

## Catholic News of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow at Your Fingertips

By Jennifer Younger, Executive Director, Catholic Research Resources Alliance, and Director of the Hesburgh Libraries Emerita, University of Notre Dame

Digitization has made a vast body of historical newspapers and documents instantly accessible to scholars and students on their desktops, laptops, tablets, and phones. Yet the leading online sources — such as the Library of Congress’s huge database of historical American newspapers and state newspaper collections — are largely focused on municipal and trade newspapers, with Catholic newspapers conspicuously under-represented.

It is all too easy for scholars in any field to overlook Catholic newspapers and lose the richness of significant Catholic voices found in the public media. Timothy Meagher, associate professor of history, curator of the American Catholic History Collection, and university archivist at the Catholic University of America, has said, “Think how much more significant it would be if all Catholic newspapers were online, ensuring the Catholic tradition, experiences, and views of Catholics continue to be part of the American dialog. Absent from the [Internet],” he concluded, “Catholics may well soon be invisible in history.”

### Developing a Free Online Resource

The Catholic Research Resources Alliance (CRRA), a nonprofit membership alliance of academic, diocesan, and religious congregation libraries and archives, accepted Meagher’s challenge. We heard the pleas of scholars, newspaper editors, archivists, and librarians for online access and digital preservation. With generous financial support from 24 founders and two grants from the Catholic Communication Campaign of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, CRRA established the [Catholic News Archive](#). Early content includes 10,720 issues from nine diocesan papers (in Cincinnati, Hartford, Miami, New Orleans, Newark [NJ], Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and St. Louis), the Catholic News Service (CNS) historic newsfeeds through 1986, the *National Catholic Reporter*, and the *Catholic Worker* (forthcoming). We are grateful to these bishops and papers for their permission to include their content for freely available access via the Internet.

A growing number of bishops and papers have expressed additional interest and we are seeking collaboration with

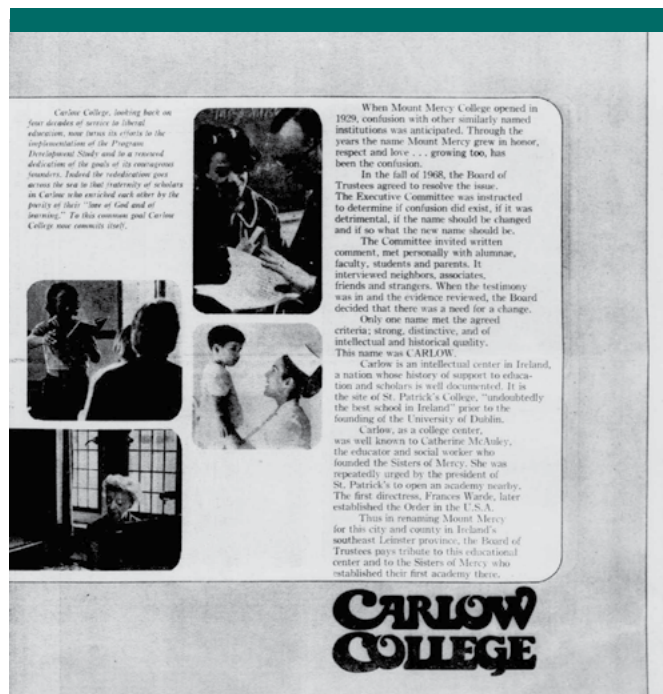
other organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit, to expand the archive. CRRA will partner, however, only with those that allow us to be true to our mission: using modern technology to preserve the rich history of Catholicism in the United States, so that it is freely available to all, without a paywall or other commercial barriers. As Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans expressed to CRRA so eloquently, “The Catholic Church needs to have its history easily accessible to researchers and interested readers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. The CRRA digitizing project will allow us to tell our story directly and effectively.”

### What Scholars Are Saying

Usage statistics show that from January through April 2018, the average number of individual users was 1,149 per month, a big jump from the monthly average of 400 in 2017. Trending topics include parish histories, Catholic advocacy and charity on human rights, diversity, war, desegregation in schools, and even the Super Bowl, enabling scholars and students to easily unearth many accounts of the Catholic Church’s important contributions to a wide range of human endeavors.

Catholic newspapers have long been a primary resource for research. James P. McCartin, director of the Fordham University Center on Religion and Culture and an early advocate of online access, said, “My students and I frequently use Catholic newspapers to illuminate how Catholicism engages with the broader context in which it exists. We explore many different questions, most currently how attitudes of Catholics toward family life are congruent with or different from the attitudes of others in the United States.”

Similarly, Paula Kane, Marous Chair in Contemporary Catholic Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, wrote about the use of Catholic papers in student research projects. Students might explore the editorial outlook on specific issues or how major subjects such as the Vatican, the Homestead Strike of 1892, the Great Depression, and the assassination of John Kennedy are reported. “Students,” she said, “love to click to their sources, rather than going through hard-bound newspaper issues in the stacks.... One student who was researching the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh was able to locate information in digitized Irish newspapers, as well as in the local *Pittsburgh Catholic*.”



A page from the *Pittsburgh Catholic* in 1969, recalling some of the history of Carlow University (then Carlow College).

### Turning Disparate Papers into a Narrative

A fascinating story comes from Mary Brown, archivist at the Center for Migration Studies in New York, who tells how the Catholic News Archive was helpful in turning a folder of disparate papers into a story of refugee rescue. She and an intern were looking for something among the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) Bureau of Immigration records when Mary noticed the Bureau's Czechoslovakia file seemed thicker than the usual folder.

"To our astonishment, we found documents from the 1930s describing the Czech Catholic immigrant aid agency's efforts on behalf of refugees from the Nazis," she recounted. Using clues from the documents, they found press releases from the NCWC/CNS newsfeeds "about 'political changes' in Czechoslovakia [and] described Czech Catholic efforts to aid co-religionists whose Jewish ancestry left them vulnerable to the Nuremberg laws recently imposed on their country." Matching names, dates, and activity reports, they were able to tell the story that the documents alone failed to convey.

*"Journalism has been called the first rough draft of history. Looking beyond the main headlines of old newspapers, at minor stories, and even advertising gives us a sense of the culture of a particular time, and helps us place past and current events in historical perspective."*

— K. E. Colombini, author of *"Tracing Church History through Old Newspapers,"*  
*First Things, May 18, 2017*

It is rewarding at this early stage to learn how the archive supports the goal we have set. David E. Cassens, dean of libraries at Saint Louis University, described it this way: "The major goal of the Catholic News Archive is to provide concurrent access to primary source materials that in most cases have been available only to a limited number of scholars and students. This important project will result in a wholesale transformation of how Catholic newspapers are read and studied by scholars, students, and the general public, enhancing humanities scholarship in a significant way." ✦

CRRA welcomes your suggestions, use, advocacy, and support. Write to us at [jyounger@catholicresearch.org](mailto:jyounger@catholicresearch.org).