The Vatican School of Librarianship in a Time of Change: Current Organization and Future Perspectives

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Founded in 1934, the Vatican School of Librarianship, in its early days, aimed at forming both secular and religious librarians following the North American library tradition. Later on, teaching has been largely based on international standards. A brief outline of the initial setting of the School is provided. Presently, the School includes eight courses, ranging from those having a more historical approach to ones which focus on specific more technical skills, such as cataloguing, metadata and data management, reference services, document delivery and information literacy, library services, networking and digital libraries, preservation of printed material, and digital archives. In order to maintain the native hands-on approach, theoretical teaching is backed by lectures and laboratory lessons with practical exercises and teaching on the field. Moreover, internships have been agreed with libraries and educational institutions.

To keep up pace with job-market requirements, a series of workshops aiming at providing students with soft skills is organized each year. By taking active part in these workshops, they are confronted with the need to rely upon common sense, the ability to deal with peers, and the need to develop a positive and flexible attitude. In order to assess their satisfaction and to get some useful feedback for further enhancing the quality of teaching, a survey was carried out among current and previous students.

The Vatican School of Library Science is 85 years old. Its principles and inspirational values were defined by Eugène Tisserant (1884–1972), pro-prefect of the Vatican Library and later Cardinal Librarian. In his opening speech to the courses, delivered on November 13, 1934, he described the mission of the School as follows: "Curare quel che resta delle antiche biblioteche monastiche ed ecclesiastiche, conservare il materiale, ordinarlo, accrescerlo, descriverlo e metterlo in valore" (L'inizio del corsi, 1934, p. 2).[1]

The School aimed at forming librarians who would scrupulously apply the tools of the library profession following the highest standard models provided by North American librarianship. The creation of the School was one of the projects stemming from the so called "cataloging expedition" to the Vatican Library carried out in 1928 by a group of pre-eminent North

KEY POINTS:

- An international educational portfolio should be drawn up as a basis to provide LIS students and alumni with worldwide assistance in job searching.

- Teamwork and gaming should be considered instrumental to the acquisition of soft as well as hard skills, since the job market requires candidates to skillfully navigate their environment, to work well with others, to perform and achieve their goals, and to act in a creative way.

- Librarians should be engaged in research and educational networks, pursuing a multidisciplinary approach that can enable them to coordinate and act "glocally" both within their own environment and toward the outside world and can offer them useful and affordable means of professional development.

American librarians.[2] A coherent and integral application of the Vatican library cataloging rules, based largely on Italian adaptation of the Library of Congress's and ALA's rules, was part of its scope (Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1931).[3] Thus, two courses were provided in the School's early days: cataloging and classification, taught by Igino Giordani (see Robertson, 1986; Sorgi, 2003) and bibliography and library services management, taught by Nello Vian.[4]

The course, lasting one academic year, was taught on Thursdays, from November to June, and consisted of two lectures of one hour each, followed by afternoon workshops, for 25 weeks. The academic year 1938–39 saw an increase in the number of courses: Bibliography became an autonomous module and book history was introduced. A third one-hour lecture was added to the previous two, which brought the total to 75 lectures per academic year, and the number of workshops doubled. Over the first seven years, 424 students were admitted to the School, 200 of whom graduated. Initially, students came from Italy, Spain, Latin America, and continental Europe, especially France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands, from North America, and Slavic countries. Subsequently, courses were joined by students from Arabic and African countries, India, China, Korea, and Vietnam. Alongside ecclesiastics, the majority of participants currently comprise lay people, men and women who are admitted without any religious or gender discrimination.

