

## Email Correspondence between James Yarnall and Dennis Raverty, 2023

September 27, 2023

Dear Dr. Yarnall,

I am a retired art history professor that recently joined Church of the Ascension in New York City where John La Farge's large mural serves as an altarpiece, and which also boasts several stained glass windows designed by that artist. My area of specialization is American art of the 19th and 20th centuries (I studied with Matthew Baigell), but I have also taught Renaissance and Baroque art in Italy and Germany, so I have a good background in European art of the old masters as well.

I have undertaken to write short essays on works of art from the collection of the parish for their records (I have no plans for publication at this time), and as the foremost authority on this artist, I was hoping that you might be available if I have questions regarding these works (I promise I won't ask you to read anything, I just have some questions).

I have attached a recent short article by me as well as my c.v. I also do popular lectures at churches and libraries and this is my website: <https://www.dennisraverty.com/disc.htm>. Please get back to me either through this email address, or by calling me at home, my number is 212/489-7634. If I am not in, please leave a message with a telephone number and a good time to call you back.

Thank you for your time, and for your wonderful work on this interesting artist. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely Yours,

Dennis Raverty, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Art History (retired)  
New Jersey City University

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October 24, 2023

Dear Dr. Raverty:

As you know, I retired from my professorship at Salve Regina over six years ago. At that time, I dispersed my personal library and research archives by donating everything to various places. I now live 5,500 miles away from Newport in the remote reaches of Hawaii and took virtually nothing with me except electronics. In that regard, I do have an old database containing in-depth scholarship on La Farge artworks (even though it has not been updated since 2016). This database was the source of all of my writings and was an attempt at a catalogue raisonné.

I am glad to try to help you but it will have to be by email. I would not be of any use on the phone because I don't know the material any longer off the top of my head as I once did. I would have to look up every question in the database and then synthesize a response, which would be very difficult to do while on the phone. What I will do instead is to use the database to generate catalogue entries for anything owned by the Church of the Ascension in the form of individual PDF files. Those will contain everything I have recorded and can tell you about the windows and the mural (even though I think I also have some entries for artwork that was never carried out and perhaps some entries on some of the other opalescent windows by other artists). I will send those PDFs to you as attachments and you can get back to me with any questions (even though if it's not in the PDF files I

probably won't know the answers).

My recollection is that we are talking about a fair number of artworks. I also know that the majority of the Church of the Ascension catalogue entries have copious information. This means that it will take me a few days at least to get everything together.

I hope this is a satisfactory way to proceed given that I have been "out of the La Farge business" since 2016.

Best regards:

James L. Yarnall

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October 25, 2024

Dear Dr. Yarnall,

Thank you for your generous response. I would be very interested in anything you have on the collection of the parish and greatly appreciate your assistance.

My immediate concern is that I am writing an article for *Living Church* magazine on the St. Joseph window for a deadline of November 15, and any information on this window that you have would be helpful.

For many years it was taken to be a depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd because, I guess, of the sheep grazing in the background landscape (other images of St. Joseph by Titian and by John Everett Millais also have sheep). However, the flowering rod is an unmistakable attribute of the saint--but here he is shown as a beardless youth (not an old man). He hands the slumbering infant Christ a pomegranate, whose 613 seeds symbolize the 613 laws of the Torah, and so represents the transmission of Jewish law through Joseph to the divine child. His use of fabric glass, dappled glass and ripple glass is extraordinary. Parts of the distant landscape are made blurry (suggesting aerial perspective) by placing them behind translucent milky glass that partially obscures their outlines.

I wonder when the parish started calling it a "Good Shepherd"? Do you have any information on the commission for this particular window? (I think it was from around 1905).

In any event I am delighted to have finally contacted you and found you to be so cooperative and helpful. What a resource! I think I can speak on behalf of the whole parish family when I express our gratitude for your willingness to work with us. I look forward to our continued collaboration and remain

Sincerely Yours,

Dennis

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October 25, 2023

Dear Dr. Raverty:

In response to your follow-up this morning, I hurried up and found that it was not difficult to pull things together including what I have about the Davies Coxe memorial. I discuss that more below.

