



Sacred *and* secular: What data should I share with the Church?

PHOTO FROM MICHAEL RICHARDS

DEAR FATHER KERPER: I recently joined a new parish. The secretary gave me a packet of materials, including a data form. I was surprised by the information they requested: race, marital status, date of birth, date of baptism and so on. Also, my adult daughter, who claims to be an atheist, wants her baptism “de-registered.” This seems to make sense. After all, I own my personal data. Why should the Church control it?



Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Nashua.

Your concerns about data collection by the Church are well-founded. The Church, which operates within the broader society, often tends to follow the lead of technology and copy its techniques. These include digging deeply into personal data and treating people as targets for advertising and persuasion. This happens even within the realm of independent Catholic media and, as you’ve already experienced, within parish life. We must ask: What data does the Church really need? Have we gone too far in collecting tons of data simply because we have the capacity? How can we protect our personal information?

To answer these questions, we must distinguish between “sacred data” and “secular data.” The first type consists of data linked to the celebration of the sacraments, especially baptism, and to the governance of the Church. The second type includes everything else, such as addresses, phone numbers, racial categories, age, contributions and so forth.

“Sacred data” has enormous importance because it preserves the memory of life-and-death events. In the book of Revelation, for example, we see foreshadowings of “sacred data,” specifically in references to the “book of life.” These verses emphasize the close connection between written names and salvation itself. We see this in the baptismal ritual which requires the priest or deacon to receive the child’s name in a formal and public manner. After the service, the celebrant must then inscribe the child’s name into the official baptismal register, thereby creating a permanent record of a public and historical event.

These ritual acts, then, have sacred significance, powerfully reinforcing our belief in the “sacramental character” of baptism. This term simply means that the bond between Christ and every baptized person — whether Catholic or not — endures forever. Therefore the Church, which sees baptism as the bedrock of the sacraments, earnestly strives to preserve all its essential details such as date, place and parental names. This “sacred data” belongs primarily to the Church, not to the baptized person.

This emphasis on permanence affirms the impossibility of ever “de-registering” someone’s baptism. This issue has recently arisen in Belgium. According to the Belgian bishops, last year more than 5,200 Catholics asked to be expunged from baptismal registers, a four-fold increase in just two years. The bishops of Belgium just note such requests but don’t remove the names. This reminds us that the Church, which alone produces sacramental acts, “owns” the “sacred data,” not only of baptism, but of confirmation and holy order as well.

Now let’s take a look at the Code of Canon Law. I recently flipped through the code and discovered over 70 canons

(individual laws) related to gathering, securing, managing and interpreting data. We can divide these laws into three broad categories.

First, we find laws strictly mandating the prompt and accurate recording of baptisms, confirmations and ordinations. Catholics need to be certain that their priests are really ordained, and priests need to know who's baptized and who's not.

Within the second batch, we find laws that regulate the celebration of matrimony, especially dispensations, permissions and challenges to the validity of marriages. These laws and documents usually come into play when someone challenges the validity of a particular marriage. Most preserved documents simply contain public information such as birthdates, addresses, parent names and so on. They include a sworn statement by both spouses as to their knowledge and acceptance of the Catholic understanding of marriage, their intention to have children and their freedom from coercion.

The third group has laws that specify how to handle, retain and consult confidential documents held by diocesan "secret archives." Many people, of course, "smell a rat" here. After all, we live in a time of radical transparency that expects — and demands — the disclosure of everything. Still, we must always remember the moral obligation to protect privacy and reputations while also working prudently to promote justice.

Considering the size and diversity of the Catholic Church, we should not be surprised by variations in how dioceses handle data. Some dioceses even have practices peculiar to themselves. Not long ago, a young woman from Africa presented me with a card that needed to be signed to prove that she had fulfilled her Easter duty. I had never seen such a card; she said her diocese requires it.

Now let's move from "sacred data" to "secular data." The Church, which projects Christ into the world, also has a human dimension. As such, the Church needs all sorts of data: wage rates, health insurance, taxes and so forth. The Church also collects demographic data. This helps with planning. Take, for example, schools and nursing homes: the Church needs to know how many kids will be in first grade in 2030 and how many people will be over 90. This "secular data" differs from "sacred data" in that it has nothing to do with the sacraments or church governance.

In short, Catholics are not obligated to pass on personal information to the Church except "sacred data." I cannot, for example, baptize an unnamed baby presented to me by anonymous parents. And I cannot marry people who have no baptismal certificates. However, I cannot demand "secular data" like a vaccination certificate for a baby or proof of citizenship for someone who desires confirmation. Though the "sacred" and "secular" realms overlap at times, they remain separate and distinct. If you feel that questions from your parish — or any other Catholic entity — seem irrelevant or intrusive, think before you answer. You have the right to leave the box unchecked and the space blank. ■



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