

SACRAMENTAL RECORDS

PROCEDURES FOR THE CREATION OF SACRAMENTAL REGISTERS AND THEIR ANNOTATION

Registers in General

Required Registers. Each parish shall keep the following sacramental registers: Baptismal, Confirmation, Marriage, and Death. (C. 535/1, 895) A First Communion register is optional, as is a Profession of Faith register (If a Profession of Faith register is not used, the Baptismal register must be used for this purpose). Each sacramental register shall include the name of the parish, and the dates and shall be indexed. Although computer storage may supplement the registers for reference or statistical purposes, it is not an acceptable replacement for the books themselves.

Permanent Bindings, Paper, Ink. Registers are meant for permanent preservation, therefore, bindings and paper shall be of a quality that is considered permanent, durable, and acid-free (i.e., non-yellowing). The ink that is used shall also be of permanent quality. Only black ink shall be used. The best types of inks are those made for artwork or India inks (usually found in cartridges). A black ballpoint pen is acceptable. (Felt-tip pens, gel ink pens, and pencils are not acceptable.)

Accuracy and Legibility. Since the registers are kept for future reference as legal proof (canonical and civil) of church events, age, and/or nationality status, it is necessary that the entries be made promptly, accurately, and legibly. For this reason, entries, except for signatures, shall be printed rather than written out in longhand. An inaccurate or illegible record is a great future disservice to the persons involved and to their families.

Corrections, Additions, Deletions. One of the tests for the validity of a record as legal proof is whether it has been officially kept and whether any alterations were made. For this reason, the proper way to correct a factual error (i.e., a name or date) is to draw a single line through the error and add a notation. Do not erase or cross out what someone claims is incorrect. The notation must be based on some written proof of error (this proof should be identified in the notation). The notation should be dated and initialed by the person making the correction. In case of a technical or incidental error (i.e., spelling, date out of sequence, etc.), which is obvious to the “person in charge”, once it is pointed out, a change in the original entry may be made without the need for the notation or proof (C. 876). In cases of doubt, the Diocesan Archivist and/or Chancellor’s Office shall be consulted.

Baptismal Registers

In General. The baptismal register shall record the following information for each baptism: the name, date, and place of birth of the baptized; the name of the minister of the sacrament; the names of the parents (including mother's maiden name), sponsor(s), godparent(s) and witness(es); and the date and place (if outside the church parish) of the conferred baptism. (C. 877)

Routine Notations. The baptismal register serves as the "master record" of a person's membership in the Church. (C. 535/2) Notations concerning other sacraments received later in life that change the status of the person are to be entered there: Confirmation, Marriage(s) (including convalidations), reception of Holy Orders, a perpetual profession in a religious institute, and change of rite. Notations of annulment (and prohibitions on future marriages), laicization, a dispensation from vows, and departure from the Catholic Church by a formal act shall also be entered when requested officially by the appropriate authorities.

RCIA. Outside of emergency situations, adults and children over seven years of age are required by canon law to participate in a process of formation governed by the "Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults." This culminates in the celebration of all three sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, and first reception of the Eucharist—in the same ceremony. Information concerning those who receive the sacraments of initiation shall be recorded in the baptismal and confirmation registers as set forth in this section entitled *Baptismal Registers*. (*In General* and *Routine Notations* above and *Professions of Faith* and *Confirmation Registers* below.)

Catechumens. A catechumen is a person who is not yet baptized at all and who has celebrated the "Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens" as part of the RCIA. The name of a catechumen, along with the names of the sponsor, officiating minister, and date and place of this celebration, shall be entered into a special parish register of catechumens (see RCIA, above). Note that already-baptized candidates for full communion and confirmation technically are not catechumens and that these persons' names are not placed in the catechumenal register.

Elect. An "elect" person is a catechumen who has subsequently celebrated the "Rite of Election or Enrollment of names" as part of the RCIA, and so has been chosen by the Church to receive the sacraments of initiation. The name of an elect catechumen, along with the names of the sponsor, officiating minister, and date and place of this celebration, shall be entered into a special parish "book of the elect." Note that already-baptized candidates for full communion and confirmation technically are not catechumens and do not become members of the elect, and that these persons' names are not placed in the "book of the elect."

