

The Vatican Library and the IFLA between 1928 and 1929

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On August 30, 2019, the Vatican Library hosted a satellite IFLA conference on topics related to education for professionals, exactly 90 years after the first international conference was held in Rome, when the IFLA was officially named and its first statute was established. This paper was presented at the satellite conference to briefly summarize the major events of those memorable years and the Library's history as the background of this extraordinary season for world librarianship. In that period, the Vaticana was experiencing a moment of both institutional and professional prosperity, deeply connected with the events that led to the foundation of the IFLA; these were the same years in which Italy and the city of Rome, in the middle of the Fascist Regime, were hosting, in 1928 and 1929, respectively, the preparatory works and the First World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography, the major event that marks the foundation of the IFLA.

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Between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the mid-1920s, the Vaticana underwent a profound renewal that deeply affected both its structures and the professional skills of its staff. The birth of the School of Library Science (*Scuola Vaticana di Biblioteconomia*) was also part of this process: A very important role was played by the relationships established with the United States, especially with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Thanks to this cooperation, the Vaticana quickly became one of the most modern and cutting-edge libraries in Europe.

The first important projects aimed at improving access to the collections of the Library and were undertaken by Father Franz Ehrle (who was Prefect of the Vaticana between 1895 and 1934, and later Cardinal Librarian and Archivist of the Holy Roman Church) and Vincenzo Gioacchino Pecci (who was elected pope in 1878 with the name of Leo XIII). Ehrle and Pecci were both particularly attentive to the Library users' needs and aimed at the enhancement of scholarly research: In 1892, for instance, a new reading room for manuscripts and printed books was inaugurated, namely the *Bibliotheca Leonina*, which replaced the Sistine Hall as the main reading room. After Ehrle's initiative, in 1898 the International Conference at St. Gallen was the starting point of a completely new understanding of book conservation; the Library immediately became a modern institution and an international point of reference. Two years

later, the Library started its publishing activity with the *Studi e Testi* collection, an edited series of primary texts and scholarly studies.

In those same years, the Library undertook the acquisitions of some important collections of manuscripts, incunabula, and printed books. Both the management of storage and the access to books became increasingly difficult, despite the good professional skills of the Library staff. The Library's different collections were organized in a quite disjointed way, and the cataloging resources were inadequate; moreover, the consultation tools available at that time were not homogeneous and did not cover the entire amount of the Library resources. The increasing number of scholars coming, especially from abroad, to access the Library resources were frustrated by the inconsistencies of the system; Americans in particular were already well accustomed to the efficiency of modern card catalogs. More adequate methods of conservation and a more efficient bibliographic control of the collections were urgently needed. Unfortunately, despite the Vaticana leaders' wish to find a solution, in the aftermath of the First World War, the Holy See had to deal with the costs for reconstruction and was therefore unable to provide the economic resources needed in order to overcome the problems of the Library in a more consistent way.

In 1908, Eugène Tisserant arrived at the Library, first as a *scriptor* for oriental languages, then as deputy-prefect, before being nominated cardinal. Tisserant was responsible for most of the Library reorganization initiatives, which, however, would not have been possible without Achille Ratti, Pope Pius XI. Before becoming cardinal and later Pontiff, Ratti was a librarian at the Ambrosiana Library in Milan and then at the Vaticana. In 1929, a few months after he signed the Lateran pacts, he welcomed the participants to the First World Congress of Libraries and Bibliography in Rome as colleagues, showing his deep engagement with the library universe.

KEY POINTS:

- Between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the mid-1920s, the Vaticana experienced a moment of both institutional and professional prosperity, deeply connected with the events that led to the foundation of the IFLA.
- With the support of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, some Vatican librarians spent several months in the United States, working at the Library of Congress and attending library courses in Ann Arbor in Michigan and at Columbia University in New York.
- Another important product of this huge renewal process came in 1934, when the Vatican School of Library Science was founded following the American model, thanks to the initiative of the Vatican librarians who had deepened their skills in the United States.

He was perfectly aware of what the Library needed and took different actions in order to resolve its space issues so that the physical reorganization of the collections could become the precondition to the improvement of the related cataloging procedures. For example, after visiting some rooms that were particularly crowded with books, the Pope assigned to the Library some new spaces and decided to build new book-stacks: He chose a long gallery at the lower part of the building, which was originally used as stables but was now redundant after transport by car for the entire Vatican State was introduced.

