

“IT’S ONE FOR THE RECORD BOOKS”: WHY SACRAMENTAL RECORDS MATTER

My handwriting was **so poor** in grade school that my own mother convinced the **nuns** to allow me to print my letters, rather than continue my struggle with learning cursive. Though the nuns relented, it was not due to any lack of effort on their part. I was simply **hopeless**. Would that some other priests had followed my lead! Deciphering our oldest entries in the Cathedral’s **sacramental registry** requires a keen eye for detail, but I am captivated by it. To be fair, it is not mere enjoyment— it is also an obligation. The Church’s Code of Canon Law states in Can. 535 §1. “Each parish is to have parochial registers, that is, those of baptisms, marriages, deaths, and others as prescribed by the conference of bishops or the diocesan bishop. The **pastor** is to see to it that these registers are **accurately inscribed** and **carefully preserved**.”

The only greater fear than forgetting a wedding (yikes!) is forgetting to record it properly in the books! Given that I am “cursively challenged” it is a good thing that priests these days typically receive assistance from **highly trained** lay people to help keep the parish registers. Back in the “olden days,” when making a pastoral visitation, a bishop would always “inspect the books”— sacramental and financial! Thankfully for all concerned, I do not inscribe the register as did our **pioneer priests**! We are ably assisted by parish staff with outstanding **penmanship**. As registers become worn, they are to be **rebound** by a professional binder. That has certainly been the case here. Even if I do not write in the register myself, all sacramental certificates (an official document with the parish seal) must be signed by the pastor and **only** the pastor.

Nowadays, people move frequently. The Church where a baptism is recorded is a detail that **every** (peripatetic!) **Catholic** parent should recall. Future sacraments (Confirmation and Matrimony) are recorded as **notations** on one’s baptismal page, ensuring that a complete sacramental record is maintained. But not to worry— we **do not** keep track of your confessions! That’s one sacrament that is not recorded! Parish registers are **not public** registers. Someone ringing the rectory doorbell, insisting upon inspecting the books will be disappointed. They **may be entitled** to an official notice that a record exists. It is required to ascertain one’s baptismal status prior to a wedding, so that its sacramentality may be assured. It is generally accepted practice to provide it also before one’s First holy Communion. Registers must always be retained as **physical items**. Typically, they are stored in fire-resistant or fire-proof safes or filing cabinets.

Sacramental records are **never** to be **removed** from the premises without permission, and only then in an emergency. How many family documents do you have from 1840? I’m guessing very few! Though the log chapel of Saint Paul was replaced by the mid 1850’s, **Fr. Lucien Galtier’s** original sacramental records remain in our possession. They contain the **first baptisms** at St. Peter’s in Mendota— shh, **don’t tell** Fr. Hoffman or else he may demand that we hand them over! Of course, Fr. Galtier was pastor of **both parishes**. Rarely, if records have not properly been kept, other protocols may be employed. For example, prior to a sacramental marriage, it may be necessary to obtain Baptismal photos and letters of attestation. Sacramental record keeping is a **highly specified** aspect of church life, and every parish entrusts someone to record sacraments in a timely manner. One never knows when the information contained may be needed.

Why is the Church so particular about such record keeping? Lots of reasons, really. The parish of baptism is significant because all future Sacramental records are **traced back** to your initial baptismal entry. Even if your family relocated before your first birthday, when preparing to receive the sacrament of matrimony a quarter century later halfway across the nation, you’ll need it! If a baby is baptized outside of a parish church, a record is kept in the **territorial parish** within which the baptism took place. When performing **emergency baptisms** in a hospital, I remind the parents

that they will need knowledge of the **territorial parish** in which the hospital is located. We occasionally receive notices from United Hospital when the Catholic chaplain performs a baptism. Those records are maintained here. So too is the baptismal record of the **baby** that was **discovered** in the Cathedral doorway **five years ago** this Tuesday! We even require a **birth certificate** prior to entering **parental names** in the baptismal register. Why? As sensitive **paternity** information could potentially be at issue, we must assiduously guard against any errors.

Though I love history, we are strongly discouraged from assisting with **genealogical** research. There are other avenues for this; it is both a time-consuming endeavor and it is not our purpose for keeping them in any case. However, I recently had a wonderful exchange with a **Québécois** gentleman who was trying to confirm a **wedding held here in 1850!** French Canadian fur traders were among the first settlers to call Saint Paul home. That request was **impossible to resist**, yet my arduous search was proving fruitless. That is until I surmised that multiple sacraments **might** be contained in the book marked “Baptisms.” Bingo! Tucked in the back were listed the weddings—faded and in French— but I could discern the **date and names**. The gentleman was thrilled and kindly sent a complete translation. However, the witnessing priest’s signature needs no translation— “A. Ravoux,” **Fr. Augustin Ravoux**, first rector of the Cathedral!

- **St. Mary Magdalene** is one of my favorite saints. I am honored that her window sits above my confessional. A **2000-year-old synagogue** has recently been unearthed in ancient Magdala (today called Migdal) off the Sea of Galilee. The building was comprised of a square shaped meeting hall, two rooms on the side and a **shelf**, likely for the **Torah scrolls**. It is amazing that in 2021, archaeologists continue to uncover such ruins.
- I received an unexpected Christmas gift— a **1968 Rod Carew** baseball card— and in **excellent condition** (PSA 5) to boot. During a rain delay of a Royals game, a Kansas man saw a program that featured my charity baseball card auction from last March. He was moved to send me a gift. How thoughtful!
- I offer my **profound gratitude** to all our volunteers who helped prepare the Church flowers (inside and out!), polish our thuribles, and execute our liturgies. It takes a great team to pull this off!
- The recently named Archbishop of Lima, Peru inexplicably preached at Mass that Jesus died as “a layman,” and did so without offering a “sacrifice.” I humbly suggest he **re-read** the Letter to the **Hebrews**, in which the **priesthood of Jesus** is the central theme. Now, it is possible to slip up in a homily when tired or distracted. But, if these words were meant? Sorry, Archbishop, but that’s heresy!
- Hear about the **65-vehicle pileup** on Interstate 94 near Fergus Falls? Last month, I passed there on the way to **Crookston** for the installation of Bishop Cozzens. I **skipped** the post-10:00 Mass greeting so that Fr. Bambenek and I could get on the road ASAP. Those who left the cities even 30 minutes after us ran into a **blizzard**. We arrived just as the worst winds kicked in. Northern roads can be treacherous.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector

