

Sponsor Guide

A Sacrament is:

- *Effective.* A sacrament actually brings into existence the spiritual reality it symbolizes.
- *Outward.* A sacrament appeals to our sense: You can see, hear, touch, smell, and sometimes even taste a sacrament.
- *From Christ.* The sacraments are Christ's idea, not ours.
- *A source of grace.* Sacraments give grace, the free gift of God's own life.
- *Given to us through the Church.* The Church hands on and celebrates what Christ instituted.

What was your reaction when you got your invitation to become a Confirmation sponsor? Were you excited? Nervous? Did you wonder if you had what it takes to do the job well? Do not be afraid. You do not need a doctorate in theology for this job. You may want to take this opportunity to access the Catechism and other Catholic resources to refresh your own knowledge of the faith. As you find answers to your own questions, you will be better able to guide your candidate to legitimate sources of Catholic teaching. In a real sense, it is easier now than at any other time in history to know precisely what the Church teaches and why. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a great treasury of Catholic teachings. In addition, there are many reliable resources to help you.

What qualifies someone to be a Confirmation sponsor?

1. Be a Catholic
2. Be at least 16 years old
3. Have received the Sacrament of Confirmation
4. Not be a parent of the candidate
5. Be a person who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on

In short, a sponsor should be a fully initiated Catholic who is faithful to Christ and his Church. Because of the deep connection between the two sacraments, the Church recommends that the candidate's baptismal godparents be considered as Confirmation sponsors.

What is my primary role as a Confirmation sponsor?

- A sponsor has three primary roles: to assist the candidate in preparing for Confirmation, to present the Candidate for Confirmation, and along with the parents, to help the confirmed person to live out his or her Christian life faith fully. There are several ways you can help your candidate.
 - *Share your own experience.* Lead him or her closer to Christ by telling your candidate about your own spiritual journey.
 - *Spend time talking and listening.* Help your candidate grow in understanding and acceptance of Christ and the teachings of his Church.
 - *Pray for your candidate regularly.* Pray that he or she will not only come to know about the Faith but also will encounter Christ while preparing to receive the sacrament. As a sponsor, commit to lifting your candidate up in prayer every day.
 - *Encourage him or her to grow in virtue* and to set aside any habits that would prevent his or her soul from being fully open and ready to receive all the gifts that God wants to give through the Sacrament of Confirmation

What if I'm not sure I have what it takes to be a good sponsor?

- If you feel spiritually inadequate to be a Confirmation sponsor, consider this as an invitation from God to grow in your own faith. He loves you, after all. If something glaring has been separating you from God, maybe now is the time to bring that to Confession. Your candidate sees something spiritually admirable in you—something in you that inspires him or her in the Catholic Faith. Set aside any self-doubt, and consider that God may be calling you to this role for the sake of examining your own heart as well as guiding your candidate. The best way to be a good sponsor is to pray often for your candidate and to keep your own eyes fixed on Jesus. Do not be afraid if you aren't perfect. It is often said, "The Church is not a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners."

How can I help my candidate prepare for the Sacrament?

- Two of the most important things you can do to help your Confirmation candidate prepare for the sacrament are (1) be personally committed to prayer and (2) impress upon your candidate, by word and example, the importance of participating in the sacramental life of the Church. The principal way we participate in the church's sacramental life is through regular reception of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Sadly, many Catholics do not attend Sunday Mass, which is the most vital, basic element in the life of faith. Irregular commitment to weekly Sunday Mass has many serious consequences for one's "spiritual health." By your own example, you can help to ensure that these two sacraments become an active and habitual part of your candidate's Catholic life.

What if I am unable to spend time with my candidate before his or her Confirmation day?

