

Catholic

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GODPARENTS & SPONSORS

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF THEM TODAY?

Being a godparent or a sponsor means more than just lighting a candle or lending a hand: it's a lifelong commitment to share in a relationship of faith with your godchild or candidate.

by William F. Wegher



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Most of us at some point have to choose either a godparent for our children or a sponsor for ourselves, but how do we choose these people? Or you yourself may someday be asked to be a godparent or sponsor. What is expected of a sponsor or godparent today?

In reality, a lot of Catholics are confused over the difference between a godparent and a sponsor. Let's look at the role of godparents first, then examine the purpose of a sponsor, and finally we'll look at what all of this means for your family, parish, or RCIA.

GODPARENTS FOR INFANT BAPTISM For Parents

Choosing godparents is a decision not to be taken lightly. Above all, a godparent serves a special role for one to be baptized, whether it be a child or an adult. Godparents are to represent the Christian Catholic community, the Church. They are to assist in the preparation of adult candidates for Baptism and to be supportive of them afterward. When it comes to infant Baptism, godparents are to assist the child's parents in raising their child in our Catholic faith so that the child may profess and live it as an adult.

What you are looking for are godparents who can truly represent that Christian community. Basically this means you want at least one active and committed Catholic. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states "... the godfather and godmother ... must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized—child or adult—on the road of Christian life" (1255). This is the Church's way of saying that being a godparent is truly a ministry in the Church, and not simply an honor.

Church law insists that *this person be at least 16 years old* (for maturity's sake), *fully initiated* (having received Confirmation and Eucharist), *be someone other than the legal parents*, and *one who leads a life in harmony with the Church*.

All this may seem like quite a bit, but the purpose is to ensure that the rich and beautiful faith of the Church is passed on to your child in the most loving and authentic way possible.

For Godparents

If you think that the role of parents in choosing godparents is a serious one, so is the role of being a godparent.

Make sure that you have the *time*, the *willingness*, and the *faith* to live out this sacred vocation. These parents are calling you to be something special for their child: to set an example; help teach their child about the Catholic faith; have a lifelong relationship of prayer, faith sharing, and love. Before accepting this invitation, take some time to pray and reflect on your ability to do this.

You should ask, "Can I share my faith unashamedly? Do I live close enough to really get to know my godchild? Am I an

active member of my local Catholic parish?" If you are from another parish, you'll probably be asked for a letter from your home parish attesting to your active faith in the Church. If you're an active Catholic, getting such a letter from your pastor will be easy. If you're not, maybe you need to question your fitness to serve as a godparent at this time.

SPONSORS FOR CONFIRMATION For Confirmation Candidates

Confirmation can be a great experience, and hopefully you've thought a lot about what this sacrament means and how the Holy Spirit will affect your life. You'll be required to have a sponsor—someone who will guide you and share the story of faith with you.

If all has gone as planned, the best person will be one of your baptismal godparents. Having one of your godparents helps us to see how Baptism and Confirmation are connected.

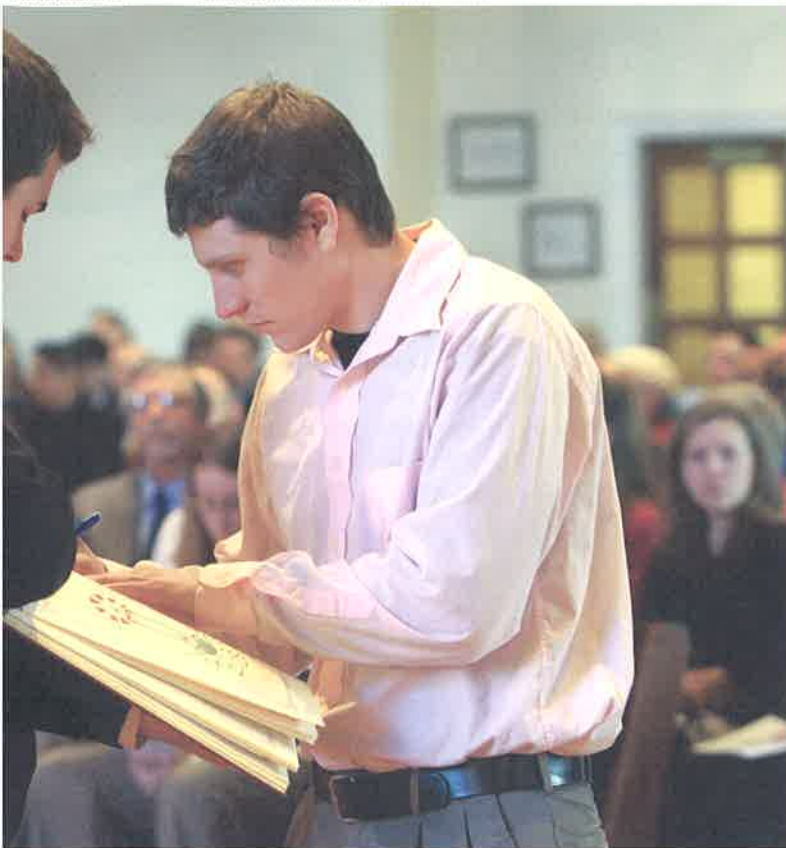
You're looking for someone you trust, whose faith you admire, and who will be there for you. The requirements mentioned for godparents earlier also apply to sponsors: that they be *confirmed Catholics, at least 16 years old, and practicing members of the Church, while not being your parents*. This means you can choose a relative, friend, or someone from your parish as your sponsor.

For Sponsors

If you have been chosen to be a Confirmation sponsor, congratulations! This person sees in you a profound faith commitment, finds trust, and knows you are someone who will care about this person and his or her faith. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? It's not all that complicated, but it does take time, a caring heart, and a listening ear.

GODPARENTS AND SPONSORS FOR THE RCIA

Almost everything that's been said in the previous section about seeking a godparent for a child applies to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA)—to those making the decision to come into the Church as an adult. There are some differences, however. If you are a catechumen seeking full initiation into the Catholic Church—Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist—your godparent(s) for Baptism at the Easter Vigil should also be your



TIPS FOR SPONSORS

- **BE A LIVING MODEL OF FAITH.** At least a part of what this young person admires in you is your faith! If the way you practice your faith is not what it should be, “get it together,” so to speak! If you honestly can’t, maybe you should decline the invitation to be a sponsor. Your life doesn’t have to become artificially saintly, but your faith should be authentic and sincere.
- **PRAY FOR YOUR CANDIDATE AND YOURSELF.** As candidates decide to be confirmed, they need spiritual strength. Your prayers for them are important, but don’t forget to pray for yourself, also, that you can share why you value and practice your Catholicism.
- **GIVE OF YOUR TIME AND SHARE YOUR GIFTS.** You’ll be asked to spend time together on various activities. This may mean preparing lessons or even working on a Christian service project. You could also share your own experiences or write a letter of encouragement. Offer a gift of spiritual significance—a new Bible, rosary, or book about our faith or about the saint the candidate has chosen for a Confirmation name.
- **DON’T MISS THE CEREMONY.** Participating in the ceremony is the easiest part of being a sponsor. Your basic job will be to place your hand on your candidate’s shoulder and tell the bishop your candidate’s Confirmation name. You’re there to be a support, but your role on Confirmation day is only beginning.
- **DON’T FORGET THIS NEWLY CONFIRMED CATHOLIC.** After Confirmation day, remember birthdays and this anniversary. Send a card or make a phone call. Continue to worship together or from time to time do some Christian service.

sponsor(s) for Confirmation on that same night.

However, if you are a candidate for Confirmation or a candidate for full initiation into the Catholic Church through a Profession of Faith (for confirmed Protestants becoming Catholic), you’ll need to choose a sponsor. Even if you were baptized Catholic, your godparents might not be suitable sponsors at this point. If you weren’t baptized as a Catholic, you need to find someone who is Catholic to be your sponsor in the RCIA process.

You want to look for someone who will share his or her faith, teach you the basics of Catholicism, and be willing to pray and “walk” with you weekly during the RCIA process. If you don’t know anyone like this, the RCIA coordinator in your parish can provide you with the opportunity to meet such people who would be more than willing to be a companion on your spiritual journey.

Often a person in RCIA will want a spouse or a sibling to be the godparent and/or sponsor. While there is nothing wrong with this, you might want to consider a few things. First, since you are entering a new faith community, having a new person serve in this role—or at least as a second godparent or cosponsor—might help you adjust more easily. You would now have a different contact to introduce you to the family of the Church.
(continued on back page)

DIG DEEPER

What special qualities should we look for in a good godparent or sponsor?

How can godparents and sponsors have ongoing friendship with their godchildren and candidates?

(continued from page 3)

Second, many people find having a new spiritual friend or fellow “walker on the journey” to be truly helpful as they make their way to the Easter sacraments.

Finally, make sure that your godparent/sponsor has the time and ability to be with you. For the RCIA to be as meaningful as it can be, you need someone to be with you week after week.

Godparents and sponsors, the previous sections will help you better understand your role and responsibilities. Working with adults will require more personal commitment to faith sharing. You must also be willing to sacrifice your time, but I have yet to meet a person who has found being an RCIA sponsor unrewarding.

William F. Wegher is a priest of the Diocese of Lansing, Michigan. He holds an STL degree from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium.

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TIPS FOR GODPARENTS

- **PREPARE WITH THE PARENTS.** In most parishes, the parents will be required to attend a Baptism preparation class to reflect on many of the things mentioned in this article. If you're able, you should be there, too! Your willingness to be with the parents now says a lot about your willingness to be present to your godchild in the future.
- **BE THERE ON THE BIG DAY.** Be available for the Baptism ceremony. Besides saying, “We are,” when the priest asks if you are ready to assist the parents in raising the child in the practice of the faith, you will have the opportunity to clothe the child in the white baptismal garment and to light the baptismal candle. You may also be asked to write a touching intercession for the Prayers of the Faithful on behalf of your godchild.
- **DON'T FORGET THE BIG DAY!** Hopefully you will always remember your godchild's biological birthday, but don't forget this “birthday” into the Body of Christ. Make a phone call or send a card. Better yet, suggest having a get-together to honor this day each year.

- **PRAY FOR YOUR GODCHILD.** Keep your godchild in your daily prayers. On occasion, take time to celebrate Eucharist together, for it is, after all, the source and summit of our faith lives.
- **SHARE THE FAITH THAT'S BEEN SHARED WITH YOU.** When your godchild is young, introduce him or her to a children's edition of the Bible. Teach about his or her patron or name saint. Attend and offer encouragement at the child's first Communion or share your own faith story as your godchild approaches Confirmation. Continue your lifelong relationship by participating in your godchild's wedding.

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