9 Sponsor Couples: Peer to Peer education/formation that benefits engaged couples and the sponsor couple themselves.     Rob Ruhnke

1 - The particular value of “sponsorship.”

I think there is a critical insight about sponsor couples that motivates me to keep up the effort to promote this method of marriage preparation. Recently I have been engaged in a conversation/dialogue by email with some folks in Ireland that has make it even more clear to me that many/most people do not understand the difference I define between "sponsorship" and "leader/teacher/facilitator" (or whatever other word might be used).

I use the word "sponsor" to define the role/task of one who passes on a (faith) tradition within the context of a peer relationship...and whose fundamental authority flows from his/her praxis of the (faith) tradition that he/she is consciously trying to pass on (or share with) to the new candidate. While a sponsor could also be a highly educated person and even have achieved advanced academic degrees in the faith tradition that he/she is attempting to pass on to another person, the art of sponsorship relies on the ability of the sponsor to establish a peer relationship with the candidate and thereby avoid the negative consequences of a relationship in which the candidate views the "sponsor" as a person who is “superior” (to the candidate) in wisdom/holiness. Why is this important? Because the goal is for the candidate to live the faith (not merely have an intellectual understanding of it) and is more likely to achieve this praxis when the candidate becomes self motivated as a consequence of the relationship with the sponsor...i.e. "I can do this because my sponsor has made it clear to me that he/she is enough like me that I now know I can also live the (faith) tradition as effectively as he/she does. I have no reason to say I cannot live the (faith) tradition because I am not as gifted/blessed as my sponsor (because he/she is “superior” to me)."

I think this is the heart of the Catholic use of the word "sponsor" as traditionally used in Baptism and Confirmation. I think it is also related to the Catholic concept of martyr/witness in that the central issue is the effective living of the faith tradition, and not academic certification (degrees) or titles (professor/priest/bishop).

2 – Why has “sponsorship” not been incorporated into most marriage preparation programs?

Marriage preparation began to develop in North America (where it has probably been worked at more consciously/thoroughly than in other areas of the world) in the 1940s, before the role of the adult sponsor in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults was re-developed after Vatican Council II. Prior to Vatican Council II, the Church tended to think of catechesis ~ and marriage preparation ~ as a process best accomplished by trained teachers (experts) and education/formation was a “one way” street (the teacher taught, the student learned). This is probably the simplest explanation for why marriage preparation programs ~ beginning in the 1940s ~ did not include the concept of the "sponsor." The first efforts to develop the role of “sponsor couples” began with Carmody/Ruhnke in 1974, just after the RCIA was being introduced to parishes. Even though the leaders of the "marriage preparation
movement” have always placed a high value on the inclusion of married couples into the parish/diocesan marriage preparation teams, marriage preparation programs have been founded on and designed within educational models and assumptions that rely on the theory that the engaged couples are lacking certain information that the teacher(s) have gained from a combination of life experience and academic study, which is why the couples are expected to become students of the teachers. [Note: engaged couples do not necessarily choose to become students when they take part in marriage preparation programs, but that continues to be the hope of this model of marriage preparation!] It can also be pointed out that the key leaders of the marriage preparation movement were celibate clerics who could never function as "sponsors" in the literal sense of the term (because they were not married and not peers to the engaged), and this could easily explain why these leaders did not have a clear recognition that the educational assumptions/models used in the marriage preparation programs might be missing something valuable.

It is also worth noting that Marriage Encounter/Engaged Encounter/Cursillo/Beginning Experience/etc. are programs that made efforts to incorporate "ordinary lay people" (not celibates and not clerics) into the educational model and even developed some ideas about "peer to peer ministry" and "witness." HOWEVER, while these efforts were surely a step forward (beyond) the teacher/student model, they were an effort to improve the teacher/student model but did not replace it with a new model. "Sponsorship" is an effort to put in place a new model of education/formation. It is an example of “peer to peer” education/formation.

3 – The marriage enrichment effect for the sponsor couple.

The most consistent feedback coming from experienced sponsor couples is their claim that they get more (benefit) from the process of sponsorship than the engaged couples. I have been hearing this feedback for more than 30 years, and I continue to try to understand exactly why this seems to be true.

Here is my current theory.

Marriage experts are consistent in saying that most married couples do not get involved in marriage enrichment programs and this is the primary reason for the high divorce rate. In other words, the experts know that most marriages could be “saved” today, but most couples are not willing/able to do the kind of “work” that will make their marriage effective. Even though most people are wise enough to do maintenance on their homes and cars and even get regular medical check-ups, at the same time most people are highly resistant to doing maintenance on their marriage...even when they are having obvious marital problem. This aversion to marriage maintenance (“marriage enrichment”) is so prevalent in North America that the even the most successful marriage enrichment program ~ Marriage Encounter ~ reached only a small percentage of married couples¹. And this highly regarded program never achieved more than getting couples to just one weekend. Even though the program

¹ It must be said that most of the lay couples who became most involved in ministry in the 1970s/1980s acknowledge Marriage Encounter as the experience that motivated them to “work on” their marriages and get involved in ministry to others in their parishes and dioceses. But when you compare this number of couples to the total number of Catholic married couples, it is still a very small number.
promotes the necessity of on-going support and follow-up programs, most couples never come back for a “refresher” experience. On the other hand, sponsor couples have the built in benefit of doing marriage enrichment of their own marriage every time they go through the process of sponsoring an engaged couple. It is interesting to note that they do this marriage enrichment not because they are choosing to focus on their own marriage enrichment, but only because they are willing to assist the engaged couple. The enrichment to their own marriage is an “award” they obtain because they were willing to make the sacrifice of ministering to the engaged couple!

My thought is that it is the motivation to serve others (i.e. the engaged couple) that provides the energy (grace) to overcome the aversion to vulnerability that marriage enrichment necessarily entails.