I am attaching PDFs derived from my old database containing all the information I have on artworks related to the Church of the Ascension. At some point around 1995-1999 (I am no longer sure precisely when), I came to the church to go through the archives and document the mural and windows in person and so gleaned a lot of information in that way. I also, prior to dispersing my research archives, had collected over the course of forty years working on La Farge some 30+ filing cabinets of documentation and hundreds of books. I essentially worked all this information into my database and so that's what you are getting here (the mural happens to be the most heavily published artwork in La Farge's oeuvre). I no longer, however, possess any of the source material (collected all over the country in libraries and archives) and so unfortunately you would need to track down any of the source material you wanted to see again. A lot of it would be available in New York City at the NYHS or the NYPL although a great deal also comes from the Library of Congress in DC, where I lived for fifteen years while doing a pre-doc fellowship and then working at the Smithsonian.

The database software dates from the 1980s (a variety of dBASE called Foxbase) and is primitive by today's measure. The text fields do not support true footnoting and so you will see the awkward system I came up with ("`<1>`" is the format) and you will notice that the general formatting is not refined as it might be in today's software. But it was better than not having some sort of computerized system for capturing, organizing, and storing a large database of complexly configured data. Converting the data at this point to a current software system is not worth the cost or effort to me given my lack of intent to publish anything further.

As I mentioned, I have been "out of the La Farge business" for six years but in fact did not update the database after 2012 when I published my Ashgate biography of La Farge that I assume you know and that is not cited in the database documentation. That in-depth biography was a compendium of my lifetime of research on La Farge and is a thorough resource for anything you need to know about La Farge's life and career.

In terms of the attached PDFs, I have ordered them A-J per the following schema: A-E are the catalogue entries for the mural and four memorial windows that La Farge completed for the church; F-H are entries for two more memorial windows and a set of ornamental organ loft windows that La Farge discussed in one way or the other producing for the church but never did; I and J are skeletal (meaning merely notational) entries for two windows that have been continually misattributed to La Farge on the basis of the glass but they are by John J. Humphries Johnstone who, starting in 1884 when the La Farge Decorative Art Company collapsed, was a partner in the Decorative Stained Glass Company located formerly on Washington Square. This company manufactured La Farge's windows for the rest of his life and hence it is not surprising that the glasses in Johnstone's windows are the same as the glasses in La Farge's windows, but La Farge had nothing to do with those two commissions.

E is the PDF related to the Davies Coxe window.

I think you need to be cautious here because I believe that the identification of the subject as the Good Shepherd came from La Farge. Without my manual files, it is hard to demonstrate but here is what I can tell you from my database and memory. In 1998 or so, I went to the Library of Congress for a week to research and, among the successes of that endeavor, I was able to photocopy copyright cards from a manual file (a real old card file). La Farge began copyrighting his glass and mural designs sometime around 1900, concerned that they were being parroted/pirated by other artists (he was right). At that time and through La Farge's death in 1910 at least (but probably many decades after as well), the cards contained an image of the artwork, the title, and other identifying information. Among the cards was one for the Davies Coxe window and that MAY hold the key to documenting the original title as "The Good Shepherd". I say "MAY" because I do not have the photocopy any longer but there is another way to verify the identification at the time, namely the Catalogue of Copyright Entries that published (without photos however) the contents of the old card file each quarter or semester (I no longer recall). I consulted the volumes (a wall of them) in the Library of Congress but they were widely distributed to major libraries around the country. I'm sure you can find a wall of the volumes in NYPL and the Met and Columbia. It's possible that in the last decade, the catalogue has been digitized and can be found online so you should check that out too. The

volume and page number and date for the CCE are all found in the catalogue entry on the Davies Cox memorial.

