

GENTREK: Roman Catholic Church Records

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Although Roman Catholic church records form an immense mine of information for genealogists, there seems to be little information in the genealogical literature on the scope and nature of those records. Mayhap the fact that few of these records have been published has kept them out of the public eye. Mayhap also the small Catholic population in 18th century America has tended to circumscribe interest in Catholic church records. Whereas today, Catholics comprise about a fifth of the total United States population, in 1783 they were estimated to number under 20,000, or less than one percent of the population. Most Catholics, moreover – some 15,800 – lived in Maryland. Of the remainder some 700 Catholics lived in Pennsylvania, about 1500 in New York, 200 in Virginia, and only a scattering in the remaining states.

Catholic church law has long required the keeping of an elaborate system of records which are of interest to genealogists. I'll attempt to describe the nature and development of those records this evening. The records exist largely because of the Church's sacramental theology. The Council of Trent in 1547 defined as a theological truth that there are **seven sacraments**, viz. baptism, confirmation, holy eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick (formerly called extreme unction), holy orders, and matrimony. Furthermore, the Council defined that three of these sacraments – baptism, confirmation, and holy orders -- leave an indelible mark on the soul of the recipient and, hence, can be received only once. Finally, Trent made historic changes in the canon (Church) law of marriage.

Before Trent, the exchange of consent by two baptised persons capable of marrying produced a sacramental marriage. No clergyman or, indeed, any other witnesses had to be present. But clearly proving the fact of such a marriage could be most difficult. Indeed, the largest category of cases in mediaeval matrimonial courts dealt with proving that words of consent had actually been exchanged by the parties. To end this endless confusion, Trent declared that henceforth no marriage was valid unless contracted before an authorised clergyman and two witnesses.

Clearly Trent's mighty sacramental decrees would have rested on feet of clay had no permanent records been kept of the administration of these sacraments. Hence it is, that the pastor of each parish is required to keep registers of the baptised, the confirmed, the married, the buried, and the parishioners' sacramental history.

The requirements for the contents of these records, for the most part, were laid down in the Roman Ritual, promulgated in 1614 by Pope Paul V. **But it was not until the 20th century that the church law concerning records was rendered complete.** Only in 1907 by the decree *Ne Temere* was it required that marriages be noted on one's baptismal record. Finally in 1918 the Code of Canon Law, which became effective that year, completed the system of interconnecting records by requiring confirmations, ordinations, religious professions, in addition, to be noted in the baptismal register. Thus by looking at a 20th Century Catholic's baptismal record, one can quickly learn her entire sacramental history. For the genealogist this provides very valuable information. The baptismal record (since 1918) is an index to the location of all the other sacramental records of the individual.

Alas earlier records, in the United States especially, are not nearly so complete. Enforcement of these record keeping laws depended on a system of periodic inspections by a supervising prelate. The Council of Trent ordered prelates to make inspections, called visitations, of each parish

biennially. An integral part of each visitation was the inspection of the records to see that they were being properly recorded and preserved. Unfortunately, until 1784 the prelate in charge of English-speaking North America was the Vicar Apostolic of London, who never visited the scattered American missions. If there were no operative sanctions for not maintaining the required records, there was little positive inducement to keep the records. In Europe such records would have enjoyed the status of public, official records. In English-speaking lands Roman Catholic records were merely private records. They were, moreover, during the days of the penal laws, evidence of criminal activity. Earlier records, therefore, tend to be scantier and less well preserved.

Twentieth-century records are not only fuller but also better preserved. The Code of Canon Law requires that copies of the baptismal, confirmation, marriage, and burial registers be sent annually to the diocesan headquarters. Thus, even if the parish register is destroyed, there should be another record available. Unfortunately, these copies are often buried in diocesan archives and are not readily accessible.

In the US, there are about 200 dioceses. To locate a specific diocese link to <http://www.usccb.org/state.shtml> . To find historical dates about a diocese, go to <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/dus.html>. For a basic timeline, go to <http://www.katolsk.no/utenriks/kronologi/usa.htm>.

