En la Capilla: Navigating Hispanic Church Records

Hailey Wentz, Genealogical Forum of Oregon 2022

The influence of the Catholic church upon the records in Spanish-speaking countries cannot be overstated. Understanding what information can be gleaned from some of the most common of these records will aid you immensely as you search for the Hispanic ancestors in your family or on behalf of a friend. In this class, you will gain some valuable tools to help you as you begin your Hispanic research in these essential documents.

Objectives

1. Understand the key parts and information in Catholic baptism, marriage, and burial records
2. Recognize the basic format used for Catholic church records in Spanish-speaking areas
3. Learn some of the essential vocabulary used in the records (as well as resources to use when encountering unknown vocabulary)

Contents of Catholic Record Types

Baptism Records	Marriage Records	Death/Burial Records
Usually contain: • Date of baptism • Location of baptism • Name of child • Child's date of birth • Names of parents (the father's name may be missing if the child was born outside of marriage) • Names of godparents May also contain: • Child's birthplace • Parents' birthplace • Names of grandparents	Usually contain: • Date of marriage • Place of marriage • Name of groom • Name of bride • Names of parents (of both the bride and groom) • Names of witnesses and/or godparents May also contain: • Groom's birthplace • Bride's birthplace • Groom's place of residence (town/city) • Bride's place of residence (town/city)	Usually contain: • Date of recording • Name of the deceased • Date of death • Place of death • Whether the individual received their last rites May also contain: • Names of the deceased's parents • Place of burial • Whether the deceased left a will

Note: this is not an all-inclusive list. The records you encounter may include further information than what is listed here, while some may not include even some of the most basic information provided here. The contents of a record depend entirely on what the recorder (usually the parish priest) decided to include on that specific occasion.

Format of the Records in Spanish-Speaking Countries

Records kept in Spanish-speaking countries were generally kept in paragraph form, though this has been exchanged for fill-in-the-blank forms or other typed formats in more recent decades. The following baptism record from 1899 in Huacho, Chancay, Lima, Peru demonstrates the basic flow of an average baptism record:
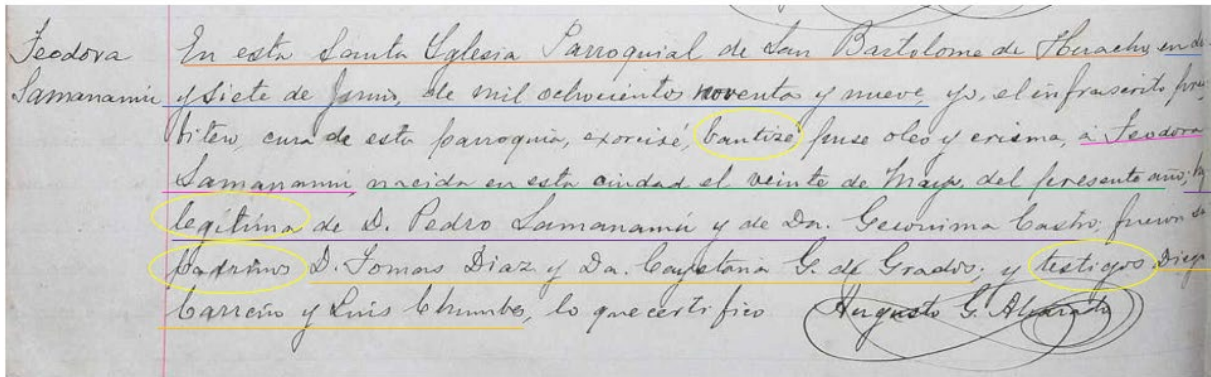
1. "En esta Santa Yglesia Parroquial de San Bartolome de Huacho…"

"In this sacred parish church of San Bartholome of Huacho"—this phrase provides the name of the church. Rather than meaning that Saint Bartholomew was from Huacho, the statement "of Huacho" indicates that this church is located in the city of Huacho.

2. "…en diez y siete de Junio de mil ochocientos noventa y nueve…"

"On the 17th of June of 1899"—here the priest provides the date of the baptism event, NOT the date of birth of the child. Be sure to follow the sentence carefully to ensure that you do not confuse the two dates with one another.

