



by Fr. Mark Steffl, STL, JCL

The important Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation both require a sponsor. In the case of Baptism, these are commonly called "godparents."

Historically and theologically speaking, the reason for a godparent or sponsor is to assist the person receiving Baptism or Confirmation through example, encouragement, and prayer. The individual or individuals who are acting as "sponsors" are called upon to show a loving example of the practice of the Catholic faith to the one who is receiving the Sacrament of Baptism or Confirmation. In addition, the sponsor assumes a moral responsibility to assist the parents of the individual (in the case of a child) in imparting the Catholic faith.

In establishing criteria for a sponsor, whether for Baptism

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This month's question:

What is required to be a godparent/ sponsor for Baptism or Confirmation?

or Confirmation, the Church is very specific in requirements (found in canon 874 of the Code of Canon Law). The requirements established are:

- The sponsor must be appointed by the person, (or by the person's parents in the case of a minor) and have the intention of fulfilling this life-long role,
- The sponsor must be at least sixteen years of age,
- The sponsor must be Confirmed and have received the Holy Eucharist and must practice the Catholic faith,
- The sponsor must not be subject to any canonical (ecclesiastical) penalties such as excommunication,
- The sponsor must not be the mother or father of the individual.

In the case of Baptism, only one "sponsor" or "godparent" is required. If there are two, as is common culturally in the United States, they should mirror the child's parents in gender: one "godfather" and one "godmother." Since it is common to have two sponsors at baptism, at least one

must meet the requirements that the Church establishes for the purpose of being recorded in the baptismal register of a parish as a "godparent." If there is a second person designated who does not meet the criteria established, he or she is referred to as a "Christian witness" in the baptismal register (it would still be appropriate to refer to that individual as a godfather or godmother).

In some cultures, it is common to have more than one "set" of godparents. In this case, only one set of godparents, meeting the established criteria is recorded in the baptismal register as the "official" godparents.

At Confirmation, a sponsor must meet the same criteria. Theologically speaking, Baptism and Confirmation are two sacraments sharing a close relationship, so much so that Church Law says in canon 893 that "it is desirable that the sponsor [for Confirmation] be the one who undertook this role at baptism." But "desirable" does

not mean essential, and very often this is simply not possible or advantageous depending on circumstances (and in reality is a rather rare occurrence).

Many parishes, emphasizing the role of sponsor, provide a sacramental preparation class not only to parents but also to godparents. Parish priests will often require a letter of suitability to be a baptismal sponsor from the parish priest of the sponsor if the priest does not know the individual personally, to make sure the individual is indeed suitable to take on this role.

In Confirmation preparation, it is very common in parish programs to involve the chosen Confirmation sponsor in the preparation of the individual preparing for Confirmation. This emphasizes that the role of a sponsor is not merely an honorary or symbolic role but a serious one of taking on a duty towards another in the Church – of helping to form the individual in the specifics of living the Catholic faith.

All of these requirements are not

to "make things difficult" but to provide every opportunity and advantage to those who are receiving the Sacrament of Baptism or Confirmation in growing in the Catholic faith through the witness, encouragement, and prayers of the one/ones who are chosen as sponsor/sponsors for these "milestone" sacraments in the life of an individual.

NEXT COLUMN: Why would a baptized non-Catholic married to another baptized non-Catholic need to get an annulment through a diocesan Tribunal?

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Editor's note: Fr. Mark Steffl serves as the Diocese of New Ulm's canon lawyer and is the judicial vicar of the diocesan Office of the Tribunal.