
LISTEN AND LEARN SESSIONS

Expanding Research Horizons

The Catholic News Archive as a Resource for
Social and Cultural Inquiry

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ABSTRACT The Catholic News Archive (CNA) is an invaluable digital resource, granting researchers access to a wide range of Catholic newspapers that illuminate theological, social, cultural, and political developments. This article demonstrates how scholars, students, and librarians can employ the CNA to investigate historical narratives, public discourse, and community dynamics, particularly in relation to issues such as immigration, civil rights, education, and international relations. The CNA's extensive holdings, including non-English and ecumenical newspapers, offer unique perspectives on immigrant communities and interfaith dialogues, making it a vital tool for interdisciplinary research. Practical guidance is provided for effectively navigating the Archive, integrating its rich primary sources into teaching and research, and fostering critical engagement with historical media that shaped both local and global Catholic experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic News Archive (CNA) stands today as a vital, innovative resource for scholars, librarians, archivists, and the public interested

in Catholic history, thought, and news in North America. Its creation and growth are a key part of the mission of the Catholic Research Resources Alliance (CRRA), whose broader mission is to provide enduring global access to Catholic research resources in America. Examining the history of the CNA reveals the challenge of making Catholic news sources widely available, while also illustrating the value of a digital archive. Additionally, this resource surfaces the vast array of benefits these newspapers represent for those studying social and cultural issues viewed through a Catholic lens.

ABOUT THE ARCHIVE

Origins and Motivation

The beginning of the CNA can be traced to an identified need. Catholic newspapers had not been added to the different digital newspaper projects, leaving a gap in access for researchers and other interested users. Recognizing the unique nature and historical significance of Catholic newspapers, CRRA took on the challenge to digitize and make these materials accessible in a single archive. This was not solely a matter of capturing mainstream Catholic perspectives; it was also about preserving regional and local voices, opinions, and historical records critical for a full understanding of Catholic life, culture, perspective and influence in North America.

BUILDING THE ARCHIVE: COLLABORATION

The development of the CNA was the result of collaborative efforts. From its start, the CNA relied on this collaboration to support its technical and operational needs. The work of the CRRA founding institutions contributed significantly, supporting the Archive's technical, administrative, and other needs, and providing ongoing support. The CNA began with major city and selected national newspapers, maximizing the research value by allowing users to compare regional and national Catholic coverage. The CNA was envisioned as a phased project, acknowledging the substantial financial and logistical demands of extensive digitization.

THE VALUE OF THE CATHOLIC NEWS ARCHIVE

The CNA's value is multifaceted. First, it brings together Catholic newspapers, many of which were previously inaccessible. By centralizing these materials on a robust digital platform, the CNA not only preserves them for future generations, but also democratizes access. Researchers no longer face barriers of distance as the resource is available online and open access. Scholars can quickly trace trends in Catholic perspectives on public issues. Even genealogists and local historians can delve into community life as documented in parish and diocesan bulletins.

Beyond practical access, the Archive's scholarly value is immense. The ability to compare local, regional, and national Catholic voices offers critical insight into the role of the Catholic Church in broader social, political, and cultural movements. Scholars of American history, religious studies, sociology, and political science have a unique tool through which to examine how Catholic communities reported on, adjusted to, and influenced the events that were occurring around them. In an era where questions of religious identity and inter-religious relations are deeply relevant, the CNA provides crucial primary sources for informed debate and analysis.

Additionally, the CNA is continuously expanding as new materials are digitized and integrated. Being open access, it ensures that not only academics, but also members of the public can explore the diversity of American Catholic history.

EXPLORING THE ARCHIVE

Scope of CNA Coverage

As mentioned above, content within the CNA comes from parishes, dioceses, and organizations from across North America. As of July 2025, the Archive holds content from twenty-nine sources. These sources represent regions from the Pacific Northwest, to Louisiana, to Boston, MA. Some are national publications, while others are local diocesan papers. Yet each brings to bear a unique voice and unique perspective from each region on social and cultural issues and events. Depending on the title, these newspapers also span the years 1831 to 2024, thus covering many events that have occurred in

American history. Within this collection, a researcher will discover social, cultural, and regional differences as they seek to understand Catholics' and the many Catholic churches' views on these events. Likewise, the Archive provides the opportunity to look across time to understand changing social and cultural perspectives.

CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVES

A researcher using the Catholic News Archive gains invaluable access to Catholic perspectives on many local and national topics. The Archive provides firsthand accounts and contemporaneous reporting on Catholic religious traditions and beliefs, enabling rich insight into how faith was practiced and perceived across different eras. Newspaper coverage of local religious celebrations and festivities provides vivid details about community participation, rituals, and evolving customs. Articles and obituaries may highlight prominent Catholic religious historical figures, offering context about their roles and influence within both the Church and society. Exploration of the arts, literature, and sciences through local and national newspapers can reveal how religious thought shaped artistic expression or scientific discourse, capturing debates and innovations as they unfolded.

