

A Practical Guide to Sacramental Records

1. What registers are necessary?

Canon Law requires parish books to include registers for baptisms, marriages, deaths, and confirmations. (Canons 535, 895) A first communion register is recommended. A Register of the Elect and a Register for Reception into Full Communion are helpful.

Sacramental registers are permanent, historical records. Care should be taken to purchase registers of quality paper and binding.

It is recommended that separate registers be purchased and maintained for mission churches. This is useful when missions are raised to the status of a parish or when care of a mission is transferred to a different parish.

Sacramental records are confidential information. Registers should be kept in a safe, secure place in the parish, and should not be removed, copied, or loaned without the approval of the chancellor of the diocese.

2. What happens when one parish (or mission) merges into another parish?

When a parish or mission church merges into another parish, entries stop in the registers of the closed church. All future sacramental entries are recorded in registers of the existing parish.

3. How are entries to be made?

Creating a sacramental record is a documentary service performed by the Church. Sacramental records also have importance as legal documents. The pastor is responsible for proper maintenance of the registers. However, he may delegate the day-to-day administration of the records to a responsible person such as the parish secretary or business manager. (Canon 535)

Recording sacramental entries should be done promptly and accurately. (Canon 877) Information should be entered neatly in printed letters, not cursive handwriting. A good quality pen should be used, preferably black ink. Do not use pencil, colored ink, or felt-tipped marker.

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4. What should be entered in a baptismal record?

The baptismal record lists the name of the baptized person, the minister, the parents, sponsors or witnesses, the date and place of baptism, and the date and place of birth. When the mother's name is listed, her maiden name should be used. (Canon 877)

In addition to recording baptism, this record is to contain notations regarding the reception of confirmation, marriage, or reception of holy orders or religious profession. Also it may record the dissolution or nullity of marriage making reference to the name of the Tribunal and the protocol number.

Documents that accompany or testify to information in the register are to be maintained in a separate file after the entry is made in the register. Some of these documents are kept permanently such as those related to legal name change, adoption, or Tribunal procedures, and should be marked with the page and number of the entry in the register. These separate files should be maintained in a safe and secure place in the parish.

Notices related to the celebration of marriage or receipt of confirmation also are to be kept in a separate file after entry is made in the register. These notices may be destroyed after one year. In case of any question, consult the diocesan chancellor.

5. Why is the baptismal record considered to be the complete record concerning a person's status with the Church?

The baptismal record is the primary sacramental record. It is the location for information on the reception of the other sacraments. (Canon 535)

When confirmation is received, the pastor of the church where the sacrament was administered must inform the pastor of the confirmand's church of baptism. This information is to be entered into the baptismal record. (Canon 895)

When a marriage takes place, the pastor of the church where the marriage took place is to notify the pastor of the church(es) of baptism of the Catholic party(parties). (Canon 1122)

Diocesan curia handling a case of dissolution or nullity of marriage notifies the church(es) of baptism so that this notation may be made in the baptismal register. (Canon 1123)

The local bishop or major religious superior is to send notice to the church of baptism for those who receive holy orders or make religious profession of vows. (Canon 1054)

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6. How is baptism recorded for a child of unmarried parents?

For a child of unmarried parents, the register lists the name of the mother if she asks freely before two witnesses or if there is public proof of her maternity. The father's name is entered if he asks this freely before the pastor and two witnesses, or makes an open declaration of his paternity, or if a public document lists him as father. (Canon 877)

It is permitted to record the baptism with no notation of parents' names or only one parent's name. If no parents are given or if only one parent is given, it is best to enter "not declared" in the register. Do not leave the space blank. A certificate also is to indicate "not declared" if no mention of parent(s) is provided.

7. How are baptisms recorded in cases of adoption?

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) has approved a standard format for dioceses in the United States for entering baptisms of adopted children. (Complementary legislation for Canon 877, approved by the NCCB November 18, 1998; Action granted recognition by the Congregation for Bishops, September 30, 2000; Effective date December 1, 2000)

For children baptized after adoption is final, the following information is to be entered in the baptismal register:

- Christian name(s) of the child as designated by the adoptive parent(s);
- Name(s) of the adoptive parent(s);
- Date and place of birth;
- Names of sponsors (godparents) selected by the adoptive parent(s);
- Date and place of baptism;
- Minister's name;
- Notation of adoption but not the names of the natural parents.

