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**FRENCH-CANADIAN GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH IN
AMERICAN ROMAN CATHOLIC PARISH RECORDS:
AN EDITORIAL**

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For many French-Canadian genealogists gaining access to the parish registers of Roman Catholic churches in the United States of America can be frustrating. There is no central national archives for these records nor is there a standard policy concerning access. Each parish and diocese follows their own set of rules. In contrast to America, Catholic records are easily accessible in Québec. Although access has improved over the years in America, there are still many limitations for genealogists to overcome. This paper will discuss the accessibility and location of Catholic parish records in America from a French-Canadian genealogical perspective. It also will review the types of information found in these parish registers.¹ This paper is both a guide to using the records and a plea for their greater accessibility.

Parish Registers in Québec

There are several factors behind the accessibility of parish records in Québec. The colonial officials during the French régime mandated that the parish priest was to copy the register and forward the duplicate to the local government. These registers eventually were deposited in the protonotary's office for the local judicial district. This is still the practice in Québec even though civil registration of vital events has been in place since 1926.² The duplicates of the parish registers before 1877 have now been transferred from the judicial districts to the regional offices of the Archives nationale du Québec. As a result of this dual parish registry system, copies are now in the hands of the civil authorities. They are safely stored in facilities designed to preserve documents and accommodate researchers. Furthermore, the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) have microfilmed these Catholic parish registers. These microfilm copies are now available at branch Family History Libraries throughout the Mormon interlibrary loan system.³

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¹The Catholic Church calls parish registers sacramental registers since they are used to record the issuing of sacraments to parishioners.

²Eric Jonasson, The Canadian Genealogical Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Finding Your Ancestors in Canada (2nd ed., Winnipeg: Wheatfield Press, 1978), pp. 84-87. Patricia Gee, A Guide to Quebec Vital Records (Dearborn: Dearborn Genealogical Society, no date), pp. 1-4. Duplicate copies of the parish registers in the other provinces of Canada are suppose to be sent to the diocese.

³The Québec parish registers were microfilmed as part of a joint project with the historical demography program at the Université de Montréal. The Mormons have also microfilmed Roman Catholic parish registers in France, Ireland, Poland and other European countries as well. I do not know if this is because these records are considered civil records in these European countries or because European Catholic clergy are less hesitant than Americans about sharing their records with the Mormons. Relatively few American Catholic parishes are in the collection.

There are two other significant differences between accessing Catholic records in Québec and the United States. First, in Québec many of the parish marriage records and now some burial records have been published in repertories. To my knowledge only some New England French-Canadian and Louisiana Cajun parishes have repertories of their records published.⁴ Although more are being done every year, we Franco-Americans are still far behind our Québec cousins. Second, Québécois priests have been responsible for publishing many of these repertories as well as other significant works of genealogical interest. In fact, some of the greatest French-Canadian and Acadian genealogists have been priests, such as, Fathers Godbout, d'Entremont, Tanguay, Loiselle, Rivest, and Gaudet. In America only Father Hebert's work in Louisiana stands out.

Limitations to Access in America

Despite a growing awareness of the historical value of their records, Catholic parish registers in America are still not widely accessible to genealogists. American parish registers are strictly the property of the Catholic Church. Access varies from parish to parish even within the same diocese. In my own family history research I have had a range of reactions to my requests to use parish records within a single Michigan diocese. One priest was kind enough to let me go through the books at my leisure under minimal supervision over several visits through the years. Another priest in a neighboring parish willingly looked up each item I was concerned with and then showed me the entry I was interested in. However, he carefully covered the entries above and below with sheets of paper. And still another priest in the same diocese not only denied me access to the original register but informed me that it would be a venial sin for me to view the document and for him to show it to me. This kind of variation in rules of access drives genealogists to distraction.

There are of course two sides to the issue of access to Catholic parish records. There are several factors limiting the Church's ability and willingness to make the records accessible. The most important point is that the Church wants to protect the privacy of the people discussed in the records. For example, the parish registers make mention of illegitimacy. The Church is compelled to record honestly the known facts surrounding an illegitimate birth, but it is hesitant to share this information. The Church has to safeguard against lawsuits resulting from the release of confidential information.

