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What is a Godparent? What is a Sponsor?

“Sponsors are persons who have known and assisted the candidates and stand as witnesses to the candidates’ moral character, faith, and intention” (RCIA 10).

“Godparents are persons chosen by the candidates on the basis of example, good qualities, and friendship . . . It is the responsibility of godparents to show the candidates how to practice the Gospel in personal and social life, to sustain the candidates in moments of hesitancy and anxiety, to bear witness, and to guide the candidates’ progress in the baptismal life” (RCIA GENERAL INTRODUCTION, 11).

IT IS THE PRACTICE OF MANY PARISHES to choose a sponsor from the parish who will be able to introduce an inquirer to parish life. If you are a sponsor chosen by the pastor or RCIA leader to support and “journey with” an inquirer, you might be called a “parish sponsor,” the term used for this role in the remainder of this *Handbook*. You are very important to the RCIA process, for you will probably get to know your inquirer better than anyone else on the RCIA team. Even after the person you are serving receives the sacraments of initiation, you will be one of the people he/she knows best in the parish. Your commitment is not to become “best friends,” but to be *available*. Along the way, you will help to introduce your inquirer to parish practices, and will discuss how to live the faith he/she is learning.

Following the Rites of Acceptance and Welcoming, each catechumen and candidate is to choose a godparent, perhaps a friend or family member who reflects the qualities the catechumen/candidate wishes to have as a Catholic. Parish sponsors might also be chosen to continue as the catechumen’s/candidate’s godparent. Your RCIA leader will explain this further. For the purposes of this *Handbook*, the usual English-language understanding of “godparent” as someone who stands up for a person

⁵ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part III, Chapter 10.

at Baptism is retained for (unbaptized) catechumens, while the term “personally-chosen sponsor” or simply “sponsor” is used for the godparents of (baptized) candidates.

If you as a parish sponsor are not chosen to be a godparent or personally-chosen sponsor, this does not reflect negatively on your role or the care you have offered to that individual, but rather reflects his/her desire for a godparent or sponsor that has personal ties in other ways that ensure long-term involvement in his/her life.

In whatever capacity you serve as a godparent or sponsor, you have a privileged role. You are asked to enter into a relationship with a particular person. This will involve devoting a portion of your prayer, time, and energy to help him or her serve as a companion, and by your witness to invite this person to a life in Christ. With your loving support, you can assist this person in becoming a “new person” in Christ. You will be called upon one or more times to give testimony to this person’s progress in faith and readiness for reception of the sacraments of initiation. As a representative of the parish community, you serve as a bridge and connection that warmly welcomes and introduces *this* person into *this* community of believers.



If you love God, speak about him as often
as possible. . . . To love our neighbors
does not mean merely to wish them well,
but also to do them all the good
that is in our power to do."

~ St. Francis de Sales

What are My Responsibilities?

THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS are based on guidelines and requirements taken directly from the RCIA ritual book. You will see that the requirements are very general. Many of the responsibilities listed below are practical suggestions compiled from the experience of godparents and sponsors who have successfully fulfilled this role in the RCIA process. If you have any questions, remember that your pastor or RCIA leader will define your duties according to the process as it is carried out in your parish.

DURING THE PRECATECHUMENATE PERIOD

"The candidates are to receive help and attention so that with a purified and clear intention they may cooperate with God's grace" (RCIA 38).

Suggestions:

- ✱ Pray *every day* for the person you are serving.
- ✱ Ask God *every day* for his help and for wisdom in serving this inquirer to the best of your ability.
- ✱ Ask a family member or friend to faithfully pray specifically for *your* work as a sponsor.
- ✱ Respect the privacy and confidentiality of all the inquirers.
- ✱ Get to know your inquirer.
- ✱ Exchange telephone numbers and email addresses.
- ✱ Respect and encourage your inquirer's freedom.
- ✱ If your inquirer misses an RCIA session, call afterwards to show concern.
- ✱ Listen to the faith journey of your inquirer, in as much detail and as often as he/she wishes to share.
- ✱ Share your interior life and struggles so that the person you are serving can see the action of God in your life.
- ✱ Encourage your inquirer in his/her desire to learn and live the Catholic way of life.
- ✱ Respect the parish clergy, RCIA leader, catechists, and team members, and trust that the RCIA process will make it possible for your inquirer to hear and respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

⁶ *Maxims of St. Francis de Sales*, as cited in *Every Day with Saint Francis de Sales*.

