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The Bilbao Diocesan Library: From an Academic Support Centre to a Heritage Reference Point

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In celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Diocese of Bilbao (Roman Catholic Diocese of Bilbao n.d.), this article aims to show the history and transformation of the library from its foundation as a study centre, through critical periods of hardship, and recent ventures into AI (artificial Intelligence), with an ultimately hopeful outlook towards a future in which it seeks to serve both the diocesan community and wider society.

My library reflects a situation that occurs in many Church libraries in Spain associated with ABIE (Asociación de Bibliotecarios de la Iglesia en España (ABIE) n.d.), which are generally libraries with large collections of historical and cultural significance, yet possess very limited financial and human resources. Even so, these libraries are joining forces, seeking synergies, and training themselves professionally and technically with simple projects that utilise AI.

1. Initial Stages (1956-1970)

I would like to explain the historical evolution of the library up to the present day. In 1950, the Diocese of Bilbao was officially created (although its existence, linked to other dioceses, dates back to 1501). The diocesan library, then belonging to the Seminary, was established in 1956 to support the study centre of the newly founded Diocesan Seminary.



[Image 1] Inauguration of the Diocese (photo provided by the Vizcaya Ecclesiastical Historical Archive (Diocese of Bilbao))

Although the Bilbao Seminary was officially opened in 1960, the minor seminary had existed since 1953. By the 1956-57 academic year, all the seminarians were already studying in Derio, a town situated 12km from Bilbao, where the Seminary had been built for the newly created Diocese of Bilbao in 1950.

The library is the only space in the entire building that has remained in its original location. It was later expanded by one floor.

It was one of the first institutions created, serving both the Minor and Major Seminaries.

From 1956 to 1968, the Diocese invested in the library, providing financial resources to acquire works and publications to support the seminarians' studies in theology and humanities. At the same time, it purchased essential ecclesiastical works such as *Migne's Patrologia Latina*, *Mansi's Councils and Synods*, *Corpus Christianorum*, and *Sources Chrétiennes*.

The library also gathered works from previous centuries that had been dispersed amongst the parishes, and purchased others of great interest that date from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries

2. Period of Transition (1970-1990)

With the relocation of the seminary and its students to Bilbao (Zarate 2024), the library and its building entered a period of transition. During the last days of Franco's dictatorship in 1974, the Seminary moved to Bilbao and the library lost its role as a study centre. This decision had significant repercussions for the library and its functional role. All book purchases were suspended, and subscriptions to periodicals were cancelled.

From this date onwards, the building also fell into disuse for almost two decades. It was in 1992 that a new chapter began for the building, as it was gradually transformed into a hub for business, cultural and sporting services, which is now visited by approximately 3,000 people every day.

Even so, most of the collections, particularly the older ones, were not moved and remain in the library. As mentioned earlier, the library is the only part of the entire building that remains in its original location since the building was first constructed.

Between 1974 and 1986, thanks to the concern of a priest, the library continued to receive bequests and donations from priests, parishes, institutions, and individuals. However, these bequests were simply collected and stored, since there were no staff to classify or catalogue them. I am sure that without the priest's intervention and supervision, the library would have disappeared, and its valuable heritage would have been lost.

In 1986, after persistent requests to the bishop of that time, a volunteer was permitted to catalogue the old collection using manual cards, although the library still had no relevance in diocesan life. In 1995, another volunteer continued to catalogue the modern collection.

[Image 2] Library Paper Cards (photo provided by Jaime López de Eguílaz Munsuri)



This quiet, behind-the-scenes voluntary work was essential for laying the foundations—albeit in a rudimentary way—for what is now the library. During these years, parts of the collection were organised and briefly catalogued on manual index cards, whilst classification criteria were established to facilitate searching for items.



[Image 3] Old Reading Room (photo provided by the Vizcaya Ecclesiastical Historical Archive (Diocese of Bilbao))

3. Stage of Transformation (2000-2020)

From 2000 onwards, we entered a decisive stage in the restoration of the library. In 2006, I began working at the library with the aim of running it according to the standards of any other library.

In 2010, after years of neglect, it was decided to transform the library into a Diocesan Heritage Library. In practice, this decision means that it is no longer affiliated with the Diocesan Seminary as an institution under its authority. Instead, it is now part of the diocesan curia, reporting to the General Vicariate within the diocese's Department of Cultural Affairs and Heritage, which houses the Museum of Sacred Art, the Diocesan Historical Archive, and all matters relating to architectural heritage.

When I started working at the library, the subject areas were defined and physically allocated across two floors. This process involved the organisation and relocation of collections in line with the decisions that were made. An ILS (Integrated Library System) and OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue) (Biblioteca Diocesana de Bilbao n.d.) were acquired, and cataloguing of the old collection began.

In the following years, the library joined diocesan and supra-diocesan networks such as the Spanish Episcopal Conference, ABIE, BETH, BNE, as well as collective catalogues.

