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Shrines and Pilgrimages: Documenting Mary's Role in the Pandemic

Presented for Marian Spirituality and Studies on Radio Maria

April 9, 2020

Description:

A 1997 special report in Scientific American claimed that the average lifespan of a website was only 44 days. A study in 2001 put that at 75 days, while a 2003 article indicated 100 days. Everything on the Internet doesn't last forever. The Marian Library has collected material related to the Blessed Virgin Mary since its founding in 1943. Increasingly, some of the material that would have once been printed, and possibly made their way to the Marian Library archives, is now being shared only electronically. Things like shrine mass schedules, news articles, or blog posts are available on websites, but are often updated and overwritten. Web archiving is the process of "capturing" a snapshot of a website at a particular time and preserving it for future use and study. With the current coronavirus pandemic across the world, individuals are asked to avoid gathering in large groups, practicing social distancing to curb the spread of the virus. Future scholars will want to one day study the impact that the coronavirus has had on Marian shrines and Marian devotion, and through the Marian Library's web archive collections, they will be able to see these snapshots in time.

Speaker Bio:

Kayla Harris has been Archivist and Assistant Professor for the Marian Library at the University of Dayton since 2016. She is responsible for managing the Marian Library's variety of archival collections, including manuscripts, visual resources, and artifacts. She answers reference questions, provides primary source instruction to both undergraduate and graduate students, and frequently writes for the Marian Library blog, highlighting some of the unique items in the collection. She is also very involved in digital projects, both preserving and making materials available. Prior to her role at the University of Dayton, she worked as a records manager and archivist for a local county government, and as a Metadata Librarian for the University of Alabama.

Hello everyone! As Mike introduced me, my name is Kayla Harris and I am the archivist at the Marian Library at the University of Dayton. Today I'm going to talk about web archiving - what it is, why it's important, and what the Marian Library is doing to capture some of the quickly changing information related to Mary during this time when the coronavirus has changed so many things.

I'd like to start with a little bit of a story. Back on Monday, March 2nd, I was preparing material for a class visit to the Marian Library. The class was an English class called Narratives of Medicine, and they were going to come to the Marian Library to learn about the materials we have, but specifically, to spend some time working with and analyzing some archival collections related to the baths at Lourdes. The class had read an article about the Lourdes baths as a site of miracles and healing for many people. At this time, the coronavirus had been making headlines, mostly in China and starting to emerge in Europe, but it wasn't really affecting us at the University of Dayton quite yet.

When the class arrived, we did some analysis activities and talked a lot about the practices at the Lourdes baths. One thing we read talked about how the attendants changed the water once a day, and as an act of faith, they would drink a cup from it as well to demonstrate the healing powers. The students were pretty horrified by this, but then we started to talk about what might happen with the coronavirus spreading. Would the baths close?

Later that evening, I came across an article that was shared announcing that the baths had actually already closed on February 28th. The shrine issued a statement that they had been monitoring the situation and that their first concern was the safety and health of the pilgrim's and those who worked there. At that point, they also explained that while the baths would close, the shrine would still be open to pilgrims. On the Lourdes sanctuary website (the English version since I don't read French!) there were big notices on the front page saying "the pilgrimage season in Lourdes is not in question." On March 12th, I "captured" the page with further explanation (I'll explain more of what this means shortly). The page included some Questions and Answers, such as "I'm planning on coming, what should I do?" The answer was "don't change your plans. There is no reason to have more concerns than in other places in France. Health guidelines are already being applied and widely disseminated in the Sanctuary which will adapt the measures according to the changing situation. This epidemic is, on the contrary, an opportunity to pray more and to ask for the intercession of Our Lady." Just a day earlier, on March 11th, Pope Francis had offered a prayer to the Virgin Mary, asking for protection during the pandemic. A few days later, on March 17th, the Lourdes Sanctuary decided to close completely.

