

Archival Resources on the Web

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“What’s a Digital Exhibit?” Celebrating a Religious Community’s Anniversary during the Pandemic Lockdown

By Andrew Rea, Director of the Robert M. Myers Archives and Resource Center, Techny, Illinois

The Society of the Divine Word (SVD) is a Catholic men’s religious community dedicated to missionary work. Founded by St. Arnold Janssen in 1875, the SVD currently boasts a worldwide community of over 6,000 priests and brothers serving in over 70 countries. Along with foreign mission work in countries such as China, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and Ghana, SVDs in North America also established a host of domestic missions. They were among the first Catholic missionaries to minister specifically to Black Americans, leading to the order’s creation of the first Black Catholic seminary in the United States, St. Augustine in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.



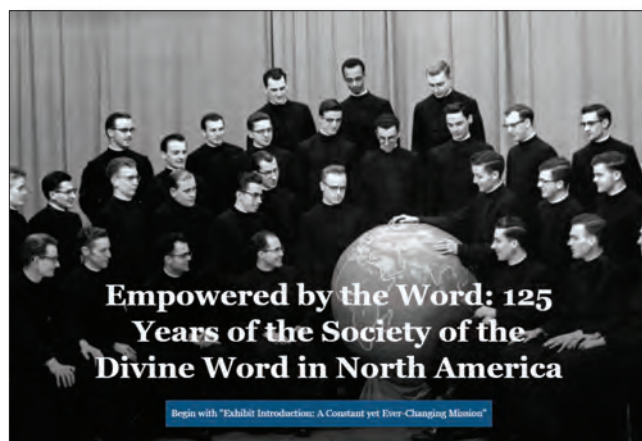
On May 23, 1934, at St. Augustine Seminary, SVD seminarians Anthony Bourges, Maurice Rousseve, Vincent Smith, and Francis Wade became the first Black Catholic priests ordained in the United States.

Established in 1989, the Robert M. Myers Archives and Resource Center (RMARC) holds the records of several SVD provinces, the papers of deceased and former Divine Word missionaries, and the records of former and current SVD educational institutions, parishes, and missions throughout North America.

While we are a small shop, we work diligently to make our collections available to community members and outside researchers interested in the history and legacy of the Society of the Divine Word.

2020 marked the society’s 125th anniversary in North America. On October 15, 1895, the first German SVDs arrived in New Jersey, and, by 1900, they had founded a community in the Chicago suburb of Techny that today functions as the headquarters of the Chicago Province and the home of RMARC. To support the celebration of this milestone, RMARC was initially asked to create an exhibit exploring the society’s history in North America. However, as was the case for so many things last year, plans changed. While provincial administration canceled the in-person celebration, archives staff opted to create an online digital exhibit in lieu of a traditional one, a first for the institution.

The result, *Empowered by the Word: 125 Years of the Society of the Divine Word in North America* (<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/svd125/index>) went live October 15, 2020.



The landing page of the digital exhibit

I’ve been fortunate enough to work on many exhibits in my career, both physical and digital, and I knew that with a full-time staff of two and about four months of

(Continued on page 20)

ARCHIVAL RESOURCES ON THE WEB—Continued Lauren White, Assistant Editor

(Continued from page 19)

lead time we wouldn't be building an exhibit platform from the ground up. Having worked with Scalar, a free, open-source web authoring and publishing platform created by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, at other institutions, it was clear to me that it would be a natural fit for this particular exhibit.

Using a number of templates, as well as digital-humanities-friendly interactive tools and data visualizations, Scalar allows quite a bit of content customization right out of the box. While the platform supports much deeper customization with knowledge of Javascript, our compressed timeline didn't allow us to go that route.

Scalar also provides different hosting options for media. While users—or third parties—can host files, we took advantage of the ability to upload our media directly onto the site. This option caps file size to 2 MB, so users interested in showcasing audio or video may find the file cap to be more of an issue than we did. Media can then be described using a number of metadata standards, including Dublin Core, IPTC, and ArtSTOR.