The rules of the Church, that is, Canon Law, mandates that the priests keep a register of baptisms, marriages, and burials, that these records be kept in a protected storeroom, and that the parish priest "... take care that they [the registers] do not come into the hands of outsiders."⁵ They have to maintain the integrity of the records. They also have to make sure that they do not fall into the hands of people with intentions that

⁴The finest collection of the New England parish repertories that I have come across is in the library of the Société généalogique canadienne-française in Montréal. For Cajun parish records see: Donald J. Hebert, South Louisiana Records: Church and Civil Records of Lafourche--Terrebonne (1794-1920), 12 vols. (Eunice, Cecilia, and Baton Rouge, LA: Hebert Publications, 1978-1985); and Southwest Louisiana Records: Church and Civil Records of Settlers (1756-1953), 34 vols. (Eunice, Cecilia, and Baton Rouge, LA: Hebert Publications, 1974-1989). I am also aware of works dealing with New Orleans and Baltimore. Earl C. Woods and Charles E. Nolan, comps., Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 3 vols. (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1987-1989. Mary A. Piet and Stanley G. Piet, comps., Early Catholic Church Records in Baltimore, Maryland; 1782 through 1800 (Westminster, MD: Family Line Publications, ca. 1990).

⁵James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel, The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary (New York: Paulist Press, commissioned by the Canon Law Society of America, 1985), p. 430, Canon 535.

would oppose the interest of the Church. And they must safeguard them from people who might use the contents to embarrass public figures.

Besides the issues of privacy there is another practical difficulty. The parish is not set up to handle genealogical researchers. The priests are busy with their regular duties and do not have time to search through the old registers. The priesthood is a full-time demanding job. A priest does not need to come home from the hospital after giving extreme unction to a patient and comforting the family only to find a genealogist at his doorstep.

Nor do they have the time to do translations of archaic handwriting in Latin. Although they may know Latin reasonably well, the seminary training probably did not prepare them for deciphering eighteenth and nineteenth century script. Another language complication is that the registers were not always kept exclusively in Latin. The English speaking priest of a formerly ethnic parish might now have to contend with old records in German, Italian, French, or Polish.

Occasionally, the parish priest will delegate the responsibility of searching for genealogical information to his secretary or to parish volunteers. Unless these people have an interest in genealogy (and I have been lucky to come across several of them) they might not be enthusiastic about the assignment. Also, many might have difficulty in finding and interpreting the data. Furthermore, they are kept busy enough with the normal business of the parish.

The American parish registers are not always indexed. Although some parishes did construct separate indexes years later, the lack of an index in many parishes makes recovering information difficult. This is so not only for the priest and his staff but also the genealogists. Moreover, the parish rectory often does not have the physical facilities to handle genealogical researchers, such as, table space or photocopiers. Another complication is that the parishes with the most interesting records from a genealogical point of view are now often poor urban parishes with limited budgets and staffs. Lastly, the priests are often concerned with preserving the old registers that may be in a deteriorated condition due to years of use.

Importance of Parish Registers

Given these limitations it is understandable why many priests are less than sympathetic with eager genealogists. Nevertheless, the genealogists have a case to plead. The parish records are important tools in their research due to flaws in civil vital records. Parish records serve two purposes.

First, they can take the place of missing civil records. Often Roman Catholic records were kept for decades prior to civil records. In Michigan the records of the parish of Ste. Anne in Detroit start in 1704 and Ste. Anne at Michilimackinac in 1695 long before civil registration in 1867.⁶ Often a vital event may only have been registered in the local church and had failed, for one reason or another, to be recorded in the civil records at the distant courthouse. These records make late eighteenth and early nineteenth century genealogy possible for French-Canadians whose ancestors were usually not among the literate.

⁶The parish register for Ste. Anne at Michilimackinac has been published in several forms. The best indexed version is Marthe Faribault-Beauregard, La population des forts français d'Amérique (XVIII^e siècle), 2 vols. (Montréal: Éditions Bergeron, 1982-1984), vol. 1, pp. 120-174. A planned future volume will cover Ste. Anne at Detroit. A xerographic bound multiple volume copy of Detroit's Ste. Anne is available at the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Registre de Sainte Anne, Detroit, 2 February 1704-30 December 1848, Mss., 5 vols. in 7 with an index, French text, Jacques Hercklar, copyist.

Second, these parish records are especially valuable because they fill in the gap caused by the lack of parents' names on civil marriage records. Frequently these civil marriage records will only mention the names of the couple, the officiating priest, the date, and the town in which the couple was married. Using a local or parish history a researcher can verify the church their ancestors were wed in. At that point the family historian can contact the rectory and hopefully find the ancestors' marriage recorded with the names of their parents in the parish register. Thus the researcher can extend the pedigree back another generation.