In those same years, even the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace took an interest in the Vatican Library. In the postwar context, a strong sense of solidarity was growing, along with a willingness to cooperate in the reconstruction. Many American philanthropists made part of their assets available for charitable causes. One of these was Andrew Carnegie, who in 1910 founded the Endowment, which would provide economic assistance in the European postwar reconstruction, with particular attention to the support of European libraries. Many people played a significant role in the birth and development of this collaboration and are worth mentioning in more detail.

Nicholas Murray Butler was president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace from 1925 to 1945. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Without Butler's interest in the Vatican Library, the collaboration between the two institutions would not have taken place. General William Barclay Parsons, an engineer and trustee of Columbia University, informed Butler that the Vatican Library did not have a catalog and that its many thousands of books and manuscripts were scattered around in various apartments and halls of the Vatican, being thus not completely available for students and researchers. Prince Gelasio Caetani, Italian Ambassador to Washington, also brought to Butler's attention the Vatican Library's different needs.

William Warner Bishop, who at that time was the director of the Libraries at the University of Michigan, was considered the dean of American librarians and a scholar of great experience. His leadership and dedication to the Endowment's work with the Vaticana had a crucial impact on the successful outcome of the project. James Christian Meinich Hanson, associate director of the University of Chicago Libraries; Bishop wanted him to be involved in demonstrating the American method at the Vaticana. His autobiography ([Hanson, 1974](#)) contains many observations about this experience. Milton E. Lord, then librarian of the American Academy in Rome, was also involved.

In December 1925, the board of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace approved the proposal to fund and assist the Library in the preparation of a modern cataloging system and in the creation of a card catalog. In May 1926, Henry S. Pritchett, trustee of the Carnegie Endowment, went to Rome to develop the best methods for reorganizing

the cataloging and classification systems so that the collections of the Vatican Library could become accessible to scholars from all over the world. The authorities of the Vaticana liked the idea of making the Library more accessible to scholars and were willing to inaugurate a plan for a modern cataloging system as soon as possible. Aidan Gasquet, the Cardinal Librarian who was the highest Library authority at that time, approved the plan and informed the trustees that the Vaticana would welcome any help in that direction. The Librarian of Congress, Herbert Putnam, selected a group of experts to be sent to Rome; Warner Bishop focused on the more technical aspects, as he had been several times in Europe and in Rome in particular, being thus very familiar with the Italian language (and he was also a Library user). At that time, Giovanni Mercati was the prefect of the Library, assisted by Tisserant.

At first Bishop thought to reject the proposal because, as he noted, "it is not a very gracious thing to offer advice on how to run another library" (Bishop, 1949, p. 248); but Carl Milam, the secretary of the American Library Association, convinced him to carry out a preliminary survey of the Vaticana on behalf of the Carnegie. Bishop spent about four weeks at the Vaticana, carefully studying the situation. He was of the opinion that most of the Library problems were due to the lack of resources needed to manage the large number of volumes, which prevented the reorganization and cataloging of the resources according to modern methods. Bishop was surprised to discover that none of the Vatican librarians seemed to be aware of the functionalities of a modern library. For this reason, he suggested to the Endowment to invite the heads of the Vaticana to visit some of the main libraries of North America. Tisserant then accompanied Bishop on his return to the United States; he visited the Library of Congress, and then the libraries of Princeton, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Champaign, and Toronto, ending up in Ann Arbor.

In the summer of 1927, the plan for the reorganization of the Library was finalized, established, and approved. It included the compilation of: (a) a summary index, by author, of the manuscripts; (b) a catalog of a section of the printed books to serve as a model; and (c) an index of the incunabula, for inclusion in the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke*. The plan also involved the arrangement of an exchange: Some catalogers from the Vatican would go to the United States to help with the cataloging of some collections and to attend courses in library science. At the same time, some American expert librarians would assist the Vatican staff in cataloging a collection not yet described.

The project attracted a lot of attention due to the prestige of the two institutions involved, namely the Vaticana and the Carnegie Endowment. As soon as the information was disseminated, some important library institutions, in America as well as elsewhere, wished to commit to the project and contribute with the participation of their best professionals. As a result, thanks to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the first

four Vatican librarians arrived in New York on August 24, 1927. Two of these librarians, Enrico Benedetti and Carmelo Scalia, two clergymen who were part of the permanent staff, spent six months at the Library of Congress, where they learned to catalog according to the American rules and, at the same time, helped their Library of Congress colleagues to create the subject categories for works on theology, liturgy, and canon law. The other two were Igino Giordani and Gerardo Bruni, young librarians who had been promised to be hired on a permanent basis by the Vaticana after the training was completed. They spent two semesters attending library courses in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and at Columbia University in New York.

