

GODPARENTS AND SPONSORS

The terminology can get a little confusing, because the RCIA and the Code of Canon Law aren't always consistent. As you can see below, the Code of Canon Law simply uses the term "sponsor." But what is clear is that the RCIA envisions two different ministries.

For Catechumens

Let's talk about catechumens (those not baptized) first. The first ministry is one of accompaniment during the period of the catechumenate. This individual, officially called a "sponsor," is ideally chosen by the parish. Their task is to offer encouragement and the example of their lives as the catechumen journeys through this period of formation. They aren't intended to be theological experts or perfect, but be living the Catholic faith. Nick Wagner recommends that we look for sponsors who are faithful, questioning, hospitable, and disciplined.

The second ministry is life-long mentorship in the faith. We typically call this person a godparent," and they are usually chosen by the catechumen. They present the catechumen at the Rite of Election, accompany them during Lent (the Period of Purification and Enlightenment), and are present with them at the Easter Vigil.

The "sponsor" and "godparent" can be the same person. Therefore, it is common to refer to this one person as the "godparent" if we are speaking of catechumens.

For Candidates

The RCIA calls for the same two ministries for those who are already baptized and are preparing for reception into the Catholic Church and/or completing their initiation. Unfortunately, the same terminology is used here as for catechumens – a "sponsor" accompanies during equivalent of the catechumenate, a "godparent" during the equivalent of Lent.

The "sponsor" and "godparent" can be the same person. Therefore, it is common to refer to this one person as the "sponsor" if we are speaking of candidates.

Who can serve, canonically?

The "sponsors" during the period of the catechumenate (or equivalent) "are persons who have known and assisted the candidates (=catechumens) and stand as witnesses to [their] moral character, faith, and intention" (RCIA #10).

The "godparent" (or "sponsor") during the Period of Purification and Enlightenment (or equivalent) and who stands with the catechumen or candidate at the time of Initiation must meet the criteria laid out in Canon 874 (below).

Because it is often the case that a candidate or catechumen will ask their initial "sponsor" to also take on the role of "godparent" (or "confirmation sponsor"), it is prudent that one selects initial sponsors who also meet these criteria. After all, they are to be modelling the faith for the one with which they are journeying!

Relevant Canons

Baptism

Canon 873

Only one male or one female sponsor [=godparent] or one of each sex is to be employed.

Canon 874

§1. To be admitted to the role of sponsor [=godparent], a person must: (1) be designated by the one to be baptized, by the parents or the one who takes their place or, in their absence, by the pastor or minister and is to have the qualifications and intention of performing this role; (2) have completed the sixteenth year, unless a different age has been established by the diocesan bishop or it seems to the pastor or minister that an exception is to be made for a just cause; (3) be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has already received the sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist and leads a life in harmony with the faith and the role to be undertaken; (4) not be bound by any canonical penalty legitimately imposed or declared; (5) not be the father or the mother of the one to be baptized.

§2. A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community may not be admitted except as a witness to baptism and together with a Catholic sponsor.

Confirmation

Canon 892

As far as possible a sponsor for the one to be confirmed should be present; it is for the sponsor to see that the confirmed person acts as a true witness to Christ and faithfully fulfills the obligations connected with this sacrament.

Canon 893

§1. To perform the role of sponsor, it is necessary that a person fulfill the conditions mentioned in can. 874. §2. It is desirable that the one who undertook the role of sponsor at baptism be sponsor for confirmation.