For those interested in genealogy, newspapers within the CNA are an essential resource, containing birth, marriage, and death notices, as well as stories about everyday community members. By comparing local diocesan newspapers, which offer nuanced, community-specific perspectives, with national newspapers that provide broader context and coverage, researchers can trace the interplay between local practices and national trends, resulting in a well-rounded understanding of their topics.

EXPLORING THE CATHOLIC NEWS ARCHIVE: USER INTERFACE AND RESEARCH APPLICATIONS IN AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORY

In this section, we focus on exploring the CNA user interface and demonstrating its applications for research at the intersection of Catholic and North American history. To best do this, we look at two components: first, we do a detailed review of the user interface and its numerous search modifiers; second, we do an examination

of four pivotal topics in the American Catholic historical experience, with particular emphasis on social and cultural dimensions of Catholicism in the United States.

THE CNA USER INTERFACE

The first component we look at is the user interface. To best explore the CNA and to better understand its content, it is advantageous to do a comprehensive exploration of the interface capabilities of the CNA. By exploring the browsing functionality, we can examine how researchers can navigate the CNA by title, date, and tags. To illustrate the platform's search refinement capabilities, the term "great depression" served as a case study, demonstrating how users can modify search results through multiple parameters including specific date ranges, publications, categories, authors, locations, and word counts.

This demonstration clearly illustrated how the CNA serves as a powerful tool for expanding research horizons in American social and cultural history. The interface's sophisticated search capabilities enable researchers to conduct both broad thematic searches and highly targeted investigations, making it particularly valuable for interdisciplinary scholarship.

SERVING SCHOLARLY RESEARCH NEEDS: THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

The second component bridges theoretical capabilities with practical application. To do this, we examine four significant themes in American Catholic history over the past century. Each topic demonstrated how researchers can leverage the CNA to explore the complex intersections of faith, social justice, and American society.

1. The American Catholic Experience in Times of Economic Crisis and War

The first theme examines Catholic responses to national and international crises, highlighting both institutional and grassroots efforts while tracing evolving perspectives on peace and justice. Two critical historical periods received particular attention. The first, the Great Depression (1930s), revealed extensive newspaper coverage of

Catholic charitable initiatives, including parish relief efforts and St. Vincent de Paul Society activities. The CNA documents robust discussions of Catholic Social Teaching, particularly the encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, as frameworks for responding to economic hardship. Editorial content addressing labor rights, union organizing, and the work of prominent figures like Monsignor John A. Ryan demonstrates the Church's direct engagement with economic justice and workers' rights. Researchers can access this material using search terms such as "Catholic Charities," "Great Depression," "Unemployment," "Labor Unions," "Social Justice," "Msgr. Ryan," and "Soup Kitchens."

World War II and its aftermath (1940s-1950s) showcases Catholic press coverage of military chaplains, soldiers, and the broader war effort. The CNA reveals nuanced discussions of just war theory alongside emerging peace movements. Post-war coverage documents the suburbanization phenomenon, the expansion of Catholic parishes and schools, and the transformative impact of the GI Bill on Catholic social mobility. The social justice dimension emerges through examinations of Catholic responses to displacement, refugee assistance, and moral questions raised by warfare. Key search terms include "World War II," "Catholic Chaplains," "Peace," "Just War," "Refugees," "GI Bill," and "Parish Growth."

2. The Church, Civil Rights, and Aggiornamento

The second theme explores the complex and evolving role of Catholics in the struggle for racial equality and broader social transformation during the 1950s-1970s. This section highlighted two interconnected movements. The Civil Rights Movement documentation includes coverage of Catholic institutional desegregation, notably Archbishop Joseph Rummel's efforts in New Orleans. The CNA contain profiles of Catholic activists—clergy, religious, and laity—participating in marches, protests, and advocacy campaigns. Editorial content and letters to the editor reveal the diversity of Catholic opinion on race and civil rights, while official statements from the U.S. Bishops on discrimination provide institutional perspectives. Researchers examining Catholic participation in racial justice movements can utilize search terms including "Civil Rights," "Desegregation," "Interracial Council," "Martin Luther King Jr. Catholic," "Fr. James Groppi," "Sisters

Civil Rights,” and specific diocesan responses. Vatican II (1962-1965) and its American Impact receives extensive coverage in the CNA, documenting both the Council’s decrees and their local implementation. The newspapers trace increased lay involvement, liturgical reforms, and the renewed emphasis on social justice as integral to faith, particularly following *Gaudium et Spes* and its call for engagement with the modern world. Search terms such as “Vatican Council,” “Aggiornamento,” “Lay Apostolate,” “Gaudium et Spes,” and “Liturgical Reform Social Justice” provide access to this transformative period.

