



SO THE STORIES  
CAN BE TOLD

Women Religious  
Archives Collaborative



**W**e could tell stories before we learned to read. Stories help us understand ourselves and how we came to be. Whether taken from Greek mythology, Hebrew or Greek Scripture, novels, movies, or family lore, stories provide us with a context. They can be a guide. Or as one religious sister wrote about her congregation's stories, "They are a source of inspiration and delight for future generations."

### **Sr. Dorothy Kazel, OSU: Still a Symbol of Hope**



During the Civil War in El Salvador, on December 2, 1980, Sr. Dorothy Kazel, lay missionary Jean Donovan, and Maryknoll Sisters Maura Clarke and Ita Ford

were abducted and brutally murdered by five members of the Salvadoran National Guard. Preaching the Gospel and ministering to the corporal and spiritual needs of the poor were the "crimes" the four women had "committed."

In the years since her death, Sr. Dorothy has become a symbol of hope and healing in a world fraught with violence, injustice, and poverty. Sr. Dorothy's example speaks of the reality of ordinary people. Living in a climate of fear fostered by hate crimes, mass shootings, and other terrorist acts in our world today, we need Sr. Dorothy's example of courage and hope to continue to speak to us, to calm us, to remind us of what is truly valuable, and to lead us back to love in all areas of our lives.

### **Sr. Ignatia Gavin, CSA: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous**



Sr. Ignatia Gavin was sent to the newly-opened St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, OH, where she worked in the admitting office. It was there that she met Dr. Bob Smith and Bill Wilson, co-founders

of AA. At the time, alcoholism was largely seen as a moral failing rather than a disease worthy of formal treatment. But when Dr. Bob approached Sr. Ignatia and asked her to admit an alcoholic patient, she agreed. Sr. Ignatia gave the man a diagnosis of "acute gastritis," and, as there were no free rooms, set him up with a bed in the hospital's flower room. As Sr. Ignatia said much later, it seemed to her at the time to be a routine action in her position as hospital registrar. But the action wasn't quite that routine! St. Thomas Hospital is considered to be the first religious institution in the US to admit an alcoholic patient.

Sr. Ignatia is credited with helping 15,000 persons recover under her direct influence and assisting 60,000 family members through the Al-Anon sessions she initiated. However, she always thanked the hundreds of AA members for any success attributed to her.

**READ MORE STORIES HERE**  
[archivescollaborative.org/stories](https://archivescollaborative.org/stories)



# “If we don’t tell our own stories, no one else will.”

- MIRA NAIR, FILMMAKER

**Every story needs a storyteller.** Who better to tell the stories of Catholic sisters in America than these women themselves? Within the archives of congregations of Catholic sisters are stories that must be told...told in their own voices.

The Women Religious Archives Collaborative (WRAC) will establish a permanent heritage center in Cleveland, Ohio, for the archives of congregations of Catholic sisters. Through interactive programming and historical research, the heritage center will continue to tell important stories of sisters who built the Catholic Church in America and impacted society in countless ways.

Data from a 2022 study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University and 2023 data from the National Religious Retirement Office reinforce the urgency that congregations of Catholic sisters experience in managing their archives.

- 81% of Catholic sisters are **70+ years old**, while 4% are younger than 40.
- 43% of those participating in the CARA study have **fewer than 50 members**, and of those 22% have **fewer than 20 members**.
- More than one-third of congregations in the CARA study report the **need to relocate their archives** within the next ten years, with 15% saying it needs to be done within the next five years.

**Most alarming is that 50% of congregations in the CARA study report having no plan in place for what to do with their archives even as the Church requires that archives be preserved. Other congregational issues are consuming time and energy of community leaders.**

Religious communities have an urgent need for a heritage center for these reasons as the numbers of sisters decrease: lack of space as congregations move into smaller facilities; lack of professionally trained archivists; merged provinces or consolidated congregations; congregations completing their mission.

You are invited to join us in supporting these sisters. They need real, practical, feasible assistance. You can help them just as they helped all of us in classrooms, hospital rooms, orphanages, or women’s shelters. You can help them in honor of their mission work on the American Western frontier, or their advocacy for justice and civil rights in America’s cities.

**They were there for us. We are now here for them. WRAC will serve those who served us.**



Catholic sisters and Catholic schools in the United States are synonymous, from elementary and high schools to universities, and as parish catechists.

