

Our Lady of Sorrows Confirmation Sponsor Guidebook

Confirmation Program Contact:

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"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."

- Leo Buscaglia

"It does seem that it is often in those [adolescent] years that a tiny spark is lit by a teacher [or other mentor] telling you or showing you something, and that if you're lucky, that spark keeps alight and gradually becomes the glowing fire of your lifelong passion and career."

- Ysenda Maxtone Graham

Congratulations! You have been chosen by a young person for a special role. A wonderful adventure in the spiritual life awaits the two of you. As a confirmation sponsor, you have accepted a responsibility that is an honor in our Church.

Your role is to spiritually walk with the candidate during the preparation for the sacrament. You will be assisting the young person in being a true witness and disciple of Jesus, and representing the community when you present your candidate to the bishop. Your special role does not end at the confirmation liturgy; you will help the young person fulfill his or her baptismal promises after confirmation with the help of the Holy Spirit.

What is Confirmation?

The Sacrament of Confirmation....

- welcomes us and deepens our belonging to the faith community
- deepens our relationship to God, as Father, Son, and Spirit
- strengthens us as disciples

A sacrament is part of the way that God loves us and calls us. A sacrament is God's love expressed as free, undeserved gift.

God uses visible signs to communicate invisible love. To communicate God's love, God uses our senses: eyes, ears, touch, smell, and taste, and elements of our world. In confirmation, the signs we will celebrate include being anointed with oil and the laying on of hands as we remember the waters of baptism and the nourishment of Eucharist.

God calls and invites; we respond. An attitude of openness communicates a "yes" to God's invitation to a deeper relationship. This "yes" does not mean we know that we will always be faithful or that we are worthy of the gift. "Yes" means we are open to be strengthened by God who calls and loves us.

The community witnesses to and celebrates the sacraments. A sacrament is a powerful sign that God is alive and present in the world. As church, we are called to be sacrament, that is, to be God's hand and healing touch in the world. At the same time, we celebrate the sacraments as our most important prayer. This community that celebrates sacraments is global, reaching to other faith communities throughout the world and joined in a common bond. The community is also local as a diocese or archdiocese, as a parish, and as a community of faith in families.

What Do Sponsors Do?

We may agree that as adults in today's world we are used to being defined by what we do. In fact, this is a common first question we ask one another on first meeting. It is a comfortable way to initiate the small talk that at some point might evolve into deeper conversation. Yes, as a confirmation sponsor, you will have particular things "to do." These may include attending rehearsal, buying a gift, walking with the candidate to the bishop, going to dinner after the liturgy. But you are about to embark on a journey with a young person. *What you do* is not the primary concern. This is a journey concerned less with what you will do as a sponsor and more with who you are as a person of the Gospel. This journey will take you and a young person to new and exciting places in the life of faith. Faith penetrates the heart of the matter – how has faith penetrated who you are; can a young person read the Good News in the actions of your life?

But How Do I Share Faith?

Central to being a confirmation sponsor is sharing with young people the worthy adventure of living a Gospel-centered life. You may not feel equipped for this task, but don't worry, neither did the first disciples of Jesus! In fact, sharing our faith with each other is not a task, it is a way of life. We carry a particular identity with us, and into all of our environments because we are Catholic. One writer has said that the *walls* of her home growing up were Catholic, filled as they were with symbols of belief.

Ask the young person why he or she chose you as a sponsor. You may discover that this particular adolescent has already been reading the Good News through you!

As a sponsor, you are "being church" with a young person. What does this mean? The mission of church is three-fold. We *proclaim* the Good News, namely the saving action of Jesus, we offer ourselves as a group of people transformed by the Spirit into a *community of faith, hope and love*, and we bring *God's justice and love* to others through service. In its ministry with young people, of which you are a part, the church works to foster the total personal and spiritual growth of young people and to draw them to responsible participation in the life, mission and work of the faith community. In addition, we empower young people to become disciples of Jesus Christ who witness to their faith by living and working for justice, peace, and human dignity. (*Vision of Youth Ministry* 3, 7)

Here are some simple strategies for "being church" with your young person.