The American experience of the Vatican librarians really led to an encounter between two different worlds: On the one hand, the Vatican owned an invaluable bibliographic heritage that was extremely heterogeneous in terms of geographical and chronological origins, and it thus faced the challenge of finding effective ways to reorganize and describe it in a consistent way; on the other hand, American institutions possessed less rich and less complex collections, but they were well equipped to describe them consistently, thanks to the great experience acquired in contemporary publishing production, which from the end of the previous century was rapidly expanding.

The four librarians returned to Italy full of enthusiasm and immediately began to put into practice what they had learned, together with the American experts who were assisting the Vaticana. Between 1929 and 1932, other three young men undertook this professional training path: Riccardo Matta, Giuseppe Graglia, and Nello Vian. The Vaticana could now rely on excellent librarians who had been professionally trained.

Between February and June 1928, a team of library specialists traveled to Rome. The Library of Congress sent the head of the Catalog Division, Charles Martel; the University of Chicago sent J.C.M. Hanson, its acting director; and the Kennedy School of Missions in Hartford, Connecticut, sent William Madison Randall. American-trained librarian John Asteinsson also came from Norway to help create the Vatican cataloging code, and Isak Collijn, director of the Royal Library of Stockholm, one of the best authorities on incunabula living at that time and a member of the *Gesamkatalog* Commission, assisted the Library staff in cataloging and classifying the Library's incunabula.

By June 1930, the American project came to an end, having fully trained the Vatican librarians to catalog the printed books. The Vatican Library staff and the American colleagues worked together, and the most significant result of this "cataloguing expedition" was the creation of a massive card catalog and the publication in 1931 of the Vatican cataloging code, the *Norme per il catalogo degli stampati* (*Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1931*). They were an adaptation of the American cataloging rules—*Catalog Rules, Author and Title Entries*—written in 1908, and were also based on the Italian cataloging rules, *Regole per la compilazione del catalogo alfabetico*,

published in Rome in 1922. They remained in use in the Library until the last decades of twentieth century, when the Vaticana adopted the *Anglo American Cataloging Rules*.

The Endowment allowed the Vaticana to experience a new golden age, finding itself 50 years ahead compared with other European research libraries. The main events that marked this cooperation can be summarized as follows:

- the creation of a more convenient entrance space;
- the installation of more than 22 km (14 miles) of American-made cast-iron shelves;
- the cataloging and classification of the reference collection and all the new books according to Library of Congress rules;
- the publication of the Vatican cataloging code;
- the production of printed Vatican catalog cards to be sold;
- the refurbishment of the main reading rooms; and
- the creation of a school of library science based on the American model.

I would like to quickly add something more on the new stacks, since this was a very important improvement that allowed the Library to become one of the most modern institutions in Europe at that time.

In December 1928, Pope Pius XI had a tour of the newly rearranged Belvedere Courtyard, where the Library is located. He visited the Library (Figure 1) and inaugurated the new wing, which had been opened in the old stables. This enormous space created by architect Bramante in 1512 for Julius II was divided into three stories by marble floors, filled with new metal stacks. At the same time, a new entrance to the Library was opened. The new stacks (Figure 2) were of a very popular type in America but never seen before in Europe; the model adopted was the same as the one that had been recently installed at the Library of Congress. They were provided by Sned & Company of Jersey City, which from 1890 to 1950 designed and installed cast-iron shelves all over the United States. The company also provided the stacks with electrical equipment and a modern and sophisticated ventilating system that the Endowment donated to the Library on Bishop's recommendation. The heating and ventilating system was designed according to the most advanced scientific research of the time in book preservation. In order to preserve Bramante's original design, the whole armor of bookshelves did not lean on the existing structure of the Gallery but was self-standing; the framing was designed to support the cast-iron shelves by itself. Three stairways and an Otis elevator, still existing, connected the three floors of the stacks.

This was the scenario when, in June 1929, Italy hosted the International Congress of Libraries and Bibliography, at which IFLA was officially named. The steps that led to this important event can be traced back to the emerging internationalism following the end of World War I and,



Figure 1: Pius XI visits the new Library stacks. © 2020 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

more specifically, to the international meetings that followed the birth of the American Library Association (in 1876) and its British counterpart, the Library Association of the United Kingdom (in 1877). I will just briefly mention them here, as they are well known.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century represented an important moment for librarianship, as a result of a modern understanding of the library system and its services; at this time, numerous



Figure 2: The new Library stacks made by Sneed & Co. © 2020 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

collaborations among international organizations began to flourish; they were then momentarily interrupted only by the world conflict, but they immediately resumed after the end of the war: Great hopes for cooperation and the constitution of an international organization flourished on both sides of the Atlantic Sea, especially after the foundation of the League of Nations in 1920.

