

# Using Catholic Church Records in Latin America

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These records are among the most important for genealogical research as the vast majority of the population in Latin America is Catholic. In all likelihood, these records will be the only records that can identify your relatives prior to the establishment of Civil Registration by each government.

During the Council of Trent in 1563, the Catholic Church established rules that would standardized the keeping of Parish Records. It was mandated that 5 types of books or records be kept: Baptisms, Confirmations, Marriages, Deaths, and Parish Census. While each locality may have had slight variations in how church records were written, once they were standardized, the information contained is similar. Some may contain more than others depending on how old records you read are.

## How do I use Church Records?

You will need to know the name of the city or town your relative lived in. In the case of large cities that have hundreds of churches, you will also need to know the name of the parish they belonged to or worshiped at. Keep in mind that some small towns or villages were too small to have its own church building and were assigned to an larger nearby town with an actual church building in it.

## What information can I find in Catholic Church Records?

For purposes of genealogical research the focus will be on baptisms, marriages and deaths as they contain the most relevant information. Confirmation and censuses conducted may contain interesting information but not nearly as important as what we find in the other three type of records.

### **Bautizos** (Baptisms) -

- Date of Baptism

- Name of infant (often times written on the margin and in the entry)

- Legitimacy

- Race of Infant (often times written on the side or margin of record)

- Name of parents

- Place of residency of parents

- Name of God Father and God Mother

### **Matrimonios** (Marriages) -

- Date of marriage

- Name of bride and groom

- Legitimacy of bride and groom

- Age of bride and groom

There are also found Dispensas Matrimoniales, a procedure done prior to the marriage to ensure there are no impediments or reasons why the couple should not be married. If there is one, it will be mentioned in the record.

Marriages were also

- Occupation of groom
- Place or residency of couple
- Place of origin of couple
- Age of bride and groom
- Name of parents of bride and groom
- Occupation of the Father of the bride and groom
- Name of “padrinos “
- Name of witnesses

### **Defunciones (Deaths)**

- Death Date
- Name of individual
- Gender of individual
- Age
- Name of parents
- Place of death

### **How and where do I research Catholic Church Records?**

- Family search contains the most complete records for Latin American countries. Ancestry has added records for Mexico and shares these with Family Search.
- If you do not know the name of the town and parish your relative lived in or belonged to, then the indexed records found in Family Search will be the most helpful.
- Not all records have been indexed so if you type a name and you don't find someone, it does not mean there are no records. Updates are done continually so continue checking.
- Some records are digitized and are available but cannot be viewed from your home. It will show a lock next to the film. That means you will need to go to your nearest Family History Library. This is due to limitations imposed by the record owner to Family Search.
- You can access Ancestry.com along with several other membership based sites, for free at your Family History Library.
- If you are unable to find any records on online you can write to the parish and request information on your relative. You can use google translate and you can look up the addresses online as the Catholic Church has that information available online. Or you can ask a relative that lives in the locality to go in person and ask for the records.

### **Phrases and use of Latin in Catholic Records**

Catholic Records contain some phrases in Latin and some specific standardized language through all countries. There may exist slight variations on how these words are spelled.

## Baptisms-

Anno Domini - In the year of our Lord

Bautize solemnemente - Solemnly baptized

Puse oleo e chrisma - placed oil and christening

Ex licencia parrochi - by license of the parish priest

A quienes adverti - whom i advised of their duties

## Marriages -

Velados - veiled (A veil is placed over the shoulders of the couple to symbolize their union and being "clothed as one" in unity.

In facie ecclesiae - in the presence of the congregation

Impedimentum - impediment to the marriage such as a blood relation

Ya finado - already dead

## Burials -

Cruz alta/baja - high cross/low cross (distinction on social class and signifies how much money was spent, high cross burials would be more elaborate and expensive.

Limosna - alms (the congregation donated funds as the family may not have have the money to have even a low cross burial)

Fosa comun - common grave (shared by many)

Cofradia - brotherhood

## Abbreviations found in Catholic Records

Many scribes chose to use abbreviations. You can recognize an abbreviated word because there is a dot after a letter or a raised letter next to two or three letters.

Abbreviation	Actual Word
D.	Don
Da	Doña
Fr co	Francisco
Fr ca	Francisca
Ma	Maria
x	de (of, from)

For more examples of abbreviations look here

<https://script.byu.edu/Pages/Spanish/en/chabbreviations.aspx>

## Spanish spelling

Spanish spelling was standardized in the mid 1700s however, scribes wrote words as they sounded rather than as they should be written. Some letters had the same or similar sounds so scribes often interchanged letters. This is not a complete list but contains the most often used interchanged letters and most often happened with given names.

Letter	Substitute	Example
b	p, u, v	Benita for Venita
c	s, x, z	Macimo for Maximo
ch	c	chrisma for crisma
d	r	Idiarte for Iriarte
g	j, h	muger for mujer; chiguagua for chichuahua
i	y	maio for mayo
j	g, x	lejitimo for legitimo; Jimena for Ximena
ph	f	Josepha for Josefa
z	s	parentezco for parentesco
y	i	Yndio for Indio

## Spelling Variations

Dropped the H

Hermenegildo for Ermenejildo

Added the H

Ypolito for Hipolito

For more examples go to <https://script.byu.edu/Pages/Spanish/en/handwriting.aspx>

## Races

The Catholic church often kept separate ordinance records for Spanish, Indians, and Blacks. It seems that the main purpose was taxation and making it easier creating dispensas matrimoniales when needed. This practice slowly faded away after each country declared its independence. Many races were determined by the amount of blood mixed from each races. Below is a chart of some races most commonly found in parish records.

Español	Spanish
Indio	Indian
Mestizo(a)	Mix of Spanish and Indian
Negro(a)	Black
Mulato(a)	Mix of Spanish and Black
Zambo(a)	Mix of Indian and Black

## Paleography

Alphabet charts can be found here <https://script.byu.edu/Pages/Spanish/en/alphabet.aspx>

## Translation

Google has a tool that translates entire site but can use it to do words or phrases.