

Canadian Church Records

By Michael J. Leclerc

Church records are an important supplement to vital records. In many areas they are the only records available. They can fill in the blanks where vital records were not kept or were lost due to fire, flood, or the ravages of time. While they can be difficult to access, the mountain of information available there is well worth the effort.

When thinking of church records, many individuals focus solely on the sacramental registers dealing with baptisms, marriages, and burials. There are, however, a number of other records both sacramental and non-sacramental that will provide excellent information for genealogists.

The Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments: baptism, first communion, reconciliation (also known as penance), confirmation, matrimony, holy orders, and anointing of the sick (formerly extreme unction). Many of these practices were continued by other denominations as they broke away from Catholicism and developed their own rites and rituals.

In Christian religions baptism marks a spiritual rebirth (according to the doctrine of the particular denomination) most often involving the symbolic application of water. In denominations that practice infant baptism, records of this sacrament can be used to approximate a date of birth. They are often used as a substitute when no civil or other record of birth exists. It is very important when using compiled sources to use the proper abbreviation in your notations. Baptism is abbreviated as bp. or bap. and should never be shortened to b. The lower-case b. is an abbreviation for born. Respecting these practices will alleviate potential problems.

It is also important to be aware that not all denominations practiced infant baptism. Some, such as the Baptists, practiced adult baptism. It would be a huge mistake to use baptismal records of such faiths to determine a date of birth or age. In many denominations it was common for a man or woman to be baptized at the time of their acceptance into a particular congregation. Even the Catholic Church practices adult baptism for those who convert to the faith later in life.

The sacrament of reconciliation is also known as penance or confession. Children are introduced to this sacrament in preparation for their first communion. Individuals are supposed to practice this sacrament frequently but at a minimum at least once per year during Lent (known as "Easter Duty"). Records of this sacrament were not usually kept and it is therefore not genealogically significant.

First communion marks the start of full life in the church. More formal religious education is commenced, and children are allowed to participate fully in services and to take the Host at communion time. In the Catholic Church children are usually given their first communion around the ages of seven or eight. Records of first communion are not usually kept, but if found can help to approximate a year of birth.

Confirmation is the rite by which individuals affirm their belief and adherence to the doctrines of their faith and their move into full adult participation in the church. In the Catholic Church one is usually confirmed around the ages of twelve to fourteen. Many parishes maintained lists of those confirmed, and these records can also be used to approximate ages and/or dates of birth. Some parishes even recorded the age of the child at the time of confirmation.

The next sacrament that one would participate in is matrimony. Records of marriage form one of the largest categories of church records. While many denominations did not track (or possibly practice) baptism or last rites, most religious groups performed marriages. The detail in these records varies from including just the names of the bride and groom and date of marriage to extensive lists of parents' names, occupations, witnesses, etc.

Unfortunately, in many denominations, records of marriages (and occasionally other records) were considered the property of the ministers. When the ministers left for another parish, they took their record books with them. This can make it difficult to locate records for a particular church, as the minister could have ended up halfway across the country in a remote town completely unassociated with your ancestors' hometown.

One record group that is under-utilized is that of the sacrament of holy orders. When researching ancestors it is very

common to find children who seem to vanish. There are no marriage records for them, and they cannot be located in death/burial records. It is entirely possible that they may have entered religious life. While many denominations allow ministers to be married, there are some that do not. Prior to women being allowed into ministry many who felt the calling to religious life entered convents.

Records of men entering the priesthood can be located on a diocesan level. Records of men and women entering religious orders are often found at the home of the order. It is important to note that the home of the order may not even be located in Canada, but in the United States or Europe! Books such as the *Canadian Catholic Church Directory* (REF BX1421.2/A66/1995) or the *Official Catholic Directory* (REF BX845/C5) can be helpful in locating these institutions. They may also have records of what houses or parishes the individual was assigned to, as well as information on their date and place of death or burial.

Finally, the last sacrament one receives is Anointing of the Sick, formerly called Extreme Unction or Last Rites. Those who are experiencing grave illness and are not expected to recover are given a final opportunity to express remorse for any sins they may have committed in life, and are absolved of those sins before passing on. Records of this sacrament are not usually kept, but when they are it is a good indication of a death occurring not too far in the future.

Sacramental registers are not the only records kept by churches. The records of many Protestant denominations include records of admission and dismissal. Records of dismissal from the church can be a harbinger of the family migrating elsewhere. Similarly, records of admission can signify a family's arrival in a new location.

Many women are baptized into a community shortly before the baptism of their children. It is not uncommon in records to see the words "baptized and received into full communion" indicating an adult baptism and immediate participation in the congregation. Records of baptism for children are often found shortly thereafter, many times as soon as the following week.

Many parishes also kept records of burials in the church cemetery. It is not uncommon for even the smallest of towns and villages to have several cemeteries. There may be a Catholic cemetery, one for Methodists, and one for Presbyterians as well as a non-denominational civil cemetery in the town. Civil cemeteries can often contain separate sections for people of different faiths. Church cemeteries are not always physically located next to the church.

Many churches have had their records abstracted and published. This is most common in Québec, where both Catholic and non-Catholic parishes have had records published for years. The most common records to be published were those of marriages. It is important to note, however, that these transcriptions do not always contain all of the information in the original record. Additional information on residences, occupation, parents' names, etc. can be found by examining the original records.

Many parishes have had their records microfilmed. The individual provincial archives have many reels of these records. In some instances you may be able to borrow these reels through inter-library loan. Contact the appropriate archives for more details on this procedure. See [my previous article on governmental agencies](#) for information on how to contact the various archives.

Another important source of these records is the Family History Library. Search the [Family History Library Catalog](#) under the name of the town your researching in. When the results categories are returned, look for the "church records" heading. For example, a search of Shelburne, Nova Scotia, turned up the records of the parishes of Saint George and Saint Patrick, including baptisms, marriages, burials, and lists of communicants.

Church records give a wealth of information to the family historian. Make sure you do not limit yourself to the sacramental registers, but look for all information available in the records. Besides the records found here you can find information on the purchase of pews, the ordination of deacons and other church elders, and a myriad of other information to help you in your search.