Though most parish priests will help a researcher get a single record, they are less willing to open completely their books. They fail to see the value genealogists find in working with a complete register and cannot understand why researchers cannot be satisfied with simple specific information. However, genealogists know that a parish register can be rich in details about ancestors and their other relatives. For instance, a researcher might find a clue to solve a pedigree problem not in the burial record of an ancestor but in the marriage record of a sibling. If a French priest kept the parish register, then the French-Canadian genealogist has even more interest to see the records because it is likely to resemble the parish registers of Québec. Parish registers in Québec usually give detailed information about the relationship between people recorded in an event. For example, they typically mention the relationship of the witnesses to the bride and groom. Full access is desirable and means that the researcher can go through the whole register looking for clues. This is especially valuable when the register is unindexed. Over time genealogists develop an eye for the evidence they are interested in. Furthermore, due to their level of motivation, they will often put more time into doing a search in the difficult-to-read books.

The Lack of Clear Rules Concerning Access

Canon Law does not guarantee access to Catholic parish records for genealogical research.⁷ Nor does it deny access. It only states that a person has a right to view archived records about their status in the Church. It also states that the parish priest has a duty to protect the integrity and privacy of the records. The relevant law is Canon 487 paragraph 2 and reads as follows:

It is a right of interested parties to obtain personally or through their proxy an authentic written copy or a photocopy of documents which are public by their nature and which pertain to the status of such persons.

This Canon is specifically concerned with records kept in the diocesan archives that often includes copies of parish registers. It is intended to allow Catholics access to records to prove their "ecclesiastical state" in the Church, that is, have they received particular sacraments. Does this Canon Law mean you have access to information about your ancestors? According to Msgr. John J. Doyle, the archivist and historian for the Diocese of Indianapolis, it does:

There is a certain hesitancy among ecclesiastical authorities to make records public. The Code of Canon Law provides that the documents of both parochial and diocesan archives are free for inspection to those having a genuine interest in them, and that such persons are to receive a faithful copy of them at their own expense.⁸

⁷Coriden et al., Code of Canon Law, pp. 395-396 & 430, see especially Canon 487, paragraph 2, and Canon 535.

⁸John J. Doyle, "Genealogical Use of Catholic Records in North America," paper given for the Family History Session at the annual meeting of the Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 5 November 1977 (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1978), pp. 1-10, p. 10. The "faithful" copy means that the priest will issue a certificate and not necessarily a photocopy.

This is a "liberal" interpretation of the Canon Law, one that most genealogists would favor. However, in the practical world a more "conservative" atmosphere prevails. In reality the interpretation of this Canon Law depends on the guidelines established by the bishop or diocesan chancellor. Failing any central ruling the interpretation of the local priest holds sway.

The point is that Canon Law does not explicitly permit genealogical research nor does it rule it out. Rather, Canon Law leaves determining access to the discretion of the diocese and the local parish priest; hence, the frustration genealogists encounter as they move from parish to parish in search of their ancestors and find widely differing rules of access at each site.

Canon Law is simply not clear on this issue. Undoubtedly, the parish register is meant to function primarily as a religious record and not a historical or genealogical source. Nevertheless, it has great value to both historians and genealogists. The Catholic Church is becoming more conscious of the value of these records and making them more accessible.⁹ Canon Law now requires actions to preserve old parish registers. The new interest in social history is also having an impact on the preservation of the records. Historians like Jay P. Dolan are now using information contained in various parish records to paint a portrait of nineteenth century Catholic life in America.¹⁰ The Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists was formed in 1983, and along with the American Catholic Historical Association formed in 1919, has taken a leading role in raising the historical interest within the American Catholic Church.

To respond to the need of preservation many dioceses have established central archives and have requested that microfilm copies of the parish registers be deposited at the archives. These archives are usually part of the Chancery.¹¹ The Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists encourages and assists dioceses to develop archives programs and to train their staffs. This Association is concerned with setting up rules of access for genealogical research but has not yet formulated guidelines. Nevertheless, according to the current president:

⁹Ibid. Duane L.C.M. Galles, "Roman Catholic Church Records and the Genealogist," National Genealogical Society Quarterly 74:4 (December 1986): 271-278. James M. O'Toole, "The Roman Catholic Family in North America: Family History as Viewed Through Catholic Church Records," paper presented at the World Conference on Records: Preserving Our Heritage, Salt Lake City, 12-15 August 1980, series 317; and "Catholic Church Records: A Genealogical and Historical Resource" New England Historical and Genealogical Register 132:4 (October 1978): 251-263. [O'Toole is the Archivist for the Archdiocese of Boston and is also the past president of the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists.] John J. Sehllem, "Church Records of the United States: Roman Catholic Sacramental Records," paper presented at the World Conference on Records and Genealogical Seminar, Salt Lake City, 5-8 August 1969, area I-4 & 5a. Cora C. Curry, Records of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States as a Source of Authentic Genealogical and Historical Material (Washington, DC: National Genealogical Society, publication no. 5, 1935).

