

Role of “sponsor” - why is it so important in the OCIA



The first official role of the sponsor happens in the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. After the seekers have said what they are looking for from the church and have promised to follow the gospel way of faith, the presider turns to the sponsors and asks:

Sponsors, you now present these candidates to us; are you and all who are gathered here with us, ready to help these candidates find and follow Christ? (53)

It seems like such a simple question with an obvious answer. But as with all ritual questions, it is loaded with import. If a sponsor is going to answer authentically, they have to deeply understand their role as sponsor. The rite tells us:

“Sponsors are persons who have known and assisted the candidates and stand as witnesses to the candidates’ moral character, faith, and intention.” (10)

There are **three** important things a sponsor has to do here:

Get to know the candidate: The “getting to know you” process between a seeker and a sponsor is a lot like anyone getting to know a new friend. But there is one important difference. The sponsor’s goal is to become a friend in faith. That means the sponsor has to be willing to open up about their own faith journey, their own struggles with remaining faithful to the gospel, their own joy that faith in Christ has given them. And it means the sponsor has to listen deeply to the seekers hopes and goals. The sponsor has to have an open, nonjudgmental attitude. As much as possible, the sponsor has to be an **ambassador of Christ** for the seeker.

Assist the candidate: The seeker is likely going to have a lot of questions. Some seekers might be anxious or worried about the initiation process. Many seekers worry that they won’t be able to “learn” enough to become Catholic. A key role of the sponsor is to be a **rock of support** for the seeker. Sponsors do not need to know the answer to every question the seeker has. They do not need to be experts in Catholic doctrine.

They do not need to know what every step of the initiation process entails. Other members of the team can cover all of that.



The most important thing a sponsor needs to do is literally and figuratively place a comforting hand on the seeker’s shoulder and assure them that everything is going to be just fine.

Stand up for the candidate as a witness:

The sponsor is required to be a witness on behalf of the candidate at the four rites of RCIA: **Rite of Acceptance, Rite of Sending, Rite of Election and the Easter Vigil.**

At the **Rite of Acceptance**, when the sponsor answers “yes” to the presider’s question about helping the seeker find and follow Christ, they are also testifying to the candidate’s “moral character, faith, and intention.” The rite says:

Before the rite [of acceptance] is celebrated, therefore, sufficient and

necessary time, as required in each case, should be set aside to evaluate and, if necessary, to purify the candidates' motives and dispositions. With the help of the sponsors (see no.10), catechists, and deacons, parish priests (pastors) have the responsibility for judging the outward indications of such dispositions. (43; emphasis added)

(Note that in this section of the rite, "candidate" means "candidate for baptism." However, the principles also apply to baptized candidates for reception into full communion or baptized candidates for confirmation.)

What is God – through the OCIA – asking of a seeker?

It helps if we remember we are not asked to **judge** the seeker's worthiness. Only God can do that. What we are **discerning** is the seeker's intention for taking on the mission of the gospel. Any of us who have been in this ministry for very long know that sometimes seekers ask to become Catholic for motives other than the gospel. If we do not do our very best to evangelize them and help them know what it truly means to encounter Jesus in their lives, we are not fulfilling our own baptismal mission.

Most potential sponsors may not feel qualified to judge the character of another person, and it helps the sponsor to remember they are not alone in the discernment process – that the sponsor is one of many voices within a community of disciples that together is discerning the readiness of the seeker to follow the way of the Cross.

The role of the sponsor in the initiation process is **crucial**. We cannot fully know, assist, and testify to the readiness of each candidate without these important members of the team.

Another role of the sponsor is to help the seeker grow in their relationship with God. Sponsors are essentially those people who love being Catholic. Sponsors need to constantly give to their seekers by being examples of the kind of Christian described by Saint Francis: "Who a person is before God is who they are meant to be—nothing more, nothing less." (cf. Writings of Saint Francis, Admonition 19). Seekers need to know that they are loved by God. Above all, pray for the person you are serving as a sponsor.

Excerpts from an article "Why the role of "sponsor" is so important in OCIA, by Nick Wagner August 19, 2021 .

The greatest gift during the Vigil that the candidates receive is the gift of the Eucharist, the culmination of their formation (OCIA 217), and the food that will sustain them as Catholic Christians.

There are many ways to celebrate the progress of faith for those candidates in the RCIA process. Sponsors may consider giving the candidate an **Easter basket** with a cross, a candle as a reminder of the "Light of Christ", a prayer resource or favorite spiritual book; prayer card; a *book resource* – *The Heart of Faith*.



Be creative! Be prayerful! Pray to the Holy Spirit who gives us the gifts of the Spirit so that you can give gifts that are meaningful and can give the candidate "a renewal of inspiration and of outlook."

If you have any questions, please contact Deacon Chuck or Linda Cooper at 815-985-3636 or 815-985-3637. Thank you for your consideration of this important ministry.