future is in their ability to look at their memory, to look at their history...”

Bruguès’ thoughts taper off. He muses a few moments. “Without memory,” he concludes, “there is no future.”