

The Historical Value of Parish Histories

“A key to understanding the history of American Catholicism is the parish.” So wrote historian Jay Dolan nearly thirty years ago in the introduction to the path-breaking two-volume study *The American Catholic Parish*, which traced the development of Catholic parish life in the United States across time and geographic region. As he explained, a focus on the parish allows those interested in American Catholicism to “sense the pulse of the people and understand more accurately the texture and quality of their lives. . . . It was the hinge on which their religious world turned.” Based on research conducted by the University of Notre Dame’s Study of Catholic Parish Life, the essays in the two volumes burst with detail about how parishes were organized and financed, their social composition and relations with the wider community, and the diverse forms of religious expression they nurtured.¹

In contrast to previous studies of parish life based on sociological research or theological reflection, much of the information that informed the Notre Dame study was a careful reading of nearly 1,000 parish histories collected from across the country. Those seemingly prosaic sources yielded great insights into how Catholics lived and practiced their faith at the local level. Recognizing the enduring value of those histories, they were incorporated at the completion of the study into the university’s archives and library holdings in Catholic Americana. They remain an important resource not only for those interested in American Catholic history and culture but also for those pursuing research in social history, urban studies, immigration and ethnicity, and a variety of other fields.²

Those who have employed parish histories in their research recognize the value of systematic efforts to collect and preserve these works. There is particular need to replicate the efforts of the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life, whose collection is unique in size and scope but far from complete. There is need for continued, sustained efforts to collect parish histories — as many diocesan archives and local historical societies already do — and develop strategies to make them more readily available to researchers. Digital technology, in particular, offers the potential to increase access to parish histories and to link bodies of material from repositories across the country.

It is heartening that the Catholic Research Resources Alliance (CRRA) has identified the digitization of parish histories as one of its goals. In support of that effort, this essay provides a brief background on parish histories as a genre and offers some reflections on the ways that collections of parish histories can be employed by scholars. A move towards digitization will hopefully bring greater visibility to these important resources so that they can be better employed by students, specialists, and all those who have an interest in the history of local religious communities.

Parish Histories as a Genre

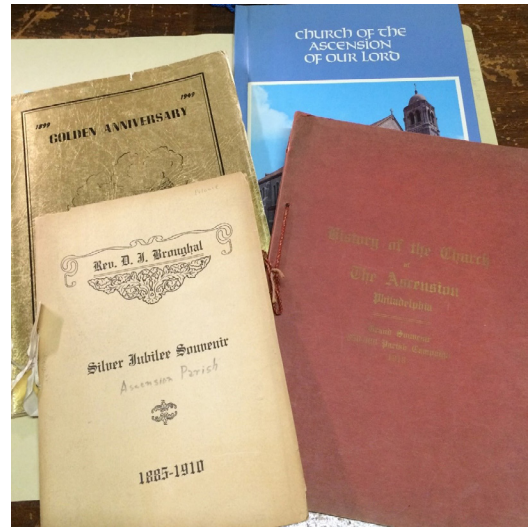
Parish histories, by their nature, tend to be institutional accounts. They generally combine a history of the parish with a description of the state of parish life at the time of publication. Many fall into a stock narrative: Catholics living in a particular area have need for a church; a priest is appointed to oversee the effort (often getting credit for “building the church,” as though he did it singlehandedly); sisters soon arrive to staff a school; and the parish grows and prospers. They are rightly intended to be celebratory accounts and tend to highlight important milestones in the life of the parish, such as the construction of new buildings and the appointment of pastors. They often also provide information about parish organizations and activities, both past and present. More recent ones tend to be richly illustrated, though earlier ones will typically contain at least a handful of photographs, especially of the parish’s buildings and clergy. Many will also contain lists of donors or a collection of advertisements from patrons and benefactors.

¹ Jay P. Dolan, ed., *The American Catholic Parish: A History from 1850 to the Present*, 2 vol. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), I: 2-3.

² See “A List of Roman Catholic Parishes Consulted in the Parish History Research Project, 1981-82” (Notre Dame, IN: Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, 1983).

Yet, despite these commonalities, there is a greater degree of diversity within the genre than is often assumed. Although the great majority of parish histories are published to mark a particular anniversary, they are not limited to those occasions. Parish histories were also produced for promotional purposes, highlighting parish development and outlining planned projects in order to solicit support for them. Others were published to mark the successful completion of a building campaign or similar achievement. Parishes have also composed histories for inclusion within parish directories or visitor guides, though these materials can be much more ephemeral than the anniversary histories from which they are often derived. They therefore pose a challenge for preservation, as do those histories now being produced digitally on parish websites.

As might be expected with such works, the quality of parish histories can vary widely. Some parishes have secured the services of trained historians or professional writers to produce their history, especially for major anniversary volumes. More often, however, parish histories are a volunteer effort and rely on the time and energy of a dedicated individual or small committee. The quality of the scholarship, therefore, depends on the skill of the author and the richness of available parish records and archival holdings. Some committees have an abundance of material, while many deal with scarcity. Consequently, some histories are extensively documented and provide a comprehensive written narrative that chronicles the development of the parish, while others are more pictorial and can be thought of as the parish equivalent of a high-school yearbook. The production quality of parish histories also varies, depending on the financial resources the parish was able to invest in the project, the talent of the designer, and the skill of the printer employed.



Parish histories of the Church of the Ascension, Philadelphia. (Image courtesy of the Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center.)