In the end, Scalar allowed us to focus on the content and user experience rather than on learning the platform's intricacies. For those institutions with limited tech support or staffing, Scalar is an excellent choice for a digital exhibit platform.

We identified two audiences for this particular exhibit: community members who knew SVD history but had little experience navigating a digital exhibit and a more web-savvy general audience with a less complete understanding of SVD history. As such, we made the decision to design the exhibit to appeal to both of these very different audiences. This limited our ability to delve deeply into specific topics but did push us to draw materials from across our entire archives.

An anniversary is a celebration of time, so it made sense to make Scalar's interactive timeline tool the centerpiece of the exhibit. I find Scalar's timeline to be both striking in its design and intuitive to use. However, as exhibit design progressed, it became clear that the points on our 125-year timeline (which link to exhibit pages discussing the respective events) needed to be at least three years apart to maintain real visual impact. Unfortunately, historical events tend to happen in fits and starts rather than at a uniform rate.



A portion of the centerpiece timeline of Empowered by the Word

For example, the years between 1905 and 1925 were an incredibly busy time for the SVD in North America: houses and seminaries were being built, and missions were being founded. Out of 21 total events on our timeline, 9 take place between those years. The prospect of populating a 125-year timeline with events spaced apart enough to remain visually discrete proved difficult and forced us to rethink what we could successfully highlight while retaining some amount of visual uniformity over the entire timeline. In the end, I'm not sure how successful we were, and we consider the timeline to be something we may choose to revisit at some point in the future.

Aside from establishing which events we wanted to focus on, we also needed to establish limits on the amount of media (in our case, images) on each event page. We first made the decision that no more than three images should be on each page, but, as the exhibit progressed and other stakeholders became involved, we raised the image number to five. Without the limits of physical space, it can often be tempting to expand digital exhibits to immense sizes, and Scalar can certainly accommodate. I believe that our future digital exhibits will likely be more focused and will contain fewer images than the over 100 *Empowered by the Word* contains, but, for the purposes of exploring the entire history of the Society of the Divine Word in North America, we were happy with the result.



Fr. William Ross SVD, one of the first Westerners to journey into the New Guinea Highlands, with newly baptized Papuans in Madang, 1931

The SVD community was also quite pleased with the exhibit, though for some, the idea of a completely virtual exhibit was confusing. “What’s a digital exhibit?” was a question we heard many times during the exhibit’s development. Many of my colleagues working in academic archives benefit from students and faculty who are comfortable with a wide array of digital tools and platforms (or at least the concepts behind them), but religious archivists often find that our older community members are not nearly as well versed. For them, viewing an exhibit means an in-person encounter with physical materials.

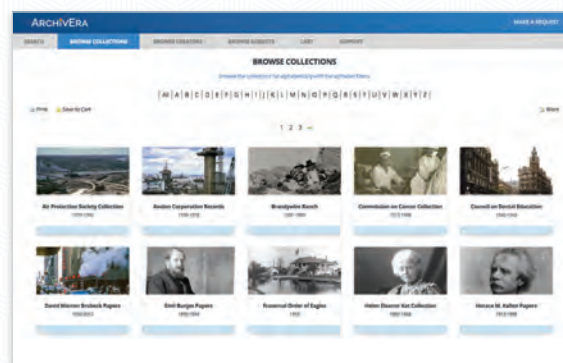


The first SVDs during construction of their community in Techny, IL, 1900

Archives staff attempted to combat this confusion by leading several virtual tours of the exhibit over Zoom, in hopes that a more personal, guided experience would make members feel comfortable navigating the digital

space themselves. Members remarked that, more than anything else, the fact that RMARC had brought their history into the twenty-first century was remarkable, and they were excited at the prospect that they could peruse the exhibit without visiting the archives proper. Several even asked what future digital exhibits might look like.

As *Empowered by the Word* approaches its own first anniversary, RMARC views the exhibit—and the experience around creating it—as a success. We were able to turn a disappointment into an opportunity, and feedback from stakeholders and visitors alike has been very positive. I’m confident that with a longer development period, we could have created a cleaner, more customized product, but perhaps we can realize that in RMARC’s next digital exhibit.



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