Quite obviously, course organization and management, students' profiles, and even the site of the School have changed over the years in response to the requirements of the job market, as well as to the never-ending evolution in the bibliographic world. However, the practical approach in acquiring the skills needed to carry out the many procedures that the librarian ought to perform has remained unchanged.[5] Theory and practice together help to better understand the object and structure of

standards and good practices in place, and to know and respect the needs of a wide range of users. "La pratique a le pas sur la théorie,"[6] as one of its directors, Monsignor Paul Canart, used to say. Therefore, the School was seen as a lab from the start. At first, it even lacked a proper classroom. Students were hosted in the offices of the library, where they could see with their own eyes how books were processed and could have direct access to bibliographic resources and reference tools available in the reading room. This was made possible by the small number of students attending the courses. As soon as their number grew, the School had to be equipped with a classroom, which was opened in 1941. Another classroom, more spacious and easily accessible from the Belvedere courtyard, was ready for the 1977–78 academic year.[7]

The current site, inaugurated in October 2002, is hosted in Palazzo San Paolo along Via della Conciliazione, across the road from Castel Sant'Angelo; therefore, for the first time, the School is outside the walls of the Vatican City. If, on the one hand, this solution has deprived the students of the charm of running into the Swiss Guards and enjoying the beauty of the Belvedere courtyard with its fountain and the overlooking structure of the Sistine Chapel, on the other hand, it has enabled equipping each workplace with a computer connected to the library network. In addition, the School is endowed with two working areas: The first hosts a selected collection of professional literature, while the other is used to store the dissertations submitted by the students at the end of their courses. Furthermore, these two rooms are frequently used for workshop activities and small roundtable discussions, and students can gather to discuss specific issues or to get to know each other better.

The year 1980–81 was indeed a crucial one in the history of the School. It was certainly decisive for me, since that very year I attended the course and took the diploma, which in some ways "obliged" me to be a librarian and to put the book, its history, and its management at the very heart of my studies. This is obviously not the reason I am drawing your attention to this specific academic year, however. Shortly before the start of the academic year, two professors, Niccolò Del Re (1914–2005; see Gigli, 2005) and Romeo De Maio (1928–2018), the latter being also the director of the School,[8] unexpectedly left the library and retired from the School. As a consequence, a thorough reorganization of the School took place, starting with the appointment of its new director. Monsignor Paul Canart[9] (1927–2017) was charged with this strenuous task. He had joined the library in 1957 as *scriptor graecus*, that is, a scholar who specialized in studying and cataloging ancient Greek manuscripts. He served the library for 40 years and was appointed Keeper of the Manuscript Department and the Vice Prefect from 1994 to 1997, when he eventually retired.

Monsignor Canart was particularly suited to the role he had been asked to play. Gifted with an outstanding feeling toward historical research and the study of the book, he never let his obvious interest for manuscripts

prevail on the care for the core business of the School, which was and still is printed books. He chose his collaborators with great care, motivating them and contributing to lessening any initial insecurity. He used his patience to minimize the consequences of potential interpersonal difficulties, in order to ensure the smooth running of the School. Being a gourmet, every now and then he used to invite the school board to dinner. Problem-solving, mediation, and programming were much easier tasks over a nice plate of lasagna and a glass of fine Tuscan red wine.

The reorganization of the School, even if dictated by the events, was in fact providential. During its first 45 years, the School had adhered substantially to the initial task of training its librarians through the Vatican Library's own rules and procedures. These were excellent criteria, as witnessed by the fact that various important Italian libraries, not only those belonging to religious institutions, adopted the Vatican cataloging rules or shaped their reading room on the model of the Vatican reading room. However, there was a need for an exchange with the Italian and international world of librarianship. This openness was granted by the new generation of lecturers who were asked to replace their illustrious predecessors.

The course of *ordinamento e servizi di biblioteca* (library services organization) was entrusted to Ivan Rebernik,[10] a Slovenian librarian who had received his bachelor's degree in theology and a doctorate in philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University and had long served the library of that University. In 1980 he joined the Vatican library, and in 1988 he was appointed director of the printed books catalog, a post he held for 16 years. Rebernik brought into the library, and therefore into the School, a special attention to international librarianship, to the professional community in Italy and worldwide, and to automation and library networks. He attended several IFLA meetings, bringing back loads of booklets, photographs, and addresses of colleagues, with which he literally covered his desk and then asked everyone to pick what they needed. In 1984, Rebernik studied the administration of an automated library as a visiting professional at the Smithsonian Institution and at the Catholic University of America. He was a great communicator, full of vitality and wit. The Vatican and the Pontifical University libraries, as well as many other libraries in this country and in his own country, owe him a lot. I could even say that this school would never have been what it has become had he not been on the faculty. Personally, I am aware that he has radically changed my approach to librarianship, opening me up to so many wonderful things: He has passed on to me a wealth of experience, passion for project management, and sensibility toward networking.[11]

