 & A with Margaret Phelan, General Archivist

Margaret Phelan, RSCJ, who serves as the Society of the Sacred Heart general archivist in Rome, visited St. Louis this summer. While she was here,  Province Archivist Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ interviewed her. Here’s a glimpse of their conversation:

**Q. As general archivist, what are the most important things you have been doing?**

A. My time recently has been much taken up with renovation of the archives space at the Villa Lante for two purposes: first, to protect documents against the humidity of Rome. We now have climate control in the two rooms that house our documents; previously, there was not even AC. The second purpose of the renovation was to make more room, which we needed. (The Villa Lante is the former novitiate, established by St. Madeleine Sophie in 1837. Currently, it serves as the Italian provincial house, public guest house, probation house and general archives.)

**Q.** **What are the most important documents kept in the general archives?**

A. We have the originals of over 14,000 letters of St. Madeleine Sophie, over five hundred letters and other writings of Philippine, most of the original letters of Janet Erskine Stuart, and tens of thousands of other letters and objects important to the history of the Society. In addition, we have the entire archive of the *Trinità dei Monti,*including the original *pensionnat* (school) and Mater’s chapel, and all the documentation on the development of the Constitutions, General Chapters, and General Council minutes, from the time of Sophie onward. (The Trinità is the house at the top of the Spanish steps established by Madeleine Sophie in 1828. The Society left there in 2006.)

**Q.** **What do you most enjoy doing as archivist?**

A. What I enjoy most is doing genealogical searches for all kinds of people who ask. Many requests come from France, but also many other countries. With the exception of the U.S., all the death records during the time of World War II are kept only in the general archives. Also, it is always a delightful surprise when a researcher’s request brings me to discover a section of the archives that I didn’t know before.

**Q.** **Do you have many researchers?**

A. About twenty researchers per year come to do research onsite, about half RSCJ and about half others. We also get about two hundred inquiries a year by email and telephone.

**Q. What other archives work do you do?**

A. I work with provinces, providing training and holding regional meetings with archivists. We held one of these regional meetings in Asia two years ago, another in Latin America in May, there will probably be one next year for English-speaking provincial archivists. Some new provincial archivists are sent to Rome to be trained. Sometimes I am invited to a province to visit all the communities and offer training for all members to their responsibility for preservation of our heritage. I also give presentations to new provincials, the probanists, new treasurers, provincial secretaries, heads of institutions where appropriate, etc.