Canon Law: Guidelines for “Sponsor Couples” for Matrimony  9-4-2011

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Canon Law (Canon 872-874) & Commentary articulates the responsibilities of Sponsors (Godparents) and the prerequisites for selecting them for Baptism. Can these canons help us define the responsibilities and prerequisites for Sponsor Couples for those preparing for Matrimony?

1 – What Canon Law & Commentary tells us about sponsorship for Baptism.

The terms used in the Latin text are patrinus and matrina. However, the Canon Law Society of America uses the English word “Sponsor” for this office (rather than “godfather” and “godmother”). Most Catholics who are not canon lawyers tend to understand that ~ in English ~ it “makes sense” to speak of the Sponsors for infants as “godparents”, and to speak of the Sponsors for adults as “Sponsors.” However, it is more complicated than that because the Rite of Christian Initiation uses the term “sponsor” for an office that is quite distinct from that of the “godparent”:

Any candidate seeking admission as a catechumen is accompanied by a sponsor, that is, a man or woman who has known and assisted the candidate and stands as a witness to the candidate's moral character, faith, and intention. It may happen that this sponsor is not the one who will serve as godparent (patrinus, matrina) for the periods of purification, enlightenment, and mystagogy; in that case, another person takes the sponsor's place in the role of godparent.

But on the day of election, at the celebration of the sacraments, and during the period of mystagogy the candidate is accompanied by a godparent (patrinus, matrina). This is a person chosen by the candidate on the basis of example, good qualities, and friendship, delegated by the local Christian community, and approved by the priest. [Rite of Christian Initiation]

According to the Rite, the offices of sponsor and godparent are distinct. The sponsor is one who assists the catechumen during the initial stages of the journey, while the godparent accompanies the candidate at the celebration of the rite of election, at the baptism, and during the period of post-baptismal catechesis.

In presenting the responsibilities of sponsors (godparents), canon 872 mentions first the responsibility unique to adult baptism, then the responsibility unique to infant baptism, and finally two additional responsibilities common to both.

The responsibility unique to adult baptism is "to assist an adult in Christian initiation." This "assistance" is explained more fully in the Rite: to assist an adult "for the periods of purification, enlightenment, and mystagogy," that is, for the final stages of initiation. The responsibility of the sponsor at the baptism of an infant is shared conjointly with the parents: "to present an infant for baptism." Responsibilities
common to both adult and infant baptism are: to assist the one baptized in living the Christian life and in fulfilling faithfully the obligations flowing from it. The Rite expands on these roles:

It is the responsibility of the godparent to show the candidate how to practice the Gospel in personal and social life and to be for the candidate a bearer of Christian witness and a guardian over growth in the baptismal life. Chosen before the candidate’s election, the godparent fulfills this office publicly from the day of the election, testifying to the community about the candidate. The godparents continue to be important during the time after reception of the sacraments when the neophyte needs to be assisted to remain true to the baptismal promises. [Rite of Christian Initiation]

2 – What might we take from what Canon Law says about Sponsors for Baptism that can help us articulate the responsibilities of Sponsor Couples for Matrimony?

