

NOTE REGARDING CONTENTS OF ECCLESIASTICAL MARRIAGE RECORDS

Ecclesiastical marriage records usually contain information of interest and importance for genealogical research together with legal information (ecclesiastical and often civil) which is of much less import for genealogy. The information important to genealogy obviously includes the names of the bride and groom, their ages, places of birth and baptism, residence, parents, witnesses to the marriage and date and place of marriage.

We must always remember that civil records and ecclesiastical records of marriage originate from two distinct points of view and contain information which was considered important to each organization keeping the records. Civil records or transcripts are concerned with civil matters or matters of interest to the civil government and can be considered what we call vital statistics. Ecclesiastical records are sacramental records concerned with recording information of interest to church officials. Neither set of records was designed to record all the information which someone researching family history would like to find in the record.

The information of much less genealogical importance deals with the fulfillment of the religious and civil requirements for the marriage to be valid and licit. Often this information begins with the statement that the three banns of marriage were announced on certain dates and that no impediment or defect was found. The banns were to be announced on three consecutive days when Catholics were to assist at Mass i.e. three Sundays or a combination of Sundays and holy days of obligation. The pastor of the place had the authority to dispense with one of the banns if he felt there was sufficient reason e.g. there were not three Sundays before the beginning of Advent or Lent and there was sufficient reason for the marriage to take place before those seasons. A dispensation of the other two banns had to be obtained from the chancery of the diocese. The purpose of the announcement of the banns was to give the members of the parish an opportunity to inform the priest of anything which would render the upcoming marriage invalid. If the two parties were from different parishes, the banns were to be announced in both parishes. Examples of impediments which would make a marriage invalid would be one or both parties being bound by an existing marriage, the parties being related by blood within certain degrees of consanguinity (e.g. first cousins) or affinity (e.g. marrying the brother of your deceased husband), etc. In the ritualistic formula the priest is simply stating that all the requirements trying to assure a valid marriage had been fulfilled and so he was able to validly witness the marriage.

When the priest records his role in the marriage ceremony he uses words like benedixi (I blessed) or ratificavi (I ratified) or words which convey the same meaning. He would never say something like Sacramentum Matrimonii administravi (I administered the Sacrament of Marriage) because the husband and wife were the actual ministers of the sacrament to each other and the priest's role was to witness the vows and to bless the marriage in the name of the church. Two other witnesses to the vows were also to be present and currently they would be the best man and maid/matron of honor. However, for marriages prior to about 1920 the witnesses were almost always two males.

The records also often list certain civil requirements which had also been fulfilled prior to the celebration of the marriage. Presently one such requirement would involve the presentation of a civil marriage license or in some countries a certificate that a civil marriage ceremony had taken place. Usually in older records this involves permission being granted by judicial order for the marriage to take place if one or both parties were younger than the civil minimum age for marriage. At other times it records the living parent/parents granting their consent or a guardian consenting to the marriage. It would

be most unusual for anyone under the canonical (ecclesiastical) minimum age being granted permission to marry since the minimum ages during those times were 12 for girls and 14 for boys.

I hope this digression helps to clarify the relative importance of information found in Latin church records and perhaps may make it easier to quickly determine what is of interest in record and thereby to eliminate what is not.

Dave