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A 'SPONSOR' DIFFERENTIATED FROM A 'GODPARENT'

Introduction

Among the many ministries of the Faithful in the Catholic Church are those of Sponsor and Godparent. These two ministries are often mistaken as one and the same. Therefore, they are used interchangeably even in some liturgical documents. However, when we look into the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and the Code of Canon Law, these appear to be two distinct ministries. There has been a misunderstanding that a Sponsor is a Godparent, and a Godparent is a Sponsor. The question is: Is there any difference between the two? If so, what is the difference? Surely, there is a difference. The difference is made clear when we look at the duties and roles of each of the two ministries. Below is a brief description of the two.

1. Sponsors

There seems to be confusion between who is a 'Sponsor' and who is a 'Godparent'. Therefore, it is important to turn to the Church documents which describe the duties of each of the two ministries of sponsors and godparents in the Church. There are various liturgical documents giving information on the question of who is a sponsor and who is a Godparent? Here are a few words from the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, RCIA, and Code of Canon Law. RCIA, n. 10, indicates clearly that sponsors are 'companions on the journey'. According to the RCIA, a sponsor is a faithful who accompanies an adult candidate seeking admission into the Order of Catechumenate. According to RCIA, "*sponsors are persons who have known and assisted the adult candidates and stand as witnesses to the candidates' moral character, faith and intention*" (RCIA, 10). Sponsors, not only serve to give testimony about the conversion experience of the catechumen but they also provide the necessary link to the community. From the Code of Canon law, "*the sponsors' duty is to see that the one confirmed acts as a true witness to Christ and faithfully fulfils the duties inherent in this Sacrament*" (Can. 892). In the words of Canon Law, a sponsor "*assists an adult in Christian initiation and help the baptised person to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and fulfil faithfully the obligations inherent in it*" (Can. 872).

2. Godparents

The liturgical norms require that at the Baptism of infants, children of catechetical age and on the day of the election of adult candidates for Christian initiation, each of them should have Godparents: Godmother, or Godfather, or both. According to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, “*Godparents are persons chosen by the candidates on the basis of example, good qualities, and friendship, delegated by the local Christian community and approved by the priest*” (RCIA, 11). For Christian initiation of adults, Godparents are to accompany the candidates on the day of election, at the celebration of the Sacraments of initiation and during the period of Mystagogy. It is the responsibility of Godparents to show the candidates how to practice the Gospel in personal and social life; to sustain the candidates in moments of hesitancy and anxiety; to bear witness, and to guide the candidates’ progress in the baptismal life. The RCIA states that “*Godparents fulfil those offices publicly from the day of the rite of election, when they give testimony to the community about the candidates*” (RCIA, 11). Thus, they should be chosen before the candidates’ election. They continue to be important during the time after reception of the Sacraments when the neophytes need to be assisted so that they remain true to their baptismal promises. In infant baptism, the Godparent, with the parents, presents the child for baptism. For infant baptism Godparents are chosen by the parents, or the person who takes their place, or by the priest. The duties of the Godparents are much greater during preparation for adult initiation than for infant initiation. It is permissible that the “*person who served as a sponsor may be chosen again as a Godparent for the periods of purification and enlightenment and of Mystagogy*” (RCIA, 10).

Requirements for one to be a Sponsor or a Godparent

The Code of Canon Law has laid down some requirements for a person to stand as a Sponsor or a Godparent in the Roman Catholic Church. These requirements are outlined in **Canon 874**.

They are as follows:

- a) Be designated by the one to be baptised; or by the parents or the person who takes their place; or, in their absence, by the priest; and have the aptitude and intention of fulfilling this function.
- b) Have completed the sixteenth year of age, unless the diocesan bishop has established another threshold age, or the priest has granted an exception for a just cause.
- c) Be a **catholic** who has been confirmed and has already received the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist and who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken up.

- d) Not be bound by any canonical penalty that has been legitimately imposed or declared.
- e) Not be the biological father or mother of the one to receive the Sacrament.

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