Professions of Faith. The name of persons who first were baptized in another Christian religion and who enter into full communion with the Catholic Church by means of a formal profession of faith shall be recorded in the parish baptismal register, or in the parish register of professions of faith. The date and place of the person's profession of

faith is indicated, as well as the date—if known, even if only approximate—of the non-Catholic baptism, as well as all of the other information as required in a typical baptismal entry. Note that since 1983, confirmation is ordinarily administered at the time of this profession of faith, so that the proper entry must also be made in the parish confirmation register. The “sponsor” for a person joining the Church typically serves also as the sponsor for confirmation.

Illegitimacy. If a child is born of an unmarried mother, the name of the mother is to be inserted in the baptismal register if there is public proof of her maternity (i.e., a civil birth record, a record of birth). The name of the father shall be inserted in the register if there is a public document (i.e., civil birth certificate, record, or birth). In the event that the father’s name does not appear on the birth certificate, the space for the name of the father on the baptismal certificate should not be left blank, but instead, a notation of *not declared* should be entered on the certificate. The space in the baptismal register is to be left blank (C. 877/2). **It is not permitted** to make an annotation that says *Illegitimate*.

Adoption. (C. 877/3) Baptism shall be postponed until after the child has been placed with the adopting parent(s), except in extraordinary circumstances such as a serious threat of imminent death. This is with the understanding that the postponement will be for a relatively short time only.

For children baptized after their adoption is finalized, the following information shall be entered in the register:

- a. the Christian name(s) of the child as designated by the adoptive parent(s);
- b. the name(s) of the adoptive parent(s);
- c. the date and place of birth;
- d. the names of the sponsors selected by the adoptive parent(s);
- e. the place and date of the baptism;
- f. the name of the minister performing the baptism; and
- g. the fact of adoption but not the names of the natural parents.

Baptismal certificates issued by the parish for adopted children will be no different from other baptismal certificates. **No mention of the fact of adoption shall be made on the baptismal certificate.**

II. For children baptized before their adoption is finalized, the following notations shall be added to the baptismal register, but only after the adoption has been finalized and with due regard for the civil law of the jurisdiction:

- a. parentheses shall be placed around the names of the natural parents;
- b. the name(s) of the adoptive parent(s) shall then be added;

- c. the child's former surname shall also be parenthesized and the new surname added; and
- d. a notation shall be made that the child was legally adopted.

Baptismal certificates issued by the parish for these individuals shall give only the name(s) of the adoptive parent(s), the child's new legal surname, the date and place of baptism, and the name of the minister who conferred the sacrament. **The name(s) of the sponsor(s) shall not be given, and no mention of the fact of adoption shall be made on the baptismal certificate.**

For future ease in reference, and to afford what may often be the only possibility of reference after the adoption has been finalized, a baptismal entry for the adopted child can be made in the baptismal register of the adoptive parents' parish, citing the date and location of the original baptismal record, and listing only the name of the adoptive parents, and the date and place of birth.

Parish personnel having access to parish registers have an obligation not to disclose to any person any information, which would identify or reveal, directly or indirectly, the fact that a person was adopted.

Attestation of a Baptism. There are occasions when baptism entries cannot be located, were mistakenly omitted, cannot be read because of damage to the register or the register was lost. The following procedures should be followed in posting an attestation of a baptism.

If a person presents a valid Baptism Certificate (a certificate with the original signature and the seal of the parish) it may be posted to the register. It should be posted to the year in which the baptism took place. A notation should be made in the note field stating that this is a delayed posting and is being made from a copy of the original baptism certificate. Copy the certificate, authenticate it and keep it with the baptism register.

In the circumstance where there is no certificate, the baptism may be posted to the register under specific conditions. The declaration of a witness (in the case of an infant baptism) or the testimony of the person baptized (in the case of an adult baptism) properly given and notarized is sufficient proof of baptism (C 876). As much information about the baptism as possible should be included in the statement (name of the person, date and place of birth, date and place of baptism, church, celebrant, sponsors). The signature of the person making the statement may be witnessed by a priest or a deacon or it may be notarized by an ecclesiastical notary or a civil notary. An after-the-fact entry can be made in the baptism register based on this testimony. As much as possible, information should be included in the register in the year in which the baptism took place. The note field entry should state the following: *Entry made in accordance with Canon 876 per attestation of (name of the person)*. The original of the testimony should be kept with supporting documents for that baptism register.