If that card or the CCE had identified the Davies Coxe window with some other title, that would be noted and discussed in my catalogue entry for the window, but there is no mention at all. Ergo, my conclusion based on memory and methodology and database is that JLF called it "The Good Shepherd" when he copyrighted it. There is also other evidence for which once again I cannot provide the actual visual evidence but I can swear on this based on my database. There was a presentation color study for the window that would have been used to procure the commission from the patron but then returned to La Farge. That watercolor was in his possession in early 1910 after the window was installed and before he died in November 1910. In March 1910, it was exhibited under the title "The Good Shepherd" at a one-man exhibit at the Boston gallery of his dealers, Doll & Richards (18-30 Mar. 1910, #34). After his death, the watercolor ended up in the hands of his posthumous dealers, Vose Gallery in Boston, and was exhibited in a memorial one-man exhibition, again under that title (13-25 Nov. 1911, #91). I used to have photostats of the catalogues from those exhibits but once again no more...perhaps they can be found online? If not, possibly the Met library (for sure the Boston Public Library but that is not convenient to you). That color study by the way was around and about in private hands I knew about until 1984 when it was sold at auction in California (see catalogue entry for details) and disappeared into unknown private hands (presumably). The color study was not annotated but it might have had labels on the back from Vose with the original title. But again it's not around to look at...although if you can find the auction catalogue from 1984, the entry might note such things.

So my conclusion is that La Farge did use the title "The Good Shepherd" for the design and I suspect that's where the church got the title from, although I've been unable to document when the church first called it that. But, in any case, if La Farge used the title "The Good Shepherd" as I believe then you have a dilemma if you contradict him. He was very picky about such things and seldom wrong. You will note in my catalogue entry for the Southworth Memorial (PDF D) there is a discrepancy between how JLF identified the three female figures and how the church has later chosen to identify them. JLF very specifically talked about The Three Marys in his titles for the color studies related to the window. To return to the Coxe window, I never found anything about that particular window in the church vestry minutes but you might try again to look through 1909-1910 to see if it might have been mentioned and I overlooked it (or Barbara Weinberg missed it before me). The window was commissioned in 1909 and installed in February 1910 so it should take too much to go through the minutes for that year.

I hope this information is helpful and I will be glad to answer other questions if I can, although as I implied I am pretty rusty at this point and obviously without my old files I have to guess at things that I would rather run to the filing cabinets and check. But you can't drag 30 filing cabinets along to paradise and I really disengaged from art history and La Farge when I retired to the Big Island of Hawaii. I REALLY retired.

I have just been in touch about you with my close friend Julie Sloan, with whom I wrote articles on JLF glass a couple of decades ago. She now lives up at Lake Placid and is an expert on stained glass who oversees glass restoration projects nationwide (including some big ongoing projects in and around Manhattan) and serves as the La Farge glass expert for the auction houses. She would be glad to try to answer questions that I can't and feel free to consult her regardless. She really knows and loves the glass in your church (all of it, not just the La Farge glass); she could give you some helpful specific terminology for the varied glasses in the Coxe window given that she is a trained restorer of opalescent stained glass (when we wrote together, she did all the technical stuff and I did all the art history). Her email is [sloan16@msn.com](mailto:sloan16@msn.com)

I'll shut up and send this since you are pressed for time.

Best regards:

James L. Yarnall

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October 25 [i.e. later that same day]

Dear Dr. Raverty:

It dawned on me this afternoon that I must have compiled a report of my visit to research copyrights since at the time I was employed by the La Farge Catalogue Raisonné Inc. and was required to file reports on any and all field work. After some searching on my archived backup hard drive, I located the Library of Congress reports from 1995 (not 1998 as I misreported earlier). The report on copyrights is attached.

This report includes a transcription of all the information in the CCE volumes and, sure enough, on page 12 of the attached PDF, you see the entry for the Good Shepherd. Items in square brackets are mine but the title and the description of the imagery and the other non-bracketed text were an exact transcription of the CCE entry.

So this confirms what I surmised, namely that La Farge filed this copyright under the title of Good Shepherd. Ergo, there is no doubt that the artist intended that to be the iconography even if there are to you incongruities in the imagery that suggest a Saint Joseph figure.

La Farge (or more likely his agents by post) filed this copyright just a few days before the window was installed. I also just noticed that La Farge's name and the words COPYRIGHT 1910 appear in the lower left border of the window. So that date corresponds to the date on the copyright entry.