¹⁰Jay P. Dolan, The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1985).

¹¹The Chancery is the administrative office of a dioceses. The Chancellor runs it and is the notary for the diocese. He prepares official documents and manages the diocesan archives. Any records of genealogical interest at the diocesan level would be kept in the Chancery archives.

In general, our policy is to try to assist researchers to the extent of our resources and our Association encourages the microfilming of records and the development of archival personnel. That, of course, is a slow process.¹²

The centralization of records is a boon to genealogists because it potentially provides a single point of contact. The microfilming insures the survival of records. However, as is the case at the parish level, these diocesan archives are not set up to help genealogical researchers. The archives are private repositories of church-related documents and not generally open to the public. The archivists prefer written requests because their limited facilities cannot accommodate visits from genealogists. Nor do they have an abundant staff. The diocesan archivists are usually willing to do a limited amount of research to answer simple questions. For example, they can help you locate an ancestor's parish or a single sacramental record among their collection. However, they are not prepared to carry out extensive genealogical research. Nevertheless, the presence of these archives heralds a future with better arrangements for genealogists.

The Archdiocese of Detroit is a fine example of a Catholic archive and what it can do to help genealogists within the limits of its budget and staff. The Archdiocese has a directory for all its parishes that shows the date they were created.¹³ It also has prepared a chronological list of the Archdiocese's 386 parishes that have existed over time.¹⁴ The Archdiocese also has a well-developed policy regarding access to records. Baptism, confirmation, or marriage records before 1900 are open to the public. All burial records are open. They have sent microfilm copies of these parish registers to the Burton Historical Collection of the main Detroit Public Library. Researchers can view them there. They may make single photocopies for their personal use, but more copies and publication approval must come from the Archdiocese. To use these records at the Burton you must complete a permission form. Except for burial records, all other records after 1900 are closed since people mentioned in them might still be alive. The archives will answer specific questions about these records from family members if time permits.

In summary, the Church does not guarantee genealogists full access to parish registers. The level of access varies from parish to parish. The discretion of the parish priest determines access within the guidelines of the bishop. The Church has made important changes regarding the protection and centralization of parish records that promises to preserve the records over a long period. However, these improvements do not mean you will have easier access to the records or the kind of openness that genealogists ideally desire.

Genealogical Data Contained in Parish Registers

Despite the difficulties of gaining access to parish records, it is well worth the effort because of the information they contain.¹⁵ The Council of Trent in 1547 recognized the seven sacraments and required that their administration be recorded. The parish register was the result of this ruling. It records baptism,

¹²Letter from Rev. M. Edmund Hussey, President of the Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists, to John P. DuLong, 17 April 1989.

¹³Rose Marie Massey, ed., The Archdiocese of Detroit Directory (Detroit: Office of Communications, Archdiocese of Detroit, 1986). This is typewritten in a loose leaf binder and updated periodically.

¹⁴Archdiocese of Detroit, Archives, "Chronological List of Parishes and Missions in the Archdiocese of Detroit," 1 February 1967, and "Update," 3 May 1978, 9 pp. typewritten.

¹⁵The following details are derived from O'Toole, "Roman Catholic Family," Galles, "Roman Catholic Church Records," and Joy Reisinger, "Finding and Using Catholic Church Records in the United State and Canada," Lost in Canada? 15:3 (Fall 1989): 138-142.

communion, confirmation, ordination, marriage, and burial information.¹⁶ Except for communion, confirmation, and ordination, these records parallel events recorded at the civil level. In general the parish register contains the following information per record type:

Baptism: The name of the child, names of the parents, often the maiden name of the mother, the names of the godparents but not always their relationship to the child, the date of the baptism, usually the date of birth, and lastly the officiating priest. Illegitimacy will be recorded and the names of the parents given if known. Adopted children are often recorded with their adoptive parents and no mention of their natural parents.¹⁷

Communion and Confirmation: These are typically lists of children who received the sacrament on a given date. For confirmation the name of the sponsor is usually recorded but not their relationship to the child. These records often are not preserved with regularity.

Ordination: The names of the ordained, the officiating authority, and the date and place of the ordination. Usually, the name of the parents, place of origin, and age are also recorded. This information usually does not appear in a separate register. It is simply added to the original baptism record.