3. Faith in Action: Catholic Activism and Shifting Social Mores

This third theme highlights prominent Catholic social movements and figures who challenged injustices while navigating evolving societal norms from the 1930s through the 1980s. The Catholic Worker Movement receives substantial coverage, including reporting on Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, houses of hospitality, and their commitment to pacifism, voluntary poverty, and service to the poor. The CNA documents discussion of distributism and anarchist-pacifist ideals within a Catholic framework, representing a radical embodiment of Catholic Social Teaching focused on direct action and solidarity with marginalized communities. Relevant search terms include “Dorothy Day,” “Catholic Worker,” “Peter Maurin,” “Pacifism,” “Houses of Hospitality,” and “Works of Mercy.”

Vietnam War Era and Catholic peace activism reveals diverse Catholic responses ranging from staunch anti-communism and war support to vocal opposition. Coverage includes profiles of the Berrigan brothers (Daniel and Philip) and their civil disobedience actions alongside editorial debates about the morality of war and conscientious objection. This period marks the emergence of a significant Catholic anti-war movement challenging government policy on moral grounds. Researchers can explore this topic using terms such as “Vietnam War,” “Catholic Peace Fellowship,” “Berrigan,” “Draft Resistance,” “Conscientious Objector,” and “Cardinal Spellman Vietnam.”

4. Navigating Modernity: Immigration, Identity, and Ongoing Challenges

The final theme examines the American Catholic Church's enduring connection to immigrant communities and engagement with contemporary social issues from the late twentieth century to the present.

Immigration and refugee advocacy coverage includes documentation of new immigrant waves from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa, highlighting the Church's role in resettlement and support services. The CNA captures the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s and ongoing advocacy for immigrant rights, including USCCB statements and initiatives on immigration reform. This demonstrates the Church's consistent advocacy for immigrant and refugee rights, rooted in its own immigrant heritage. Search terms include "Immigration," "Refugees," "Sanctuary Movement," "USCCB Immigration," "Hispanic Ministry," and "Boat People."

Contemporary social justice concerns receive ongoing coverage, including poverty, healthcare access, pro-life activities within a "consistent ethic of life" framework, and environmental justice following *Laudato Si'*. The CNA documents Catholic institutional and individual responses to these challenges, illustrating the breadth of Catholic social concern in the twenty-first century. Relevant search terms include "Poverty Catholic," "Healthcare Reform Catholic," "Pro-Life Social Justice," "Environmental Justice Catholic," and "Laudato Si'."

CATHOLIC NEWS ARCHIVE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR USE AND GROWTH

The value of the CNA grows with every title that is digitized and added to the search platform. A scenario from 2018 serves as an example. The Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame participated in a "sprint" with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to add articles from a wide variety of newspapers to the History Unfolded Project, to see what groups in America were learning and reporting about the Holocaust. Volunteers took shifts at microfilm readers to scan as many Catholic newspapers as possible to find articles about Kristallnacht (November 1938) and seek Catholic responses to the events and aftermath. This kind of collaboration is made easier as we strategically add Catholic newspaper titles that fill out coverage of the 20th century and earlier. Discovery in the

CNA is further enhanced by the federated searching of all the titles, keyword search, and full text access.

The CNA is growing steadily, and with the guidance of the Atla CRRA Program Committee and contributions of library and archives providing funds and content, the expansion will serve local and global needs. The advantages for those providing content include preservation of the resources, global accessibility of Catholic newspaper content, and a stake in building a valuable research resource that will persist and hopefully spur others to add to the database.

The bottom line is that more Catholic newspaper content will increase the potential for use by scholars and students at all levels on a global scale. Bibliographies, such as the epic work *Catholic Serials of the Nineteenth Century in the United States: A Descriptive Bibliography and Union List*, may provide a starting point for adding historical titles. Diversity of Catholic viewpoints can be added through the digitization of foreign language titles, mission publications, and small or regional publications. In production, for instance, is the German language Benedictine publication the *St. Joseph's Blatt* from Mt. Angel Abbey and Seminary in Oregon. More diversity of language, viewpoints, international scope, and years covered will enhance the CNA and our collective use of it.

CONCLUSION

Researchers will benefit as they learn more about and explore how the CNA serves as an invaluable resource for understanding the multifaceted relationship between Catholicism and American society over the past century. By combining sophisticated search capabilities with rich primary source material, the CNA enables researchers to explore how Catholic communities have engaged with and responded to major social, political, and cultural developments. The Archive's ability to capture both institutional perspectives and grassroots voices makes it particularly valuable for scholars seeking to understand the lived experience of American Catholicism and its ongoing commitment to social justice.

The CNA embodies the mission and collaborative spirit of the CRRA. From its early conception in the face of significant gaps in digital collections, through painstaking groundwork and strategic

partnerships, to its ongoing role as an indispensable resource, the CNA is a singular achievement in the preservation and dissemination of Catholic news and history. Its continued development promises still greater visibility for Catholic voices, deeper understanding for contemporary scholarship, and enduring access for generations to come. Each researcher can explore the CNA to learn more about the different social and cultural events in history, and about Catholics within the different regions. Additionally, scholars and educators can find new ways to leverage the resources of the CNA as they develop new pedagogies around these local, national, and international events and topics.