- It seems appropriate to use the term “sponsor couple” in English to convey the responsibilities of married couples who are trained to assist those preparing for Christian marriage. [See How to best translate “sponsor couple” in Spanish for an explanation of why it may be best to use the Spanish words: pareja aparadrinadora.”]
- The articulation of 2 different offices ~ sponsor and godparent ~ has practical value when there may be a good reason that a sponsor cannot ~ for whatever reason ~ be present and fulfill the responsibilities of godparent. However, this distinction of different offices is not likely to be pastorally necessary/useful for “sponsor couples” because the goal of establishing the ministry of “sponsor couples” is that they begin a relationship with the couple preparing for marriage during the time of immediate preparation for marriage and then continue to follow-up with the newly married couple during the first year(s) of their marriage. Pastoral experience demonstrates that it is the relationship established during the time of immediate preparation for marriage that provides the foundation for continuing the relationship beyond the wedding date into the first year(s) of marriage. To have a “sponsor couple” assist the couple preparing for marriage up to the day of the wedding, and then try to introduce another “godparent couple” who would follow-up beyond the wedding ceremony (rather than the “sponsor couple”) would seem to be an unworkable concept. It is true, however, that once the couple is married they surely have the freedom to establish a relationship with one or more other couples (who were not their “sponsor couple”) whom they find useful as a “support system.”
- The responsibilities of a “sponsor” for an adult catechumen provide are “to assist an adult in Christian initiation” by assisting him/her through “the periods of purification, enlightenment, and mystagogy.” It is the responsibility of the “sponsor” to assist the newly baptized person in living the Christian life and in fulfilling faithfully the obligations flowing from it. This expectation that the “sponsor” will “show the candidate how to practice the Gospel in personal and social life and to be for the candidate a bearer of Christian witness.....and continue to be important during the time after reception of the sacraments when the neophyte needs to be assisted to remain true to him/her baptismal promises.” This seems to provide a clear model for the responsibilities of “sponsor couples.”
3 - It is critical, however, to point out that there are likely to be significant differences between adult catechumens (making an adult decision to choose to be baptized and live the Catholic Faith) and couples who are preparing for marriage in the Church. These differences will need to be taken into account because they will affect the criteria for selecting and training couples to be effective “sponsor couples” for those preparing for Christian marriage.

- **Difference #1** – Adults who choose to become catechumens can be presumed to be making an informed decision to begin a process of formation that will involve significant self-change (personal conversion). The parish leaders of the RCIA process can speak to the whole group of catechumens about personal conversion with the assumption that everyone is ready and willing to learn how to make the changes that will be needed to live as a disciple of Jesus. In contrast, those who seek the sacrament of Matrimony are often unaware that to correctly live the vows of Christian marriage they will have to be willing to begin ~ and continue every day of their marriage ~ a process of self-change (personal conversion). The parish leaders of the marriage preparation process are wise to take into account that couples (or individuals of some couples) are unaware that, while they are consciously asking for the sacrament of Matrimony, they are also assuming that they can continue living their current values/commitments without knowing their current values/commitments are ~ often ~ in contradiction to the values/commitment of Matrimony. The reality does not mean that the couples seeking Matrimony are “bad.” It usually means that they are “invincibly ignorant” of the gap between their person intuitions about Christian marriage and the formal teaching of the Catholic Church. Those who are going to be sponsor couples need to be trained so they can deal with engaged couples “where they are at” (unaware of a need for personal conversion) and in an adult and respectful manner coax them ~ by sharing their own journey of learning the importance of personal conversion ~ to begin a life long journey of person/couple ongoing conversion in the living of Matrimony.

- **Difference #2** – In Catholic tradition, the adult Catechumen is allowed/encouraged to select his/her sponsor and if the catechumen does not know someone who can fulfill this responsibility then the parish usually takes the lead to find a qualified Sponsor. A difference in regard to the selection of a sponsor couple for Matrimony is that the leaders of the marriage preparation process know that there are 2 factors that need to be addresses in the selection of a sponsor couple that make it much more practical that the parish leaders select the sponsor couple for each particular engaged couple. Factor 1 – The sponsor couple must know and relate to the engaged couple as “equal in value/dignity”….the sponsor couple will never “take sides” in dealing with a couple they sponsor. For this reason, it is almost always best that the sponsor couple have no previous relationship with either of the individuals engaged to be married. So family and friends of the engaged couple are usually NOT appropriate to be a sponsor couple for them. Factor 2 – The engaged couple is unaware of the level of intimacy that is likely to develop between them and their sponsor couple. The fact that there is no previous history of relationship actually provides the opportunity for a deeper level of honestly/intimacy between the two couples. These two factors make it a better pastoral strategy ~ most of the time ~ for the parish leaders to select the sponsor couple for each engaged couple.