- ✱ Begin attending the weekly catechetical sessions as soon as you are appointed. The advantages of doing this are:
 - ⊗ You have a natural starting point for conversations with your inquirer during the time you are getting acquainted.
 - ⊗ You know what your inquirer is being taught and what he/she is experiencing.
 - ⊗ In small-group sessions, you gain an additional opportunity to listen to and interact with your inquirer.
 - ⊗ You can help reinforce the teaching in one-on-one encounters with your inquirer.
 - ⊗ You gain further formation in your own faith and can deepen your own conversion to Christ.
 - ⊗ You are ready to be consulted about your inquirer's progress as the first gateway Rites approach.

AT THE RITES OF ACCEPTANCE AND WELCOMING

"Before the rite is celebrated ... sufficient and necessary time ... should be set aside to evaluate and, if necessary, purify the candidates' motives and dispositions. With the help of the sponsors, catechists, and deacons, pastors have the responsibility for judging the outward indications of such dispositions" (RCIA 43).

Suggestions:

- ✱ Pray for the inquirers who are going through these first Rites.
- ✱ Be available for any rehearsal for the Rites.
- ✱ Reflect on what liturgy means to you, so that you might help your inquirer understand the place of liturgy in the life of the Church.

Note that the effect of the Rite of Acceptance is to create a formal relationship between unbaptized inquirers and the Church. Inquirers become:

- ✱ Members of the household of Christ.
- ✱ Entitled to catechetical instruction, to take part in celebrations of the Word of God (Liturgies of the Word), and to receive blessings, minor exorcisms, and anointings while they prepare for the sacraments of initiation.
- ✱ If marrying another catechumen, entitled to marry according to the Rites of the Catholic Church.
- ✱ Entitled, if death occurs during the catechumenate, to a Catholic burial.

Baptized inquirers are already part of the household of Christ through their Baptism. The Rite of Welcoming accomplishes the following for these inquirers:

- ✠ They are strengthened in their desire to come into full communion with the Church.
- ✠ They are entitled to the Church's special care and support while they prepare for the sacraments of Confirmation and the Eucharist.

During the Rite of Acceptance, as a sponsor of an unbaptized inquirer you are asked whether you are "ready to help [your inquirer] find and follow Christ." During the Rite of Welcoming, as a sponsor of a baptized inquirer you are asked whether you are ready to help your inquirer to complete his/her Christian initiation or to prepare for reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church.

DURING THE CATECHUMENATE PERIOD

"As they become familiar with the Christian way of life and are helped by the example and support of sponsors, godparents, and the entire Christian community, the catechumens [and candidates] learn to turn more readily to God in prayer, to bear witness to the faith, in all things to keep their hopes set on Christ, to follow supernatural inspiration in their deeds, and to practice love of neighbor, even at the cost of self-renunciation" (RCIA 75.2).
"Their godparents [that is, personally-chosen sponsors] . . . have the same responsibilities as the godparents have toward catechumens" (RCIA 404).

Suggestions:

- ✠ Pray every day for the person you are serving.
- ✠ Ask God every day for his help and for wisdom in serving your catechumen/candidate to the best of your ability.
- ✠ If you have not already done so, ask a family member or friend to faithfully pray specifically for your work as a godparent or sponsor.
- ✠ Be present at weekly catechetical sessions.
- ✠ Be willing to say "I don't know" and to say "let's ask."

Assist your catechumen/candidate in the Christian initiation process by:

- Bearing witness to the faith.
- Offering the Christian witness of your own conversion of heart to Christ.
- Nurturing him/her in the ongoing process of conversion.
- Sustaining him/her in moments of hesitancy and anxiety.
- Providing support, guidance, and comfort as his/her situation warrants.
- Remaining open to God's will when things go differently than you hope.

