



# Through the Eyes of the Parish Priest

Debbie Gurtler, AG®

FamilySearch – Family History Library  
[dsgurtler@FamilySearch.org](mailto:dsgurtler@FamilySearch.org)

Catholic parish records are among the richest resources for family history research in Spain and Latin America. The local parish priest recorded the happiest and saddest events of the lives of our ancestors, from their baptism as an infant to their final resting place. You will learn tips and strategies which will facilitate your success in locating and searching these records. Stories from parish records will be shared to highlight the richness of the records.

## History of Catholic Parish Records

The mandate to parish priests to begin the recording of sacramental rites, such as baptism, marriage and burial, traces its origins to the Council of Trent held between 1545 and 1563.

These parish records are a fundamental resource for family history research in Spain and Latin America as well as many other countries where the Catholic church is the predominant religion. Three important reasons to use them are:

1. They contain important genealogical information from lives of our ancestors.
2. In Spain and Latin America, a large part of the population can be found in them.
3. Clues found in parish records can lead to other ancestral records.

## Organization of the Catholic Church

Understanding how the Catholic church is organized helps us understand who created the records and where we might locate them. The various jurisdictional levels in the Catholic church include the following:

- Archdiocese (several dioceses)
- Diocese (several parishes)
- Parish (town, sector of a large city, or a group of several small towns)
- Prelate (comparable to a diocese)
- Auxiliary parish (small town attached to a parish)

## Helpful Records Used

While the church generates many sacramental records, the table below illustrates which records are used more frequently and are more helpful for family history research

Record type	Jurisdiction	Usability
Baptism	Parish	Used frequently
Marriage	Parish	Used frequently
Death / Burial	Parish	Used frequently but may not be as helpful
Confirmations	Diocese	May or may not be filmed or digitized. Not always helpful
Marriage Information Files	Parish or Diocese	May or may not be filmed or digitized
Dispensation	Diocese	Not usually filmed or digitized

## **Content, Tips and Strategies for Using Parish Records**

Records may come in a pre-printed form with fill-in-the-blank spaces for vital information, or they may be written in the form of a paragraph following a formulaic pattern. Sometimes parish records may contain notes in the margin next to an entry. These notes might include:

- Corrections or additional information about the person mentioned in the record.
- Marriage information.
- Information about legitimacy-if the child was illegitimate at birth but was legitimized later by his parents' marriage. Acknowledgement of paternity by the father.
- Death information.

### **Baptism Records**

*Information usually found:*

- Date of baptism
- Name of the child
- Names of parents (some older records might only give the name of the father)
- Names of godparents

*Possible additional information found:*

- Date of birth
- Names of grandparents
- Places of origin for parents and/or grandparents

*Tips and strategies for baptism records*

- Begin your search with the approximate date of birth.
- Search for several years. Family birth information may be incorrect.
- In more recent years, the baptism might have occurred long after the birth.
- Search using just the names of the parents.
- Read through the entire document for additional information.

### **Marriage Records**

*Information usually found:*

- Names of the groom and bride
- Date of the marriage
- Names of witnesses

*Possible additional information found:*

- Places of birth and/or residence of the groom and bride
- Ages of the groom and bride
- Names of the parents and their places of origin
- Name of the previous spouse, if widowed
- If the couple were closely related (if so, they needed a dispensation)

*Before searching in marriage records, you need to know the following:*

- Names of groom and bride
- An approximate marriage date or birth date of oldest child
- Place of marriage or residence

### *Tips and strategies for marriage records*

- Begin your search with the approximate date of marriage.
- Begin your search with the date of birth of the oldest known child.
- Search for several years before and after the approximate date.
- Read through the entire document for additional information.

### **Death / Burial Records**

#### *Information usually found:*

- Name and age of the deceased
- Date of death
- Date of burial
- Place of burial

#### *Possible additional information found:*

- Age of deceased
- Birth place of deceased
- Name of spouse
- Names of surviving children
- Cause of death
- If the deceased made a will

### *Tips and strategies for death / burial records*

- Begin your search with the date of death.
- Take note of the informant or witnesses.
- Read through the entire document for additional clues, such as the names of relatives or the existence of a will.

### **Confirmation Records**

#### *Information usually found:*

- Name of the parish
- Name of the child
- Name of the godparents
- Confirmation date (usually at the beginning of a series of entries)

#### *Possible additional information found:*

- Names of parents

### *Tips and strategies for confirmation records*

- Should be used when:
  - Baptism records are missing
  - To determine if a child may have died.
- To determine name variations. A child baptized as Juan Alonso might go by the name Alonso for the rest of his life.
- The age of the person confirmed can vary depending on how often the Bishop visited the parish to perform confirmations.

### **Marriage Information Files**

#### *Information usually found:*

- Names of groom and bride
- Marital status
- Names of previous spouse(s), if any
- Place of residence
- Names of parents
- If there was an impediment

#### *Possible additional information found:*

- Place of birth of the groom and bride
- Ages of groom and bride
- Copies of the couple's baptismal records
- Names of grandparents

- Family tree showing possible relationships

#### *Tips and strategies for marriage information files*

- Locate the marriage first.
- Their organization is difficult. Begin your search with the date of the marriage and then go back in time. The file may be dated several weeks or months before the marriage.
- Read through the entire document for additional information.
- Not available for all areas.

#### *The format of these multi-page files may be as follows:*

- Petition to marry
- Consent of parents, if needed
- Statements by the groom and bride
- Statements by witnesses about the couple's ability to marry
- Marriage certificate

#### **Indexes**

- If any, they are usually found at the front or back of the book
- Sometimes a book contains an index that may cover more than one book
- May be separate indexes for males and females
- May be organized by first name
- May be organized by surname
- May be organized by page number
- May be organized by record number

#### **Using the FamilySearch Catalog to Find Records**

1. On FamilySearch.org pass your mouse over the Search tab and click on Catalog. On a mobile device such as an iPad or phone, click on Search and then click on Wiki.
1. In the Place field, enter the name of the city or town you are trying to locate records for. It must be spelled correctly. When in doubt about spelling ask Google.
2. When the correct place name appears, click on it and then on Search.
3. On the results page, click on the entry that contains the words **Church records**.
4. Click on the words **Registros parroquiales**.
5. Advance to the section Microfilm Notes and look for the record set that fits the record type and time range you need. If the record set has an item number, the records you want will be found in that section on the microfilm or digital image set.

#### *Format of the Records*

**Magnifying glass:** This indicates some or all the records from this record set have been indexed and searchable by name. Click on the magnifying glass to search by name among the records that are indexed.

**Camera:** This indicates that the record set has been digitized and is available online. Click on the camera to view the images.

**Camera with a key:** This indicates that there are restrictions as to who can view the digital images. You may need to be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to view them or you may need to be in the Family History Library or a family history center.

**Microfilm roll:** This record set is only available on microfilm and will need to be viewed in the Family History Library or a local family history center if they have a copy.