

*Diocese of Covington*  
*RCIA Policies and Guidelines Manual*  
**RCIA Sponsors**

**VI. RCIA Sponsors**

**A. What is a Sponsor?**

1. One encounters the use of both terms *sponsor* and *godparent* when referring to those who support a person seeking full initiation into the Catholic Church. The term *sponsor* is used more often because this encompasses all those who support the catechumens or candidates, while a *godparent* is a term used to describe a more specific subset of the sponsors, who fulfill a very specific role. In other words, every godparent is a sponsor, but not all sponsors will be godparents. A more detailed explanation follows. This manual will use the term *sponsor* throughout to refer to both sponsors and godparents, except where it is necessary to make a distinction.
2. A sponsor accompanies any person seeking full initiation into the Catholic Church.
  - a) Both unbaptized catechumens and baptized candidates must have a sponsor.
  - b) The sponsor should accompany the catechumen or candidate at catechetical sessions, all rites, and other RCIA events (e.g., retreats).
  - c) The sponsor does not need to attend the sessions when the catechumens and candidates are dismissed from Mass to reflect on the Word.
  - d) If desired, the catechumen or candidate may have someone other than the RCIA sponsor be the official witness of the Church at the reception of the Sacraments. (See section 3 below.)
3. The official witness of the Church when a person is baptized or confirmed is called a godparent. “It is a very ancient custom of the Church that adults are not admitted to baptism without godparents, members of the Christian Community who will assist [them] at least in the final preparation for baptism and after baptism will help them persevere in the faith and in their lives as Christians.” (RCIA General Introduction, 8)
  - a) The godparent may be the same person who served as the sponsor throughout the RCIA process, or a different person may be chosen (e.g., a close friend or family member) as a godparent.

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- b) There may be one or two godparents. If there are two, they must be one male and one female. “There is to be only one male sponsor or one female sponsor or one of each.”(CIC, c. 873)
- c) The godparent(s), if possible, should be present at all rites beginning with the rite of election / call to continuing conversion through the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation. If the godparent is not able to be present at any of these rites (e.g., due to illness or living in a distant location) a proxy may be used to stand in for the actual godparent.

**B. Discerning and Inviting Members of the Parish to be Sponsors**

1. Some inquirers will have a friend or family member in mind to be their sponsor (or godparent). The friend or family member should be interviewed to discern if they meet the minimum canonical requirements and other standards for sponsors and godparents as outlined in section B.3.a) below.
  - a) It is generally not a good idea to have a “significant other” (spouse, fiancé, boyfriend/girlfriend) be the primary sponsor. If this person wishes to accompany the catechumen or candidate on the journey, his or her participation should be encouraged, but another person from the parish should be assigned as sponsor or co-sponsor.
  - b) It is generally not a good idea to have a future in-law be the primary sponsor. This can put strain on the sponsor-candidate relationship or on the future familial relationship.
  - c) A parent cannot be the godparent. (CIC, c. 874.5) A parent may, however, accompany the catechumen or candidate as a sponsor throughout the RCIA process and then choose another person to be the godparent (official witness of the Church) at Baptism. All parties should be aware of this at the beginning of the process.
2. In many cases, the pastor and/or RCIA leader will need to find sponsors for the catechumens and candidates. These should be carefully discerned and selected from the parish faithful. An information form and interview are helpful in this discernment and selection. (See the Appendix of this section for examples of a “Sponsor Information Form” and “Interview Questions for a Potential Sponsor”.)

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3. All sponsors (including godparents) should be screened to be sure they meet the canonical requirements for sponsors, as well as some general standards:
  - a) Canonical requirements per c. 874: To be permitted to take on the function of a sponsor a person must:
    - (1) be designated by the one to be baptized, by the parents or the person who takes their place, or in their absence by the pastor or minister and have the aptitude and intention of fulfilling this function;
    - (2) be sixteen years of age, unless the diocesan bishop has established another age, or the pastor or minister has granted an exception for a just cause;
    - (3) 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 on;
    - (4) not be bound by any canonical penalty legitimately imposed or declared;
    - (5) not be the father or mother of the one to be baptized.
  - b) General standards (helpful in following c. 874.3 above):
    - (1) Fully initiated and active practicing Catholic;
    - (2) Active registered parishioner of the parish, in good standing (parish sponsors); sponsors chosen by the catechumen or candidate may belong to another parish, with their membership and active status verified by their pastor (See B.4. below.);
    - (3) Love for Christ and his Church;
    - (4) Basic understanding of the Church's teaching;
    - (5) Steadfast commitment to the teachings of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church;
    - (6) Evidence of a lived faith in one's personal life;
    - (7) Strong life of personal and communal prayer;
    - (8) Mature Christian understanding of the meaning of *servant* and *service*;

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- (9) Punctual, flexible, and prepared to make the required commitments;
  - (10) Good communication and listening skills;
  - (11) Openness to new relationships;
  - (12) Ability and willingness not only to share the faith, but to challenge the catechumen or candidate to live the faith;
  - (13) Prudent and able to keep confidentiality;
4. Sponsors who are not members of the parish should provide a letter of recommendation from their pastor, certifying that the canonical requirements are met.
  5. When interviewing potential sponsors, a job description should be provided, which lists these criteria as well as the specific commitments and responsibilities of being an RCIA sponsor. (See the Appendix for this section for an example of a “Sponsor Job Description”.)