For children baptized before the adoption is final, the following notations are to be made in the register after the adoption is finalized:

- Names of the natural parents will be placed in parenthesis;
- Names of the adoptive parent(s) will be added;
- Child's former surname will be placed in parenthesis and new surname added;
- Notation of legal adoption will be made.

Certificates will list only the adoptive parent(s), the child's new legal surname, date and place of baptism, and minister's name. No mention will be made of the fact of adoption. Neither will the sponsors' (godparents') names be listed on a certificate.

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8. What is entered in registers for those entering the Church through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults?

For catechumens (those not previously baptized), baptism is recorded in the register at the date of conferral of the sacrament with all the appropriate entries as given in No. 4 of this guide. (Baptism customarily takes place at the Easter Vigil.) Entries are made also for reception of first communion and confirmation. It is appropriate for the parish to maintain a Register of Catechumens to record the names of the catechumens after the Rite of Acceptance. This register lists the name of the catechumen, sponsor's name, minister's name, date and place of Rite.

The Register of the Elect officially enrolls the names of those catechumens who publicly declare that they are seeking baptism at the Easter Vigil.

Regarding candidates for full communion, a record of the profession of faith is entered in the baptismal register at the date of profession, with the candidate's date and place of baptism, date and place of birth, and parents' names. Entries are made also for reception of first communion and confirmation. It may be useful to maintain a register of baptized Christians received into full communion. Some parishes also may have a register for professions of faith.

9. What happens in cases of errors and omissions?

When a correction or change is needed to an entry in a sacramental register, the information is added by way of a notation. The original entry should not be marked out. Obvious errors such as evident misspellings or transposed dates may be corrected without additional information. Other corrections must be based upon some type of proof, either in the form of a witness, the testimony of the person if the sacrament was received as an adult, or other appropriate documentation.

Corrections should be annotated with explanatory remarks, and documentation received as verification should be kept in a separate, secure file. If there is any question regarding the proper action, contact the diocesan archivist or chancellor.

Omitted entries require the same circumstance of proof, that is, one witness, the testimony of the individual if the sacrament was received as an adult, or appropriate documentation. (Canon 876) The omitted entry is added in the nearest available space in the register, and notation made at the proper place for the entry indicating the location of the information (usually by giving page number and item number.) A note is made that the entry serves to correct an omission.

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10. What happens when someone asks to leave the Church?

For a Catholic to validly leave the Church requires a formal act of defection. Church law does not clearly define this formal act. If an individual makes a personal request to withdraw from the Church or to be removed from Church membership, consult with the diocesan chancellor.

If it is decided that the individual has formally defected from the Church and has provided the documentation necessary to do so, a notation is to be entered in the individual's baptismal record with the date and method of withdrawal. The corroborating documentation is to be maintained in a separate, secure file for ninety years. All certificates subsequently issued would reflect this notation. (Canons 204-206, 329, 1086)

11. What should be entered in a marriage record?

The marriage record lists the names of the spouses, the name of the person who assisted at the ceremony, witnesses' names, date and place of marriage, and if a dispensation was issued from canonical form. Also it is helpful to list the dates and places of baptism of the couple. (Canons 1121-1123)

When a marriage takes place, the pastor of the church where the marriage took place is to notify the pastor of the church(es) of baptism of the Catholic party(parties).

If a dispensation from canonical form has been granted and the marriage has taken place, the parish of the Catholic party is to be notified so that the marriage may be recorded in the marriage register there. (Note: A dispensation from canonical form, if granted, allows a marriage between a baptized Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic or a baptized Catholic and an unbaptized person to take place before a non-Catholic minister or civil official.)

Also to be noted on the marriage record are decrees of dissolution or nullity as well as any restriction on future marriage.

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12. What should be entered in a confirmation record?