- Technology can actually be very helpful for connecting with your candidate. As a young person, your candidate probably carries a smart phone, sends text messages, and uses social media on a daily basis. Take advantage of these media sources to communicate with him or her, even if your schedule requires such contacts to be brief. A simple "I am praying for you today" text message can be a powerful reminder that you take your sponsorship seriously. This signals your candidate that you take him or her seriously—which is the key to communicating with teenagers. Don't overlook more traditional but very meaningful communication methods—a short written letter or postcard with an inspirational or encouraging message is rare enough to make a big impact.
- Why do these things? Such simple acts are both personal and targeted specifically at your candidate. Many teenagers sorely need this kind of personalized care, and they will eagerly respond to it. Because you are the candidate's chosen sponsor (and not a parent, teacher, or some other authority figure), your candidate is less likely to resist or shrug off this kind of outreach from you. You have a special relationship with a significant potential for impact at this particular time in your candidate's life.

What will I need to do or say at the Confirmation ceremony? What should I say to the bishop?

- A sponsor's part of the sacramental rite is simple. You and your candidate will process to the altar in a line similar to a Communion line with the other sponsors and candidates. If you receive no specific instructions about what to say ahead of time, when your candidate gets to the front of the line, simply place your right hand on your candidate's right shoulder and say "Your Excellency, I present [name of your candidate]." Note: if the confirming bishop takes the lead and asks the candidate their name, or if some other process has been put in place to have the candidate's name called, there is no need for you to say anything. Most bishops are fine with simply being addressed by their title: "Archbishop."

What role do I play before, during, and after the sacramental rite?

- Your most important job as a sponsor is to be a “a spiritual help” to your candidate. The sponsor is to take care that the confirmed person behaves as a true witness of Christ and faithfully fulfills the obligations inherent in this sacrament. So your primary mission—should you choose to accept it—is to ensure that your candidate is genuinely ready to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation and to live out the mission that comes with it.
- How to ensure this readiness is a broad question that this guide will explore. Briefly, however, your role is to:
 - Discuss with your candidate the content of the Catholic faith.
 - Provide a “sounding board” for your candidate to talk about his or her spiritual life, habits, hopes, fears, and struggles.
 - Be a good example of the Christian life to your candidate.
 - Pray with and for your candidate.
 - If possible, invite your candidate to go to Confession with you.

What do I need to do after my candidate has been confirmed?

- After your candidate has received the Sacrament of Confirmation, your role as an encouraging mentor of faith continues. Obviously, each situation allows for different levels of ongoing contact, but it is fitting to check in often with your candidate. Continue encouraging him or her in the life of faith. As best you can, send a clear message that Confirmation was not a “graduation” from religious education, but a fuller initiation into the Christian faith. Developing consistent communication prior to Confirmation will be helpful in continuing the relationship with your candidate.

Ideas for sponsorship in the digital age:

- Text a daily or weekly Scripture verse for your candidate to reflect upon.
- Post spiritually encouraging notes and/or links on you candidate’s social media accounts.
- Send brief postcards or e-cards to your candidate before a big game or important test.
- Become “pen pals” via email or Facebook messenger. Ask your candidate about his or her struggles, curiosities, questions, anxieties, worries, or hopes, and respond in writing.
- Skype or text before Sunday Mass and talk for a few minutes about the upcoming readings.
- Don’t give up! Teenagers do not always reveal how a particular outreach effort touches them. Even if you do not observe a positive response, any genuinely loving outreach will make a powerful impression on your candidate.

Why is going to Mass every week so important?

- As Catholics, we are called to full, conscious, and active participation in weekly Sunday Mass. The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. By making Mass a priority, we observe the third commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day as well as Jesus’ command to do this in remembrance of me. To fail to meet this serious obligation is to damage our relationship with God and put our spiritual well-being at risk. When we receive Jesus in the Eucharist, we experience the source and summit of our Catholic faith and receive an infusion of Jesus’ divine life. To miss Mass, then, is to deny ourselves the immeasurable grace of receiving him in Communion. At Mass, Jesus offers himself to us: Gathering our works, joys, and sufferings, he transforms them in the most powerful way. What could possibly be more important?

Why is going to Confession an important part of the Christian life?

- In addition to setting a powerful example for your candidate, going to Confession regularly will strengthen your own personal commitment to Christ. While telling our sins to a priest—even under the strictest confidentiality—can be intimidating, it is as important to spiritual healing as a doctor’s exam is to physical healing. Confession exists solely to offer us the freedom that comes from knowing we are forgiven and loved. Perhaps you have not been to Confession recently. Consider your sponsorship as an occasion for your spiritual growth. What an authentic witness to your candidate it is when you examine your own heart, trust Jesus, and seek true freedom! There is no more powerful way to give your candidate the strength and courage to do the same.