You might also:

- ✦ Be present at Sunday Mass with your catechumen/candidate.
- ✦ Show your catechumen/candidate around the parish church and grounds, and informally introduce him/her to other parishioners and parish staff.
- ✦ Be asked by your RCIA leader to be present at other RCIA activities such as retreats and service activities.
- ✦ Call to see how the week is going.
- ✦ Talk about something heard at a catechetical session, in a homily, or in the news.
- ✦ Discuss a situation that has come up raising difficulties in putting the Christian life into practice in the family or workplace.
- ✦ Discuss struggles with temptation or sin that need prayer and support.
- ✦ Discuss opposition from family or friends to your catechumen's/candidate's decision to enter the Church.
- ✦ Share a wonderful experience in responding to a situation from a Gospel perspective.
- ✦ Share new insights about the journey of faith.
- ✦ Arrange to get together.
- ✦ Get to know your catechumen's/candidate's family.
- ✦ If possible and appropriate, offer to baby-sit so that your catechumen/candidate can have a special night out with his/her spouse.
- ✦ Share good Catholic resources (books, magazines, movies, music), or go to a Catholic bookstore together to browse.
- ✦ Gently challenge ideas that conflict with a Christian understanding of God.
- ✦ Invite your catechumen/candidate to attend Mass or other parish activities or ministries with you.
- ✦ Send a Christmas card or give a small gift.
- ✦ Send a birthday card.

Be ready to be consulted about your catechumen's/candidate's progress as the second gateway Rites approach. You should avail yourself of the opportunity to speak with the pastor, in whatever way your parish RCIA process provides, regarding your judgment about your catechumen's/candidate's readiness and commitment. When you testify solemnly, and publicly, as to his/her readiness, it is important that you are confident in your own judgment, that you are certain in your own mind that this person is truly ready to receive the sacraments of initiation.

AT THE RITE OF SENDING (OPTIONAL)

"I turn to you, godparents, for your testimony about these candidates. Have these catechumens taken their formation in the Gospel and in the Catholic way of life seriously?... Have they given evidence of their conversion by the example of their lives?... Do you judge them ready to be presented to this bishop for the rite of election?" (RCIA 112). *"As God is your witness, do you consider these candidates ready to receive the sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist?"* (RCIA 440).

Godparents and sponsors will first be called upon by the celebrant in the above words to publicly testify to an individual's readiness for the sacraments of initiation at the parish Rite of Sending, if it is celebrated, shortly before the Rites of Election and the Call to Continuing Conversion.

Suggestions:

- Pray for the catechumens and candidates who are going through this Rite.
- Be available for the Rite.

During this Rite, you as a godparent publicly attest to your catechumen's readiness after each of three questions put to you by the celebrant, or you as sponsor publicly attest to your candidate's readiness.

AT THE RITES OF ELECTION AND THE CALL TO CONTINUING CONVERSION

"Have they faithfully listened to God's Word proclaimed by the Church?... Have they responded to that word and begun to walk in God's presence?... Have they shared the company of their Christian brothers and sisters and joined with them in prayer? (RCIA 131B). "Have they faithfully listened to the apostles' instruction proclaimed by the Church?... Have they come to a deeper appreciation of their Baptism, in which they were joined to Christ and his Church?... Have they reflected sufficiently on the tradition of the Church, which is their heritage, and joined their brothers and sisters in prayer?... Have they advanced in a life of love and service of others?" (RCIA 453B).

These Rites belong to the bishop and are normally celebrated early in Lent. They most often take place in the diocesan cathedral or other suitably large church in the diocese, to accommodate all those who will go through the Rites, together with their godparents and sponsors, and others. Participation in these Rites can be awe-inspiring. These Rites are a solemn acknowledgment that the elect, as the catechumens are now called, and the candidates are ready to receive the sacraments of initiation at the coming Easter Vigil. For many of them, this is their first opportunity to experience the universal Church and meet their bishop.

Suggestions:

- Pray for the catechumens and candidates who are going through these Rites.
- Be available for the Rites.
- If transportation is not provided, offer to take your catechumen/candidate to the Rites.

DURING THE PERIOD OF PURIFICATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

"Godparents, you have spoken in favor of these catechumens: accept them now as chosen in the Lord and continue to sustain them through your loving care and example, until they come to share in the sacraments of God's life" (RCIA 133). "Sponsors, continue to support these candidates with your guidance and concern. May they see in you a love for the Church and a sincere desire for doing good. Lead them this Lent to the joys of the Easter mysteries" (RCIA 454).

