

Caring for Sacramental Records



Diocese of Pittsburgh

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Introduction

Sacramental records form an important religious function. They document an individual's spiritual journey and the spiritual growth of the parish. The records may also be used as legal documents when civil documents do not exist. Canon Law 535 requires parishes to maintain and preserve their sacramental records. While time, fire and flood pose very real threats, the greatest danger these records face is poor storage and wear and tear caused by poor handling. This guide provides the parish with guidelines on the proper handling and storage of these irreplaceable documents.

Canon Law also requires that the sacramental records be recorded on paper in a bound register. Computerized files cannot be substituted for the paper record. If you wish, you may enter sacramental information into a computer for ease of access and use *in addition to the paper record*, but not in substitution of it. If you do enter sacramental information into a computer file, you must ensure that stringent security precautions are taken to prevent the theft of or unauthorized access to the files.

Registers

The first step in ensuring the preservation of sacramental records is the purchase of a high quality register. Books made with low quality paper made from wood pulp tend to deteriorate rather quickly. Use only sacramental registers that have acid free paper and permanent binding. Most reputable suppliers of religious goods sell standard size registers (9" x 14") that meet these requirements. Before purchasing a volume, verify that it meets these standards.

Ink

The ink used to enter information into the register should be black, acid free, water proof and fade resistant. We have flood damaged registers in the diocese in which pages of entries were literally washed away because the parish used water soluble ink.. We also



Above: The entries in this flood damaged register were washed away because the parish did not use water resistant ink

have registers in which the ink has faded over time, making the entries illegible. Only buy pens to use on your sacramental records that specifically state that the ink is acid free, water resistant and fade resistant.

Entering information

Due to the importance of these records for canonical and civil purposes, the entries should be made promptly, accurately and legibly. Except for signatures, all information should be printed, not written out in longhand.

Correcting entries

Occasionally a mistake is made while entering a record, such as transposing letters in a name or entering the wrong date. The proper way to correct the mistake is to draw a line through the item and enter the correct information above or below it. *Do not use white out to cover the mistake.* While it may look neater, white out is acidic and will, in time, damage the paper. Note that this procedure applies only to mistakes made when entering the item. If someone contacts your parish years after the event claiming that the informa-

tion in the record is incorrect, contact the Office for Canonical Services for the proper procedure to follow to correct the entry.

Notations

Notations, such as notification of marriage, divorce, diaconate, etc. should be made in the notations column. If you run out of space, the additional information can be entered elsewhere on the same page or even on another page, so long as it is cross referenced clearly. These notification documents should not be left in the book. Under no circumstances should the documents be paper clipped, stapled, taped or glued to the pages of the register. No loose documents should be stored in the volume.

Storage

The volumes should be stored in a fire resistant safe or fire resistant vault. If one of these is not available, they should be stored in a fire resistant metal file cabinet. If a file cabinet is used to store the records, they should be kept in an upper drawer to help protect them from possible water damage from a flood. If none of these options is available, store the volumes on steel shelving. Do not store them on wooden shelves. Make sure that the bottom shelf is at least 3" off the floor.

Handling

Careless handling of sacramental registers can accelerate their deterioration. Always handle the volumes carefully. If the books are stored on shelving, they should stand upright on their bottom edge. If the books are stored in a file cabinet where they can't stand upright, they should be stored on their spine, not on the edge opposite the spine. The books should be properly supported and not allowed to sag or lean against each other. Nor should they be jammed tightly together. It should be possible to retrieve and return the volumes without force. If the volumes are too large to be stored upright or on their spines, they can be stored flat. However, no more than 3 volumes should be stacked upon one another.

Do not photocopy the pages of the volumes. Pressing the volume down on the photocopier weakens the binding.

Do not expose the volumes to sunlight or fluorescent light more than necessary. Both types of light emit ultraviolet (UV) radiation which is extremely damaging to paper. UV filtering tubes can be purchased to slide over fluorescent light bulbs to protect against this danger and an UV filter film can be purchased to place on windows. Without these protections, minimize light exposure to the records. Store them in a dark area. When they are taken out to add or retrieve information, do the work quickly and immediately return the book to storage. Do not leave an open book exposed to light.

When removing a book from the shelf, do not grasp it by the top of the spine. Grasp the sides of the book firmly on each side and gently slide it out.