This marked a crucial step in various aspects: on the one hand, the library is increasingly becoming part of the ecclesiastical community and the other representative bodies to which it belongs, beyond its diocesan affiliation, thus achieving a greater ecclesial communion within its spheres of influence. On the



[Image 4] Library Shelves (photo provided by Jaime López de Eguílaz Munsuri)

other hand, it is gradually being integrated into the public professional network, from which it can contribute its specific strengths and more effectively tackle the common challenges that libraries face, both in Spain and in wider Europe.

It also explores the need for diocesan coordination, which has already been taking place between specialist libraries within the diocese, such as the library's collaboration with the Labayru Foundation (Labayru Fundazioa, n.d.) and its Euskal Library, which is responsible for collections relating to Basque culture, regardless of language or place of publication. Another link is with the Diocesan Institute of Theology and Pastoral Care (Instituto Diocesano de Teología y Pastoral n.d.), whose library is a 'branch' of the diocesan library and is responsible for purchasing the most up-to-date books on theology, thereby complementing the work of the Diocesan Library, which focuses on its role as a heritage library.

4. The Library Today

In the present day, the catalogued collection amounts to seventy thousand items (books, journals, music, vinyl records, and so on) out of a rough total of 142,000 items. 12,200 of these items date from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The excellent collaboration with the Vizcaya Ecclesiastical Historical Archive (Archivo Histórico Eclesiástico de Bizkaia n.d.) remains fundamental to the work of preserving and promoting our bibliographic heritage through close cooperation aimed at achieving synergies and fostering collaborative work.

The task of cataloguing continues. As a heritage library, we continue to receive donations (Radio Popular de Bilbao 2026a) from former priests, institutions and other sources, contributing to the work that began way back in 1956. Whilst our founding mission remains unchanged, it is constantly being updated and executed in keeping with the times in which we live.

As Church libraries, it is essential that we remember and revitalise our core purpose: namely, the mission and identity (Bizkeliza 2026) of our institutions as agents of evangelisation, both within and through the means of culture. There is no technical course or training that can remedy this should it be lost.

The library continues to grow largely through donations from priests, institutions, individuals, and from materials found in parishes, as well as through subscriptions to the *Corpus Christianorum* and *Sources Chrétiennes*.

The library's participation in monthly radio programmes (Radio Popular de Bilbao 2026b), which present the library and its connection with diocesan life, has helped to raise awareness and interest in the library and its collections.

Whilst our resources are limited, particularly in terms of staff, this does not prevent us from continuing to work on projects which I believe to be essential for the preservation and promotion of culture, both within the diocese and in terms of the contribution it makes to society, so that we may faithfully fulfil the mission entrusted to us.

To the best of our ability, we endeavour to implement new technologies that make our work easier and are already readily available to us. We do not view the challenges posed by AI with fear, but rather as an opportunity that must be linked to the mission referred to earlier.

Digitisation projects are also undertaken where possible.

Three years ago, for the first time, funding was obtained from the Basque Government for the digitisation of works from the old collection and for their inclusion in the Basque Cultural Portal, Euskariana, which is also uploaded to Europeana.

As a heritage library that receives the majority of its holdings through donations, it has been part of the library's mission since its foundation to assist those places, institutions and individuals in need through the library's surplus collections. For this reason, the library makes regular and periodic donations to countries in South America, particularly to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in which collaborative projects have been underway for many years through diocesan missions.

5. The 75th Anniversary of the Diocese of Bilbao

In 2025, we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the official foundation of the Diocese, although its existence dates back to 1500 through links with the Diocese of Calahorra and, later, to Vitoria.

The library has been part of many events, culminating in a public fair attended by 3,000 people in Bilbao (Bizkeliza 2025).

At this event, the library presented an exhibition with panels to demonstrate that the diocesan history can be read through the books and documents preserved in the library.

It has been a valuable opportunity to highlight the importance and necessity of continuing to support the library due to its position as a reference point for the conservation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

6. Looking Ahead

Why not dream of small implementations in AI?

From a heritage library, significant in its holdings but modest in its resources, we are committed to gradually introducing aspects of AI that are within our reach.

Here follows a brief overview of some projects we'd like to undertake.

In collaboration with my diocese's IT department, we are working to implement a chatbot embedded in the library's OPAC to interact with users and researchers. This project goes beyond the library, aiming to integrate it into the diocesan website so that it can provide information and support for all diocesan institutions, including other libraries.

We also seek to disseminate and implement some of the proposals on AI put forward

by REBIUN's Artificial Intelligence Observatory (Red de Bibliotecas Universitarias Españolas (REBIUN) n.d.), which we at ABIE have taken on board and are promoting. Lastly, we have compiled a list of prompts, categorised by theme, so that they can be easily used in libraries.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, I will end as I began: it is possible to take small steps, each from our own particular circumstances, and look directly at AI without fear.

I believe that as libraries of the Church, we have a responsibility to contribute ethical criteria to the use of AI. Let us take advantage of opportunities such as this one provided by BETH to reflect on this issue.

I would like to conclude with these three words, which have been present throughout this year of celebration and which accurately summarise our vision from a heritage library: Remember – Live – Dream.

Remember our history, live the present, and dream of the future.



[Image 5] Library Building (photo provided by Jaime López de Eguílaz Munsuri)

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