Physical access to the records is not the only problem, however. In dealing with the parish registers one should keep in mind that **in 1868 the second plenary council of Baltimore**, which enacted legislation applicable only to the Catholic church in the United States, **ordained that the entries in the registers be in Latin**. This can create some problems of detail. The Latin 'Jacobus,' for example, can in English mean either 'Jacob' or 'James.' Likewise, 'Margarita' can in English mean 'Margaret,' 'Marguerite,' 'Gretchen,' or 'Pearl.'

Note: Names may be recorded in older parish registers under the Latin version of the name. A partial listing can be found at <http://freereg.rootsweb.com/howto/latinnames.htm>

One last general note should be added. The church law discussed here covers only the western church. The Eastern Churches or rites (Greek, Ukrainian, Syrian, Maronite, and Coptic) have their own code of canon law. One follows the rite of one's father. Nevertheless, it is possible that Eastern-rite Catholics receive sacraments in western (or Latin) churches. In 1863, the Vatican Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (which had charge of Catholics in the United States until 1908) ordered a special book to be maintained when a pastor baptised a child of another rite. The fact of the difference of rite was to be noted and the child's own pastor was to be informed of the baptism.

The Baptismal Record

Having described the nature and interrelationships among the various Catholics records, let's examine each record individually. In the case of a baptism the pastor is required to record exactly and without delay the names of the person baptised, the parents, the sponsors, and the minister of the sacrament as well as the date and place of baptism.

In the case of an illegitimate child, the name of the mother is to be recorded if she is publicly known with certainty to be the mother of the child or if she voluntarily requests her name to be recorded as the mother either in writing or orally in the presence of two witnesses. Similarly, the name of the father is to be recorded if he is known to be the father of the child from a public authentic

document or if he voluntarily requests his name to be recorded as the father either in writing or orally in the presence of two witnesses. In the case of illegitimate children born of adultery, incest, or sacrilege, the names of the parents are to be recorded following these rules but care is to be exercised to avoid a loss of reputation. Illegitimacy will generally be noted by such Latin expressions as '*pater ignotus*' (father unknown), or '*extra matr. natus*' (born out of wedlock), or '*ex matr. civili*' (born of a civil, but not sacramental, marriage).

Baptismal records of adopted children present a problem. Traditionally, the situation of adopted children has not been dealt with in the universal law of the Catholic church. [Adoption of children is largely an American phenomenon](#). Adoption was unknown in English law until 1926 and in Roman law, which is the basis for most European law, adoption was a public proceeding whereby an elderly man selected another man as his heir. American adoptions, by contrast, are almost always of children and American adoption law often requires the identity of the natural parents and even the fact of adoption to be kept secret.

Faced with this requirement, the various dioceses of the Catholic church in the United States seem to have followed two basic courses of action. The first is to restrict access to the baptismal record of an adopted child and to provide that a court order, for example, is needed before a pastor may disclose information on an adopted child from a baptismal register. The other approach has been to create a special baptismal certificate. [Genealogists should be alert to the existence of such documents](#). They will give the adopted name of the baptised, the adoptive parents' names, the pastor of the adoptive parents, the date of birth, the date of baptism, and will usually be annotated "*ad usum civilem*." Such baptismal certificates are issued for limited purposes, generally to attest merely the fact of baptism in order that the child might be confirmed or receive its first communion.

The record yielding the identity of the natural parents will exist elsewhere. Generally the baptismal register will be annotated "For original record contact Catholic Charities." The Catholic Charities is the Catholic adoption agency and it will have a cross-index between the adoption baptismal record and the original baptismal record which will yield the identity of the natural parents. The parish in which the original record lies will have been instructed not to disclose information from the record because of an adoption and thus the original record may be closed unless a court order can be obtained. In general it will be difficult to obtain information of the parents of an adopted child without a civil court order or the consent of the natural parents.

