



Sacramental Registers as Bound Books

by Carolyn S. Denton, Certified Archivist

Archdiocese of Atlanta 2010

When information about an event is entered by hand on paper, dated, and authenticated by signatures near the time when the actual event occurs, the document then becomes a manuscript, a primary source, and therefore is official and legal. Traditionally a manuscript is defined as an original document written by hand and not reproduced in multiple copies. Such is the nature of sacramental registers as bound books.

With the advent of the computer, the question often arises as to the appropriateness of using database printouts stored in ring binders as official sacramental registers, thereby eliminating the need to enter information by hand into bound books. Because computer printouts are not manuscripts, can be easily manipulated, deleted, and duplicated, they are not as authentic as manuscripts, particularly when they are not certified by original signatures. The Code of Canon Law (can.535) refers to sacramental registers as “parish books” that are to be “accurately inscribed and carefully preserved.”

In historiography, a primary source (also called “original source”) is an artifact, a document, a recording, or other source of information that is created at the time under study. If created by a human source, then it is a source with direct personal knowledge of the event being described and can be used as evidence. A baptismal register should be such a source.

Also, because book pages are bound together and contain multiple entries per page, it is less likely that an entry will be removed or altered without notice. Changes to entries can also be easily traced since they are not obliterated or easily erased as in a database. Computers are known to crash; books do not. Computer data has an average life expectancy of ten years or less; books can last 500+ years. Data entered into a computer cannot be associated with a particular person, while the handwriting of a person on a document can be identified.

The baptismal register is the chief locus for requisite information on every Catholic in a parish and exists to help uphold and preserve the culture and spiritual life of the community and the church. Computer systems dependent on hardware and software are wonderful for storing and manipulating sacramental data found in sacramental registers, but they are unstable and will not preserve information as long as paper.

The Catholic Church since early times has placed high value on handwritten books. The Vatican Library is one of the oldest libraries in the world and contains one of the most significant collections of historical texts, which includes 75,000 manuscripts.

The printed Bible, as an example, is based on the existence of ancient manuscripts that verify authenticity. Biblical manuscripts have become notarized affidavits or statements that can be classified as original, primary source documents. From manuscript discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is undeniable evidence that today's Old Testament Scripture, for all practical purposes, is the same as it was when originally inspired by God and recorded. Combined with the massive amount of manuscript evidence supporting the New Testament, it is clear that the Bible is a trustworthy and reliable book. Sacramental registers should also be trustworthy and reliable books.