Have Faith Conversations: Witness to God's Presence in Your Life

Young people, particularly older adolescents, are exploring their beliefs and values. They are searching for a worthy adventure upon which to embark; an adventure that Gospel living surely is. Here are some simple strategies that will help you initiate faith conversations:

- **Share stories with each other.** Stories have a tremendous impact. If all you do as a sponsor is share how God has been moving in and through your life, you have given your young person a gift of tremendous value. Share with each other the significant religious celebrations of your lives – compare “notes” about First Communion, etc. Help the young person identify what is uniquely Catholic about his or her life. Share as well significant life experiences in the context of faith.
- **Affirm the actions of the young person which witness to the Good News.** Make direct correlation for the young person between what you see him or her doing and how it is a value and action of Jesus. Break open the Scriptures for the week and share how Jesus’ teachings apply today.
- **Help the young person explore how the events of his or her life are glimpses of the “vision of the glory of God.”** Be comfortable with the young person’s questions and challenges. In order for belief to be meaningful, for God to be meaningful, young people need the space to explore their questions and doubts. They need adults who will stand by them, be faithful to their searching, and not abandon them in their disbelief.

Explore Prayer and Celebration

Our tradition as Catholics is rich with ritual and celebration of God’s presence and action in humankind. Prayer is relationship with God. Young people are exploring the meaning of Catholic ritual, discovering their own unique spirituality and personal relationship with God. Walk with them on this adventure!

- **Plant a seed somewhere special with the young person.** Talk about how the seed is now underground in the damp and dark preparing to burst forth new life. Relate each step in the plant’s development to the growth of each of us spiritually.
- **Challenge yourself and the young person to move beyond mediocrity in your spiritual lives.** Have prayer discussions. Share your own struggles with a prayer life and explore praying together. Help the young person establish a regular pattern of prayer. Together commit to a joint effort such as placing a prayer/Scripture reflection on your bathroom mirrors and praying it each morning individually.

- **Invite the young person to join you at the parish Lenten mission.** Take him or her for ice cream afterwards and talk about what you heard.
- **Laminate the renewal of baptismal vows as a prayer card or book mark.**
- **Focus prayer with the young person on significant events in his or her life** (e.g., driver's license, death of a friend, finishing the semester).
- **Visit the local museum to see the variety of artistic expressions of faith and prayer.**
- **Give the young person a symbol** (poster, icon, picture of Jesus, candles, quotes from role model or saints) that he or she can place in a prayer corner at home.
- **Encourage the young person to write prayers in the form of poems or journal entries.** Give him or her a decorative blank book for this purpose.
- **Read Scripture aloud.**
- **Have the young person share contemporary music which is meaningful to him or her.** Talk about why.

Explore Justice and Service Opportunities

Young people have a tremendous capacity for selflessness. In giving themselves through service and concern for others, they discover more about who they are and about the unique gifts that God has given them. Tap into the idealism of your young person by initiating participation in service opportunities or by expressing interest in what the young person is already involved. Explore together the needs of the world (individual, parish, community and world) and how the gifts of individuals are meant to meet those needs.

- **Decide together on one meaningful service project in which you will both be involved.** Find something that calls forth the unique gifts of the young person. Talk afterwards about how the involvement was a reflection of Jesus' mission of service.
- **Discuss options for further direct service or exploring social justice issues.**
- **Assist the young person to find information and resources in expressed areas of interest.** Visit local service organizations and Catholic social ministry programs together.
- **Search Scripture with the youth and discover Jesus' teaching on the social issues of his time.** Talk about how they relate to the social issues of our time.

Building the Relationship

One-on-One

It is an honor to have been asked to be a sponsor for confirmation. Now you are wondering not only “What are we going to talk about?” but more fundamentally, “How do I talk to a young person?” Communication skills are foundational to any relationship. What follows are some simple guidelines and practical ideas, which if followed, will assist you to develop effective communication and have meaningful and fun conversations.

*** Be committed to communicate with the young person.**

Your presence and your faith story are gifts you give. The young person offers you a gift as well, through his or her self-disclosure.

- ✓ **Establish a regular pattern of contact.** This could be a once-a-week phone call or a trip to the yogurt shop. First and foremost, the young person needs to know that you care and that you want to be a part of his or her life. He or she also needs to know that you take your role as sponsor seriously. This means that you are willing to be present, that sometimes you will go out of your way to be where the young person is. You are willing to share your stories of life and faith, and to listen to him or her and help reveal God active in the day to day realities of being a teenager.

*** Communication is a revelatory process.**

As you and the candidate prepare for confirmation and look forward to continuing the faith journey together afterwards, you will be sharing about yourselves. Your sharing communicates trust in the young person and a willingness to share your personal vulnerability.

- ✓ **In your regular contact with the candidate, *share your feelings*.** This can be as simple as telling him or her how you feel, and relating the various experiences of the day or week and how they have impacted you. Since these are your feelings, use “I” statements rather than “you” statements. A simple and very effective formula is “I feel (felt) _____ when _____ because _____.”
- ✓ **Express gratitude to the young person for listening to your story.** Let him or her know that it makes a difference to you that you were able to share. “Thanks for listening. It’s great to be able to talk with you about my day.”

✓ **Be present in an active way to the young person's story.** This implies that you accept him or her "as is," you listen attentively, and you do not pass judgment on what is shared. This means that you "seek first to understand, then to be understood." Active, revelatory communication also implies that you offer suggestions but not advice. Remember, the young person is sharing who they are with you. You also thank the young person for sharing with you. It is an honor to enter into life's story with a youth. Here are some helpful hints on how to listen attentively:

- ➔ **Share empathic and reassuring reactions.** Another phrase for this is "reflecting feelings." To do this, pretend that you are a mirror and you are reflecting back what the young person has said so that you demonstrate understanding and acceptance. For example, "The frustration you feel from missing the deadline for that job application must be pretty intense."
- ➔ **Remove any blocks that are communication hazards.** Trying to have a conversation in front of the busiest escalator at the mall may not be the best idea. Environment can help facilitate communication or it can distract. Removing any visible barriers between you and the young person will aid in facilitating conversation as well.
- ➔ **Listen attentively by *clarifying the meaning of things that are shared*.** These are called "reflecting skills." In addition to "reflecting feelings" mentioned above, you can "paraphrase," that is, give a concise response that states what you heard in your own words. Another skill is to "reflect meanings" by using the phrase, "You feel... because..." and to be open to clarification of your interpretation. "Summary reflections" are also very helpful. Here you give a summary of what you have heard. This is not a summary of the young person's thoughts; hopefully your reflecting gives the young person the opportunity to pull together a summary of his or her own.

* Use effective skills for good communication.

These skills include attending skills, following skills, and the reflecting skills mentioned above. Total presence with your young person shows that you care about him or her. Attending and following skills involve total presence.

- ✓ **Maintain a posture of involvement.** This posture includes a relaxed alertness which expresses the balance between "I feel at home with you and accept you" and "I sense the importance of what you are communicating to me and am intent on understanding you." Inclining your body towards the young person indicates full attention, and maintaining an open position (arms and legs uncrossed) communicates receptivity. Placing yourself at eye

level with the young person and facing him or her directly will alleviate the risk of seeming disinterested.

- ✓ **Use appropriate body motion.** How your body responds as you communicate with the young person speaks volumes. Your body can demonstrate empathy just by the way you position yourself as the young person talks. Avoid gestures and distracting movements that draw attention away from the conversation.
- ✓ **Use eye contact.** Our eyes are powerful communication tools. Use yours with the young person to communicate trust, eagerness to listen, and caring about him or her.
- ✓ **Create conversation starters with 'door openers'.** One type of door opener describes the young person's body language, "You look like you're not feeling quite up to par." Another is offering an invitation to talk: "What do you want to talk about it?" Silence can also be a door opener. This gives the other person room, time and space to decide whether to talk, how to begin to talk, or even to decide what to say. The attending skills mentioned above are door openers as well.
- ✓ **Interject *minimal encouragers* throughout the conversation.** Some examples are: Tell me more, yes, I see, Right, Go on, For instance? Oh? Really? Then? You bet.
- ✓ **Ask *open-ended questions*.** Open-ended questions begin with "what," "where," "how," and "why" and stimulate conversation.

Ten Tips for Sponsors

- 1** Participate with the young person in activities, i.e., take him or her to a movie and talk about it over a snack afterwards, or invite him or her on an outing such as biking, running, ice skating, or hiking. Try activities that involve the young person in creative expression.
- 2** Establish a regular time to be with the young person as listener, sharer and co-traveler on the faith journey. Communicate that the friendship between the two of you makes a difference in your life.
- 3** Encourage the young person to keep a personal journal and share reflections of your own from daily life. Talk about current events and trends.
- 4** Be willing to enter into discussion with the young person about the differing values around us and affirm the healthy, life-giving choices of the young person. Model healthy, life-giving choices and relationships in your own life. Share stories of others, both current and of history, who have struggled with issues of personal integrity.
- 5** Share how your faith and experiences of church have made a difference in your life – including the doubts and struggles you may experience.
- 6** Support mom and dad with a listening, empathic ear.
- 7** Share with the young person the significant moments in your faith life. Ask open-ended questions (why, how, where, when) that encourage the young person to explore how his or her faith is experienced in life.
- 8** Participate with the young person in community service activities and together keep a photo journal of your involvement.
- 9** Explore with the young person a variety of ways to pray. Send the young person Scripture notes every week. Meet with the young person and talk about what kind of homily the young person would write for the upcoming Sunday.
- 10** Pray for the young person, and let him or her know it.