**C. Training Sponsors**

1. Once sponsors are chosen and approved by the catechumen/candidate and the pastor and/or RCIA leader, they should be given instruction regarding their role and responsibilities.
2. It would be wise to train additional sponsors in the event that a sponsor becomes unable to fulfill his or her duties.
3. Training should be provided at the parish level. (Resources for sponsor training, including a “Sample Outline for Sponsor Training”, are available in the Appendix of this section. Further resources may be available in electronic format through the Diocesan Office of Catechesis and Formation).
4. Parish-based training should be conducted by the pastor, RCIA leader or a qualified RCIA team member.

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5. Handouts should be provided to the sponsors for their reference throughout the RCIA process. Some examples are:
    - a) Sponsor Job Description (See the Appendix for this section.)
    - b) Practical Suggestions for RCIA Sponsors (See the Appendix for this section.)
    - c) RCIA Godparent and Sponsor Handbook - Association for Catechumenal Ministry (available through Liturgy Training Publications)
    - d) Guide for Sponsors – Fourth Edition by Ronald Lewinski (available through Liturgy Training Publications)
- D. Ongoing Sponsor Formation** – Opportunities should be made available for ongoing spiritual formation of sponsors.
- E. The Sponsors’ Role in Discernment of the Catechumens’ and Candidates’ Conversion**
1. In addition to being a companion on the journey and a witness to the faith for the catechumens and candidates, the sponsors play a role in the discernment of their conversion and readiness at each step of the RCIA process. During the rites, the sponsors (godparents) are asked for their testimony regarding the person they are sponsoring.
  2. *Pre-catechumenate* – The sponsor should get to know the inquirer or candidate and provide “some experience of the company and spirit of Christians through contact with . . . members of the community.” (RCIA, no. 43) The RCIA leader should consult with the sponsor when discerning if there is evidence of “the first stirrings of repentance, a start to the practice of calling on God in prayer, a sense of the Church.” (RCIA, no. 43) These will indicate the readiness of the person to make the first step of the RCIA process at the rite of acceptance or rite of welcome. The sponsor should be prepared to introduce the catechumen or candidate to the Church during this rite.
  3. *Rite of Acceptance / Rite of Welcome* – Sponsors will be asked to make a commitment to the formation of the catechumens and candidates: “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?” (RCIA, nos. 53 and 513)

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4. *Catechumenate* – The sponsor should be very involved in the RCIA process, attending weekly catechetical sessions and other events, such as retreats or prayer opportunities. These will be opportunities for the sponsors to get to know the catechumens and candidates so they can assist the pastor and RCIA leader in discerning their readiness to continue to the next stage of the process.
5. *Rite of Sending* – This is an optional rite celebrated at the parish to send the catechumens and candidates to the bishop for the rite of election. The sponsors (godparents) will be asked to give testimony to the readiness of the catechumens and candidates to be sent to the bishop for election and to celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation. For catechumens: “I turn to you, godparents, for your testimony about these candidates. Have these catechumens taken their formation in the Gospel and in the Catholic way of life seriously? ... Have they given evidence of their conversion by the example of their lives? ... Do you judge them ready to be presented to this bishop for the rite of election?” (RCIA, no. 112). For candidates: “As God is your witness, do you consider these candidates ready to receive the Sacraments of Confirmation and Eucharist?” (RCIA, no. 440)
6. *Rite of Election and Call to Continuing Conversion* – Sponsors (godparents) will be called upon by the bishop to further testify to the lives and conversion of the catechumens and candidates. For catechumens: “Have they faithfully listened to God’s Word proclaimed by the Church? ... Have they responded to that word and begun to walk in God’s presence? ... Have they shared the company of their Christian brothers and sisters and joined with them in prayer? (RCIA, no. 131 B) For candidates: “Have they faithfully listened to the apostles’ instruction proclaimed by the Church? ... Have they come to a deeper appreciation of their Baptism, in which they were joined to Christ and his Church? ... Have they reflected sufficiently on the tradition of the Church, which is their heritage, and joined their brothers and sisters in prayer? ... Have they advanced in a life of love and service of others?” (RCIA, no. 453 B)

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7. *Purification and Enlightenment* – The sponsors (godparents) are called upon in the rite of election and call to continuing conversion to continue to assist them in their preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation. For the elect: “Godparents, you have spoken in favor of these catechumens: accept them now as chosen in the Lord and continue to sustain them through your loving care and example, until they come to share in the sacraments of God’s life.” (RCIA, no. 133) For the candidates: “Sponsors, continue to support these candidates with your guidance and concern. May they see in you a love for the Church and a sincere desire for doing good. Lead them this Lent to the joys of the Easter mysteries.” (RCIA, no. 454)
8. *Sacraments of Initiation* – The sponsors (godparents) stand with the elect and candidates as the official witnesses of the Church to their celebration of the Sacraments. Their presence signifies the love and support of the entire Church, not just on this occasion, but throughout their lives as Christians.
9. *Mystagogy / Neophyte Year (and beyond)* – The godparents and sponsors continue to have a role in the lives of the newly initiated. They should maintain contact with the neophytes and continue to be a guide and a witness to the faith. “Godparents ... assist the candidates ... and after Baptism will help them persevere in the faith and in their lives as Christians” (RCIA General Introduction, no. 8). “[Godparents] 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.” (RCIA General Introduction, no. 11)

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