This recognition would not be complete if I failed to mention the other two persons who were my professors at the time, to whom several cohorts of students and the School are deeply indebted. Cataloging was the realm of Antonio Alecci.[12] He, too, was a vigilant observer of the international scene and a keen participant in committees where new cataloging

standards were discussed and approved. He deserves credit for implementing the Vatican norms with the ISBDs, which at the time appeared to be an almost impossible undertaking given the large number of users, let alone the nobility of that code. His teaching paved the way for the adoption of MARC- and AACR2-based headings when the library moved to online cataloging and students were introduced to original and derived cataloging from databases such as OCLC and RLIN.

The third field of education was bibliography, a course that was taught for one year by Nello Vian, the same professor who had traveled to the United States in 1932–33 to get highly professional training at the University of Michigan. Prof. Vian had then taught for many years the course of *bibliografia e ordinamento generale dei servizi di biblioteca* (bibliography and library services organization). He most generously agreed to resume teaching for one year in order to transfer his great experience to Attilio Pernigotti, a much younger colleague who, having been designated to take over bibliography, was reassured to have such an illustrious mentor.

Along these lines, the School evolved further when Leonard Boyle, the Irish Dominican who had become prefect of the Library, took over from Monsignor Canart, who was eager to devote his time exclusively to manuscripts, the post of director of the School. It was felt that the state of the art in library studies required more courses to be added, in order to include topics such as manuscripts, rare books, preservation, information retrieval, and, of course, automation.[13]

All these changes led to a need for more hours, encompassing theoretical teaching as lectures and laboratory lessons with practical exercises and teaching in the field. Students were then required to attend a full day of lessons (9 a.m.–5:30 p.m., with a mid-morning coffee break and one hour for lunch) and class size was reduced from 100 to 48, the management of a cohort as such appearing to be much more sustainable. Following a series of agreements with libraries and educational institutions, students were also provided with the possibility of free internships consisting of 300 hours of training and practice.

This is not the end of the story. Since last year, the number of school days has doubled. Theoretical teaching, practical exercises, and visits to libraries are offered on Mondays, while Tuesday is dedicated to workshops and lectures. Scholars and experts covering many aspects of library and book disciplines are invited to give lectures and presentations and to share with students their highly reputed experience. Internships, which were assigned on a voluntary basis, are now compulsory and provide the subject for the dissertation that all students are required to discuss at the end of their course.

Workshops are particularly important, as they aim to provide students with soft skills, that is, a combination of personal and interpersonal, social and communication skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, and social and emotional intelligence. Currently the job market requires

candidates to skillfully navigate their environment, to work well with others, to perform well, and to achieve their goals with complementary hard skills. The majority of librarians in Italy have humanistic studies as their background. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, most of them became used to working on their own, teamwork being less frequent than it should be. Taking active part in the organization of workshops, such as the creation of virtual exhibitions, our students are confronted with the need to rely upon common sense, the ability to deal with peers, and a positive and flexible attitude, skills that complement acquired knowledge, the so-called hard skills. Qualities such as communication, courtesy, adaptability, integrity, a sense of humor, a positive attitude, responsibility, and teamwork should boost their chances of a successful employment, and not just in the library world.

Heading toward the end of this presentation, I would like to share with you some of the answers to a questionnaire that was circulated among faculty, students, and alumni in preparation for this event.[14] Data emerging from this survey, which are shown in the Appendix, are particularly relevant in current discussions about steps that that the School ought to take in order to be aligned with the job and professional market, within an informational, communicational, organizational, and social context that significantly clashes with the one which saw the foundation of IFLA 90 years ago and inspired Cardinal Tisserant's vibrant remarks.