I suspect I've messed up your article but better to know this documentation before publishing a theory that would contradict it. Perhaps you could refocus on the incongruities of the iconography. In any case, the facts are the facts....

Best regards:

James L. Yarnall

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October 26, 2024

Good Morning,

Please call me Dennis. It will take me a while to process all this information. Thank you. The bibliographic references alone are just incredible. The church is now much richer as a result of your work.

I have not yet had a chance to think through the iconography of the window, but thank you for the copyright information--I will take it seriously under consideration when drafting my article, and will get back to you with some of my thoughts later.

I do have a quick question however, regarding the mural.

Weinberg says that the chancel wall partially collapsed when they tried to stretch the canvas. I have never heard of stretching a canvas to a wall--she goes on to say that it came crashing down with over

500 pounds of canvas and metal (metal?).

Do you suppose they tried to bolt the canvas to the wall somehow, which could not withstand the enormous weight and stress and so collapsed? They later rebuilt the wall and after being reinforced they were able to successfully install the huge canvas Weinberg points out.

Puvis painted his work in his studio and later glued the canvas to the wall and so I just assumed this was what was done here, but Weinberg says he first stretched the huge blank canvas, attached it to the wall (which initially collapsed, and then completed the painting in situ.

Do you have any recollection of this installation disaster off the top of your head? (I don't want you to have to look up anything). I wish I could call Weinberg and ask her what she meant--but she does describe it pretty well in her dissertation. Perhaps the 35-foot canvas was to just large to glue to the wall as Puvis had done in his smaller murals.

I wonder why he didn't just have the wall plastered and then execute the painting directly on the wall, as he had done at Trinity Church in Boston.

Best,

Dennis

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October 26, 2023

Dear Dennis:

I no longer have Barbara's dissertation so I can't look at her footnotes again to help answer your question. She lives on Fifth Avenue across from the Met, where she was Curator of American Painting during the tail end of her career. You could call the Met, ask for the American Wing secretary, and ask to have forwarded an e-mail inquiry to Barbara. She dispersed her La Farge research and donated her photographs to the La Farge Catalogue Raisonné a couple of decades ago but has an amazingly brilliant mind and recall.

My understanding has always been that the canvas for the Ascension mural was stretched over a framework reinforced with steel due to the massive size of the canvas. I think that Cortisoz in his bio talks about the framework and the collapse (meaning using information that came from JLF since the latter wrote a source manuscript that Cortisoz rewrote) but I no longer have that book to check. The outer frame is as you know an elaborate sculpted plaster affair that I believe covers the actual framework. Stanford White designed it and I suspect that the underlying framework was engineered by someone from McKim, Mead & White who, by 1885, were building all kinds of structures with steel hidden beneath stone and plaster.

By 1885, JLF had abandoned painting murals on plaster; he actually transitioned to the use of stretched canvas in his commission for murals in the Cornelius Vanderbilt II house in New York in 1881. These were lunette-shaped canvases that he and his crew carried out in his cavernous studios on the top few floors of the Century Building on Union Square. When JLF interrupted his work on the Ascension mural in 1887 to carry out the murals for the Whitelaw Reid house (the ones now in the New York Palace Hotel dining area), those were on canvases set up in his Tenth Street Studio Building suite of studios (he occupied off and on between 8 and 10 studios at once in the building formerly on the same side of 10th Street as the church and where 45 West Tenth Street now is). After that, all of his remaining murals were executed on canvas in either his New York or Newport studio. From

descriptions, it seems that, once completed, a given mural was removed from the stretcher, rolled up, and then restretched and touched up in situ. That's how JLF executed his last murals for the Minnesota State Capitol and the Baltimore Court House in the early 1900s.

JLF liked working in a studio for a number of reasons, including lighting, but mostly because he didn't want anyone snooping on him. Given that he perpetually ran very late in delivery, and given that he often allowed projects to interfere with one another (as with the Ascension mural being preempted by the Reid murals), he did not want to be scrutinized. He couldn't avoid working in situ with the Ascension because it was so large that he had no choice.

