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Introduction: You Have Been Chosen

“It is a very ancient custom of the Church that adults are not admitted to Baptism without godparents.” (RCIA GENERAL INTRODUCTION, 8)

FROM ITS EARLIEST BEGINNINGS, the Church has asked its members to be godparents for adults preparing to be baptized. This is still the case today for adults seeking Baptism. In addition, sponsors fulfill many of the same roles as godparents to adults baptized in other Christian faiths. Catholics who have not been fully initiated also benefit from having sponsors.

The Church has been given a mission by Christ: “The Lord’s missionary mandate is ultimately grounded in the eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity: ‘The Church on earth is by her nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, she has as her origin the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.’ The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love” (CCC 850, quoting Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, 2).

Your role as a godparent or sponsor flows from your own initiation into Christ through Baptism. When you were baptized, you received the graces to participate in the mission Christ gave to his Church.

We can cooperate with baptismal graces only when we understand who we are as men and women created in the image of God. We image God’s unity in our individuality — there is no one else like any of us, and there never will be. We image the inner life of the Trinity of Divine persons when we love others for love’s sake, and generously give of ourselves to others. When we bring Christ’s love into a relationship, we take on an “apostolate of influence,” cooperating with the Holy Spirit in his work of transforming lives. As a member of Christ’s Mystical Body, the Church, you have a role and purpose that *no one but you can fulfill*. Being a godparent or sponsor allows you to help build up the Kingdom of Heaven, today and now, in a way that God has intended for you alone.

If you have accepted the role of a godparent or sponsor, this *Handbook* is for you. It will help you to understand what the Church expects of you, and will assist you, with the help of God’s grace, to fulfill your responsibilities as godparent or sponsor with assurance and joy.

¹ *Letters of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, letter to her sister Céline, October 15, 1889.



Most of the faults committed by good people
arise from their not keeping a sufficiently steadfast
recollection of the presence of God.⁷

~ St. Francis de Sales

Frequently Asked Questions

What If the Person I'm Serving . . . ?

You are not likely to experience every situation below, but you should expect that there will be times when the person you are serving experiences problems, or that you experience a problem in your relationship. Your parish clergy and RCIA leader normally are experienced in coping with problem situations and will handle these concerns with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the virtue of prudence.

Although you are not expected to handle major problems alone, you should have confidence in your calling and in yourself, because the Holy Spirit is ever ready to help you with the graces needed to fulfill your responsibilities. Even during major difficulties and crises, it is helpful to give as generously as possible of yourself as a friend and comforter. One thing to remember is that your role is primarily to be a companion on the journey, not a judge or teacher. You are not a counselor or therapist. Some knowledge of your catechumen's/candidate's heart will come as a natural result of a well-ordered, prayerful friendship. That is all that is required; everything else will fall into place.

. . . doesn't want anyone to know he/she is beginning the RCIA process?

This is not unusual. Respect the person's wishes. There may be reasons why he/she does not wish to make public his/her participation in the RCIA process. With the Rites of Acceptance and Welcoming comes a public statement of intent to pursue membership in the Catholic Church. Until that statement is made, it is inappropriate to tell anyone about your inquirer's participation in the RCIA process.

. . . tells me something that I think the RCIA leader should know?

Respecting the trust you have developed, you should explain that this information should be discussed with either a parish priest or the RCIA leader. If the person you are serving is hesitant to approach the priest or leader directly, ask permission to do so on his/her behalf. Ignoring a serious problem is not an option. Once your leader knows what the situation is, he/she will take over from there to ensure that appropriate help is offered. Your leader may also see to it that additional prayer intercessors are assigned to the person you are serving.

⁷ *Maxims of St. Francis de Sales*, as cited in *Every Day with Saint Francis de Sales*, November 30.

... experiences a spiritual crisis?

Periods of doubt, uncertainty, anxiety, and “cold feet” are normal. When this happens, you should encourage the person you are serving to seek the Lord’s help in prayer, and also intensify your own prayers for him/her.

Conversion to Christ cannot occur without affecting the very depths of a person. Because conversion often brings with it significant life changes, you should expect that spiritual crises may arise. You should welcome the guidance of your RCIA leader in helping the person you are serving through the crisis.

Part of being a godparent or sponsor is “walking with” the person you are serving during these times. It is all right to allow the person to experience distress. You cannot “fix” every crisis; in fact, the crisis may be necessary for conversion to take place.

... is living with someone, outside of marriage (cohabiting)?

It is not at all uncommon for a person to be living with someone to whom he/she is not married, or to be living in an irregular marriage (a previous marriage that had ended in divorce, but no decree of nullity had been sought or granted). Your role is that of prayer, encouragement, emotional support, and trying to obtain or provide help when appropriate. In some cases, a godparent or sponsor has facilitated a separation of living arrangements by providing a temporary room in his/her home. (Keep in mind that you can only do what is possible in light of your resources and situation.)

... has a problem of persistent and serious vice?