How do I talk to a teenager about faith, Jesus, and moral issues?

- First, take heart. Your candidate has chosen you because he or she admires you and holds you in regard. As a sponsor, you have a distinct advantage over any other kind of authority figure—you were personally chosen by your candidate. Any communication with teenagers must be honest above all else. Despite the fact that their own behavior is often unpredictable and inconsistent, teenagers have a keen sense of whether or not adults believe what they say. They want to be treated as increasingly mature and independent young adults, not as children. Here are some things to keep in mind as you talk with your candidate:
 1. *Avoid presenting yourself as an expert or as someone who never makes mistakes.* Draw from your own life to illustrate a point or emphasize an aspect of faith. Your role is to use your own honest experiences to guide them, but use appropriate discretion. In deciding whether to share a particular story, consider carefully how much detail is needed to make a particular point. Sponsors and others who work with teens are often drawn to share about their personal experiences to establish credibility and to relate to the struggles common to teens. This can be helpful, if done prudently; damaging, if done imprudently. Ask God to give you the wisdom to know what to share. Ultimately, draw from your own life experiences, good and bad, to point your candidate to the truths of the Catholic faith.
 2. *Listen for the “question behind the question.”* If your candidate asks you a difficult question, seek to discover what he or she is really getting at. Teens often ask a particular question, but there is really a deeper issue they are trying to understand.
 3. *Be sure you understand the question before responding.* You may want to repeat your candidate’s question before answering it, in order to be sure you understand what he or she is asking. As much as possible, talk to your candidate honestly and directly; do not water down the truth. Teenagers appreciate honesty, even if they are not yet fully mature and able to deal with the truth of your answer.
 4. *Whenever possible, find a point of affirmation or agreement to build upon.* Avoid conversation-ending statements such as, “That’s just how it is,” or, “You must believe it because that’s what the Church teaches.” Affirm what is good in your candidate’s opinions—even if it is just to praise his or her willingness to grapple with hard questions. Teenagers sometimes ask questions that may seem crude or silly, but you should assume that each question is sincere and that the teenager may not have learned yet how to express it more delicately. More than anything else, teenagers want to be taken seriously. These gestures of respect will help your candidate feel more open and will foster genuine conversation.

Three rules for sharing:

1. Do not glorify sinful behavior or encourage experimentation.
2. Give only as much detail as is needed to make your point.
3. Be straightforward, honest, and encouraging.

What if I'm uncomfortable praying aloud? Do I still need to pray with my candidate?

- We tend to overcomplicate prayer. St. Thérèse of Lisieux tells us that prayer is a simple look turned toward heaven. There are many traditional prayers and devotions that can turn you toward heaven. You and your candidate may participate in a particular devotion together, such as praying the Rosary or a novena to the candidate's chosen patron saint, attending a prayer group, or visiting a Eucharist Adoration chapel. It's also powerful just to talk to Jesus from your heart with your candidate, thanking God for his blessings and asking him for whatever you need. If you are not able to do prayers or devotions together due to distance or other conflicts, you and your candidate could agree to cultivate the same "prayer habit"—like offering a decade of the Rosary for each other on Friday, for example—as a form of spiritual solidarity.

What if my candidate questions basic Catholic teachings, such as whether God exists?

- First, pray for the gift of faith for your candidate, and share the life of faith with your candidate—praying, encouraging, and engaging in acts of service with him or her. Christianity is not a science to figure out, but a life to live. When lived well, many questions disappear. And good answers to theological questions do not necessarily translate to faith. Faith is about building a relationship with God. That said, never gloss over a question. Questions can be very important in helping your candidate develop a genuine, mature faith. When our faith is stirred up, we naturally ask questions and want to know more. As questions are sparked in the heart and mind of your candidate, you can be a reliable guide to the truth by seeking answers from the Catechism, Scripture, and other trustworthy sources.