Marriage: The names of the couple, their ages, the names of two witnesses but rarely their relationship to the couple, occasionally the names of the parents, sometimes their place of residence, the date of the wedding, and the officiating priest. Rarely is reference made of birthplace. Mention will also be made of special dispensations for impediments. For example, the marriage of cousins (consanguinity), age (at least 14 for women and 16 for men), or arrangements for a Protestant partner (disparity of worship). All three cases are of genealogical interest.

Burial: The name of the deceased, the date of death, the date of the burial, the age at death, and the signature of the officiating priest. Frequently they do not mention birthplace, parents, spouse, or pallbearers.

A unique feature of Catholic sacramental records is that the religious events in a person's life are often noted in the baptismal record. In 1907 the Church decreed that marriage information be recorded on the baptismal record. The 1918 Code of Canon Law required that confirmation, ordination, and marriage be recorded on the original baptismal record. Moreover, the marriage record might show when and where the bride and groom were baptized if they were not originally of the parish. It was the responsibility of the officiating priest to send a notice of the marriage back to the home parish of the bride or the groom. The priest would

¹⁶The register does not record the sacrament of penance (now referred to a reconciliation). Although it is performed near death, the sacrament of extreme unction (anointing of the sick) is usually not recorded. However, death and burial are noted.

¹⁷A notation often accompanies the baptism record of adopted children to indicate that an original record can be found at the Catholic Charities. This is the agency that handles adoptions. They usually have a cross index showing the natural parents. The Church carefully guards these records. Do not expect to see this information without a valid legal reason. According to Roman P. Godzak, in the Archdiocese of Detroit both adoptive and natural parents are listed in a child's baptism record. The policy of the Archdiocese forbids obscuring or removing natural parents' names from the register. Only on the baptismal certificate do the names of the adoptive parents appear and not the natural parents. Again, this information in the register is treated as confidential.

also have to send a notice to the father's parish if a child was baptized away from home. This linking of records was never extensively done given the challenge of the task and is usually only seen in the twentieth century.

Besides these basic records of interest, parishes also generated many other records of genealogical value including, membership lists, Catholic school records, visitation of the sick records, Catholic charity records, pulpit announcement books, and the sexton's records for the local Catholic cemetery.¹⁸ Groups associated with the parish, such as the Société St-Jean-Baptiste for French-Canadians, also created records of interest. Unfortunately, most of these secondary records have not been preserved at either the local parish level or the diocesan level.

Secondary printed works might be of help with some of this information. For example, many parishes at their centennial published histories that mentioned the names of prominent parishioners who helped establish the parishes or took a role in the devotional or social groups. Also, the Polk city directories often list the officers of mutual benefit societies, such as the Société St-Jean-Baptiste.

The records that do exist vary in their completeness, accuracy, and the language they are recorded in. Unlike the Québec parish registers, which usually identify the relationship between godparents and child or witnesses and couple, the American registers fail to do this. Also the priests vary in the completeness of the information they recorded. Some priests were more accurate than others in attaining the information and recording it. A French-Canadian priest might be more motivated than a German priest in recording the names of parents or birthplace information because of his familiarity with Québec. In general, language is an obstacle. An Irish priest would have a difficult time recording the names of a French-Canadian couple in English. If he felt required to record it in Latin, then there is another chance for the record to become muddled.¹⁹ Lastly, what is recorded might depend on the ledger the parish had purchased. In the nineteenth century most parishes relied on printed ledgers with column headings. Occasionally, parishes acquired ledgers with column heading for parents' names and birthplace. There is no guarantee that the priest would record this information, but it is more likely than if no space was made available for it.

Locating an Ancestor's Parish

To use these records, or rather to gain access to them, you must locate the parish your ancestors lived in. A knowledge of your ancestors community is essential since there is no centralized index for parish records. You will have to identify your ancestor's parish. In small rural communities with a single Catholic parish nearby your task is easy. However, in frontier communities with visiting missionary priests or large urban centers with many parishes your task is more difficult.

To locate the records of missionary priests you will have to do some general reading about the period and identify the parish and diocese they operated from. The records might be found in that parish's register or in the archives of the diocese. For example, the missionary priests who handled Green Bay, Wisconsin, recorded their information in the register at Detroit. It is also conceivable that the missionary priest may have deposited his records with the headquarters of the order to which he belonged.

¹⁸According to Galles, the parish priest often kept a "status animarum." This was a register of family members of the parish arranged by households with boarders and servants included. It was used to indicate the sacraments received and often kept on index cards which usually were discarded at the death of the parishioners. Galles, "Roman Catholic Church Records," p. 276.