So I'm not telling this story to place blame anywhere, or to imply that Lourdes should have closed to pilgrims sooner. What I'm hoping it illustrates is how quickly certain situations can unfold. For this particular pandemic, I think most people have had a similar sort of trajectory - there was a time when it seemed like nothing in our individual lives would change, and then all of a sudden everything changed.

My life is in upheaval right now but too (you may hear one of my three young children in the background) but as the archivist for the Marian Library my job is to document popular devotion. What's really interesting though, is how this event is going to be remembered and studied in the future. When you visit the Lourdes site now, that prominent information about "Pilgrimage not in question" is obviously no longer on the front page. Websites are often used to convey the most

recent and up-to-date information for its visitors. Sometimes certain aspects of a website are internally archived, or at least not overwritten, but it's hard to even say how frequently information is lost when a website is updated to reflect new situations.

A 1997 special report in *Scientific American* claimed that the average lifespan of a website was only 44 days. A study in 2001 put that at 75 days, while a 2003 article indicated 100 days. There are a lot of different definitions and factors in these various studies - such as is a website really the content, or the URL, but the point is that websites are fragile. At this point, many people are starting to come around to the realization that not everything on the Internet is true, but a lot less people understand that not everything on the Internet lasts forever. There's a quote that a lot of archivists use to illustrate this point from Megan Ankerson:

"it is far easier to find an example of a film from 1924 than a website from 1994."

Archivists and librarians are well versed in archiving paper materials. Although there are certain steps we can take to ensure that paper records are available for future researchers, theoretically if we left a book sitting on a shelf, the book would continue to exist for hundreds of years. If we set a floppy disc on a shelf with that same information, the information held within it would deteriorate all on its own over time without active intervention to save it. Websites are some of the most fragile electronic data because they can be lost for a variety of reasons. From overwriting a website to update to the most current information, changing domain names, hosting services shutting down, or deliberately deleting information for better or worse.

Web archiving is the process of "capturing" (like I mentioned earlier in my story) or collecting portions of the web, storing it, and making it accessible for future researchers. This is just the electronic equivalent of what archivists have already been doing for years with preserving physical records.

The Internet Archive is a non-profit organization based in California that is the leader in web archiving and has been capturing parts of the Internet since 1996. They use several different methods to accomplish this enormous task, including automatic crawls, where robots search the web and capture certain websites, as well as offering a tool where individuals can select a website and manually save the page. 2018 statistics show that the automated crawls collect around 1.5 billion pages per week, and about 1 million captures from individuals. Surely, there has to be some Marian content in there, right?

Well, sort of. There's not really clear information on who determines what sites should automatically be crawled and how frequently, but the Internet Archive also offers a service called Archive-It. This is a paid, subscription-based, tool where cultural heritage institutions like libraries and museums can choose which sites are important to save, and set up schedules on how often they want to save them. Users can also add descriptions and context to their collected sites. So instead of having to know the exact URL of a particular website to search in the Wayback Machine, users can search cataloged archived websites using keywords.

At the Marian Library we've been using Archive-It since 2015, but in the past year have been expanding to include different types of things in our web archive collections. This is especially important because many of the types of things that we would normally collect in the Marian Library, may now be made available only online.

Take for example something we have in the Marian Library known as the Sutton File. Mildred Sutton was a dedicated and longtime volunteer in the Marian Library who collected various newspaper clippings, brochures, journal articles and more, on almost every Marian subject imaginable. Each individual item would get an identifier number and would be indexed according to the one or more subjects. Although the Marian Library is not adding to this file (which had 50,000 items in 1986!), it is still used frequently as a reference tool. So what about the various clippings and articles that would have once been the types of materials collected in the Sutton file? As part of our mission to serve the research needs of faculty and students of the International Marian Research Institute, the University of Dayton, and the community worldwide, we realize that a lot of that information is now available on the web.

That's where web archiving can come in, and can really be used to document Mary's global presence, especially in the world's current situation. Last year I started a "Web Clippings" collection using Archive-It to capture some of the interesting and unique content on the Web related to Mary. I like to think of it as a scaled-back digital version of the Sutton File. This collection includes news articles, social media like tweets or facebook posts, and even shrine websites.