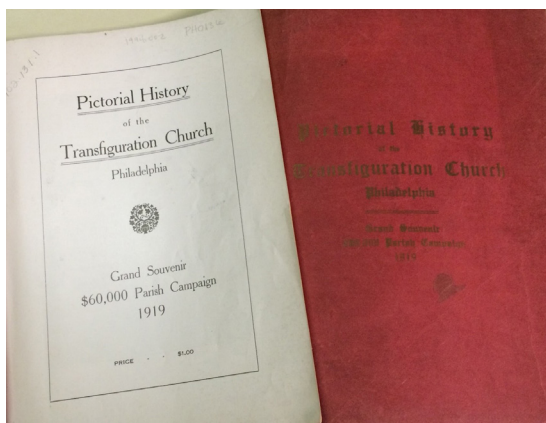
Research Potential

Parish histories will always be an indispensable resource for those interested in learning about the history of a particular parish community, but they also have value to broader audiences. As Dolan argued, a focus on parishes and their histories “enables the historian to examine a variety of issues that touched the lives of the people.”³ In chronicling the history of a particular faith community, they provide a window into the spiritual and social world of those living in a particular time and place. They help us understand the demographic profile of particular communities, trace neighborhood development, and recognize the social concerns of the times. They also give us a sense of the social networks present within a community and how they intersected. The sponsorship advertisements that appear within many parish histories, for instance, can help scholars gain a sense of the local business community and the economic ties that existed in the neighborhood. Looking at parish organization and development, likewise, can assist us in gaining an understanding of church-state relations at the local level and the voluntary nature of American religious life, including its contributions to education and social welfare.

For scholars of American Catholicism, parish histories can aid in the support of multiple avenues of research. They not only explain how individual parishes came to be and how they developed but also how they functioned. One gains a sense of the pastoral leadership as well as the changing role of the laity in parish affairs. Parish histories also reveal the rhythms of parish life and the lived experience of Catholicism in a given locale. They provide a glimpse of the spiritual practices that parishioners found meaningful and capture the modes of worship particular to that community. The lists of parish societies and their membership reveal the spiritual and social interests of individuals within the parish, while the descriptions of feast days, festivals, and other events show the unique character of a parish. It can also be particularly enlightening to see how individual parishes have told their story over time. Comparing the various histories a parish has produced provides a sense of the changing social profile of the parish and the spiritual priorities of its members at those various points in time.

³ Dolan, *The American Catholic Parish*, vol. I: 3.

While each parish history has value in its own right, there can be even greater benefits from having access to collections of parish histories that allows for more comprehensive analysis or comparative study. While it is often assumed that parishes are fundamentally alike, examining a range of parish histories helps us grasp the diversity of the American Catholic experience. Not only do ethnic variations come to the fore, so, too, do geographic ones, such as the different rhythms of urban and rural parish life. Looking at a set of parish histories from a particular time can also yield some unexpected surprises, as I discovered in my own research into parish growth in the early twentieth century using the parish-history collection at the Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, one of the partner institutions of CRRA. In looking at histories written in the 1910s and 1920s, I noticed that a number of them were published to mark the successful completion of a fundraising campaign. Investigating further, I realized that most of them had been produced not by the parish but by the firm hired to manage the campaign. Though it had not been my intent, reading through those campaign histories caused me to stumble upon the untold history of one of the first professional fundraisers to work among Catholic parishes.⁴



Parish history of Transfiguration Church, Philadelphia, published on the occasion of the successful completion of their fundraising campaign in 1919. (Image courtesy of the Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center.)

The parish history collection at the Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center serves as a good example of how parish histories can be organized, maintained, and made accessible. Separate and distinct from official parish files and sacramental records, the collection contains published parish histories and other ephemera relating to the various parishes in the archdiocese.⁵ Developing organically as the archives acquired these materials, the collection is divided into two main series: 1) parishes located in the city of Philadelphia and 2) parishes located in the four surrounding suburban counties, organized alphabetically by town name. Older parishes tend to have more extensive files than younger ones, but the breadth of the holdings can also depend on how active a parish was in promoting its history and its care in depositing materials with the archives.

Unlike some official parish files that are closed to researchers or require special permission to access, the parish history collection is open to researchers without restriction. As a result it serves as the starting point for anyone doing research on a particular parish in the

archdiocese. Taken together — and when used in conjunction with parish calendars, photograph collections, newspaper coverage, and other archival holdings — these materials offer a good glimpse into patterns of parish development and the character of local Catholic life.

Parish histories do, however, have some limitations. As one might suspect, they can be rather parochial in scope: They often fail to connect the history of the local parish to wider developments in the Catholic Church or society at large. They also tend to include only those events that put the parish in a favorable light, excluding controversies or tensions that may have arisen in the past. If parishioners had troubles with parish leadership, for instance, or questioned the cost of a particular building project, one would be hard-pressed to find any evidence of those conflicts in a typical parish history. Likewise, histories may also be less than forthright about the current state of the parish, especially if the parish is struggling with declining membership or waning vitality. Accounts are meant to present the history of the parish as its parishioners wish it to be remembered.

Yet no matter their shortcomings, parish histories remain valuable to researchers and should be actively collected by church archives and other repositories. Indeed, the need to preserve these parish histories has only grown in recent decades as parishes continue to close or face restructuring in response to financial pressures and demographic shifts. Too

⁴ Thomas F. Rzeznik, “The Parochial Enterprise: Financing Institutional Growth in the Brick-and-Mortar Era,” *American Catholic Studies* (Fall 2010): 1-24.

⁵ Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center Parish Histories and Calendars, <http://www.pahrc.net/collections/parish-histories/>.

often parish histories are some of the only documentary sources that remain after a parish has ceased to exist, other than sacramental records and other items that canon law requires be preserved. Even if other materials have been deposited in the diocesan archives or other repository, parish histories remain some of the most widely consulted and most easily accessible sources for those interested in the history of a particular parish and its people. They have many stories yet to tell.