Suggestions:

- ✙ Direct your prayer life toward asking God to pour out an abundance of graces upon your elect/candidate, so he/she might respond with the eagerness of a lover to God's outpouring of himself in love.
- ✙ Offer your own fasting, abstinence, and other Lenten practices for the sake of your elect/candidate.
- ✙ Encourage him/her in beginning the practice of Lenten fasting and abstinence.
- ✙ Invite him/her to the devotions normally available during Lent in your parish, such as the Stations of the Cross.
- ✙ Help your elect/candidate choose a suitable Christian name (for Baptism) or patron saint (for Confirmation) by discussing your favorite saints, and helping him/her think about how to decide and how to look for resources on saints.
- ✙ Be present for any liturgical Rites.
- ✙ If you are the sponsor of a baptized candidate, be present when he/she celebrates the sacrament of Reconciliation for the first time, to encourage him/her and to celebrate afterwards this experience of the Lord's mercy and forgiveness.
- ✙ If possible, receive the sacrament of Reconciliation at the same time, and explain your own feelings to your candidate.
- ✙ Accompany him/her throughout Holy Week.

This may be the first Holy Week your elect/candidate has experienced. There is no better spiritual preparation for receiving the sacraments of initiation than a fully-celebrated Holy Week. It can make a deep impression

on those who are close to receiving the Easter sacraments, and can affect how they celebrate Holy Week for the rest of their lives. As the Church's liturgical time slows to match "real time," together with all the faithful your elect/candidate enters into Jesus' life and actions as he shares the Passover meal with his apostles and institutes the Eucharist, begins his sufferings at the Garden of Gethsemane, offers up his life on the cross, and is entombed.

AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE PREPARATION RITES ON HOLY SATURDAY

As Holy Saturday dawns, the elect and candidates realize that, before the day is over, they will be fully-initiated Catholics and will have received their Lord and Savior in the most intimate union of the Eucharist. At the Preparation Rites, the barely-restrained joy of anticipation, of "almost," is shared by everyone present.

Suggestions:

- ✠ To the extent possible, set aside the day for prayer, reflection, and fasting for the sake of the elect/candidate you are serving.
- ✠ Give a suitable gift to celebrate the event of initiation, such as a patron-saint medal, a book or DVD on the chosen patron saint, a rosary, a crucifix, a framed picture of the Sacred Heart or of Our Lady, a framed Scripture quote that is relevant to his/her journey, a copy of a book of a spiritual nature such as the *Imitation of Christ*, a subscription to a good Catholic periodical, a subscription to *Magnificat* (a shortened form of morning, evening, and night prayer with daily meditations), holy hours prayed before the Blessed Sacrament for your elect/candidate, or enrollment in a religious order's novena or other special prayers.
- ✠ Be available for the Rites.

The explanations of baptismal names and patron saints, normally solicited from the elect/candidates during the Preparation Rites, can be a source of considerable emotion. These selections reveal something essential about how each individual perceives himself/herself in relation to God, the Church, and the parish community. This revelation, stated publicly, can be sharply poignant and stunningly beautiful as each heart's journey of faith is laid bare.

AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION AT THE EASTER VIGIL

“The three sacraments of Christian initiation closely combine to bring us, the faithful of Christ, to his full stature and to enable us to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the Church and in the world” (RCIA GENERAL INTRODUCTION, 1).

This is a night, and a celebration, of inexpressible joy. With the entire Church, the parish assembly rejoices in our Lord's Resurrection. The new Catholics have achieved their long-desired goal to become adopted sons and daughters of the Father and members of Mother Church, and have attained “one-flesh” union with their Divine Bridegroom in the intimate embrace of the Eucharist. You as a godparent or sponsor, together with the entire community of the faithful, are caught up in the joy of this “wedding feast.” As a godparent or sponsor, you might feel, as did St. John, that *“no greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth”* (3 Jn 1:4). It is, indeed, a time to lift up your heart to the Lord!

