

Catholic Records and their Use in Irish Research

By Dwight A. Radford

I think that we often fail to appreciate Catholic registers in genealogical research. It's so easy to be in a hurry to find what you want that the really good things are missed altogether. I want to share some of the strategies and logic that I have used over the years.

Types of Records

Catholic records, whether in Ireland or in the immigrant country, usually consist of baptisms and marriages. Burial is not a sacrament in the Catholic church so a parish did not have to keep burial registers. I believe one of the most important pieces of information that can be derived from a baptism or marriage record is the names of the godparents at a christening and witnesses at a marriage. In theory they are people the family know and trust so they may be family members or friends from Ireland. For immigration purposes if you can't find out where in Ireland your ancestor was from, research the lives of the godparents or witnesses.

Often marriage registers will list parents' names and place of birth. If a priest recorded this information, it may solve a very difficult immigration problem. Burials, when kept, are also a source of immigrant origins. If the records give county of birth in Ireland, make sure to look at all entries (not just your surname) to see if a high percentage of them are coming from a particular county.

If you're using Irish records, the godparents and witnesses names found can be utilized as an immigrant resource. By this I mean that if you think you have found your ancestor in an Irish church record, now you have to prove it. You can take the godparents and witnesses' names from the register to see if this cluster of families settled where your ancestor did. This may be the only way to determine if that person in the Irish record is really your ancestor. Often, I will write to a heritage centre in Ireland and they will apologize for finding five people in the county with the same name and they don't know which is the correct entry. To me this is a blessing as I can now take the godparents names from these five christenings and continue with my immigrant research. I then write back to the heritage centre to request that they send me the siblings' names and godparents' names for those five families.

Another type of record that is often overlooked are dispensations. When a couple wanted to be married by a Catholic priest, but a question arose, it goes before the bishop of the diocese for his consideration. The resulting record can be really good as it will frequently give parents' names and birth places for the couple. Dispensations are usually kept at the diocese. However, there should be a notation in the local parish register that a dispensation was granted.

Dispensations were granted for any number of reasons. A few reasons are as follows:

1. A Catholic marrying an unbaptized person.
2. The couple were related to one another.
3. One or both of the couple were minors.
4. If it can be proven that the marriage will insure that the children will be raised Catholic.
5. A couple's relationship was already known as notorious or that it will become so.
6. The scandal or loss of reputation due to pregnancy or to prevent conduct short of intercourse which can be prevented only by marriage.
7. That the marriage provides for the welfare of the child and also of the mother lest she remain unwed.
8. The most common reason for a dispensation would probably be something as simple as the banns were not read the proper amount of times in church.

What If Your Ancestors Aren't Found

What if you don't find your ancestor listed in a church register? The problem can range from only part of a couple's children being listed in the christening records to none of them being listed. If you already know where your ancestors lived, then I would suggest the following course:

1. Maybe your ancestors had their family events recorded in a neighboring parish. This will especially be true if

your ancestral parish was originally a mission of another parish.

2. On the frontier of America and Canada prior to the arrival of priests families may have been baptized and married by a Protestant minister or married by a civil official. This is more common than some would like to believe.
3. When you're looking in Irish records for an ancestor, it's important to remember that in many parts of rural Ireland the people did not "go to church" in the sense that they do today. The priest went out into the townlands where he held Mass, married couples and baptized children. The priests did not take the registers with them into the townlands. They wrote the information down (in theory) and added to the parish register periodically (again in theory). This did not always happen. The Heritage Centre in County Clare estimates that some 30% of the population who should be in the registers are not.
4. Often the Catholic records in Ireland or in North America simply do not start early enough. Again, it may be that a traveling priest took his notes back to the main church or cathedral he was serving from. Then again, sometimes we'll never know.
5. I have found when a Catholic marries a non-Catholic, the marriage usually occurred in a non-Catholic church while the children were baptized and raised Catholic. Also, this may be the first clue in family research that one of the spouses was not from a Catholic family. It is common to see throughout church records where a spouse converts to Catholicism.

When You're Desperate

I have been known to go through the same Catholic record two or three times. Although this may sound extreme it really isn't. If one strategy fails, that's okay, go on to the next one. My desperation strategy is to take a particular time frame and conduct the following in-depth analysis:

1. Look for all persons in the records for a 10 or 15 year time frame with the same surname as your ancestors (maiden name of the wife included). Chart these individuals in date order in the christening and marriage registers (if burials exist, use them also). Then ask yourself if these people are relatives from Ireland. If you find that they have some of the same witnesses and godparents involved with their lives as your ancestors did, then I would guess they were siblings or cousins from Ireland. Trace out their lives to see where they are from in Ireland. This, of course, is helpful if you're seeking immigrant origins.
2. Take a given span of years and not look for the surname of those being christened or married, but look strictly for the godparents and witnesses. This way you can extract those familiar family surnames and see with whom they were involved. Again the big question is whether they are friends, in-laws, or cousins from Ireland.
3. Catholic records in Ireland do start late. I will note one last strategy to bridge the gap created by records which do not often start until the late 1820s or early 1830s. Take note of who acted as the godparents to your ancestor's children, and if they have the same last name, you have probably stumbled upon their siblings or cousins. Godparents at a christening are usually the same generation as the couple having the children. The identity of witnesses at a wedding can be more tricky; not only can they be siblings or cousins but also parents to the groom or bride.

Conclusions

Catholic records can be one of the most useful sources in your research. Just make sure that you keep an open mind about them even if you don't necessarily find what you're looking for outright. Remember many parishes in the US and Canada were made up of years and years of immigration from the same area of Ireland - thus the local parish will have a high percentage of persons from the same county in Ireland. There are so many possibilities when researching in Catholic records that your imagination is truly the limit on what you can learn from them.

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