¹⁹In 1868 the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore ruled that the entries in the parish registers were to be in Latin, *ibid.*, p. 273. However, I have seen parish records in Latin before that year and in English after that year. The ruling was not consistently followed.

To identify an ancestor's parish in a city requires that you learn his exact residence from the census or a city directory. You must then locate the parishes that served that neighborhood. The Official Catholic Directory is the best tool for locating a parish. It has been published annually in one form or another since 1817.²⁰ It is organized by dioceses and provides information about the hierarchy of the diocese and the names and addresses of all the parishes in the diocese.²¹ It also includes parish schools and notes with the cryptic CEM if the parish has an associated cemetery. A directory of priests is also provided.²² It has three major flaws: (1) it fails to list the date a parish was created; (2) it no longer indicates the ethnic background of the parishes unless a particular group is still attending it (that is, parishes formerly devoted to French-Canadians will not be noted as such); and (3) it does not mention closed or merged parishes nor name changes. Earlier issues did show the ethnic orientation of the parishes. Although it has been in publication for some time, I do not know where a complete series of the directories can be found to track down former parishes. The Religion Section of the Detroit Public Library has the volumes from 1912 to the present. I suspect that the Jesuit University of Detroit Library also has a thorough collection.

City directories can also help identify an ancestor's parish since they often list the churches then in existence and indicate their ethnic loyalties. Lastly, town, county, or regional histories might also prove of value.

It can be a challenge to locate the proper parish. For example, if your French-Canadian ancestor lived in the Copper Country counties of Houghton, Keweenaw, and Ontonagon around the turn of the century, there were about twenty-two Catholic parishes operating then.²³ In Houghton County the French-Canadians had ten churches that they used frequently or that were totally dedicated to them. Moreover, before the creation of their own parishes they often worshipped in Irish or German parishes.

In the mining center of Calumet alone there were the parishes of Sacred Heart (Irish and German), St. Anthony (Polish), St. Joseph (Slovenian or Austrian), Ste. Anne (French-Canadian), St. Mary (Italian), and St. John the Baptist (Croatian).²⁴ To complicate matters further, Ste. Anne was formally known as St. Louis. The French-Canadians had their own parish in operation from 1883 to 1966. Before 1883 they used Sacred Heart. Now Calumet has two parishes, Sacred Heart and St. Paul the Apostle. St. Paul is a consolidation of Polish, Slovenian, French-Canadian, Italian, and Croatian parishes. St. Paul is housed in St. Joseph, the former Slovenian church. To find your Calumet French-Canadian ancestor you will have to start with the records now preserved at St. Paul. Calumet's Catholic parishes are not unique. Many towns have similarly complex histories. The point is that an effort must be made to untangle local parish history to identify the correct repositories of the records you seek.

²⁰The Official Catholic Directory (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Son, 1988).

²¹It has diocese level information only for Canada. The Catholic Almanac (1988) is also published annually. It provides only basic information about the diocese, however, it is a valuable guide to the various religious orders and the church in general. It also contains information about Canada. Specifically for Canada, the Canadian Catholic Directory was published from 1895 to 1913 and the French-Canadians published a similar work entitled Le Canada Ecclésiastique since 1887. The Catholic University of America publishes the New Catholic Encyclopedia (15 vols. and two supplements, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967, 1974, 1979). This work has articles that clarify issues of interest to genealogists, for example, consanguinity.

²²This can be used to track relatives in religious orders or the priesthood. Information about a relative in the religious life often contains interesting genealogical clues.

²³The Official Catholic Directory, 1912, pp. 516-521.

²⁴Arthur W. Thurner, Calumet Copper and People: History of a Michigan Mining Community, 1864-1970 (Hancock: Privately printed, 1974), pp. 22-23.

The diocesan archives might be particularly helpful in locating your ancestor's parish. The diocese will often publish a local parish directory that will list the parishes and indicate the year they were created. The diocesan archivist will have a copy of this directory as might your local library. The diocesan archivist might also have the needed knowledge about the closure, mergers, or name changes of parishes and the depository of their records. Often the records for these closed parishes might be in the archivist's own office. Sometimes the records of closed parishes are placed in the rectory of the newer and larger parish they were merged with.

Some of the former parishes were missions before their closing or merger. Missions are parishes without resident priests but which are serviced by nearby priests. The records of these parishes are in the home parish of the visiting priest. When these parishes are closed the records often go to the visiting priest's parish.

Although most dioceses now have parish registers on microfilm, they are not set up to do genealogical research. They have neither the staff nor the time to devote to answering genealogical inquiries. There are notable exceptions, but most can only be relied on to help you locate where the records you seek are kept. Unless it is a closed parish whose records are on deposit in the archives, you will have to depend on local parish priests and their staff.

