

Librarians as Keepers of Faith: Our Task at Home and Abroad


by Hans Arns

Moments of crisis have a habit of jolting us into life-changing decisions. Like all of you, I had to face a number of these crucial moments in my life, but it is the consequences of two major ones I had to meet that I would like to share with you this morning. The first of these I encountered at the age of forty when my family had to work through the tragedy of losing our youngest child. That happened at the end of a two year period in Melbourne where I worked at the Baillieu Library. To cope with that crisis we decided that a change of living environment was needed. So when an advertisement appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald for a librarian to organize the historical library at St Patrick's



College in Manly on Sydney's seaside, I decided to apply. It not only appealed to my Catholic antecedents but the move also brought us back to family and roots. That change in career and environment was to become a great source of healing. The Catholic Theological Faculty, as it was then called, offered me the job and my decision to take that challenge led to an exciting twenty year period between 1976 and 1996 during which time I was able to reorganize, develop and open up this magnificent but decaying historical collection in one of the most beautiful places on earth to the wider world. Perched high above Manly, my office window faced the Pacific Ocean and an amazing view of the Peninsula coastline and the daily walk along the beachfront kept me fit during those years of toil. This move from a job into a vocation was the source of much joy. I think it finally landed me in a situation in which God wanted me to be. The new environment also gave my family an opportunity to flourish.

However, it was not long after arriving in Manly that I began to feel professionally isolated in my lonely splendour so I decided to ring around to other theological librarians in Sydney and the region to see if they might be interested in meeting to share professional knowledge, work towards common goals and foster friendship. A remarkable response from librarians of all denominational stripes in Sydney and New South Wales indicated that it would fill



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a great need. It led to regular and most enjoyable meetings at each other's institutions, we got ourselves a primitive constitution and a newsletter and it became the beginning of long cooperation and many initiatives as you all know.

In the meantime Trevor Zweck had, initially unbeknown to us, started a similarly successful initiative in South Australia. After some mutual exchange the two groups decided to meet at the annual ANZATS meeting, which was held in Melbourne during the winter of 1978. While continued association with ANZATS proved impractical, we decided to work towards a formation of a national association, which after several further meetings came about in 1986 when Australian and New Zealand theological libraries joined in what has become ANZTLA. Those early beginnings and its many subsequent achievements have been well documented by Kim Robinson and others so I won't elaborate on them further here. A little aside on one of these achievements may however be in order.

A modest union list of periodicals held by a number of theological libraries in Australia was compiled by Fr John O'Rourke, CM in 1975. As an updated and expanded edition was much needed I got to work with the help of Sr Marianne Dacy and we produced the first edition in 1983 of what became known as AULOTS. After preparing a further expanded paper edition in 1990, Tony McCumstie took over this initiative and put the data online after I retired in 1996, while updating and further expanding it. As you all know he is still keeping this onerous task going at present. To him be laud and praise as I am sure you all agree that AULOTS has and is still contributing significantly to theological learning and scholarship in Australasia and beyond in years past.

The decrease of ministerial students after the 1960s and increase of lay enrolment in courses led to the decision to close the Manly site in the early 1990s and transfer both the Catholic Institute of Sydney and the diocesan seminary to separate central Sydney locations in Strathfield and Homebush. That took place in 1995. As I had only one assistant to keep a full library service running, to plan and coordinate with architects and builders you can imagine the strains it put on myself and my family. We also installed a Dynix ILS, increased our staff to five persons and even had to provide a full year of library service with just a Special Reserve collection, as the whole collection had gone into storage! However, the outcome was a magnificent modern, spacious and fully automated library to house our expanded modern collections and a fine array of specialized collections built up during my years in Manly. They included a much needed Centre for Australian Catholic Documentation, gathering the printed output of Australian Catholicism, a project very close to my heart.

While all this went on a second personal crisis came to a head and led to my early retirement in late 1996. By then all was running smoothly at the new Strathfield site, leaving it for someone else to further develop my vision. So much in my life had been preparing



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for a paradigm shift in my views of church and world that a spiritual stocktaking could no longer be postponed. While some of my colleagues may be able to separate work and world view I am a person who needs to align heart and work to function effectively. After much hesitation I therefore decided to row to other shores at the rather young age of 60.

As the situation of Catholic libraries had rapidly deteriorated with the closure of seminaries and Congregational libraries after the 1960s, I then undertook to compile a vision document for the NSW Catholic Bishops, which kept me occupied during 1998, outlining ways and means to keep providing good access to the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the People of God. It was carefully read by some but proved to be most disappointing in the execution of its recommendations.

As we were financially sufficiently secure I then decided to put my skills to work helping Catholic seminarians and others in the third world preparing for a ministry relevant to our age and the needs of their societies. Official statistics tell us there are almost 10,000 seminarians preparing for ministry in some hundreds of seminaries throughout the world. As celibacy is the stumbling block for many, these seminaries have a huge attrition rate. Many of those educated in these institutions leave to become leaders in various layers of their societies and knowing that provided a further incentive to share my talents by volunteering in the developing world.