The area where the volumes are to be used should be free of food, clean, flat and large enough to support the registers.

Environmental Conditions

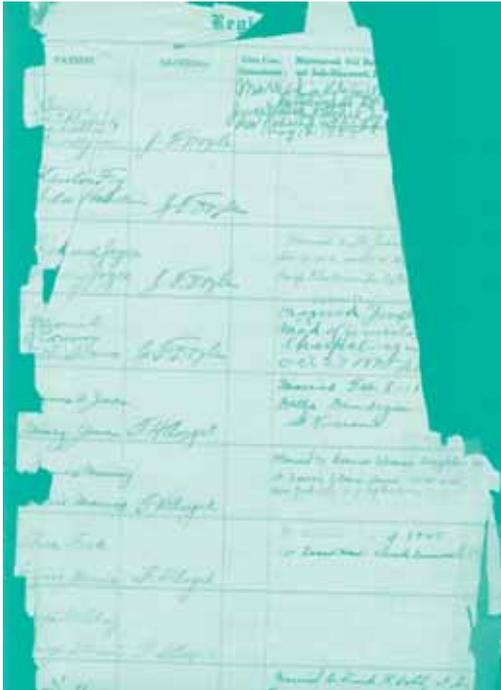
The environmental conditions in which the registers are kept will go a long way in determining how long the paper will last. The two major threats to the records are temperature and humidity.

Ideally the records will be stored at a constant temperature of 69 degrees year around. High temperature speeds up the chemical breakdown of paper. For every 10 degrees the temperature rises, the useful life of paper stored there is cut in half.

Even more important is the humidity level. Paper records should be stored at a constant relative humidity of 45%. High humidity can cause the paper to break down chemically and increases the likelihood of mold and mildew. Low humidity can cause the paper to become brittle.

Temperature and humidity problems become even worse when they fluctuate wildly. As humidity levels fluctuate, paper absorbs or releases moisture. This constant absorption and release of moisture causes the fibers in the paper to expand and contract, breaking them down.

Ideally, your parish will provide a storage space that has both heating and air conditioning and a humidifier/dehumidifier. Lacking



Left: This is what happens when the paper in the register becomes brittle.

that, store the records in the best environment available. *Do not store the records in a basement area.* Store them in office space. Do not adjust the thermostat when the staff leave for the day. Maintain the same temperature level constantly.

The worst thing that happens to paper stored in a poor environment is that it becomes brittle. The first warning sign that the paper is becoming brittle is that it discolors along the edges. If any volume shows signs of discoloration, *contact the Archives immediately.* If the deterioration can be caught and treated early enough, the volume can generally be saved. Ignore this warning sign and eventually the volume will become a total loss. Once the paper becomes brittle, there is nothing that can be done to reverse the process.

What Not to Do

Do not use pressure sensitive tape (Scotch tape) under any circumstances. This tape is highly acidic and destructive to paper. Not only that, but the adhesive will eventually dry out and the tape will fall off.

Do not laminate any pages. The process involves driving plastic into the paper through heat. It will ultimately destroy the paper and is virtually irreversible.

Do not staple, glue or paper clip any documents to the pages of the registers.

Do not let any vendor do any work on your records without first contacting the Archives & Records Center. An inexperienced vendor can do more harm than good. If a vendor approaches your parish, contact the Archives before agreeing to let them do any work. If you are seeking a vendor, contact us for suggestions.



Above: The parish attempted to repair this tear with scotch tape. The tape eventually dried out and fell off. The brown stain was caused by the acid in the tape adhesive burning the paper

What to do

Maintain the volumes. Address any problems with the books as soon as they arise. The longer you put off conservation repairs, the more expensive and difficult those repairs will become.

Contact the Archives and Records Center for assistance. Our role is to help you preserve your records. Feel free to contact us any time.

Transfer your older records to the Archives. We have a facility that provides the best environment for the long term preservation of the records as well as experience and expertise in handling records. We will be happy to have a member of our staff come to your parish to

discuss which records should be transferred to us and which should be retained in the parish.

Summary

Sacramental records are the most valuable records in the diocese and must be preserved permanently. By properly caring for its records, a parish can not only ensure that the records are preserved, but they can avoid costly repairs by avoiding damaging the records in the first place.