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Endnotes

1. "To preserve the rare book collections of monastic and ecclesiastical libraries of the past, in order to safeguard, arrange, increase, describe and promote them." Pope Pius XI, when addressing faculty and students of the School, on May 11, 1935, openly embraced the said mission, arguing that "La Scuola di biblioteconomia ha proprio lo scopo di iniziare nel modo più largo, nel modo migliore, ad una tenuta, un governo, una cura dei libri che non si arresta ai libri stessi e non ha questi soltanto per oggetto, ma va anche a quello che i libri rappresentano, cioè la scienza, il culto della scienza, e della nobile fatica che intorno alla scienza si esercita" ["The goal of the School of librarianship is to introduce students to organizing, managing, and taking care of books in the best possible way. Interest in books does not confine itself to books, nor has those books as its main focus. Knowledge, care for knowledge, respect for effort and time consecrated to knowledge, that is what books are made of"]. (Alecci, 1983, p. 16). On the foundation

of the School, see Tisserant (1935, pp. 346–347); on the history and the organization of the School, see Pernigotti & Weston (1992, pp. 121–135), and Manfredi (2011, pp. 429–449).

2. The cooperation lasting from 1927 to 1947 between the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Vatican Library was thoroughly investigated by Háry (2009). In particular, with regard to the cataloging expedition and its consequences on cataloging practices at the Vatican Library (as well as in many other Italian and international libraries) see Weston & Galeffi (2013).

3. Based on the official Regole per la compilazione del catalogo alfabetico (1922), for the Italian libraries, with modifications conforming more nearly to Anglo-American usage. "Il signor Ansteinsson ... rifece completamente di nuovo le regole, con esempi nuovi scelti per lo più fra le schede del nuovo catalogo" ["Mr. Ansteinsson has devoted his time to a careful study of the whole system of cataloguing, adding new examples usually taken from our new card catalogue"] (Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1939, p. iii). The Vatican *Norme* met with a favorable reception. According to William Warner Bishop (1871–1955), director of Michigan Libraries from 1915 to 1941, "The Vatican *Norme* [are] perhaps the best of modern cataloging codes, and one which goes far to reconcile European and American practice" (Bishop, 1934, p. 167, n. 2). In turn, Rev. Colman J. Farrell (1937. p. 22), president of the Catholic Library Association, stated that "The compilation of the Vatican catalog rules [...] stands today as the world's best code of rules for cataloging. The opinion of Harriet MacPherson (1936, pp. 15–16), a faculty member at Columbia University, is likewise enthusiastic: "The Vatican rules are at the present time the fullest and most up to date in the world. When this code is translated into English it will no doubt be very much used in American libraries, and even in the original Italian it is a code of rules which scarcely any large library will want to be without." MacPherson even went on to publish an unofficial translation of the original Italian text for her students.

4. Nello Vian (1907–2000) was a member of the Library staff from the 1930s to 1976. He was one of the librarians who traveled to the United States in 1932–1933 in the aftermath of the aforementioned "Vatican library cataloging expedition" to get highly professional training at the University of Michigan. He taught for many years the course on "Bibliografia e ordinamento generale dei servizi di biblioteca." See Vian (2001).

5. Igino Giordani, Director of the School as well as Head of the Printed Books Catalogue office at the time, recalls the fruitful and so special legacy of the North American library schools tradition: "La nostra scuola ha un carattere autonomo anche in confronto con le altre scuole di biblioteconomia che ci sono in Italia. Anzi, sin dall'inizio, ci siamo

preoccupati di non creare un duplicato a Roma, dove già vive una scuola di biblioteconomia presso la regia Università. La scuola dell'università ha un carattere umanistico, comprende studi di paleografia e di storia, ed è più teoretica che pratica. La Scuola Vaticana ha scopi più modesti e sopra tutto più pratici. Perciò somiglia più alle scuole americane per bibliotecari: non per nulla chi l'ha progettata e chi vi insegna, s'è formato nelle scuole americane: nella Library Science School dell'Università di Michigan e nella School of Library Service della Columbia University" ["Our school shows a distinctive character compared to the other library schools in Italy. From the start we have taken care not to duplicate the library school which existed already at the Royal University. The latter has a humanistic character, it includes courses in palaeography and history and adopts a theoretical rather than a practical approach. The Vatican school pursues more modest though practical objectives. Therefore, it looks more like the North American library schools. It's not a coincidence that those who planned it and teach there were formed at North American schools: at the Library Science School, University of Michigan, and the School of Library Service, Columbia University"] (Giordani, 1942, p. 497).

6. Practice takes precedence over theory.
7. In 1993, in order to enable cataloging practice, the classroom was equipped with computers sharing the Geac Advance system in operation at the library.
8. De Maio was director of the School, *scriptor latinus* at the Vatican Library, a full professor at the universities of Salerno and Naples, Federico II, Honor Guest at the Warburg Institute, London, and a member of the committee for the study of illuminated manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. See Zen (2009, forthcoming).
9. Canart was *scriptor graecus* at the Vatican Library from 1957, director of the School (1979/80–1984/85), professor of manuscripts at the School (1979/80–1998/99), director of the Manuscripts Department, and vice-prefect of the Library (1994–1997). See Canart (2007), Pasini (2017), and Maniaci (2017).
10. Ivan Rebernik (b. 1939) was librarian at the Gregorian University (1964–1988), joined the Vatican Library and the School in 1980, was director of the Printed Books Catalogue (1988–2004), and created the URBE library network among the Pontifical Universities libraries.
11. Since as colleagues we were not always on the best of terms, I take this opportunity to make amends for the past.
12. Alecci (1933–2009) was professor of cataloguing at the School, a member of the Vatican Library printed books department and of several library associations (e.g., AIB – Italian Library Association, ABEI – Italian Ecclesiastical Librarians Association), and a corresponding member of IFLA.

13. The retrospective conversion of the Vatican Library catalogue project (1994–1995) was an early example of teamwork. Some 25 alumni of the School worked together in the Barberini Library surrounded by files of xeroxed catalog cards. They revised 500,000 records that had been created offline by over 100 colleagues working remotely. The creation of an online authority file was also part of the project. All decisions regarding cataloging criteria were discussed and approved by this group, with the coordination of two expert cataloguers.

14. Questionnaire replies were received from: Giuseppina Cerri, Giulia De Castro, Mariangela Distilo, Agnese Galeffi, Ada Facchini, Serena La Malfa, Antonio Manfredi, Luca Marinelli, Silvia Rossi, Arianna Rufo, Leyla Vahedi, Ilaria Vercillo, Raffaella Vincenti. I wish to thank them all.

Appendix

The questionnaire consists of two parts, both aiming at assessing the adequacy of the course, the achievement of individual targets, the need for changes, and the level of satisfaction. The first one is addressed specifically to faculty, while the other one is addressed to the entire statistical sample. Respondents were also asked to express in three words their idea of the School as it is now and as it should be in the near future. Two word clouds have been generated respectively from the list reflecting the current state [Figure A1] and from the one showing the state toward which respondents wish the school will evolve [Figure A2]. For the purposes of this presentation, I shall consider only answers given to the second set of questions.
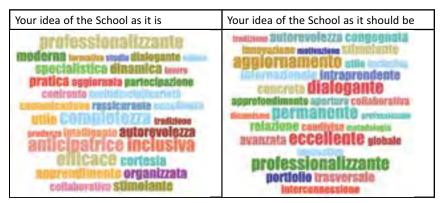

Questionnaire: Part 1.

In regard to your class,

- What are the principal topics?

- What are the educational objectives?

- In what way do you assess the achievement of these targets/objectives?

- Have you embraced changes in relation to topics or teaching methodology over the past few years?

- What use do you make of digital technologies?

- Which of the still outstanding topics would you recommend covering in the near future?

- Do you believe there is a balanced relationship between the front-end teaching and the more interactive part of the courses (workshops, laboratories, site visiting, etc.)?

Questionnaire: Part 2.
In regard to the whole process of education, • Do you believe the School is aligned with current job-market requirements? • What kind of users is the School prepared to serve? • What is your assessment of the organization of the classes? • Do you believe that the classes fulfill—on the whole and in proportion—their declared targets? • Which aspects do you consider to be still wanting? • What is your assessment of the present use of technology? • Do you feel that the relationship between the students and professors is adequate? • Do you think that the School should foster the creation of more frequent opportunities to get to know the students, to respond to their queries, to give advice on their professional options, or to provide feedback on the perceived quality of either individual classes or the school in general? • Do you believe that the participation of external experts (lectures, seminars, summer or winter schools, visits to sites, etc.) is perceived as useful by students? • Do you believe that students should be taking part in conferences, round tables, panels, etc., in order to raise awareness of and/or promote the research and teaching activities carried out at the School? • What is your opinion on fostering interactions (presentations, debates, social events, etc.) between alumni and students to facilitate the exchange of experience and to promote a sense of belonging? • Do you believe that the current qualification title is adequate for job placement? • Taking into account factors such as job-market evolution, changes in the profession, the cultural and social role that libraries could be playing in the future, and sustainability on the part of the School, how should the profile of the School evolve and what should its role be in the wider context of professional training over the next 10 years?