Guidelines for Acquiring Information

Once you have located your ancestor's probable parish it is time to make contact. In my experience, most priests will answer written requests for information, some will supervise researchers who visit the parish by appointment to use the records, and a few will let the researchers use the parish registers with little restrictions. I have been completely turned away only once. Usually, if you employ common sense and courtesy, the records you seek will be made available to you.²⁵ I suggest the following guidelines:

1. Always remember that the job of a local priest is to minister to the spiritual needs of his parishioners. It is not to solve genealogical problems. Do not waste his time with questions merely meant to satisfy your curiosity. Go after religious records to solve a particularly difficult problem that other records fail to address. If the parish or diocese ever becomes more flexible, then go back for more detailed research.
2. Use the civil vital records first and only after you find nothing in them contact the church for help. Make sure the priest understands that you have already searched the civil records and that the information you seek is not there.
3. Make your request as specific as possible, for French-Canadians this means clearly indicating all name variations including "dit" names.
4. When making a written request always include a self-addressed and stamped envelope as well as a donation [an arbitrary minimum is \$10.00 for each specific item requested].
5. If you do not receive a reply within a reasonable amount of time (two to three months), then contact the parish again. Offer to pay more if the records are especially difficult to work with and the priest will have to hire someone to help search.

²⁵The following points are based in part on Sister Mary Louise Donnelly, "'Lost' Catholics and How to Find Them," Ancestry Newsletter 4:5 (September-October 1986), pages unknown, reprinted in Ancestry's Special Edition, p. 7.

6. If you believe that you must search through the parish register yourself, then have your justifications to do so prepared in advance. Make it clear that you have to search for a particularly difficult surname that is often misspelled or that you are looking for patterns of interrelationship between relatives. Remember that approval of a visit to search through a register is rare in most parishes and should be well justified.
7. Never drop in unannounced, call first and make an appointment. Make sure that the priest will permit you to use the records and that he or an assistant will have time to help you.
8. Do not assume that the priest will allow you to have unsupervised access to the registers. He wants to protect the privacy of your ancestors as much as you want to find out about them. Build a rapport with him and show that you are an earnest researcher, perhaps on your next visit he might give you more latitude.
9. Be prepared to contact several parishes. Your nineteenth century ancestors moved locally quite a bit and there is no guarantee that they were married in the ethnic church rather than a nearby parish. If you fail to find what you seek in a particular parish, then ask the priest for his recommendation of where to search next and ask for the name of a contact.
10. And lastly, always thank the priest or his assistant. This last step keeps the door open for you to come back and will help other genealogists. The parish staff is an important ally. If they remember you favorably from your last visit, then they will probably be more willing to help. If the priest or his assistants have been extremely helpful, then a donation is in order.

It is beyond my expertise to provide an accurate glossary of the variety of Latin and French terms found in the parish registers.²⁶ However, it has been my experience that once you translate a few basic acts you can easily build a working vocabulary to translate all but the most complex ones. Be prepared though to confront not only Latin and French, but also German, English, or just about any other European language used in Catholic countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the parish registers of American Catholic churches contain a wealth of genealogical information. To tap this rich source of data you must locate your ancestor's parish and then gain access to the records. Gaining access can be problematic and frustrating due to the varying interpretations of Canon Law from diocese to diocese and at the parish level. The lack of an overall policy towards genealogical research means there is no guaranteed access to the full use of parish registers. Despite these drawbacks, the use of common sense and courtesy will usually prevail.

²⁶For help in translating Latin parish records see, The Rev. Karel Denys, "Latin Words Most Commonly Used in Parish Registers," Flemish American Heritage 1:2 (July 1983): 23-26. He also published in the same journal helpful guides for translating French and Dutch civil records. These articles have recently been republished in a booklet entitled Translating Vital Records of Belgium from Latin, Dutch, and French and a Look at Calendars available from the Genealogical Society of Flemish Americans, 18740 E. 13 Mile Road, Roseville, MI 48066. The price is \$3.00 plus \$1.00 for postage and handling.

Editorial

My position on access to parish records is by now obvious to the reader and, hence, the reason this paper carries an editorial subtitle. The Catholic Church should standardize access to the parish records and make it easier for the sake of both the genealogist and the priest. For several religious reasons the American Roman Catholic hierarchy is reluctant to share its sacramental records with the Mormons. Nevertheless, most dioceses have microfilmed their own parish records. Therefore, preservation is not the concern, but access that protects the interest of the Church, the privacy of ancestors, and the legitimate research concerns of genealogists is still an issue. Simply put, I want full access to parish records and not have to pester busy priests to get to them.

We should applaud and encourage the policy of the diocese of Detroit, and several other dioceses, to make records before 1900 or after eighty years accessible. Finding nearby public facilities that can handle transferred parish registers and that genealogists and religious authorities can both use is also a laudable practice. However, I realize that it takes more than an enlightened policy on the part of the Church. It also requires funds. Many dioceses lack the financial resources to carry on their extensive spiritual and charitable works as well as historical projects.

So far actions to preserve Roman Catholic parish registers and to make them available have come from the top down. Certainly, in the light of the Second Vatican Council, the Church hierarchy has become more flexible. Perhaps we can also bring some pressure from the bottom up. We could encourage the leading archivist and historical groups in the Church to take a stand that would favor access.

Part of this grass roots approach could be based on volunteerism. French-Canadian genealogists could volunteer to answer queries for their local parish under the guidance of the pastor. With the permission of the Church authorities we could start the enormous task of preparing marriage repertories for Franco-American parishes. And lastly, we could engage in projects to index the parish registers. In each of these examples both the Church and the genealogists would benefit.

In the final analysis, genealogy is of necessity less important to the American Catholic Church than saving souls or managing its many charity programs. However, knowledge of our Catholic ancestor's struggles in Protestant America, which was often prejudiced against them, is an important way for French-Canadian descendants to keep in touch with their ethnic and religious heritage. Now that the dust has settled from the popularity of Roots and the Bicentennial, we can work on a practical policy that would be in line with both the interests of genealogists and the Church.

Catholic Organizations Interested in Historical Records

American Catholic Historical Association (1919)
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC 20064
The Catholic Historical Review quarterly

American Catholic Historical Society (1884)
P.O. Box 84
263 S. Fourth
Philadelphia, PA 19105
Records of the American Catholic Historical Society quarterly
[They have a museum, library, and archives.]

Association of Catholic Diocesan Archivists (1981)
St. Paul Church
308 Phillips St.
Yellow Springs, OH 45387
ACDA Bulletin twice a year

National Catholic Cemetery Conference (1949)
710 N. River Rd.
Des Plaines, IL 60016
The Catholic Cemetery monthly

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Note: Unless otherwise stated, the meetings of the Detroit Chapter are held on Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00 noon in the Explorers' Room of the Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward Ave., Detroit, MI 48202.

March 28, 1992: Annual Get Acquainted and Share Your Knowledge Meeting, Detroit Chapter Meeting.

April 25, 1992: Topic to be announced, Detroit Chapter Meeting.

May 16, 1992: French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan's Annual Workshop, speakers to be announced, Mt. Clemens Public Library, 150 Cass Ave., Mt. Clemens, MI, 10:00am-3:00pm.

Note from the Michigan Genealogical Council: 1920 Census - Thanks to the Abrams Foundation, records from 20 states have been ordered: Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. The Iowa, Michigan and Ohio Soundex have also been ordered. Materials will be added as moneys become available.

Our sympathy is extended to Corinne (LaLone) Throop in the loss of her husband, Frank L, age 76, who passed away in Lansing (MI) November 10th, 1991. Frank and Corinne have been members of the society since it was chartered in 1980. Besides his wife, Corinne, to whom he had been married 52 years, he is survived by a daughter, son, and 3 grandchildren. Frank is also the uncle of James P. LaLone, co-founder of FCHSM.

QUERIES

Joe Dupries - 5339 East Broadway - Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858-8936

ALLEN. Want to exchange information with anyone who has an interest in the BILL and ANN JANE WILKINS ALLEN family plus son HERB ALLEN who at one time lived in Orangeville, Ontario and Mono Mills, Ontario.

STAUFFER/STOVER. Want to correspond with anyone who has an interested in surname and Bobbie's Gift Shoppe which at one time was located in Grand Bend, Ontario and run by a L. Stauffer.

Deanne Speer - 2735 Rigel Drive - Colorado Springs, CO 80906

THERESA (LUCRETIA TROMBLE/TREMBLEY, born 26 Jan 1923 at Detroit. Parents: Benoit Tromble & Theresa Pominville. Married 1 March 1840 DANIEL CHAPEL(LE) at Bay City, MI. DANIEL CHAPEL (LE) died November 1867 in Bay City. Seek info on death. Theresa married 1869 JOHN DIAMOND in Bay City. Seek info on JOHN DIAMOND. Theresa Tromble Chapel(le) Diamond died 26 Nov 1905 and is buried in St. Patrick's Cemetery, Bay City.