



Diocese of Westminster

ARCHIVES

Parish Archives

What are parish archives?

One of the many hats that parish priests and administrators wear is that of archivist. According to canon law, in each parish there is to be an archive, in which the parochial books are to be kept, together with Episcopal letters and other documents which it may be necessary or useful to preserve (Can. 535 §4). The Code explicitly mentions the keeping of

- baptism, marriage and death registers (Cann. 535 §1 and 895)
- register of foundation Masses and other obligations (Can. 1307 §2)
- parish account books (Can. 1284 §7)
- register of catechumens (Can. 788 §1)
- title deeds, insurance policies and other papers relating to temporal goods (Can. 1284 §9)
- papers relating to marriage preparation (Cann. 1066-1070)

Many parishes will also have a sometimes bewildering collection of other records: notice books, newsletters, architectural plans and drawings, photos and postcards, videos and DVDs, orders of service, newspaper cuttings, correspondence, school records, invoices, documents relating to parish groups and all sorts of other artefacts. In some cases these will be extensive; in others very minimal.

One thing to bear in mind is that parish records don't get to the diocesan archive unless the parish deposits them there. This means that if there is not an extensive archive in your parish and nothing has been sent to WDA, the likelihood is that the archive has been lost over time.

To whom do the parish archives belong?

In civil law parish archives are the property of the Westminster Roman Catholic Diocesan Trustees (WRCDT); they do not, therefore, belong to the parish priest/administrator or the religious order/congregation administering the parish. In canon law, where the parish is recognised as a legal 'person' with the right to own and administer property, archives are part of the cultural heritage of the parish itself and the priest, as custodian, is responsible for safekeeping and preserving its patrimony. This, of course, extends to the parish buildings and the historic contents of church, sacristy and presbytery.

How should the parish archives be cared for?

We recognise that many priests will have limited time and resources to care for the parish archives. However, if possible, they should be kept in a clean, secure, well-ventilated space that is not damp or liable to flood and is not subject to extreme heat

fluctuation. Registers and other important materials should be deposited in a lockable, fireproof safe or cabinet. Archives should not be kept in cellars, boiler-houses, damp garages or dusty attics! If it wouldn't be suitable for as an office for people, it's probably not suitable for irreplaceable documents either

Here are some basic hints that may be found useful in the keeping of parish archives:

- Try not to use biros when completing registers, since the ink is unstable and fades over time. Registrar's black ink is ideal.
- Do not cover registers with brown paper or sticky-back plastic, both of which are highly acidic and will rot the covers over time.
- Avoid using sellotape to repair registers and other documents, since this will not last and eventually leaves a sticky residue. Seek advice from us, or from a paper conservator
- Loose pages in registers should, if possible, be taken to a bookbinder for repair.
- Keep all items unfolded, since folds weaken paper.
- Papers should be kept flat whenever possible.
- Remove paper clips, staples and other fasteners that are liable to rust. Plastic or brass fasteners are preferable.
- Avoid using rubber bands, since these will rot and damage the papers. Bundles may be tied with white archival tape (or any flat cotton ribbon will do if desperate)
- Do not use lever arch files or any kind of file with metal fastenings. Try to use archival, acid free boxes or folders
- Don't use plastic wallets - these can react with paper and ink and cause the documents to stick together!
- Avoid using any kind of photo albums or scrapbooks where items are permanently glued down or laminated

Recording for posterity

As well as keeping the records of the past, parish priests have the duty of preserving the present for posterity. This needn't be very elaborate - newsletters, parish magazines, orders of service and other documents should at least be kept. Some may choose to keep a photo album or scrapbook, recording important events in the life of the parish, as well as a picture of daily life. If a parish history has not been written for some time, it may be worth thinking of a fresh look at the parish's story.

What should be kept?