3. "…yo, el infrascrito presbitero cura de esta parroquia…"

"I, the undersigned priest, curate of this parish"—the priest states who is writing the record (himself).

4. "…exorcisé, bautizé, puse oleo y crisma, a Teodora Samanamú…"

"I exorcised, baptized, I placed oil and chrism, to Teodora Samanamú"—notice that a direct translation here is somewhat awkward due to the structure of English grammar in comparison to Spanish grammar. The first six words here describe the process of baptism in the Catholic church. "A" indicates that what follows will be the name of the child being baptized in this sentence format.

5. "…nacida en esta ciudad el veinte de mayo del presente año…"

"Born in this city the 20th of May of the current year"—now the priest provides the child's birthdate. Watch for the terms "nacida," "nacido," or nació" to pinpoint the birthdate, which almost always follows one of those words.

6. "…hija legitima de D. Pedro Samanamú y de Dn. Geronima Castro…"

"Legitimate daughter of Mr. Pedro Samanamú and of Mrs. Geronima Castro"—The parents' names are indicated with a statement of legitimacy for the child. If the child were born outside of the bonds of marriage, she would most likely be referred to as an "hija natural." For more terms referring to legitimacy, see the FamilySearch Wiki Spanish Genealogical Word List (the link is included at the end of this handout).

7. "…fueron sus padrinos D. Tomás Diaz y Da. Cayetana G. de Grados…"

"Her godparents were Mr. Tomas Diaz and Ms. Cayetana G. de Grados"—names of the godparents are listed after the term "padrinos."

8. "…y testigos Diego Carreño y Luis Chumbe…"

"And witnesses [were] Diego Carreño and Luis Chumbe"—in this case, two witnesses were also listed by name in the baptism record.

9. "…lo que certifico…Augusto G. Alvarado."

"Which I certify—[signed] Augusto G. Alvarado."—A variety of phrases could be used here, all of which generally mean "I certify," "In faith I give testimony," etc. See the Spanish Record Extraction Guide for a more complete listing (the link is included at the end of this handout).

Navigating the Vocabulary

The following are key words to watch for when reading Catholic church records in Spanish. This is not an all-inclusive list, but will offer some ideas of what words to look for when trying to locate specific pieces of information.

Baptism	Marriage	Death
• Bauticé—I baptized (followed shortly thereafter by the child's name) • Hijo/a legitimo/a—legitimate child (-o if the child is male, -a if the child is female) • Hijo/a natural—natural-born child (meaning born outside of the bonds of marriage) • De—of (when following the two previous phrases, this word will be followed by the names of the child's parents • Fueron padrinos—the godparents were (followed by their names)	• Casé—I married (followed shortly thereafter by the name of the groom) Usually the groom's name is given, as well as those of his parents, before the bride's name is listed. • Y/Con—and/with (when found after the information about the groom, this indicates that the priest is beginning to talk about the bride)	• Se falleció—he/she died • Se murió—he/she died • Fue sepultado—he/she was buried (you may also encounter the phrase "se sepultó," which means the same thing; either of these phrases should be followed by the date and/or place of burial)

Useful Links and Reference Books

- FamilySearch Wiki Spanish Genealogical Word List: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Spanish_Genealogical_Word_List
  - This page provides a genealogy-focused listing of Spanish language terms that you may encounter as you work your way through various records.
- *Finding Your Hispanic Roots* by George R. Ryskamp (1997)
  - Chapter 9 focuses on Catholic church records. Chapter 10 is also a great resource for learning more about other types of marriage documentation that you may encounter in your research.
- Google Translate: https://translate.google.com
  - Don't underestimate the power of the "Did you mean…" feature of Google Translate! If you are unsure of a spelling in the document you are studying, this feature may help you to determine the actual spelling of a word based on a misspelling you put into the website.)
- Script Tutorial: Making Sense of Old Handwriting by BYU: https://script.byu.edu
  - This tool is particularly helpful when deciphering handwriting and determining names used in the records.
- Spanish Records Extraction Manual: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Spanish_Records_Extraction_Manual
  - Want to practice making sense of the antiquated handwriting styles you will encounter in your research? Use this guide to practice with real, accurate examples.