Prayer is the center of life for all Catholic sisters, and for some it is their primary ministry—praying for us and for our world.



Fearless and faithful, Catholic sisters have lived and served among the poor in our forgotten neighborhoods. They sponsor women's shelters, food pantries, after-school programs, and health clinics.



We have Catholic sisters to thank for health care. Hospitals have been a primary ministry for many congregations of Catholic sisters.



For Catholic sisters, care for the Earth and all the life within is an act of praise and worship of God, the Creator.

As community leaders here and bold missionaries abroad, Catholic sisters witness to Gospel values in their work for human rights and social justice.



“A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.”

- GRAHAM GREENE, NOVELIST

There are three priorities for creating this Archives Center:



## SHARE

American history cannot be told without recounting the inspired service of these bold, undeterred, and brave women who cared for the elderly and orphans, opened schools as America pressed west, served vulnerable communities here and abroad, marched for civil rights, and established hospitals that advanced health care, especially for the poor. This history cannot be lost or forgotten. This new heritage center will have a dedicated exhibit space to showcase the rich history and legacy of congregations of Catholic sisters from around the region. It will indeed be a place where the story gets told.



## STUDY

Scholars and researchers know the importance of these archives, sometimes more than the vowed religious themselves. The archives have much yet to tell and are the legacy—the gift—that Catholic sisters can share with the world. In their own voice, we learn who they were and how they served. More than a repository, this will be a center for active research and creative programming. Researchers and historians will have in one place access to an invaluable collection of archives across different congregations with different histories and different missions, all threads that tell an important story of faith.



## SECURE

With each passing year, more congregations of Catholic sisters must find a permanent solution for safeguarding their archives as they grow smaller or lose their capacity to care for their historical legacy. WRAC heritage center will be an important resource to these congregations. Professional staff will help congregations prepare their archives and remain in a dynamic partnership with the congregations once the transfer takes place. This is a true “collaborative” where sisters of each congregation can tell their own stories in their own voice, and then together tell some vital piece of America’s history.

WRAC will become an exciting and dynamic center for research and learning, attracting a wide range of interested historians.



“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

- MAYA ANGELOU, POET

WRAC will construct its center in Cleveland’s Central neighborhood on the outskirts of the city’s downtown. The archives collaborative will join other anchor institutions, including Cuyahoga Community College, Cleveland State University, and St. Vincent Health Campus, in a renaissance of this neighborhood. WRAC will be immediately accessible to seven area colleges and universities and the nearby Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland Public Library, The Western Reserve Historical Society, and Cleveland Museum of Natural History. With the potential for strong partnerships with its academic and research neighbors, with easy access via Interstate Highways 90 and 77, and a 15-minute car ride from Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, WRAC will become a dynamic center for research and learning, attracting a wide range of interested historians.

## PARTICIPATING CONGREGATIONS

*Current as of November 1, 2023*



**Ursuline Sisters of Toledo**



**Carmelite Sisters**  
*Cleveland, Ohio*





The new archives center aligns with project architect Bostwick Design Partnership's passion to design diverse, challenging, and fulfilling projects.

WRAC has engaged Bostwick Design Partnership to help create this heritage center. Consistent with the Archives Collaborative mission, Bostwick has 60 years of experience in designing library and education spaces for "exploration, creation, and contemplation that invite participation, foster connections, and evolve along with community needs and aspirations."

WRAC has 14 current participating congregations (as of November 2023) and is awaiting confirmation from more than 10 others. The heritage center will be designed for future expansion as the need arises when it should be able to manage up to 30 different congregation's archives.

Joining together in a collaborative heritage center significantly reduces the financial burden on individual congregations to support their own archives. Through cost sharing, WRAC can provide appropriate storage, staff, workspace, and research areas, including space for exhibits, meetings, and events. This sustainable finance model includes an operating endowment to support ongoing programming.

- This 32,000 square-foot facility will include:**
- 16,000 square-foot temperature-controlled, fire-suppressing archival vault.
  - Study area for guests and researchers.
  - Programming space and gallery for historical displays.
  - Staff and intern offices.
  - Catering/serving kitchen to host events and meetings.



Join us in creating this archives center

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**For more information or to make a gift or pledge, contact:**



Sister Susan Durkin, OSU  
Executive Director  
[sdurkin@archivescollaborative.org](mailto:sdurkin@archivescollaborative.org)  
216.287.5176

**Help us write the next chapter!**

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