



Church Plate Regulations and Loan Requirements

1. Responsibility at Local Level

This simple guide is a response to confusion and uncertainty about the regulations governing the responsibility for protecting and securing Church Plate at local level.

Church Plate - simply defined as the vessels used during Holy Communion - as well as crosses, candlesticks, collecting plates and other objects used in active worship - forms an integral part of the fabric of individual parishes, cathedrals and chapels. In these contexts, pieces have been in liturgical use where they form unique and distinctive components of the Church of Ireland's spiritual and cultural heritage.

Much church plate has been acquired in the form of gifts, and many of those gifts have been memorials, capturing the memory of generations before. The Church thus has a moral responsibility to protect that memory. Church plate cannot be taken out of its local worship context without permission and the legal position of the Representative Church Body (RCB) as trustee of all church plate is not always realised.

The Church's Constitution governs that Church plate which remains in its local custody must be stored in fireproof safe along with the parish registers and other materials of historical uniqueness (chapter 3.7). The Constitution further governs the regular and accurate returns or statements of the church plate in the custody of a parish must be made to the RCB (chapter 3.39-23).

<https://www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Information/Constitution/constitution.pdf>

For practical use, the useful tips on the care and maintenance of church plate is available on this link:

<https://www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/Resources/ParishResources/LandBuildings/Tips-on-the-care-and-maintenance-of-church-plate.pdf>

2. The Inventory of Church Plate

The RCB Library maintains records of the extensive Church's Plate Collection. This includes the Church's Inventory of Church Plate, a database of data accumulated and updated from historical records – the old “pink sheet” returns or earlier returns; a later card index – to which regular changes are made as facts change on the ground, usually as notified by parish and diocesan authorities.. The Inventory accounts for the location of each piece; its type (chalice, flagon, patten, alms dish, collection plate; other; the metal (silver, gold, brass, EPA); its dimensions and all other details such as its date, inscription data, the presenter, hallmark evidence.

It is estimated that 90% of the church plate in local custody has been accounted for on the electronic database and thus there is an existing record of what should be in local custody. However, there has been increasing/worrying increase of instances where silver has turned up where it is not supposed to be – arising from the unauthorised movement of items to other churches, to bank vaults and even amongst the personal effects of deceased clergy without the knowledge or consent of the RCB.

Simply put, all movements of plate must be notified to the RCB so that the inventory can be updated.

Parishes and cathedrals are encouraged to request a copy of the inventory relative to their collections so that they can return an updated statement, in accordance with the legal requirements of the Constitution.

Indeed a systematic review of the plate in local custody will again be undertaken by the RCB, and in advance of that Church-wide process, it is advisable for parishes to request the data relating to their plate so that they can check this and then make their updated return to keep the record up to date. Specific inventories can be requested by contacting the Library RCB.Library@rcbcoi.org

3. Silver of Significant Historical Value

There is a mistaken impression, based on excessive insurance valuations about the value of church plate. The intrinsic value of church plate is actually quite low because it is so unique and cannot easily be sold on. As stated above, it would be offensive to the memory of the donors and negate the Church's responsibility of trust to consider selling or permitting it to be used in any secular context.

There are however some exceptional pieces of Irish church plate dating from before the early 18th-century and other rare pieces of national and indeed international significance. Parochial attachment to the beauty and longevity of these items in their local contexts cannot be underestimated nor the role of clergy and parishioners keeping them safe through the generations. However, local parishes and cathedrals may not always be aware of their uniqueness, and so it is strongly advised that special care is taken when handling such pieces especially if they remain in regular use for worship, and that they are also appropriately insured. If their security and maintenance cannot be guaranteed in local custody, they must be transferred to the permanent safe-keeping of the RCB.

The Library has become a place of deposit for plate that is no longer required for local worship (often where churches have closed) and provides the secure central repository for the Church at large. From this residue of unused plate, there is an existing (straightforward) procedure to arrange for the loaning replacement pieces – either to replace items that have become unfit for liturgical use, or those of such historical significance, it is unwise to have them in local use.

4. Display and Exhibition

Displays of church silver require appropriate security, and in most instances local conditions for such exhibitions do not exist. However, the RCB will continue to be proactive in working with diocesan cathedrals and national museum institutions in the creation of “treasuries” for the permanent exhibition of historical pieces which are subject to formal legally-binding loan agreements.

Conclusion

It is hoped these simple guidelines will ensure that any changes in the local status of Church plate will going forward be appropriately reported and approved by the RCB.

**RCB Library & Property Dept.
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