

SACRAMENTAL RECORDS and REGISTERS

(We are grateful to both the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and the Diocese of Dallas for allowing us to use materials from their handbooks for sacramental record keeping)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| General Principles | 1 |
| Registers | 1 |
| Confidentiality | 2 |
| Entries | 2 |
| Certificates | 3 |
| Changes to Entries | 4 |

General Principles

1. Each parish is to maintain registers for recording baptisms, marriages and deaths. (c. 535, §1) Generally, registers for confirmation and first holy communion are also maintained. It is the responsibility of the pastor to see that these registers are accurately inscribed and carefully preserved.
2. In the baptism register are also to be noted confirmation and those things which pertain to the canonical status of the Christian faithful (i.e., marriage, adoption, reception of holy orders, perpetual profession in a religious institute, or change of rite). These notations are always to be noted on the baptism certificate. (c. 535, §2) [See norms for adoption concerning which notations about the adoption are to be made].
3. Each parish is to have its own seal. Documents regarding the canonical status of the Christian faithful and all acts which can have juridic importance are to be signed by the pastor or his delegate and sealed with the parochial seal. (c. 535, §3)

Registers

1. Special registers, which are available from private vendors, are required. A parish may keep separate registers to record baptism, confirmation, marriage and death, or they may keep a combined register, depending on the needs of the parish. As new registers need to be ordered, if at all possible the pages should be made of acid-free paper.
2. Sacramental records may be duplicated on computers. However, a complete record must be maintained in the registers, and the registers themselves are never to be destroyed or discarded. The registers are considered the only authentic copy of sacramental records.
3. As registers become worn, they are to be rebound by a professional binder. Only if a register is beyond repair may the records be transferred to a new register. The original register is to be retained in as safe a condition as possible.
4. Sacramental registers are to be stored in a locked, secure place, preferably one which is fire-proof or fire-resistant. The registers may be removed only by authorized personnel and only for legitimate purposes. The registers may never be taken off parish premises except by the diocesan archivist for research, microfilming or other legitimate purposes.
5. The loss or destruction of any sacramental register should be reported immediately to the Chancellor's office.

Confidentiality

1. All of the Christian faithful have a right to protect his or her privacy (c. 220). Thus, great care must be taken with the information contained in sacramental records. Although sacramental registers contain information about public events and other facts readily known to any interested party, they also contain information which is very personal and confidential.
2. Sacramental records belong to the individual parish and they are maintained for the good of the Christian faithful. However, these are private documents, not public documents. No one other than the pastor or his delegate can claim a right to direct access to the registers.
3. The pastor is ultimately responsible for the care and confidentiality of the sacramental registers themselves as well as any reproductions. He may designate other persons to make entries in the registers and to prepare certificates. These persons should be well known to the pastor, must be capable of careful work and protecting confidentiality, and should be adequately trained to work with the registers. Their work with the registers is not to exceed their mandate from the pastor.
4. If a request for a piece of information is made that pertains to family research, the pastor or his delegate, as time permits, may research information as requested and make the information available on separate paper. Care must be taken not to disclose confidential information. Requests for extensive research must be made to the diocesan archivist.
5. Sacramental registers should never be made available to genealogical researchers. In fact, in April 2008 the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy sent a letter Bishops' Conferences which noted grave concerns raised by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the possibility of allowing the Genealogical Society of Utah (Mormons) to microfilm and digitalize information contained in parish registers. Individual bishops were notified in order to ensure "that such detrimental practices is not permitted in his territory, due to the confidentiality of the faithful and so as not to cooperate with the erroneous practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

Entries

1. Entries should be made into the appropriate register as soon as possible after the event.
2. Neat printing is preferred to script. Entries should be made in fade-proof/ water-proof ink.
3. As a general rule, the proper parish for the recording of sacraments and deaths is the parish in whose territory the sacraments or rites of Christian burial were celebrated. With regard to the case of a person whose funeral is celebrated in one parish and burial takes place in another, it is permissible to record the death in both parishes.
4. Entries should be made in chronological order. If chronological order cannot be kept in some particular case, a small note should be made in the proper chronological location in the register, cross-referencing the actual entry (e.g., "See Jones, page 37").
5. Each entry should be listed in the register's index according to the person's last name.
6. If there is inadequate space for all the data to be entered, the excess data may be entered elsewhere on the same page or even on a different page of the register. Clear cross-referencing is essential (e.g., "See Smith, bottom of page").
7. Discursive material should not be written in sacramental registers. Such material or related documents (such as civil records or correspondence) should be retained securely in a file in the parish archives. However, discretion must be exercised in deciding which

material to place in this file...not everything has to be retained. This file should be labeled "Sacramental Records," and the words "See Sacramental Records File" should be printed in the Notations column of the register.

