

Sponsor Information

What is an RCIA Sponsor?

Have you ever had to go some place for the first time, didn't know exactly where it was, had no idea how to get there, and didn't know any of the people who would be there when you did find it? Don't you seek out someone who does know where the place is, knows exactly how to get there and knows at least some of the people who will be there? Isn't that the person you want to go with you to this new place to join this new group of people?

Part of what it means to be an RCIA sponsor is to show the way and to go along. In a way it is as simple as that. In another way, however, there is a more deep and profound relationship between sponsor and catechumen or sponsor and candidate. The sponsor shares his or her own faith story, shares his own faith struggles. The sponsor admits to not having all the answers, but is willing to share in the quest. The sponsor is willing to share prayer with the candidate, to make a commitment to spending time with the catechumen, to introduce the candidate to families and individuals in the parish community.

The RCIA itself states that "the people of God, as represented by the local Church, should understand and show by their concern that the initiation of adults is the responsibility of all the baptized." (#9) The sponsor, then, is both a representative of the community, as well as a personal companion. The sponsor also represents the candidate to the community, witnessing to the readiness of the candidate to become a member of the Order of Catechumens. Thus the sponsor is the critical link between the catechumen and the faithful community who is the primary minister of initiation.

Sponsors accompany candidates to the Rite of Acceptance, stand with them as they are presented to the community for the first time, promise to "help these candidates find and follow Christ" (#53). Sponsors participate in the signings that are part of the rite and, with the community they represent, pray the intercessions for the catechumens.

Since sponsors fill such a key role at the Rite of Acceptance it is important that the relationship begin before the rite is celebrated, during the period of the pre-catechumenate or inquiry. This relationship continues throughout the period of catechumante. The godparent accompanies the catechumen to the Rite of Election. Godparent and sponsor can be the same person, but it is important to remember that the relationship of godparent continues into the future following initiation. The latter relationship is a spiritual one, a commitment of lifelong friendship in the Lord. All people seeking full initiation need to have a sponsor and a godparent, candidates seeking full communion with the church need sponsor, but not a godparent, since that role was filled at their baptism.

The sponsor needs to be a fully initiated member of the church and an active member of the parish community. The sponsor will assist in the discernment process for the candidate. Sometimes the sponsor is a friend of the candidate; often it is a volunteer from the parish.

Because of the unique nature of the sponsor relationship ongoing communication is essential, therefore sponsors and catechumens need to meet regularly. In addition to meeting individually with the catechumen the sponsor needs to attend the weekly catechetical sessions.

The role of the sponsor is vital in the conversion journey of the catechumen. From this description and other references through the rite, the various roles of the sponsor can be discerned. The sponsor is called to be:

- 1) A **Friend** an companion for the catechumen throughout the process of initiation and beyond.
- 2) A **Source of Information** about Catholic practices and the "nitty-gritty" of daily Christian living.
- 3) A **Guide** to parish organizations and to meeting other members of the Christian community.
- 4) A **Participant in the Liturgical Ceremonies** of the catechumenate, including the sacraments of initiation. (Note: Though provision is made in #42 of the Rite for the godparent to be a different person than the initial sponsor, it will generally be best for the catechumen to have the same person assist him/her throughout the rite. If there is a distinction, then the official godparent for the sacraments is expected to fill all various roles of the sponsor at least from the time of election onward.)
- 5) A **Consultant** to the priest and catechist on the process of the catechumenate and a participant in discerning the readiness of the catechumen for the different stages of initiation.

The way these roles are carried out will vary, of course, depending on the personalities involved and the particular situation.

Sponsors: A Historical View

Sponsoring in initiation has two aspects: personal sponsoring and communal sponsoring. Both are necessary and interact with each other on a regular basis. In fact, personal sponsorship is rooted in the community's role as primary sponsor for the candidate.

For a fuller picture of the ministry of sponsor, let's look at the role of sponsor in the early church. Usually, someone was drawn to the Christian way of life by the example and life-style of Christians. Curious, one would approach Christians seeking whatever they had that caused their lives to be different. After careful scrutiny of the motives of the inquirer, the Christian brought the inquirer to the assembly of Christians. The inquirer was welcomed by the church and enrolled in a long process of preparation for full initiation into the community. The Christian who brought the inquirer to the community – or someone else delegated from the community – was charged with the responsibility of serving as a companion and friend to the inquirer throughout the preparation. Together they conversed about the Lord Jesus, his way of life, the community of believers, the need to change one's life, prayer, some of the practices of the community, and the like. Over the course of years, the catechumen was gradually introduced into the Christian life-style by the community and, in particular, the sponsor. The sponsor witnessed to the community regarding the conversion of the catechumen, and accompanied the catechumen during ritual celebrations. When the catechumen became a member of the faithful at the celebration of the sacraments, the sponsor was present. And together, the neophyte and sponsor grew in their friendship and relationship as members of the order of the faithful.