Genealogists should take note that if a baptism took place outside the domicile of the baptised, the pastor of the place of domicile must be notified of the baptism so that he can record it in the proper register. The genealogist will find this a godsend in helping to locate records when the baptism took place away from the permanent home. Thus, notice of baptism in Newport, Rhode Island, of a person normally resident in Dallas, Texas, would be sent to her Dallas pastor. Domicile, by the way, is a term of art in canon law. As in common law, domicile is acquired by moving to a place with the present intention of remaining there permanently. In addition in canon law it is possible to acquire domicile by the mere fact of ten years actual residence in a place. Minors, as would be expected, have the domicile of the parent.

The Confirmation Record

Confirmation, like baptism and holy orders, can be received but once. Hence, the fact of reception must be recorded. Church law requires the names to be confirmed, her parents, her sponsor, the minister and the date and place of reception to be inscribed in the confirmation register. Moreover,

notice goes to the place of baptism to be noted in the baptismal register there. [The genealogist may find confirmation records helpful in tracing the movement of a family.](#) Also, it is very possible that the sponsor is a relative.

The Ordination Record

The third sacrament which can be received but once is holy orders. Until 1972, ordination to the subdiaconate rendered a man canonically incapable of contracting marriage. Hence, when a man was ordained subdeacon, notice had to be sent to the church of his baptism for recording in the baptismal register. Since 1972, the notice is sent when a man is ordained deacon. The canons require the name of the ordained, the ordaining minister and the date and place of ordination to be recorded. In addition the names of the parents of the ordained, his place of origin (generally the place in which he was domiciled at birth) and his age are to be entered. Although notice is sent to the place of baptism, the original record is kept in the diocesan headquarters.

The Religious Profession

The profession of solemn religious vows is not a sacrament. Nevertheless, the profession of solemn religious vows upon becoming a friar, monk, or nun is recorded on the baptismal register. This is done because under canon law a member of a religious community in solemn vows is incapable of marrying. The record includes the name of the professed, the order, the place, the date and who received the vows of the professed. The last will usually be the abbot or abbess, the prior or prioress of the order concerned.

The Marriage Record

Marriage records are probably (after baptismal records) the most important Catholic church records for the genealogist. Although the sacrament of matrimony differs from baptism, confirmation and holy orders in that it can be received more than once, prudence and the experience of the Middle Ages amply demonstrated the need for recording marriages. Moreover, since ordination and the profession of solemn religious vows are impediments to marriage (and vice versa are problems, too), it was necessary to include matrimony in the system of interconnected church records.

The canons prescribe that as soon as possible after the ceremony the clergyman witnessing the marriage register the names of the spouses, the witnesses and the date and place of the marriage. Notice of the marriage must also be sent to the church where each spouse was baptised. The Roman Ritual, in addition, required the recording of the ages of the spouses, the parish of the spouses and witnesses, and the **names of the parents of each spouse and witness.** The genealogist may also in rare cases glean helpful date from notations of any dispensation, of the validation of a civil ceremony, or the dissolution or annulment of a marriage. The genealogist may need to seek the assistance of a canon lawyer to interpret these data fully, however.

It should be stressed that Trent decreed that only marriages before an authorised clergyman are valid. All others – save those contracted in the most extraordinary of circumstances – are void for lack of proper form. But the absence of a record of a marriage in a parish register does not necessarily mean the absence of a sacramental marriage. **Canon law provides for secret marriages in certain, rare cases.** Marriage is normally a public act. It is contracted before and within the

Christian community. A 'private' ceremony is difficult to square with the theology of the sacrament. But in rare cases publicity would frustrate an otherwise proper marriage. In such cases a marriage of conscience is possible. This procedure was introduced by Pope Benedict XIV in 1741. In such cases the bishop of the diocese dispenses the norms requiring the publication of the banns of marriage and the registration of the marriage in the parish register, and the marriage then takes place privately. A notice in the baptismal register to contact the diocesan office is a clue to such a marriage. Baptisms of children of such marriage are also recorded in the confidential register, unless the marriage has been made public.

The Burial Record

The next type of parish record is the burial register. After interment the minister is to record the name and age of the deceased, the name of his parents or spouse, the date of death, the sacraments he received, the minister of them, and the date and place of interment. Unfortunately for genealogists, canon law does not require notice of death or burial to be sent to the church in which the deceased is baptised.

