4 Criteria for selecting couples to serve as sponsor couples.

Email from Tom Farrell:

Fr. Rob

_Hope you can provide some clarity for me. The question has come up: “Who makes a good Sponsor Couple for a particular couple?” In baptism it is pretty clear. Canon Laws 872-874 spell out how a sponsor is chosen and what qualifications they should have. But that is not the case with marriage sponsors, nor does it need to be as definitive, in my opinion._

_Recently, we had a couple ask if her life-long mentors could be their sponsor couple. Their mentor couple has a good Catholic marriage and plan to be trained as a "sponsor couple". We thought it was fine._

_In asking other parishes what they do, we got some pretty interesting responses! Different parishes had one or more of these guidelines: 1 - No couple less than 5 years married. 2 - No non-Catholics. 3 - No couple that knows the engaged couple._

_While I agree some guidelines are important, I think some of these are too restrictive. I looked on your website but didn’t find anything. Will you give me your thoughts on guidelines for sponsor couples?_

Tom Farrell
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Tom,

I recently wrote a document to clarify my own definition of a “sponsor couple” using the information in Canon law. The Rite of Christian Initiation uses 2 terms (godparent & sponsor) in somewhat different ways so that an adult catechumen could have BOTH a sponsor and a godparent. My own definition of a "sponsor couple" includes some of BOTH elements. See attachment: “Canon Law: Guidelines for Sponsor Couples for Matrimony.”

As for _criteria for selecting and training prospective sponsor couples and then assigning them to particular engaged couples_, I offer the following:

1 – How many years should they be married before they can be trained to be a sponsor couple?

While I understand that the parish leaders want to be confident their sponsor couples have enough experience of Matrimony to be credible/effective in their ministry to engaged couple, I avoid applying arbitrary norms, such as, “They must be married at least 5 years.” I know more than one sponsor couple who began sponsoring when they were married less than 5 years....because it was clear to me they were especially qualified (perhaps because they were in a stable second marriage) to assist couples who were preparing for marriage after they were divorced or experienced the death of a spouse.
2 – Can interchurch & interfaith couples be sponsor couples?

I say “Yes.” I know a number of interchurch couples who are terrific sponsor couples.....and I tend to think they are ideal sponsors for engaged couples who are of different faith traditions......I would have a number of criteria for selecting such couples, but I see them as a "plus" rather than as couples to be disqualified as sponsor couples. I do hasten to add that I deliberately used the term "interchurch" because I would not select a couple in which one or both of them are clearly committed to being a "non practic ing" person in whatever their faith tradition is (or was).

3 – What about the use of a sponsor couple who knows the engaged couple?

While I agree that it is probably best that the engaged couple have no previous relationship with their sponsors, I have made exceptions to this "rule" for what I thought were good reasons. I think the critical element here is that the sponsor couple must be committed to relate to the engaged couple as a "couple;" they must be committed to never taking sides (when a couple has a disagreement). Also, when the sponsor couple is already part of an engaged person's life and relationships, it could make it difficult for the sponsor couple to keep everything "confidential." I know a couple who insisted on being sponsored by the girl's uncle and his wife.....and I could not find a good reason to say "no" because I knew the family very well and thought the uncle and aunt would be a good sponsor couple. [Note: This question may be especially relevant in a small town or rural area where “everybody knows everybody.”]

4 – Additional qualifications I require of those trained to be sponsor couples are:

1 - Willingness to do the program the way it is designed. It is intended to be a FLEXIBLE program, but there is a structure that must be followed unless there are important reasons to do it differently.

2 - Willingness to NOT introduce content that contradicts the text of For Better and For Ever. This is very important because pastors/bishops need to be confident they know what is being shared with their engaged couples.

3 - Willingness to make a commitment to FOLLOW - UP beyond the wedding. I am getting more and more insistent on this point. While the newly married couple has the freedom to reject their efforts to follow-up, my thinking is that the sponsor couple who fails to work at the follow-up part of this ministry ought to be honest enough to cease being a sponsor couple into the future. Today we know too much about the challenges of marriage to think that ANY marriage preparation program can end with the wedding and call itself an adequate marriage preparation program. Efforts to create programs for newly married couples are to be encouraged, but I have serious reasons to think these will never be adequately successful. And even if they become very successful, I am still going to preach that "sponsorship" is a commitment that has a starting point....but it has no ending point. (Exactly like being a sponsor/god parent for baptism.)

Peace and Love,

Rob