Weeding is good for you. That's the conventional wisdom in the new, modern, up-to-date library. Making room for the new is matter-of-course in public libraries, where current fiction, self-help, entertainment videos, and up-to-date business information are the main courses. Although weeding by subject category and by the criterion of recent use is theoretically less the case in academic libraries, they too run out of space; weeding of duplicates, out-of-scope and out-of-date material, little-used books and those materials considered too expensive to repair or preserve or house is almost the norm in college libraries. Using such tools as Books for College Libraries (BCL) and, when affordable, such automated helps as the collections-comparing OCLC/AMIGOS Collection Analysis CD, colleges regularly (and, one trusts, judiciously) cull their stacks. Well-weeded libraries, it is said, promote increased use of the "real" collection, and this may well, in general, be true.

One danger in such culling is that some worthy but not widely-held titles will be discarded. If too many institutions give too much authority to a particular list, like BCL, college library holdings may become just duplicate reflections of each other. The diversity that enriches each institution could be dispersed into book sales, Rotary Club bins, and (horror of horrors) dumpsters. In the United States, financial pressure and downsized collecting are becoming the norm for libraries. Many librarians feel they don't have enough time to do what needs doing. Many libraries are running out of space and...
can’t afford either a building program or compact shelving; consequently, weeding becomes an almost daily necessity. In these times of retrenchment, and at what will someday be looked upon as only the nascent years of true interlibrary cooperation, it would be a shame to lose what would be of informational value in the still-clouded future. College libraries often weed with the thought that research libraries and mega-university libraries will keep copies of materials they discard. This is probably not a valid assumption. After all, the real richness of interlibrary loan in this country is not based solely on large research and university libraries. Small libraries, both academic and public, make up most of the ILL net loaners, and it is their diversity, not the sameness of their collections, that make interlibrary loan a truly enriching practice.

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Around the country Catholic parishes, schools, religious residences and colleges are closing. In those institutions, there are archives of records and documents, and also books and periodical collections. Are the local diocesan/archdiocesan archives absorbing what is important in these institutions? Who is preserving pieces of American Catholic history? Who stores pre-Vatican II theology, and the philosophical, political and social history materials about the Catholic past in the United States? Do you know? Are you tossing historically important material away when you weed your vertical files? When you discard or “repair” that yellowed Maritain, that old prayerbook, that polemical pamphlet for or against Al Smith or the Spanish Republican forces, or that anti-clerical tirade about the popish plot to assassinate Lincoln or Kennedy or Jimmy Swaggart, or the regrettable detritus of Father Coughlin’s descent into disgrace, do you know? If you repair it, are you doing it in a way that will help destroy it? If you can’t afford to keep or preserve it, should you just throw it away? Is there a place you can send it? Could your discards be someone’s special collections? Is anyone really paying attention to the CLA Archive Section’s calls for saving our Catholic past?

While attending a Los Angeles Preservation Network (LAPNet) conference on reformatting technologies, old and new, I learned again just how expensive it is to preserve information, whether through physical conservation, microform or electronic storage media. We may be relying on the hope that some day technology will take care of preservation problems, but what will survive to be preserved? While larger institutions may have the means or get the grants to preserve at least some of their unique, aging or dying materials, smaller institutions are lucky if they can afford enough microfilm to make room in their periodicals stacks. It became clearer than ever to me that the only way all we little fish are going to keep our ponds stocked with the stuff of Catholic history, whether textual or pictorial, analog or digital, is to communicate our holdings, pool our resources, and begin getting the job done somewhere -- and soon.

Catholic libraries are not alone in their slowness to truly cooperate in preserving information. Since, however, we too are affected by the new stringencies of the American and world economies, and the rising price of materials and services, it is time we stopped flailing around hopelessly in our local ponds and begin communicating. There are some good models to follow. One of the best has been the preservation program of the American Theological Library Association (ATLA). ATLA currently provides a microfilming service for serials at a reasonable cost. But for several years, ATLA conducted a preservation program that produced high-quality microfiche of pre-1919 theological monographs. Each page opening was carefully filmed; each text was enlarged to the maximum size fitting the frame. Each master was examined frame by frame, and lacunae filled, so that the final product not only preserves the information, but also makes it highly usable — and surprisingly affordable. Several Catholic institutions, including such stalwarts as Notre Dame and
St. Louis University, participate in ATLA and have contributed materials for filming. Recently, however, grant funding was cut for this project. Should the rest of us give support, both political and yes, even financial, to get it going again? The Center for Research Libraries (CRL) films and stores thousands of volumes of unwanted periodicals. Shouldn’t we participate? Or should we set up our own local or national consortia? Perhaps we need a variety of approaches:

- We could divide “weedable” materials appropriately, wheat from chaff.
- We could divide collection responsibility for categories of material by format or subject area among regional consortia of Catholic institutions.
- We could contribute appropriate discarded periodicals to the Center for Research Libraries.
- We could send wanted materials to the more research-oriented of our institutions.

Catholic libraries, both large and small, could subscribe to support a conservation/preservation filming program for Catholic materials. This could be via ATLA, a research library, a commercial service, or a combination of it. Seeking advice from such national organizations as the Preservation and Reformatting Section (PARS) of ALCTS, we could apply for grants to support such a project. Copies of filmed, or even digitized, materials could be distributed to member libraries, and traded or even sold to other consortia or interested libraries.

In doing any of the above, more knowledge would be preserved, and the interlibrary loan pool of material would expand for all.

What are our diocesan and archdiocesan archives, seminaries, abbeys, and mother houses or provincial headquarters preserving? Are they in or out of our ILL loops, and our interlibrary communication? What would they accept, preserve or store if they knew we had materials to offer? Is it possible that there is a preservation program going on under our local noses of which we are unaware? Can we use our automated systems and, via modem, our local or national databases, or create a site on the Internet, to identify Catholic materials, including monographs, pamphlets, piety materials, newspapers, personal papers, ephemera and serial runs, that are held uniquely or rarely, or are beginning to disintegrate? Can we indicate to each other what materials are being earmarked for preservation microfilming, to avoid duplicate efforts which thereby save fewer titles? Can we do what other library groups, consortia, regional organizations and national associations are finally beginning to do? Can we cooperate with them? Or will we give in to inertia, exhaustion or despair, and just continue our blindered ways? Shall we save our Catholic past? It’s up to all of us to ask ourselves if it isn’t time to at least try to begin.