I know of no case in which JLF glued a canvas to a wall. He knew (and wrote an article) about Puvis and so I think it was not for lack of knowledge of Puvis' technique. JLF was most strongly influenced stylistically and technically by Delacroix's murals at the Palais Bourbon that were, at least for some good part, painted on stretched canvases.

I don't think I answered your question but some of this seems relevant perhaps...

Best regards:

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October 27, 2023

Dear James,

I have been using the materials at the Met library and Cortisoz's book is among them, so I will consult that book for more details on the collapse. Thanks for the lead. (I want to have the parish purchase Weinberg's dissertation as well as your latest book, but the rector has been on sabbatical).

Weinberg died just a few months ago. I tried to get in touch with her, but when I googled her I got her obituary.

So if I understand you correctly, a huge steel-reinforced wooden(?) stretcher was initially installed by affixing it to the masonry wall with steel fasteners or bolts of some sort. Then the huge canvas was stretched onto that structure, and it was during the stretching of the canvas over this framework that the wall collapsed.

The docent committee at Ascension is giving a tour of the church on Sunday to some group and they were unaware that the wall had ever collapsed, so I will pass this information on to them. Thanks for taking the time to respond so quickly.

Sincerely Yours,

Dennis

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October 27, 2023

Oh my, I am so sad about Barbara. We had a long professional relationship, even though I am ten years younger and was not her student. We were comrades-in-arms against some of the crazies we encountered. In 1986, we were both maligned while working on a joint project with several other scholars and we banded together to wreak havoc. It was sweet vengeance indeed.

I am not sure about that the whole wall collapsed or that it was while the canvas was being stretched (it seems possible that the canvas was stretched onto the framework before it was raised into place but I don't know). I read over the catalogue entry I sent you and it seems that I concluded that La Farge had just started his work on the canvas already in place when a part of the wall collapsed, delaying work for a number of months while repairs were made. If you adhere to Cortissoz and Barbara's statements, you will make up for any mistakes in my scholarship. If I'm wrong, don't bother to tell me because I'm not correcting things anymore...

Good luck!

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October 28, 2023

Aloha Dennis:

I would like to donate copies of Barbara's 1972 dissertation, Cortissoz's 1911 biography, and my 2012 biography to the Church of the Ascension in appreciation to the church for its generous help to my past research and in memory of Dr. H. Barbara Weinberg.

I will order them on Amazon and have them delivered to the church directly if that is OK.

Two questions.

First, will you make sure there are not already copies of any of them there? I may have donated a copy of my book after it was published in 2012 but no longer have a record of whether I did or did not. I suspect that you don't need two copies of anything in the church library.

Second, can you tell me to whom I should direct the books and confirm the best shipping address?

When I order, I know from past experience that the books will arrive separately and take different amounts of time. Books take much longer than anything else ordered from Amazon because they come from different places and not from the warehouses. When I order, I will notify you and, when I get the USPS shipping numbers, I will send you those so you can track the orders.

I spent the whole day today thinking about Barbara Weinberg and Bill Gerds, her fellow prof (and sometimes foil) at CUNY and someone with whom I had a lot of interchanges in the 1980s (he and I published together a massive index to art early exhibition catalogues, 6 vols.; he tragically died from COVID early in the pandemic before vaccines or treatments). I was just getting going and they were both so influential on me, and so kind, and very generous.

Best regards:

James L. Yarnall

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October 30, 2023

Aloha Dennis:

My book and Cortissoz's book have been ordered and I will send you the USPS shipping numbers when the books are shipped. They are coming separately and are addressed to Brother Andrew. Both of these are new and are paperbacks. In both cases, there was no hardback copy available. I should have known this because I donated my



personal hardback copy of my book to the library here last year and when I ordered a replacement for myself I found out then that there was only a paperback copy available. I guess it is the practice for presses to run a paperback edition after the hardback edition is sold out.

Weinberg's dissertation turned out to be an issue with the price for "new" astronomical (as in 4 figures up to as high as \$2500) and the price for used pretty crazy (running in the range of \$300 to \$700). I am all for being generous but that's sort of highway robbery pricing and so for the moment, I'm not able to send her book on. I will keep poking around the web and see if I can come up with a copy that is more reasonably priced.