DURING THE PERIOD OF MYSTAGOGY, THE NEOPHYTE YEAR, AND BEYOND

“Godparents ... assist the candidates ... and after Baptism will help them persevere in the faith and in their lives as Christians” (RCIA GENERAL INTRODUCTION, 8). *“[Godparents] continue to be important during the time after reception of the sacraments when the neophytes need to be assisted so that they remain true to their baptismal promises”* (RCIA GENERAL INTRODUCTION, 11).

Your responsibilities as godparent or sponsor do not end at the Easter Vigil, but continue through the period of mystagogy — the seven weeks between Easter and Pentecost — and into the neophyte year. Your new Catholic will continue to need your strengthening help in the beginning of walking in newness of life.

The neophyte year, until the following Easter, is a special time of both joy and trial. Your neophyte may need your guidance and support even more as he/she begins to live the life of a disciple of Christ in its fullness.

The neophyte year carries with it special risks of falling away from the practice of the faith. Many neophytes experience significant temptations to fall back into old ways of living, and to neglect, in small or large ways, the practice of their faith. Work and family demands, crises, illness, difficulties in finding a “fit” with parish ministries, and even the long days of a vacation can provide opportunities for temptations to lessen your neophyte’s fervor and increase his/her “inertia.”

Suggestions:

- ✦ Continue, and even intensify, your daily prayer for your neophyte.
- ✦ Pray with him/her.
- ✦ Continue to participate in weekly catechetical sessions throughout the period of mystagogy.
- ✦ Share with your new Catholic the occasions of joy as he/she makes happy “discoveries” — personal appropriations of the truths of the faith or spiritual insights.
- ✦ Offer to join your new Catholic at Sunday Mass.
- ✦ Invite your new Catholic to join you to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation (and accompany your newly-baptized Catholic to his/her first Reconciliation).
- ✦ Spend some time in Eucharistic adoration.
- ✦ Share how various Catholic practices have helped you in your own life.
- ✦ Encourage him/her when the intense joy of the sacraments of initiation has passed and the day-to-day demands of family and work call.
- ✦ Continue to help get questions answered.
- ✦ Provide room for and encourage your neophyte to explore the richness of different spiritualities within the Church.
- ✦ By thoughtful and friendly mentoring, help him/her to persevere in the Christian life.
- ✦ Help him/her to be fully and joyfully welcomed into the parish community.
- ✦ Assist him/her to develop closer ties with other members of the parish.
- ✦ Encourage him/her to seek out others in learning how to live out his/her new faith and his/her vocation in life.
- ✦ Keep in touch throughout the entire year.

Even after the conclusion of the neophyte year, your relationship as godparent or sponsor should last. You should remember the anniversary of his/her Baptism or reception into the Church with a card, note, or phone call. As your neophyte becomes more comfortable and experienced in living as a Catholic, as he/she develops a "Catholic worldview" and sees things as God sees them, the relationship will become one of mutual support and mentoring, each keeping the other in prayer and maintaining ties of friendship in the Lord, being *"mutually encouraged by each other's faith"* (Rom 1:12).

CONCLUSION

Being a godparent or sponsor entails a significant commitment of time and a desire to be of loving service. You may feel wholly unequal to the task set before you. At times, you may have questions, doubts, or even misgivings. But remember that *no one* is "up to the task" unaided! God does not call you to his service without giving you the grace you need to succeed. You bring to one person a willing heart, ready to love. This means a desire to do God's will, a spirit of self-giving that springs from your own relationship with Christ, and a desire for others to experience that relationship as well. Relying on God's grace and the Holy Spirit at work in your life and in the life of the person to whom you are committed to be a companion and friend, you *can* fulfill your role as godparent or sponsor.

Keep in mind that being a godparent or sponsor is not "all about you." St. Paul, the great missionary to the non-Jews, wrote in settling an argument among the Corinthians that neither he nor another missionary could take credit for the conversion of hearts: *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth ... for we are God's fellow workers"* (1 Cor 3:6-7, 9). The experience of serving as a godparent or sponsor is likely to bring great rewards in your life, and will change you, deepening your own conversion to Christ. With perseverance and prayer, you will grow to be more like Christ and be more equipped to bring others to the knowledge of his great love.