Supporting Documents. Certain notations in the baptismal register are accompanied by legal documents that serve as evidence and should also be preserved. Examples include acknowledgement of paternity affidavits, adoption documents; affidavits concerning previously omitted baptisms; and notarized court and governmental documents concerning name and/or date changes. These items shall never be glued, stapled or paper clipped into the actual register. After the appropriate notations are made, these items shall be kept in a separate file corresponding to each register and page number. The file shall be referred to in the notation. The file shall be kept permanently.

Confirmation Registers

The names of the confirmed, the parents, the sponsors, and the minister; the place and date of the conferral of confirmation; and the place and date of baptism are to be noted in the confirmation register of the parish. A notice must also be sent to the church of baptism indicating the name of the recipient; date and place of confirmation; and the name of the conferring bishop or priest, so that a notation may be made in the baptismal register. (C. 895)

Marriage Registers

In General. All marriages (including marriages convalidated in the external forum) are to be entered in the marriage register. The following items are to be noted: the names of the spouses, the person who assisted and the witnesses, the place and date of the marriage celebration, and any pertinent notation (i.e., date and place of baptism) (C.1121). It is also necessary to retain the pre-nuptial file permanently in the parish archives.

Notations. The following notations are to be entered in the marriage record: permission or dispensation received from impediments; the delegation given to assist at marriage; a decree of dissolution or nullity; and any restrictions on future marriages. Whenever a rescript is involved, the name of the diocese, congregation, or tribunal, etc., which issues the rescript shall be noted, together with the date and the protocol number if one is provided. The pastor of the parish in which the marriage has taken place must forward this information as soon as possible to the pastor of the parish where each party was baptized (C.1122) or to the Archdiocese for the Military Services, if required.

When a rescript is granted dispensing a marriage from Canonical Form and the marriage is celebrated in a place other than a Catholic Church, it is to be recorded in the following manner:

1. A marriage entry shall be recorded in the marriage register of the parish where the priest or deacon who prepared the couple is assigned. A copy of the prenuptial file should be retained by that parish. The priest or deacon is responsible for notifying the parish where the Catholic party was baptized, and
2. The original prenuptial file along with the original rescript for Dispensation from Canonical Form shall be sent to the Office of the Chancellor and recorded in the Diocesan Marriage Register.

Death Registers

Deaths should be recorded at the parish of the deceased. If the parish of the deceased is unknown, then the death should be recorded in the domicile parish. It is the responsibility of the celebrant of the funeral to inform the appropriate parish.

A bound register shall be used to record deaths and burials. Burial permit books do not satisfy the conditions of a permanent register. The registers shall be chronologically arranged by the date of parishioner death. It shall include the date of anointing, the name of the anointing priest, and the place of burial. Additional information may include the name of the funeral home, next of kin, and cause of death (if known).

First Communion Registers

Where these registers are kept, they shall include the names of the first communicant and parents as found on the baptismal certificate; the place and date of baptism; and the date of reception of the sacrament.

Sacramental Certificates (C.535/3)

As an authenticated (i.e., signed and sealed) transcript of the original record, every certificate shall be accurate, legible (preferably typewritten), and complete (including all notations except in cases of adoption as indicated above in *Baptismal Registers: Adoption*). The absence of information to fit an item on the printed form shall be indicated by a line or the words "none" or "not given," rather than by leaving the space blank. It is also possible to issue a signed and sealed certificate without adding the notations. Certificates of this kind must be clearly marked with the words "FOR NON-SACRAMENTAL PURPOSES," since they are not sufficient to certify the canonical status of an individual.

PROCEDURES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF SACRAMENTAL RECORDS

In a Safe Place

Sacramental registers are to be kept in a secure place (i.e., the parish safe) as well as stored and handled in an environment that ensures their preservation (C.535). Ideally, this means a constant, cool temperature with a relative humidity of 40 to 50% and no prolonged exposure to sunlight or artificial light. While most parish offices cannot fulfill such precise requirements, steps can always be taken to avoid high temperatures, dampness, and direct sunlight.

In the event of an evacuation order, sacramental registers should be moved to a secure location or can be brought to the Houma-Thibodaux Archives.

Restoration

Registers that have been worn out by use and age can be rebound and restored, provided this work is done according to archival requirements. Rebinding that destroys any data or renders any part of the records unusable is not acceptable. For these reasons, the Diocesan Archivist shall be consulted before any rebinding or restoration work is undertaken.