Extensive guides and advice about exactly how long particular records should be kept, and when we will consider taking them into the diocesan archives, are available from WDA. We'd be very pleased if every parish put these into practice. However, in the meantime, following these guidelines should help:

1. Never dispose of any of the documents specifically mentioned in the Code of Canon Law unless instructed by the archives. This doesn't mean you will be stuck with them forever:
 - a) Sacramental Registers: you can deposit these in the Diocesan Archives 100 years after the final entry.
 - b) Other registers e.g. Foundation Masses, Mass Intentions: can be deposited if no longer in day to day use.
 - c) Final audited accounts can be deposited after seven years. Any historic account books or financial papers may also be sent to us.
 - d) Deeds and current insurance policies should be kept in the parish, as should proof of ownership of temporal goods and a current inventory.
 - e) The Chancery has advised that marriage paperwork in parishes may be destroyed after 75 years. Until then, it must be kept in the parish.
2. For any other records which show some kind of legal, financial or policy decision, keep them in the parish for at least 7 years. File them away in whatever filing system you have and write a review date on that file. Also keep a list of what you have and when it needs to be reviewed.

When the date arrives, take a look at the file to decide if you still need it – if you haven't looked at it in 3 or 4 years, you very likely don't need to keep it in current files. If you still need it, decide how long for and put it back.

If you don't need it, think about whether it should go in the archive. Ask yourself if it answers the question 'What was St X's parish doing in 200-?' or 'Would this help someone trying to do the same again? Or 'Could someone have a real need to know this in 20/30/100 years' time?' If so, archive it, if not, destroy it.

3. For records of events e.g. orders of service, newsletters, magazines, photographs and paperwork that isn't legal, financial or a record of decisions e.g. general correspondence, make sure that at least a representative sample goes into the archive every year. Again think of trying to answer the question 'What was St X's parish doing in 200-?'
4. Try and look through your files, or have someone do it, every couple of years to identify material that can go into the archive and material that can be destroyed. If you've got a huge backlog that needs going through, then we can provide advice and training on how to do this.

How WDA can help with this

When the guidelines above suggest that material should be 'archived' or 'deposited' this means that you can send it to the diocesan archives and we will sort through it, package it, catalogue it and make it available for research if appropriate.

The advantages to you are that you won't have to worry about caring for (and finding space for) an extensive parish archive and that you can send any historical enquiries, including genealogists if you have deposited registers, straight to us.

However, you should be aware that we will appraise any records sent to us – this means we will check through to make sure that everything there really is worthy of permanent preservation. We apply various criteria to this and have detailed retention schedules, so it is not a random decision. Any material weeded out in this way will be disposed of unless you tell us otherwise.

Closure

As a general rule, we do not allow the public to access material less than 30 years old at WDA unless it was originally produced for public distribution. If it contains personal information about an individual, it is closed until that individual is likely to be dead. We would recommend that the same rules are applied to parish archives. In particular we would strongly advise the following closure periods for sacramental registers:

Baptisms: 100 years

Marriages: 85 years

Confirmations: 90 years

This is to ensure that no personal information about living individuals is revealed to a third party. However, this doesn't apply to extracts requested by the person themselves or for any canonical purpose. Also, if it can be shown that the subject/s of the record is dead, you may provide information to a third party at your discretion provided it is not likely to cause damage or distress.

About Westminster Diocesan Archives

WDA is situated at 16a Abingdon Road, Kensington W8 6AF. It consists of the papers of the Archbishops of Westminster and various diocesan central bodies, some parish archives, as well as an extensive collection of documents pre-dating the restoration of the Hierarchy (1850), collections deposited and donated by Catholic organisations and individuals and a small collection of historic sacramental registers.

It is open to researchers on Tuesdays and Wednesdays every week but please contact us to make an appointment first. We are always happy to help with any archival or historical queries from parishes in the diocese.

Diocesan Archivist: Fr Nicholas Schofield

Administrative Archivist: Claire Childs

archivist@rcdow.org.uk

020 7938 3580

Useful Contacts

[Catholic Archives Society](#)

Hon. Secretary: Sarah Maspero
50A Gordon Road
Fareham
Hampshire PO16 7SP
secretary@catholicarchivesociety.org

www.catholicarchivessociety.org

A membership organisation for anyone interested in Catholic archives. They publish a journal and advice booklets, run training days and a yearly conference.

Diocesan Chancery

Brenda Roberts (Vice-Chancellor) and Christine Murphy (Chancery Assistant)

020 77989077
chancery@rcdow.org.uk

For advice regarding registers, marriage paperwork and anything canonical

Archive Suppliers

Preservation Equipment <http://www.preservationequipment.com/>
Conservation by Design <http://www.conservation-by-design.co.uk>
Secol <http://www.secol.co.uk/>