Your idea of the School as it is	Your idea of the School as it should be

Figures A1 and A2: Word clouds representing respondents' ideas about the current and future state of the Schoo

Replies to the questionnaire

Do you believe that the School is aligned with current job-market requirements?
Opinions are generally positive, due in particular to the School's practical approach and to the focus on soft skills.
Improvements should include:

- greater attention to legal education and digital technology;
- permanent education;
- a better balance between historical and technical disciplines.

Which kind of users is the School prepared to serve?
According to the replies, the School does not give priority to any specific type of user. In fact, it is considered equally useful for those working permanently in libraries, for those who are hired for a limited time and for postgrad students. It is even suggested that the School is useful for researchers who are not interested in library jobs but can benefit from a better knowledge of the impact of library standards and procedures on the circulation of information

What is your assessment of the organization of the classes?
Opinions regarding this issue are extremely or very positive ("a rich and sensibly balanced working plan," one respondent wrote). The course timeline, particularly in regard to the succession of classes, as well as the concentration in one day of workshops and other shared activities, are both praised.
There is a request for more time between the end of term and the summer session of exams.

Do you believe that the classes fulfill—on the whole and in proportion—declared targets?
Assessments are largely positive

Which aspects do you believe to be still wanting?
The replies offer a rather large number of suggestions which can be summarized in this manner:

- legal education (administrative law, labor legislation, copyright, privacy, digital rights);
- hands-on knowledge of the most common Italian online cataloging systems, as this is frequently required in job offers;
- libraries for children, entertainment, and media centers;
- fundraising and advocacy;
- ethics;
- management (access to funding, staff management).

What is your assessment of the present use of technology?
Apart from the cataloging software issue mentioned above, the use of publication platforms such as WordPress is much appreciated. A few

respondents have also expressed interest in joining and sharing a Virtual Research Environment.

Do you feel that the relationship between the students and professors is adequate?
The high number of hours spent on workshops and visiting sites allow students to engage in dialogue among themselves and with their professors. The availability of common areas at School enhances this possibility. An equally positive factor is the use of platforms for sharing educational material and for multimedia and social communication

Do you think that the School should foster the creation of more frequent opportunities to get to know the students, to respond to their queries, to give advice on their professional options, or to provide feedback on the perceived quality of either individual classes or the school in general?
While the general feeling for these issues is largely positive, it would be highly appreciated if feedback were provided and self-monitoring of progress encouraged.

Do you believe that students should be taking part in conferences, round tables, panels, etc., in order to raise awareness of and/or promote the research and teaching activities carried out at the School? What is your opinion on fostering interactions (presentations, debates, social events, etc.) between alumni and students to facilitate the exchange of experience and to promote a sense of belonging?
The idea is seen as a great opportunity for students to prove themselves and to acquire methodological skills from their professors. At the same time, the experience could provide inspiration and encourage the creation of long-lasting intellectual bonds among the researchers involved.

Do you believe that the current qualification title is adequate for job placement? Taking into account factors such as job-market evolution, changes in the profession, the cultural and social role that libraries could be playing in the future, and sustainability on the part of the School, how should the profile of the School evolve and what should its role be in the wider context of professional training over the next 10 years?

- The School should try and combine its practical approach with openness to study and research.
- The School should make a commitment to be engaged in research and educational networks constantly encouraging students to be part of these, and at the same time offering them useful and affordable means of adjournment and self-training.
- The School should define its quality standards and keep them at the highest possible level through continuous feedback from students, alumni, and faculty. The School should also issue a charter of rights for its students and alumni.
- The School should introduce an international applicable educational portfolio to provide its students and alumni with worldwide assistance in job searching.