After looking at various options, I accepted a desperate call to put the library of PNG's national Catholic seminary in Bomana (Port Moresby), which had fallen on hard times, back on track again. So off I went in 1999 as an Aesop Business Volunteer, completely unprepared for the horrors that lay in wait for me. A library, totally unsuited to the tropics, a mouldering card catalogue that bore no resemblance to actual stock, library staff that pilfered books for resale as well as huge issues of safety to life and limb were only some of the problems I had to meet, in addition to overwhelming heat and other discomforts. However, Divine Providence watched over me and after six months we had the place back in shape again. We started with culling large amounts of unsuitable, unused, outdated and insect infected material which ended up in a deep pit on campus! I then set to work cataloguing the remainder with BiblioFile catalogue software and data brought along from the Manly library. Those data gave us an amazing hit rate of about 85%. Following that ordeal I took 13,000 catalogue records back to Australia and had them seamlessly loaded into an Athena catalogue and library system. On a second visit to Port Moresby, while bringing along a shipment of books, we got the LMS up and running and I was able to train an Indian Sister to manage the library, as well as a national assistant. Fourteen years later that ILS is still working, even though the software has been superseded following a company takeover. We also managed to draw up plans for an economically rebuilt and air-conditioned




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library with the help of a local architect and we found three funding bodies which provided financial assistance with its implementation.

When word of this got out, I was asked by Pacific Regional Seminary to make a more successful attempt at automating and cataloguing its collection. After an exploratory visit, I spent six months in Fiji during 2004 again automating the library with an Athena ILS and cataloguing 12,000 of its 18,000 items collection using the combined data of Manly and PNG(!). At that time we still did not have the easy Z39.50 options for obtaining good cataloguing records that we now have. A lovely campus and environment made the stay at this seminary at the crossroad of so many Pacific oral cultures and musical traditions an experience that remains grafted in my memory. My patient wife joined me there for a month during which we also made a wonderful visit to Tonga. While keeping up contact with many overseas seminary libraries in intervening years I kept myself busy in Australia cataloguing and reorganizing the Broken Bay Diocesan Library in Pennant Hills, much of the Benedictine collection in Arcadia and was asked to catalogue two major rare book collections at the Catholic Institute of Sydney in Strathfield. In between these jobs, I spent six eventful weeks in Banz, located in the beautiful but ever so dangerous PNG Highlands where I automated another seminary library and trained its librarian to catalogue and manage it.

In 2009, Michael Kelly, an old friend and by then Abbot General of a Benedictine Order asked me to go to the assistance of their monasteries in India and Sri Lanka as they needed to reorganize four libraries and have their librarians trained in the rudiments of librarianship. So I got to work preparing about twenty short online modules on the various aspects of our profession for use at a workshop or for self-education later on. The extended workshop was held over three weeks in Bangalore in spite of major interruptions of internet and electricity supply. I then followed this up with working visits to a number of theological/monastery libraries in Kerala and Sri Lanka. Following that foray I went to Sri Lanka in 2010 to follow up on a promise to reorganize and catalogue their small but historically significant monastery library in Kandy. As this was only a house library we used LibraryThing software, adequate for their needs and easy to maintain by the community. Assignments like these provide a marvellous opportunity to experience cultures with their up and downsides from the inside. If there is anywhere I lost my heart, it was there in Sri Lanka. As things stand at present I may find it there again on an assignment to the Sri Lankan Seminaries next year!

During all these peregrinations it had become patently obvious that seminary and theological libraries in “the majority world” were all suffering with the same problems of isolation, stagnation, lack of trained staff, lack of resources, and an inability to take advantage of the electronic revolution, the benefits of which were just eluding them. As I had been dealing specifically with Catholic seminaries



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in the “majority world”, I made a number of approaches to Roman agencies with specific proposals to turn this situation around. After many failed attempts, I was approached quite unexpectedly by the Secretary General of the Society of St. Peter the Apostle when I was holidaying in Rome in May 2012. This agency is the major funder for the education of Catholic seminarians in the developing world and they definitely were interested in my proposals.

As a result and trusting in Divine Providence, a project was set up for these seminary libraries, entitled *Sharing the Word*, to implement the initiative’s aims. Its management was entrusted to Catholic Mission Australia with myself as its co-ordinator. Its programme is quite extensive and ranges from automating libraries, training their staff, improving stock, providing new ways of accessing information, open source initiatives and much else. Its outcomes depend very much on the active cooperation of seminary libraries wanting to join it of course and some have already enthusiastically embraced it. While a budget is in place, the work is currently undertaken by only two volunteers and of these I am, at the age of almost 77, the only person with professional library background.