Copies

Sacramental registers can be protected from loss due to fire, flood, age, or heavy use by making duplicate copies in any one of several ways: transcripts, digitization, microfilm, and computer. Under no circumstances, however, shall the original register be discarded.

Transfer to Diocesan Archives

The ordinary repository for sacramental registers is the parish that created them. All sacramental registers that are 75 years or older shall be transferred to the Diocesan Archives for preservation. In the event that a parish or institution does not have the facilities or the means to preserve an older book, the room to safely store the parish registers, or handle the volume of research requests, the Diocesan Archives shall be contacted for a possible transfer of the register to the Diocesan Archives.

PROCEDURES FOR ACCESS TO SACRAMENTAL RECORDS

Preamble

Sacramental records are of a mixed nature: private and public. They are private in that they were created in circumstances presumed to be private and confidential. They are public in that they will stand in civil law as valid and authentic evidence when an appropriate civil record does not exist. They are not "public" in the sense that they are open to immediate examination and inspection by anyone for whatever reason.

Every person has the right to be furnished with an authenticated certificate of his/her own sacramental records. However, these records are not only of value to the persons named in the registers. Research (whether historical, genealogical, sociological, demographic, etc.) is also a valid reason for permitting access to these records, provided that the rules of access protect the legitimate right of privacy of the persons named in the registers. It is the responsibility of the Archdiocese, acting in and through the pastors of the various parishes, to supervise how these records are used, by whom and for what purposes.

The passage of time has a critical effect on the sensitivity of all records. As current events become historical events, the need for withholding them from use is reduced and in some cases, may eventually disappear entirely. For this reason, older records may be made more broadly available to researchers, whereas recent records shall be more restricted from use. At present, a record is considered for unrestricted use when it is 100 years or older. The norms governing access to sacramental records (whether originals or copies) are as follows:

Sacramental Records That Are 100 Years or Older.

All researchers seeking records that are 100 years or older shall be referred to the published records: South Louisiana Records by Donald Hebert, located at various libraries and archives. Certificates and copies of the original may be requested from the diocese, where there is a fee for this service.

Sacramental Records That Are Not 100 Years or Older.

These records are not open to examination except by authorized & trained parish personnel and legitimate church authority.

If a person is seeking his own record or has a legitimate reason to request family records [i.e. a parent of a minor child (under 18 yrs. of age) or a child seeking records of an infirm or incapacitated parent (legal proof of guardianship or executor status required)], the pastor or authorized parish personnel shall examine the registers and issue the required information either directly or by mail. If the person is not known to parish personnel, a signed request with proof of identification (picture ID) is required. If the request is in writing it must be signed and include the name of the parents, date of birth, and other pertinent information so that there is no doubt that the person requesting the information is entitled to receive it.

If the administration of the parish records becomes burdensome (i.e. age and value, demands of researchers, or care and storage), the pastor should contact the diocese for a possible transfer of the registers to the Diocesan Archives where they can be more safely preserved and more easily administered.

All Sacramental Records

Parishes should not charge any fees for providing information from sacramental registers. However, a minimum handling fee may be charged for issuing a certificate to private persons. (If hardship is claimed, fees should always be waived.)

Requests made by government or corporate agencies (i.e., Social Security Administration, Immigration, insurance companies, etc.) should be accompanied by a signed release by the person whose record is requested (or a legally qualified guardian) authorizing the release of the information.

APPENDIX I

OWNERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

1. Copyright. Ownership of copyrights for all sacramental records of parishes under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of New Houma-Thibodaux rests with the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux.

2. Responsibility. The creation, preservation, and use of sacramental records are the responsibility of the person in charge, whether a pastor, chaplain, or administrator. (C. 535/1)

3. Chapels. A pastor who also has charge of a subordinate church, oratory, or chapel (“mission”) is obliged to maintain records for services rendered there in the church parish.

4. Institutions. Persons assigned as chaplains or parish priests with sacramental responsibilities for Catholic or non-Catholic institutions which maintain no distinctly Catholic sacramental registers shall see to it that the reception of the sacraments of baptism and marriage be recorded in the sacramental registers of the territorial parish in which the hospital/institution is located. These sacraments shall not be recorded in the parish to which the priest is assigned if it is not the territorial parish.