



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC LETTER  
ISSUED "MOTU PROPRIO"

FOR THE CHANGE OF THE NAME OF THE  
*VATICAN SECRET ARCHIVE*

TO THE

*VATICAN APOSTOLIC ARCHIVE*

Historical experience teaches us that every human institution, created with the best protection and with vigorous and well-founded hopes for progress, fatally touched by time, precisely to remain faithful to itself and to the ideal aims of its nature, feels the need, not to change its features, but to transpose its inspirational values into different eras and cultures and to make those updates that become convenient and sometimes necessary.

Even the [Vatican Secret Archives](#), for which the Roman Pontiffs have always reserved solicitude and care on account of the immense and important documentary heritage that it preserves, so precious for the Catholic Church as well as for universal culture, cannot escape such inevitable conditioning, in its now more than four centuries-long history.

The Pontifical Archive, which arose from the documentary nucleus of the Apostolic Chamber and of the Apostolic Library itself (the so-called *Bibliotheca secreta*) between the first and second decade of the 17th century, began to be called the Secret (*Archivum Secretum Vaticanum*) only around the middle of that cen. It was accommodated in suitable rooms in the Apostolic Palace, grew over time to a remarkable extent and was immediately opened to requests for documents that came to the Roman Pontiff, to the cardinal Camerlengo and then to the cardinal Archivist and Librarian from all over Europe and the world. While it is true that the official opening of the Archive to researchers from every country was only in 1881, it is also true that between the 17th and 19th centuries many scholarly works could be published with the help of faithful or authentic documentary copies that historians obtained from the custodians and prefects of the Vatican

Secret Archive. So much so that the famous German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, who also drew from it, wrote in 1702 that it could be considered in a certain way the Central Archive of Europe (*quod quodam modo totius Europae commune Archivum censeari debet*).

This long service rendered to the Church, to culture and to scholars from all over the world has always earned the Vatican Secret Archives esteem and gratitude, all the more so since [Leo XIII](#)'s death today, both because of the progressive “opening” of documentation made available for consultation (which from 2 March 2020, by my provision, will extend until the end of the pontificate of [Pius XII](#)), and because of the increase in the number of researchers who are admitted daily to the Archives and helped in every way in their research.

This worthy ecclesial and cultural service, greatly appreciated, responds well to the intentions of all my predecessors, who according to the times and possibilities have favoured historical research in this vast Archive, equipping it, according to the suggestions of cardinal archivists or prefects *pro tempore*, with staff, resources and also with new technologies. In this way the structure of the Archive itself has gradually grown in view of its ever more demanding service to the Church and to the world of culture, always remaining faithful to the teachings and directives of the Popes.

However, there is one aspect that I think could still be useful to update, reaffirming the ecclesial and cultural aims of the mission of the Archives. This aspect concerns the very name of the institute: *Vatican Secret Archive*.

Born, as mentioned, from the *Bibliotheca secreta* del Romano Pontefice, that is, from the part of codes and scriptures more particularly owned and under the direct jurisdiction of the Pope, the Archive was entitled first simply *Archivum novum*, then *Archivum Apostolicum*, then *Archivum Secretum* (the first attestations of the term date back to about 1646).

The term *Secretum*, which has become the institution’s proper name and which has prevailed in recent centuries, was justified because it indicated that the new Archive, created at the behest of my predecessor [Paul V](#) around 1610-1612, was none other than the Pope's private, separate, reserved archive. This is how all the Popes always intended to define it, and this is how scholars still define it today, without any difficulty. This definition, moreover, was widespread, with similar meaning, in the courts of kings and princes, whose archives were defined indeed as *secret*.

As long as there was still an awareness of the close link between the Latin language and the languages that derive from it, there was no need to explain or even justify this title of *Archivum Secretum*. With the progressive semantic changes that have however occurred in modern languages and in the cultures and social sensibilities of different nations, to a greater or lesser extent, the term *Secretum* in relation to the Vatican Archive began to be misunderstood, to be coloured with ambiguous, even negative nuances. Having lost the true meaning of the term

*secretum* and instinctively associating its value with the concept expressed by the modern word “secret”, in some areas and environments, even those of a certain cultural importance, this term has taken on the prejudicial meaning of secret, as in not to be revealed and reserved for a few. This is entirely the opposite of what the Vatican Secret Archive has always been and intends to be, which – as my holy predecessor [Paul VI](#) said – preserves “echoes and vestiges” of the passage of the Lord in history (Teachings of Paul VI, I, 1963, p. 614). And the Church “is not afraid of history but, rather, she loves it, and would like to love it more and better, as God loves it!” ([Address to the Officials of the Vatican Secret Archives, 4 March 2019: L'Osservatore Romano](#), 4-5 March 2019, p. 6).

Requested in recent years by some esteemed prelates, as well as by my closest collaborators, and having also listened to the opinion of the Superiors of the same Vatican Secret Archive, with this my *Motu proprio* I decide that:

From now on the present Vatican Secret Archive, without prejudice to its identity, its structure and its mission, should be called the Vatican Apostolic Archive.

Reaffirming its active desire to serve the Church and culture, the new name highlights the close link between the Roman See and the Archive, an indispensable instrument of the Petrine ministry, and at the same time underlines its immediate dependence on the Roman Pontiff, as is already the case in parallel for the name of the Vatican Apostolic Library.

I order that this Apostolic Letter in the form of a *Motu proprio* be promulgated by publication in the daily newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, coming into immediate force upon publication, so as to be immediately incorporated into the official documents of the Holy See, and that, subsequently, it be inserted into the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*.

*Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 22 October 2019, seventh of our Pontificate.*

**Franciscus**

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*\*[Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office, 28 October 2019](#)*