8. Data which is confidential and which is not to be included on certificates is to be so marked when entered in the register (e.g., "Confidential—do not include on certificate.") However, the provisions of c. 535, §2 are to be observed. [See page 1]

Certificates

1. A certificate is an official document certifying that a particular individual has received a sacrament. It is an exact duplicate of data already entered in a sacramental register.
2. Certificates of sacraments are intended primarily for internal church use, not for civil purposes.
3. Only the parish or other location holding the original sacramental record may issue a certificate. A computer copy of the record may be used for a certificate, so long as there is assurance that the computer copy corresponds identically to the original register.
4. Any member of the Christian faithful has a right to obtain a certificate of a sacrament he or she has received and which was recorded in a sacramental register. But only that person, the parents of a minor, someone with legal guardianship of another, and a bona fide pastoral minister at another Catholic parish or agency have this right. When the parents of a child are separated or divorced, both parents—regardless of legal custody—are presumed to have the right to a certificate.
5. Requests for certificates should be submitted in writing, although telephone requests from a Catholic parish or agency are acceptable. No information from sacramental registers should be provided by telephone or other electronic means except to another Catholic parish or agency. Even then, care for the privacy of persons is to be exercised.
6. Certificates should have an official appearance and should be issued in a consistent format. Parishes may obtain blank certificates from commercial vendors or may have them printed locally. All certificates must bear the name and address of the parish.
7. Certificates must be typed, printed by computer or hand-printed in ink. They are to be signed by the pastor or his delegate and impressed with the parish seal. Photostatic and facsimile copies of certificates are not considered authentic documents.
8. Certificates are to include all data contained in the sacramental register, except that which is marked confidential or which is extraneous to the person's canonical status. Data in the "Notations" column are to be included. If there is no data in the "Notations" column, the words "No Notations" should be printed on the certificate.
9. Sometimes when a certificate is requested, the record in question cannot be found. If there is any possibility that the sacrament may have been conferred in some other parish, the inquirer should be encouraged to check the sacramental records of that other parish. If such a search fails, canon 876 can be applied: "To prove the conferral of baptism, if prejudicial to no one, the declaration of one witness beyond all exception is sufficient or the oath of the one baptized if the person received baptism as an adult."

Only that data which can be vouched for with certainty should be entered in the register, even though this may leave an incomplete entry. The name of the witness, the date of his or her testimony and the words "based on the testimony of" should be printed in the "Notations" column of the register.

Changes to Entries

1. Once entered into a sacramental register, data is considered official and permanent. It may not be modified except under special conditions, as detailed below. Original data should never be scratched out, erased, “whited out” or otherwise destroyed or obliterated.
2. Minor changes (e.g., correcting a misspelled name) may be made directly to the original entry. Such changes are to be made by drawing a straight, simple line through the word, number or letter to be changed, and printing the correction immediately above or below it.
3. Major changes (e.g., to record an adoption after baptism) may require that a new entry be created. In these cases, the original entry is to be preserved without change; a new entry, with all the data from the original entry reproduced (except the relevant change or changes), is to be made in the same register as close to the original entry as possible; both entries, as well as listings in the index, are to be cross-referenced. The words “Do Not Issue Certificate from This Record” is to be printed carefully across the face of the original entry.
4. An insubstantial error (e.g., a misspelling) may be corrected upon request of those persons who have a right to a certificate, as mentioned in the CERTIFICATES section above.
5. More significant errors and other changes require authentic supporting documentation. Such documentation will ordinarily consist of an original, “raised seal” certificate from a civil or ecclesiastical office, court, agency, etc. The issuing agency, date of the certificate and any protocol number should be printed in the “Notations” column of the register. When an error involves data pertaining directly to the celebration of a sacrament (e.g., the date, the identity of the godparent) such that no external verifying documentation exists, the written or oral testimony of a reputable witness is sufficient.
6. Permitted Changes:
 - a. correct name
 - b. correct date
 - c. correct spelling
 - d. new legal name
 - e. adoptive parent(s)
7. Non-Permitted Changes:
 - a. new godparents or sponsors
 - b. non-adopting stepparents
 - c. customary name or nickname
8. Once specific data has been changed in the sacramental register, the original data is not transcribed onto certificates (e.g., the natural parents’ names after adoption).