We can't capture *everything* related to Mary. In addition to the time commitment involved in finding the information, setting up the process in Archive-It and then cataloging it (writing the title, a description, keywords etc) we also have a designated data budget - an amount of information we are allowed to capture per our subscription. However, individuals can still manually capture information like I mentioned earlier. Internet Archive provides access to these captured websites in a tool called the Wayback Machine. You can search a website URL and it will show you how many times that site has been captured in its existence, and let you view each iteration. On the Wayback Machine is the "Save Page Now" function where you can type in a website address and manually capture a website too. So anyone with an interest in contributing to this monumental task can go to archive.org/web and use this function.

Now that I've explained a little bit about web archiving - why it's important and how I do it, I wanted to talk today about some of the interesting things that we've included in this Web Clippings collection, specifically related to Mary and the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus.

So in my earlier story I already mentioned how quickly this situation has changed, and where places like the Lourdes Sanctuary originally assured pilgrims that their April 5th date would definitely still be on and then later decided to close. There's a lot of different mentions of Mary

and coronavirus - from canceled events, to changing devotional practices, and pleas to Mary for protection and healing.

A note that I want to make that echoes something I said earlier. Not everything on the Internet is true! The internet is wonderful in the sense that it allows a variety of voices but there is not always a gatekeeper to make sure that information is truthful. However, that doesn't mean the information isn't still valuable. In the physical collections in the archives we have many materials on apparitions. Some of the material is on officially approved apparitions, while much of the material is related to unofficial, or sometimes even condemned, apparitions. For example, we have rose petals with imprints of Mary that supposedly appeared miraculously. When I show these to students or visitors I am often asked "but is that real?" and I reply that for my job, it doesn't matter. My job is to document popular devotion to Mary, and whether or not something is *true* for whatever that may mean, doesn't really matter because *someone* believes it is. So, likewise with web archiving, my area of expertise is making material on the Virgin Mary available and accessible, not to necessarily be an authority on Mary. Fortunately I have many outstanding colleagues in the International Marian Research Institutes who ARE authorities in Mariology!

Now to talk about some of the interesting stories that I've found. These are all part of the Marian Library's [web archive collection](#) in Archive-It.

Calling on Mary for Protection and Healing

- On March 11th Pope Francis recited by video a prayer during a special mass asking Mary to protect Italy and the world during the pandemic.

O Mary,

you always shine on our path

as a sign of salvation and of hope.

We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick,

who at the cross took part in Jesus' pain, keeping your faith firm.

You, Salvation of the Roman People,

know what we need,

and we are sure you will provide

so that, as in Cana of Galilee,

we may return to joy and to feasting

after this time of trial.

Help us, Mother of Divine Love,

to conform to the will of the Father

and to do as we are told by Jesus,

who has taken upon himself our sufferings

and carried our sorrows
to lead us, through the cross,
to the joy of the resurrection. Amen.

Under your protection, we seek refuge, Holy Mother of God. Do not disdain the entreaties of we who are in trial, but deliver us from every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin.

- Translated by the Catholic News Services
- This is interesting too because it starts to demonstrate the way that Churches have had to adapt and change as regions began implementing social distancing rules. Many events from individual Church mass to large-scale celebrations moved online to slow the spread of the disease.
- On March 13th, Archbishop of Baltimore and Supreme Chaplain of the Knights of Columbus invited families to join in praying a novena to the Blessed Virgin Mary, inspired by the one written by Pope Francis
- An article on March 17th describes how a statue of the Virgin Mary is flown over cities in Italy by the Italian Air Force to protect against the coronavirus. The article states, “The Italian Air Force and the Virgin Mary have a long history together. The Virgin of Loreto, one of the many names attributed to the Virgin Mary, is the Patron Saint of the Air Force. Every year, the Italian Air Force celebrates a tribute to the Virgin Mary and renews its devotion to her.”
- An article for Asia News talks about Mary’s role in Saudi Arabia. A Saudi province-governor, a Muslim, calls on people to turn to Mary for strength and courage to overcome the outbreak. “The story of Mariam (Mary)” the governor notes “tells the story of every true victor. The moral of her story is clear; it’s through these directives from God that success against all struggles and pandemics can be achieved.”
- A tweet shared images from the shrine for Our Lady of Czestochowa where the President of Poland visited on March 26th to pray for the end of the coronavirus and ask for Mary’s intercession. Example of Mary’s role being relevant to more than just Catholics

Devotional Practices

- An article from Reuters, published on March 6th discussed the practice of religious statue-kissing in Spain. It states, “A Spanish pre-Easter tradition, where Catholics flock in droves to kiss statues of Jesus and Mary, fell victim to the coronavirus epidemic this week as churches with some of the most sought-after statues told worshippers not to touch or kiss them.” One church describes how they put a bench in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary to discourage people from approaching

- One news story's headline was "Clutching Icon of Virgin Mary, Entire Ohio Family Afflicted with Coronavirus Asks for Miracle". The article shows a screenshot of an interview they did, with one woman holding an image of Mary while describing their family's struggle with the virus. This one is particularly interesting because the focus isn't necessarily Mary, and it's not a national headlining story. Yet, this is exactly the type of story that is important for archives to collect - the story of voices that aren't always documented or heard in archives. It's important to collect and document things like Pope Francis mentioning Mary, but it's also just as valuable to document an individual family's devotion to Mary during this crisis.
- Another story about devotional practices was found on twitter. A twitter user described that she had overcome the coronavirus and attributed it to Our Lady of Lourdes. She wrote an extended account to the Marian Library,
 - "the first night of symptoms I had body aches and a fever like I've never felt before. I felt like I was on fire. Before bed, I asked my mom to grab the holy water from Lourdes that we have. I crossed myself with it and asked that Mary keep me under the protection of her mantle. The next day I woke up I had no fever and my symptoms from the night before were significantly lessened. I didn't decline in my health either but only got better. I continued to pray rosaries in my bed and a week from being tested, I finally got the results back that I had tested positive for COVID-19. At that point I had pretty much recovered, but I couldn't attribute my mild case to anything or anyone else except Mary. Because I called on her immediately. I am also immunocompromised since I have a thyroid autoimmune disease. But I know it was by the miraculous healing of the water and my rosaries that Our Lady nursed me back to health physically and even spiritually."
- Another tweet that a colleague of mine found, showed what was happening in Ireland. A video uploaded had a statue of Mary atop a car that was being driven around, while a loudspeaker was projecting someone reciting the Hail Mary.
- An article in Spanish, roughly translated to English using Google Translate, discusses some of the situation in Mexico. The bishops of Mexico summoned everyone for a national day of penance on April 3rd, and praying to Our Lady of Sorrows

Canceled Events

- On March 18th, a visionary at Medjugorje announced that the apparitions of Our lady on the 2nd of each month were over.
- Church officials in Myanmar canceled Marian celebrations that were supposed to take place from February 7-February 16th.
- In England, Catholics had been preparing for events to rededicate England as the dowry of Mary. The first dedication had been made by King Richard II in Westminster Abbey,

where England received the title “Mary’s Dowry” meaning that England was set aside as a gift for Mary under her guidance and protection. The original plan was for the churches across England to participate in this rededication on Sunday, March 29th. However, with quarantine measures in place at that time, most in England were isolated at home. The rededication still took place, with the official event being live-streamed - with over half a million viewers crashing the website watching it!

All of these things that I have mentioned today really demonstrate Mary’s presence across the world, not just for Catholics. We’re living through an important moment in history and the things we experience now are going to be valuable for future scholars.

I also created a call on the [Marian Library’s blog](#), which can be found on our website, udayton.edu/marianlibrary asking for our community to consider submitting items for inclusion in the archives. These items could be physical materials, like photographs, or diaries, or perhaps even electronic materials. They should somehow document the connection between the coronavirus and devotion to Mary. Questions about this can be emailed to marianlibrary@udayton.edu