The confirmation record lists the name of the person confirmed, minister's name, names of parents, name of sponsor, date and place of confirmation. When confirmation is received, the pastor of the church where the sacrament was administered is to inform the pastor of the confirmand's church of baptism. (Canon 895, 896)

13. What should be entered in a death record?

The death register is to list information on all persons buried from that parish. The register includes the person's name, date of death, date and place of burial, date of anointing and minister's name. Other helpful information includes the name of the funeral home, the next of kin, and the cause of death.

If an individual is buried from a parish other than his own, an effort should be made to notify the person's pastor of his death and burial. (Canon 1182)

The death register lists also a record of services in funeral homes or other locations outside of the church building. Services for those not of the Catholic faith are to carry a notation of the religion, or if unknown, the notation of non-Catholic.

14. What should be entered in a first communion record?

The maintenance of a register for first communion is strongly encouraged. This register lists the date of the sacrament, the name of the communicant, names of parents, and date and place of baptism.

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15. How are certificates prepared?

Certificates are to be legibly prepared with the parish seal affixed over the signature of the pastor or his delegate. A certificate lists the same information as provided in the sacramental register with the exception of the following considerations:

Regarding cases of adoption, the certificate lists only the adoptive parent(s), the child's new legal surname, date and place of baptism, and minister's name. No mention will be made of the fact of adoption. Neither will the sponsors' (godparents') names be listed on a certificate.

In cases of records with no notation of parents' names or with only one parent's name, the certificate is to show "not declared" in the appropriate space(s). Do not leave the space blank.

Baptismal certificates are to include all notations on the record regarding marriage status, confirmation, and reception of holy orders or religious profession. If there is insufficient information to complete an item on the certificate form, the space is not to be left blank, instead the words "not given" are to be entered.

When a certificate is provided in connection with a marriage investigation, it is to include all notations. If the information on the record is of a sensitive nature or the person reading the document could be injured by a notation, then a certificate may be issued with the wording, "If marriage is to be contracted, consult the place of baptism." The wording, "for non-sacramental purposes only" may be used also.

Certificates of this type may be signed and sealed, however they are not sufficient to attest to the canonical status of an individual. Certificates with this or similar wording indicate to the priest or advocate in a marriage investigation that additional information should be obtained privately.

In rare instances, a letter without the parish seal may be issued in place of a certificate, giving basic information and the declaration that all required notations appear on the official certificate. For assistance with particular cases, contact the diocesan chancellor or archivist.

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16. Who may receive certificates?

An individual has a right to an authentic, sealed certificate of his or her own sacramental information. The parent(s) of a minor child or a legal guardian has the right to the same access. Access may be given for other valid reasons with the permission of the person named in the record. These reasons commonly include requests related to Social Security, insurance, and immigration status. Other than these instances, sacramental records are considered to be confidential.

General access for research or genealogy inquiries is permitted for specific records along the following guidelines: records created prior to 1997 are open after 72 years; records created in 1997 and after are open after 90 years. This policy is in keeping with U.S. Census guidelines and recommendations of the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists.

Regarding requests for sacramental records in connection with marriage investigations and Tribunal proceedings, certificates may be issued directly to the Tribunal, or the particular Church authority (member of the clergy, official advocate). These certificates are to be marked “for canonical purposes only.” This is in keeping with provisions of Louisiana civil law. For questions related to these issues, contact the diocesan chancellor or archivist.

17. What fees may be charged for certificates?

An individual has a right to an authentic, sealed certificate of his/her own sacramental information. Therefore, no fee should be assessed for providing information to an individual from sacramental registers. A minimal handling charge is permitted for preparation of a certificate. However, this charge always is to be waived in cases of hardship. Research and genealogy requests for certificates may be directed to the diocesan archivist.

18. How may researchers be accommodated?

Parishes may direct research requests to the diocesan archives. General access for research or genealogy inquiries is permitted for specific records along the following guidelines: records created prior to 1997 are open after 72 years; records created in 1997 and after are open after 90 years. This policy is in keeping with U.S. Census guidelines and recommendations of the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists.