

Number of Sponsors

Canon 873 — There is to be only one male sponsor or one female sponsor or one of each.

The canon designates the number of sponsors permitted at the celebration of both adult and infant baptism. It allows for either one sponsor, male or female, or two, one male and one female.²⁰⁹ The rite of adult baptism always speaks of the sponsor in the singular, indicating perhaps a preference for only one sponsor. The *Rite of Baptism for Children* states more clearly, "Each child may have a godfather and a godmother; the word 'godparents' is used in the *Rite* to describe both."²¹⁰ This indicates that the *Rite* seems to prefer that two sponsors be present at the baptism. In any case, the canon allows for both of these preferences. The use of the term "godparents" rather than "sponsors" makes obvious the stipulation that if two are present, they should not be of the same sex.

The canon does not permit more than two sponsors. This may call for some pastoral sensitivity in those cultures in which it is traditional for more than two people to be designated as godparents or sponsors. In such a case it is advisable for the minister to consult with the parents prior to the baptism and determine which two names (one male, one female) will be inscribed in the baptismal register.

Prerequisites for Sponsors

Canon 874 — §1. To be permitted to take on the function of 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° have completed the sixteenth year of age, unless the diocesan bishop has established

²⁰⁹Canon 684, §1 of the Eastern code places no limitation on the number of sponsors.

²¹⁰*RBaptC* 7, *DOL* 2290.

- 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.

§2. A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community is not to participate except together with a Catholic sponsor and then only as a witness of the baptism.

The first paragraph lists five prerequisites for exercising the office of sponsor. First, the sponsor must be properly designated. In infant baptism, the choice of sponsors belongs first to the parents, then to those who take the parents' place, and finally to the parish priest. For adult baptism, the adult himself or herself designates the sponsor.

Second, the sponsor must be at least sixteen years old. However, the diocesan bishop may determine a different age. In individual cases, the pastor or the minister of the sacrament can, for a just reason, make an exception either to the canonical age or to the age established by the diocesan bishop.

Third, because of the theological interrelatedness of the sacraments of initiation, the sponsor must be a fully initiated Catholic. Since the sponsor's role extends beyond the ceremony of baptism and includes the responsibility "to help the baptized person to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations inherent in it" (c. 872), it is only fitting that the sponsor be a Catholic who has already received the sacraments of confirmation and the Eucharist. But even a fully initiated Catholic may be restricted from exercising the office of sponsor if he or she does not live the faith in a manner that is in keeping with the responsibilities of this office. Thus, people who do not participate regularly in the Eucharist or who are liv-

ing in marriages not recognized by the Church may not be qualified to function as sponsors. Fourth, those who labor under a declared or imposed canonical penalty are barred from serving as sponsors.

Fifth, parents are prohibited from being sponsors of their own children. The parents are primarily responsible for raising the child in the faith.²¹¹ The godparents' role is simply to assist them. However, the role of the sponsor becomes more critical when the parents fail in their responsibility. Thus, the canon clearly distinguishes between the role of parent and that of godparent. The canon does not, however, repeat the 1917 code's disqualification of religious, priests, and deacons and spouses of adult candidates from undertaking the office of sponsor.²¹²

The second paragraph permits a non-Catholic Christian to exercise the role of a Christian witness in the celebration of baptism. The witness does not replace the sponsor. The canon responds to the pastoral situation in which, often for merely social reasons, the parents want to choose as a sponsor a relative or close friend who is Christian but not Catholic. The canon tries to balance the tension between the canonical and sacramental role of the sponsor and a merely social understanding of this office:

For reasons of kinship or friendship, a Christian of another Communion, having a convinced faith in Christ, can be admitted along with the Catholic godparent as a Christian witness to a baptism. In similar circumstances, a Catholic can fulfill this role for a member of a Community separated from us. In these cases the responsibility for the Christian upbringing of the candidate falls *per se* on the godparent who is a member of the Church or Ecclesial Community in which the infant is baptized.²¹³

The canon repeats the stipulation of the *Ecumenical Directory* that the Christian witness may function only with a Catholic sponsor, that is, with a sponsor who meets the canonical prerequisites for the office.

The second paragraph does not make explicit allowance for a member of a separated Eastern church to serve as a sponsor, and not merely as a Christian witness, at the baptism of a Roman Catholic, even though this explicit recognition was proposed during the drafting of the present code.²¹⁴ Canon 685, §3 of the Eastern code does, however, explicitly permit non-Catholic members of Eastern churches to be sponsors at Catholic baptisms. The 1967 *Ecumenical Directory*, whose provisions are still in force, also allows a separated Eastern Christian to undertake the role of sponsor:

It is permissible for a just reason to accept one of the faithful of an Eastern Church as godparent along with a Catholic godparent at the baptism of a Catholic infant or adult, as long as the Catholic upbringing of the one being baptized is provided for and there is assurance that the person is fit to be a godparent. A Catholic invited to stand as a godparent at a baptism in an Eastern Church is not forbidden to do so. In such cases the duty of looking out for the Christian upbringing of the baptized falls first upon the godparent belonging to the Church in which the child is baptized.²¹⁵

It is not permissible, however, for a member of a separated Eastern church to function as a sponsor in a Catholic baptism unless there is also a Catholic sponsor.²¹⁶ The Eastern code makes this point clear in canon 685, §3.

²¹⁴ See *Comm 15* (1983) 230–231.

²¹⁵ *Ecum Dir* 48.

²¹⁶ See J. Cuneo, "Canon 874: Members of Greek Orthodox Church as Sponsors at Catholic Baptism," in *CLSA Advisory Opinions* (Washington, D.C.: CLSA, 1995), 261–264.

²¹¹ *SC* 67. See also *RBaptC* 5, *DOL* 2289.

²¹² See *CIC* 765, 3° and 766, 4°, 5°.

²¹³ *Ecum Dir* 57.