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After acquainting myself with the software, I visited Pacific Regional Seminary in Suva in September 2012 to train its staff in the use of a hosted Koha solution set up through the Sydney facilitator Prosentient. That installation has been a major success but Suva is fairly unique in the reliability of its access to the Internet.

The next seminary library, in Yangon (Myanmar), presented an altogether different challenge. As Myanmar is only just emerging from the misery of long isolation and impoverishment, my visit was met with great enthusiasm and willingness to learn. Internet there was still unreliable so after acquiring a number of computers and a server, and after finding a brilliant self-taught IT person to assist me, we installed a Koha on CD solution, in which an Indian Koha aficionado had put together Koha along with underlying software on a Linux Ubuntu platform, all ready for installation from a CD, downloaded from the Internet. It has worked beautifully so far and the librarian has already catalogued its nearly 8,000 books with the help of Z39.50. Since then, we have supplemented its outdated library with another 2,000 chosen titles, mainly gifts from Australian libraries and scholars. While in Yangon I was also able to hold a short workshop for librarians in other theological libraries in that city.

Following calls from two seminary libraries in Zambia, we found a very capable Zambian librarian with excellent knowledge of Koha as well as IT skills and he has now set up, with financial help by

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Catholic Mission Australia, a similar ILS connected with Z39.50 at both locations, where cataloguing with Z39.50 is now well on its way. Following a recent well-attended Koha workshop held in Nairobi, a number of Kenyan libraries are now following suit. We are also having discussions with seminaries in Sri Lanka, Malawi and other countries wanting to come aboard.

We are currently looking at implementing a Koha catalogue with DSpace attached that should allow us to provide seminaries with an increasing amount of targeted open source monographs and articles online. To it, we hope to attach catalogues of individual stand-alone libraries in the Project, providing each one with secure online searching access to their own catalogue from outside their library as well as a host of online data and hopefully resources like the ATLA Religion database. For stand-alone libraries without adequate or too costly internet access this will mean installation of a standard integrated Koha setup prepared by Prosentient, and the forwarding of updated data at regular intervals to the common catalogue. Each library will have default access to its own holdings. We can immediately add some 1,300 targeted open source titles, many from sources like *Internet Archive*, which can be read online or downloaded in various e-formats to personal readers. These data have recently been made available to ANZTLA libraries and some of them have already incorporated them in their catalogues. With DSpace in place, we can then also start negotiating online access to textbooks, indexes, articles and other material to assist that multitude of struggling Catholic seminary libraries throughout the world. We also would like to set up a dialogue forum as exists for ANZTLA and ABTAPL, and update online instructional material for library staff in these libraries. A newsletter is in the planning stages and a new website for the project has recently been set up at <http://sharingtheword.info/>, which we hope to connect to the projected union catalogue and on which other services will be hosted.

While the Project is now well on its way, we have to secure its future with people able to manage the *Sharing the Word* Project, co-ordinate its activities and take it forward. Unfortunately, time does not stand still and I am fast approaching my use-by date as I approach my 77th birthday. While we would have liked some Religious Congregation or group to take on the Project as part of its missionary activities, the institutional malaise and ageing membership of these communities makes it seemingly impossible to go that way. So instead we are looking for a person with enthusiasm, with a strong library and some theology background, an interest in library automation, a willingness to travel, but especially great sympathy with the aims of the Project. Funding is now in place to employ a part-time person to co-ordinate its work and anyone interested should make contact with the Director of Catholic Mission Australia (Martin Teulan on director@catholicmission.org.au) who takes a strong and very active personal interest in the Project. If the prospect of co-ordinating the



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Project does not appeal but you would like to volunteer with any of its specific aims we would also very much like to hear from you.

Theological libraries in many struggling economies, or with only small and poor Christian communities to maintain them, need all the help they can get. I personally have found it very satisfying work to share my expertise and enthusiasm in so many places. It opens up whole new worlds and creates many lasting friendships as people take you into their communities, their cultures and their hearts. You may have to overcome considerable cultural, linguistic and institutional hurdles, but it makes the achievements ever so satisfying.

For those colleagues who have not finished their careers or have family obligations I would advise to make contact with some struggling theological library and consider a twinning arrangement between your library and theirs to provide help in educating staff and sharing knowledge and resources. With Internet, chat, face to face dialogue on Skype, email and scanners so much can be done. It does not cost much beyond a little effort but this solidarity with our struggling Christian colleagues can make a major difference to them.

Theological libraries have a crucial role to play in keeping our Christian faith and heritage alive and available to the world of today. They connect our Christian past and our future and provide access to almost two thousand years of engagement with the Word of God. We now face their metamorphosis as the digital age threatens not only their future but our very ability to access this heritage as it is being alienated by devious commercial interests, a threat even more real for believers in struggling economies. It is our task to guard this heritage and make it accessible in every corner of our world. I could not think of a greater vocation than that.