Today, the ministry of the sponsor is as essential as in the early community. Such ministry is rooted in the vision of ministry provided in the ritual text that is both fresh yet ancient. This vision of ministry is a retrieval of the fundamental beliefs that: (a) All are called by baptism to mission and service for the reign of God; (b) Charisms are given by God to all; (c) The proper ordering of the church comes when all the charisms are used for the building up of the body of Christ; (d) The responsibility of initiation, then, rests with all the baptized; (e) Within this communal responsibility and sponsorship, there is a differentiation of ministries: bishop, presbyter, sponsor, catechist, liturgist, and the like. Sponsorship comes from that vision of church and ministry. It is not just the activity of someone to "get more numbers". It is a much more radical vision.

Qualities of a Sponsor

Most people hesitate about assuming the responsibility of sponsor because they feel intimidated or unworthy. While there are certain qualities for sponsoring, they really do not differ from those qualities the community expects of all the fully initiated. The sponsor, as a member of the order of faithful, serves as companion, guide, and learner in the Christian way of life. Sponsors are not academic theologians, nor extraordinary mystics or saints. In fact, the primary qualification is participation in the ordinary life of the order of the faithful. And it is precisely as members of the order of the faithful that we discover ourselves as theologians, mystics and saints.

Sponsors freely enter into serious relationships-with themselves, the church, and the catechumens. Sponsoring is not maintenance-oriented. Rather, sponsors are willing to invest themselves with and for the other. At the same time, sponsors recognize that much of what happens is the work of grace.

Sponsors desire to share their faith and belief with the catechumens. They are willing to risk and express what is sacred in their lives and the life of the community, knowing that faith is fostered and nurtured not by facts but by the lived stories and beliefs of the community. Sponsors also recognize there are things about the community's faith they are not completely familiar with, and are willing to say that. They are also willing, when necessary, too do the work that needs to be done to find out some particular fact or clarify an issue. And they are willing to help the catechumen learn how to find these answers rather than merely providing answers.

Sponsors are willing to be available. They have a fundamental stance of openness to receive the gifts of God that are given through the encounter with another, in this situation, the catechumen. Such receptivity can only happen when it is balanced by availability of time, of hospitality, of care.

These same qualities are exhibited in maturing communities of the order of the faithful: relational, interrelated rather than dependant, sharing of faith and belief, sincere inquiry, appropriate study, availability, and generosity. The ministry of sponsor, in many ways, serves as a focus for life in the order of the faithful. Initiation is about mentoring people into the lifestyle of the Christian disciple. It is appropriate, therefore, that the sponsors come from the ordinary life of the disciple.

The Selection of Sponsors

The choice of a sponsor for a catechumen is an important one, for a good sponsor is crucial in deriving full benefit from the initiation process. Sponsors should be chosen on the basis of their **ability** and **willingness** to really assist the catechumen in his/her growth in faith, carrying out the different roles of the sponsor's ministry.

There is obviously a value in having a sponsor who has known the candidate prior to the catechumenate and who has, perhaps, been the one to introduce the candidate to the Catholic Church.

It is also valuable for the sponsor and the catechumen to be matched according to age, occupation, marital status, etc. so that they can share the very practical aspects of the Christian way of life.

The sponsor should be reasonably informed and up to date on current Church teachings and trends and should be active in the local parish community in a variety of ways.

The sponsor should be an open and flexible person, sensitive to the needs and feelings of others and able to listen effectively to another's views and concerns.

The sponsor must be strong in his/her own faith and should be able to speak openly of his/her own relationship to the Lord.

Obviously no person is going to meet all of these criteria fully. Our experience suggests that willingness, depth of faith, and parish involvement are more important than a prior relationship or age pairing. But each case should be evaluated in how well this person can fulfill the total ministry of sponsor.

Choosing a sponsor is a joint decision of both the candidate and the parish leaders. It should be made after the qualities needed are clear. Since the role of the sponsor is a parish ministry in the catechumenate and are crucial in the church's mission of sharing our faith. The parish leaders have a responsibility to make sure that whoever is chosen as sponsor, he/she will properly fulfill this ministry. It may well happen that a number of parishioners would take on this ministry as an on-going responsibility for successive groups of catechumens. It is helpful to have prospective sponsors so that they and the candidates are known to one another before a choice of sponsor is finally determined.

The rite makes provision (#42) for a godparent distinct from the initial sponsor. But such a person is expected to fill the total sponsor's ministry at least from the time of election (1st Sunday of Lent) and thus should also be chosen according to the criteria described above. In most cases, the catechumen is best served by having one sponsor throughout. Good pastoral judgement is essential.

(Provide Catholic Update: Godparents & Sponsors)