

# WHO SHOULD SERVE AS A SPONSOR?

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The importance of the sponsor's role in the sacraments of baptism and matrimony cannot be overstated. The Church expects that the person who serves as sponsor be a practicing Orthodox Christian whose life corresponds to its teachings. Therefore, someone who has married outside the Orthodox Church or abandoned its teachings may not serve as sponsor.

To understand the Church's view, it is necessary to know the sponsor's role in context, particularly at the baptism. A Sponsor's presence at baptism dates to the early Church when initiation of adults into the Faith was common. It was the sponsor who guaranteed the sincere intentions and orthodox belief of the person about to be baptized. The sponsor, then, had to be a person of integrity with credible testimony and a real commitment to instructing another in the faith. With the appearance and prevalence of infant baptism, the sponsor's role has become purely functional. Now, all that is required is the mere recitation of the creed in place of the infant and the formal promise to nurture it in the Orthodox faith. Obviously, even the ceremonial role assumed by sponsors makes it absolutely necessary that they be identifiable Orthodox Christians. Consequently, non-Christians, non-Orthodox, schismatics and those excommunicated are forbidden to be sponsors. Also forbidden to act as sponsors, but for different reasons, are the parents, clergy, minors, the mentally impaired and persons of ill repute.

Great care should be taken in selecting a sponsor for the sacraments of baptism or matrimony. Although the original role of the sponsor may now be perfunctory, restoration of some of the sponsor's spiritual responsibilities is certainly in order and long overdue. This holds true especially for the sponsor at baptism. The person entrusted with the sacred responsibility of professing the Orthodox faith in behalf of one about to be baptized ought to exemplify all that this entails. Such expectation will help assure a special kind of relationship not only between the sponsor and godchild, but also between the sponsor and the godchild's parents. Sponsorial relationships arising from baptism and matrimony should serve to expand one's spiritual bonds with others. The more persons from a community engaged in a spiritual commitment, the more spiritually alive and aware that community can become.

Such relationships, when pursued properly, can serve to foster spiritual renewal in our parishes. However, such a goal is defeated when one restricts the choice of sponsors to blood relatives or to those with whom one is already related spiritually. There may be instances when this is unavoidable, but it should never be the norm. Let us, for example, cite the case of a couple who has sponsored one or more children of the same family as godparents. It is not uncommon for such a couple, when they have their own children, to ask the parents of their godchildren to sponsor their children. However, to do so is to forfeit the opportunity to increase the number of members in one's spiritual family. Furthermore, it gives the impression of being closed, self-absorbed and

exclusive; conditions incompatible with the all-embracing openness expected of a Christian.

In the same way, while it is the natural inclination to ask siblings and other blood relations to be sponsors, this, too, restricts a person's spiritual family to those with whom one already has close bonds. It would be more appropriate to nurture a spiritual relationship with those who are not one's kin. We should not perpetuate the notion that sponsorship is simply a social manner. On the contrary, an Orthodox Christian should carefully select sponsors whose counsel and support can be trusted as godly, pious and faithful to the traditions of the Orthodox Church. In this way, one finds spiritual stability in troubled times and is bound into a measure of accountability to the sponsor. The canonical basis of who should be a sponsor is found in ecclesiastical custom. Behind this custom there exist reasons, which make it understandable. Following custom out of empty habit, without explanation or understanding, contributes to one's disenchantment and eventually leads to the violation of ecclesiastical practice. We offer the above explanation in the interest of preserving the long-standing and tested ecclesiastical practice regarding sponsors.