So I'll keep you posted with shipping information.

Best:

James

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November 10, 2023

Aloha Dennis:

I finally found an affordable copy of Weinberg's book but it is used. It belonged previously to the library of Ira Spanierman, whose gallery in New York went out of business after Ira died in 2019.

Being an art historian, this might interest you about the closing of the gallery...strange story.

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/03/11/new-york-supreme-court-permanently-bans-gallery-from-showing-distorted-image-of-artists-work>

So I imagine that the book was purchased from the gallery when it sold its library several years ago. The copy of the book apparently has some wear on the cover but otherwise is in very good condition.

I did not buy the book through Amazon, where the copies were much more expensive, and it is coming from Mullen Books in Philadelphia and should go out today or tomorrow, directed to Brother Andrew. I will not get the usual tracking information that I would through Amazon so let me know when it is received.

Hopefully the three books can be inscribed in memory of Dr. H. Barbara Weinberg on the flyleaf.

Hope you are well and making progress on your research.

All best:

James L. Yarnall

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November 15, 2023 [from the current rector to Dr. Yarnall]

Dear Dr. Yarnall,

Thank you for the very generous gift of your book, *John La Farge: A Biographical and Critical Study*, to the Church of the Ascension, as well as Royal Cortissoz's biography of the artist, Barbara Weinberg's 1977 dissertation and other materials from your own catalogue of La Farge. What a treasure trove this is for us! We are honored to have these works in Ascension's library.

We are learning a great deal from the studies Dr. Dennis Raverty is doing on the works of La Farge (and others) here at Ascension, and of course your scholarship greatly enriches his project. He has done a number of presentations for our congregation as well as other audiences. We also have many visitors to the church every weekday from literally all over the world. Most of them are interested in Ascension's art, which means they are interested in La Farge. It will be wonderful to be able to use all this material to enhance our guides to the art in the church and our welcome to our visitors.

When you are next in New York, please come visit us at Ascension. I would love to meet and thank you in person. Again, we are most grateful for these very generous donations.

Sincerely,

Liz

The Rev. Elizabeth G. Maxwell

Rector, Church of the Ascension

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Hi James,

The article has appeared in *Living Church* on the Good Shepherd window at Ascension (attached). I hope you like my interpretation of the iconography, which had been misunderstood by the parish for decades.

I intend to write a series of short essays on the various works of art and decoration in the church executed by La Farge, Louis Saint Gaudens, Charles Follen McKim and others along with architecture by Richard Upjohn and later revised by Stanford White. I want to finish by 2027, the 200th anniversary of the parish.

Thanks again for all your help. Have a blessed holiday.

Dennis

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Aloha Dennis:

Thank you for sending me your new article. I think you cleverly worked out the iconography without contradicting La Farge's identification of the subject in 1910. So glad you were able to do that. You obviously have done a deep dive into iconography in your career.

The one thing I would suggest as a subject for future research (not mine!) is the fact that La Farge was an unabashed plagiarist when it came to Renaissance and Baroque sources. He of course transformed his sources with his own "modern" style but nonetheless he might be accused of being a bit lazy when it came to inventing iconography. So the question is whether there is in fact a source or there are sources for the imagery that he adapted to the window (just as the mural of the Ascension is an amalgam of Palma Vecchio, Raphael, and Titian). As you know, he was osmotic in his free borrowing from and knowledge of the history of art. He had plenty of second-hand sources in the libraries to which he had ready access in New York (including McKim, Mead, & White's) and he embraced photographic reproductions as a means of "collecting" prototypes starting from the time he went on his wanderjahr in Europe in 1856-57. The sources for many of his plagiarisms have been identified, especially by Barbara Weinberg when she was researching her dissertation in the Avery Library. Unfortunately, his actual collection of reproductions and his incredibly massive library have not survived intact, with most of the books being sold off during his lifetime to satisfy creditors (but with published auction catalogues providing a good record).

In any case, onward and upward.

I'm glad I was able to provide the church library with some essential sources for your future work, especially Barbara's dissertation.

Have great holidays and all best: