

A LOOK BACK AT CHRISTIAN SPONSORS



The role of a sponsor can be traced to the early Church. Though the function of a sponsor has changed, it has always been connected with Christian initiation and the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.

Originally, the sponsor was responsible to teach the candidate about Christ, Scripture, Church doctrine, and Christian living. The sponsor also helped the candidate develop his or her prayer life and cultivated a spirit of service and outreach to others in the candidate. This was a time when adult Baptism was most common in the Church.

The sponsor had a key role in the *catechumenate* (“period of instruction”) that lasted up to three years. The catechumenate culminated in the reception of all three Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist—at the Easter Vigil. It was often the sponsor, a relative or family friend, who first introduced the candidate to the Gospel and how to live, pray, and minister as a Christian.

When the preparation for initiation was completed, the sponsors presented the candidates to the Church and vouched for their readiness to receive the sacraments. They brought the candidates to church at dusk. The local bishop presided over the entire ceremony. The sponsors stood with them as they received the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.

The sponsoring role did not end at the time of the reception of the sacraments. The sponsors continued to companion the newly baptized as they became more integrated into the life of the Church.

About the fifth century, with the increase in infant Baptisms, the rites of Baptism and Confirmation were separated and

celebrated at two different times. The baptismal sponsor—called the godparent—and the Confirmation sponsor were then often two different people. Also, as time went on, the person chosen as the godparent for Baptism and the sponsor for Confirmation had little to do with the faith life of the candidate other than being present at the actual celebration of the sacrament. The role of the sponsor became mostly symbolic for many years.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the rite of the Sacrament of Confirmation was revised and the intimate connection with the other Sacraments of Initiation was set forth. The catechumenate for adults was restored—the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. In the RCIA, the candidates for initiation are accompanied by a true sponsor, one who is again a model of faith and who companions with the candidate through the entire process leading to the sacrament as well as after the reception of the sacrament.

Most Catholic teenagers are not initiated in the RCIA process. Rather, they are so-called “cradle Catholics” who were baptized as babies and raised in Catholic families. In this process called the Rite of Baptism of Children, a godparent who spoke for the infant replaced the role of the sponsor. Catechetical and spiritual formation of the infant could not take place until after Baptism as the child grew. Mostly this formation was handled by the child’s parents and parish catechists charged with this task. The godparent may have a role only to the point of his or her willingness to make time for the child and to discuss important life issues and issues pertaining to faith.

As the Sacrament of Confirmation is often delayed until the teen years, the Church recognizes that this is an excellent opportunity for an adult sponsor to have more of a positive effect on the life of the teen candidate. To emphasize the connection between Baptism and Confirmation, it is appropriate if the Confirmation sponsor is one of the teen’s baptismal godparents. This recommendation is not always doable. If not, teens are asked, with their parents’ help, to choose another sponsor for Confirmation. Sponsors must follow the qualifications listed in the following chapter.