In 1927, during the fiftieth anniversary of the Association of British Librarians in Edinburgh, the International Library and Bibliographical Committee, which was IFLA's first name, was created. Isak Collijn, who

was nominated chairman, was the first president of the Federation to be elected and was in charge of the definition and organization of the first session of the International Library and Bibliographical Committee, held in March 1928 in Rome, while he was working on the Vatican Library incunabula collection. During this first session, the International Library and Bibliographical Committee focused on the election of the executive committee and the organization of the following year's Congress.

The city of Rome, and Italy in general, was chosen to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Antonio Panizzi; the most important reason for this choice was that many important librarians from the United States were already in the city for the collaboration between the Vatican and Carnegie. In June 1929, the second official session of the International Library and Bibliographical Committee took place in Italy again, in conjunction with the first International Congress of Libraries and Bibliography. The activities were divided into three meetings: June 14 in Rome, June 25 in Florence, and June 29 in Venice.

During the Congress, the name of the association was formally and unanimously approved as the International Federation of Library Associations. The site of the League of Nations in Geneva was chosen as IFLA's headquarters, and the director of the Society of Nations library, Tietse Pieter Sevensma, was nominated secretary general of the Federation. The statutes were approved in Venice and then revised in Stockholm in 1930.

The Congress was financially supported by the Italian government. Vincenzo Fago, the head of the official Italian International Exchange Office of the Ministry of Education, convinced Mussolini to grant the necessary financial aid. Luigi De Gregori, the director of the Casanatense Library in Rome and a highly esteemed librarian in Italy and abroad, was one of the most proactive organizers of the Congress. It was really a huge event; official and unofficial exhibitions were scheduled all over Italy. A wide and attractive program of excursions to various locations along the peninsula was also set up, and it was extremely appreciated by the participants.

Benito Mussolini himself read a greeting message during the inaugural session on the Campidoglio; Pope Pius XI received and greeted, as a former colleague, the participants in the Sistine Hall. On that occasion, he talked to Bishop personally, asking for details about the cooperation between the Carnegie Endowment and the Library.

During the Congress, the Vaticana welcomed several librarians who were interested in the ongoing initiatives; the Library authorities entrusted these communications to the most competent members of staff. Several letters arrived from all over the world requesting information on the progress of the cataloging process. With the end of the Congress, requests to visit the Library became even more demanding, as they were from work groups and committees in the process of reorganizing their own libraries and showed a specific interest in technical issues.

A further result of this incredible process of renewal in which the Library was involved was achieved five years later, when the Vatican School of Library Science was founded. In September 1934, the Pope approved the institution of a course of library science to be opened in the fall. The School opened on November 15, 1934, with 30 students of eight nationalities, members of different religious orders, secular priests, seminarians, and laymen. It was initially intended exclusively for the training of the staff of ecclesiastical and religious institutes; in the first year, admissions were limited to 30 clergymen or people belonging to religious institutions. By 1938, the School already had 80 students coming from very different countries. The teaching staff was composed of Tisserant, Giordani, Graglia, and Vian.

Book preservation, collections management, cataloging, and information services have been the institutional aims of the School since its creation. This was another crucial step in the evolution of the Vaticana, from an ancient and venerable library with important collections into a modern institution that is cutting-edge in conservation and research; it is also capable of assimilating and transforming the experience and skills recently acquired into a model for other libraries and librarians to follow.

The School was meant to be different from the Italian library science courses that already existed; these were usually affiliated with universities rather than libraries, and were characterized by a strong humanistic and theoretical focus. The School was built following the American model, which aims at giving a more practical education to its students. From the beginning, the School focused on the importance of books as a legacy from the past. Pius XI, as a former librarian, considered the School as a means to enhance awareness of books, not just as objects that need to be preserved but also as cultural symbols of science in all its expressions.

This is the reason that the School constitutes another significant step in the rich path followed by the Vaticana, thanks to the Carnegie International Endowment for Peace. Its main mission today is still based on the deep connection between the present and the past, and its main objective is to train librarians as culturally aware professionals who are able to take care of the heritage entrusted to them. As His Eminence the Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin recently stressed, “only an active memory of our past can enable us to address the reality of the present and the problems of the future” (Card. Parolin, 2018).

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