The Status Animarum

The last type of register required to be kept by the parish is the Status Animarum register. This is a record of the sacraments received by each parishioner. Its purpose is to assist the pastor in the pastoral care of the parish and, since it is only for local use, copies are not sent to the diocesan headquarters. Parishioners are grouped by family for this record. The record includes the names, place of residence, occupation and domicile of the head of household, spouse, children, and other relatives living in the household as well as live-in employees. After the names and identifying information is a space for the sacramental history of each individual. These are noted usually by certain abbreviations. 'B' indicates the person has been baptised; 'chr' indicates she has been confirmed; 'C' indicates she has made her first communion. Additional spaces may give changes of residence and a notice of death. Clearly in conjunction with the baptismal register the status animarum register will be most helpful to the genealogist. It will enable the genealogist to discover children not listed in the baptismal register – those, for example, born earlier and baptised in another parish. Moreover, by listing live-in relatives and employees it will provide helpful leads to supplement or substitute for federal census records. Unfortunately, this register is very often not kept in the book form which canon law would seem to specify. Rather, for convenience sake, it is often kept on index cards which are disposed of when the subject dies or leaves the parish.

Summary

The system of Catholic church records is clearly a decentralised one. Sacraments are recorded where they are conferred. Nevertheless, the requirement of notifying the church of baptism (since 1918) provides a complete index to a Catholic's sacramental history, and easily enables all the records to be assembled.

The only difficulty is a practical one. One must know to which parish to write for a record. If the parish is known, its address can be found in the current edition of the Official Catholic Directory, obtainable at most libraries. If the parish is not known, the Directory may still be helpful in locating it, since each parish in the diocese is listed. If the parish is not known and cannot be discovered by a search of the Directory or if the parish is known but is not listed there, one should

write the chancery of the diocese in which it is located. The chancery's address will be found in the Directory, too. The parish may have been suppressed, united with another parish, or had a change of name.

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Online Catholic Sites

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Several sites on the web that may be helpful in doing research about your Catholic ancestors. Some good general ones include Cyndi's List <http://www.cyndislist.com/catholic.htm> and http://home.att.net/~Local_Catholic/

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For general reference on the Catholic Church and help in understanding unfamiliar terms, try <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/>. Interestingly, this was published in 1913, so is out of copyright.

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Another good source of information is <http://www.catholicdoors.com/>

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<http://www.parishesonline.com/scripts/default.asp> and <http://www.catholic.org/maps/> can help you locate churches close to where your ancestors resided.

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Notre Dame has a large collection of Catholic newspapers on microfilm. For a listing of their holdings, see: <http://www.nd.edu/~archives/cathnews/>. According to the Notre Dame website, the microfilms are available through Inter-Library Loan. <http://www.nd.edu/~archives/cathnews/cathnint.htm> (Scroll down the page for more info)

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A further note concerning parishes is in order. Since the Council of Trent, Catholic parishes have generally been territorial. In other words all Catholics living within a defined geographical area were members of the parish for that area. But in the late 19th century, Pope Leo XIII created an American exception to this norm and allowed the creation of parishes based on the language of the parishioners rather than on geography. Often these "national" parishes, as they were called, were territorial as well. That is, the people within a defined geographical area belonged to the parish as well as any person speaking the appropriate language who chose to affiliate with it. Persons speaking German, French, Polish, and Italian in particular united themselves to national parishes. There were also some national parishes for African Americans. When researching a family from any of these groups, this bit of history should be kept in mind. Old city directories will often point out which parishes served with language or ethnic groups. (See the Presentation on City Directories at <http://www.ShoeStringGenealogy.com>)

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If it is unclear in which Catholic diocese a place lies, consult the article on the relevant state in the New Catholic Encyclopedia. Diocesan boundaries have changed over the years. In 1790, for example, the diocese of Baltimore extended from Maine to Georgia, from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. Furthermore, some sees are no more, such as Bardstown and Vincennes. But the experienced genealogist is already well aware of the need to learn the local history in order to uncover the repository of desired records, right?

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