

RESPONDING TO PARISHIONERS' REQUESTS FOR PAROCHIAL DOCUMENTATION

In the past, if a parishioner called the church office for proof of his or her baptism, the parish administrator or person appointed to fill those requests, would simply photocopy the page of the parish register where the baptism was recorded and mail the copy to the person who made the request. That practice is no longer allowed.

The U.S. Census Bureau's guidelines regarding privacy stipulate that all baptismal records less than seventy-two years old are closed to research. In this age of Identification theft, this guideline is sensible. Therefore, we have instituted some practices to safeguard the identity of the person needing documentation, and to safeguard the parish from any civil suit. Thus the practice of photocopying a page would yield too many records rather than the specific record only.

Most baptismal records are at the parish, not the diocesan, level. Because some parishes have closed and the parish registers have been transferred to the archives, as diocesan archivist, I sometimes get requests for "a baptismal certificate," usually because a person is planning to marry someone who is Roman Catholic, or has been asked to be a Godparent to a child in that faith. The Priest will always request proof of baptism using the "Trinitarian formula" in other words, has the parishioner been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Of course, it isn't possible to issue a new certificate, and the parish administrator will write a letter. But, how do you identify the person making the request?

I ask for a photocopy of a person's driver's license or some other means of identification, such as a copy of a birth certificate, to be either faxed or e-mailed with the scan attached. The accompanying request should be made by the person needing the information (not a mother or fiancée!) The request will have the person's name (maiden name if previously married), date of birth, the approximate date of the baptism, and the mailing address where the letter should be sent. The letter written will contain the information of the person's full name, date and place of birth, date of baptism (specifying the Trinitarian formula), the baptizing priest, and the volume and page number of the parish register where the information was located. I usually finish the letter with "sworn and attested by me this (date and day) of 201..." The letter should be written on parish stationery, signed by the Rector of Priest in Charge, and either a permanent paper or electronic file kept of the copy of identification, the request, and the outgoing letter, in other words, the entire transaction.

If a baptismal record cannot be found, a confirmation record will substitute, since an Episcopalian is not allowed confirmation without baptism. So, baptism is assumed. If a confirmation cannot be found, the diocesan archivist has copies of all the confirmations of the bishops filed by year.

As a rule of thumb, the same principles will govern a request for proof of marriage. Such requests are often because of Social Security or insurance issues. For a person doing genealogical research, the 72-year rule still applies to baptisms. Other avenues are available for genealogists from The National Archives and Records Administration, Ancestry, and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints to assist researchers.