The person you are serving may be using contraception, or may have a persistent and serious vice, such as blasphemy and profanity, alcohol or drug abuse, addiction to gambling, addiction to pornography, casual sexual relations, or homosexual behavior, to name a few. You should not ignore the situation, although the complete working out of it is likely to require help beyond your capability to provide. Also remind the person you are serving that all of us are sinners and in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness, that conquering a vice or ongoing sinful situation is not easy, and that no sin is unforgivable. With God’s grace, accompanied by prayer, persistent effort, and outside assistance where appropriate, any change is possible. In these situations, listening, respect, gentleness, and patience are merciful; being judgmental or looking the other way are not.

... can't accept a Church teaching, or rejects the authority of the Church?

The person you are serving may, with complete sincerity, be unable to understand a doctrine or accept it. This should not be reason for dismay on your part. The Church encourages inquirers and participants to wrestle with the truth. This is far better than the alternatives of ignoring or rejecting a teaching!

You can help the person you are serving, first, by going back to the basic question of who, or what, is the Church. If the Church is what she says she is, the Church founded by Jesus Christ, then all of her teaching must be true. Otherwise, how could anyone *know* what is true and what is false? God would not leave his beloved children in this quandary.

Second, you can suggest that the person you are serving sincerely pray to Jesus, echoing the cry of the desperate father of an afflicted son, *"I believe; help my unbelief!"* (Mk 9:24). Your pastor may determine that this individual may still be permitted to receive the sacraments of initiation, provided that he/she will continue to try to understand the "troublesome" doctrine, for the enlightenment given by sacramental grace may be the source of resolving the difficulty.

... expects to have, or does have, difficulty with his/her family?

The person you are serving might experience, or fear, the reaction of a spouse, parent, or other loved one to his/her desire to seek Baptism or to become a Catholic. From the beginning of Christianity, the decision to embrace the Church has put people at risk of loss of family, friends, and sometimes employment, or even life itself. Jesus once compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a "pearl of great price" for which a man might sell everything he has to own it (see Mt 13:45-46).

Anxiety about how family or friends might react may not be warranted; in some cases, the opportunity to explain what the Catholic Church is and what she teaches might be sufficient to undo prejudice or bias, or even to open the door to genuine curiosity and interest by loved ones.

This will not be the case, however, for every person who enters the Christian initiation process. The person you are serving may bring home enthusiasm and excitement, and have cold water thrown on it. He/she may be subjected to offers of anti-Catholic literature, a request to sit down with the pastor of his/her current Christian denomination, or even termination of friendships and cold hostility from family members. Such a situation calls for your strong, loving support, as well as the friendship of the entire RCIA team.

You should make yourself available to listen to the person's bewilderment, sorrow, and grief. Your RCIA leader can make sure that he/she can receive sympathy and counsel from others in the parish who have gone through similar experiences, and may still be living with their own unhealed anguish.

It may also be necessary to remind the person you are serving that opposition from family members and friends is usually motivated by love and an earnest effort to act in his/her best interest. You can offer practical help by giving information on how to respond to specific arguments against the Church or her teachings; your RCIA leader can help you to do this. You might also want to make available stories of saints who have faced opposition, such as St. Monica or St. Perpetua, for comfort and encouragement. Your RCIA leader will likely make a special effort to invite family members and friends to the Rites of the Christian initiation process, and you can make yourself known to them in loving welcome.

This is also the time to make sure that your catechumen/candidate knows that Christ's call might, if efforts to gain acceptance fail, necessitate loss of family relationships and friendships. Becoming a Catholic is not for the fainthearted. Christ told his followers: *"He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me"* (Mt 10:37). Jesus may be calling the person you are serving to bear great loss for his sake; but the apostle James reminded his readers: *"Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness"* (Jas 1:2-3).

If, after all attempts to assist and support your catechumen/candidate, he/she decides to withdraw from the RCIA process, do not be distressed. Your efforts and prayers have not been in vain. Communicate with your RCIA leader about the situation, and the most prudent course to take. Keep in touch with the person you have served, if this is called for, and persist in praying for the Holy Spirit's continued work in his/her life.

... is scandalized by bad behavior of a Catholic, or something bad in Church history?

Scandalous behavior by prominent Catholics or by the clergy, or dark moments in the Church's history, can be a real hindrance to an inquirer. In every age, the Church is made up of fallible, weak human beings. The Catholic Church has always understood herself as a Church whose members are all sinners. At times the Church has been in great turmoil, yet she remains under the constant protection and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, while scandalous sin is always a cause of dismay and sorrow, it must be viewed from the perspective of redemption: God in his infinite mercy grants forgiveness to the repentant sinner, as Jesus granted forgiveness to Peter after he denied knowing his Lord. God can always bring good out of any situation.

Don't try to explain scandals away, or ignore them; rather, seek the truth of the matter and express your dismay and sorrow over those instances that are truly sinful. The Church's holiness is not altered by the sinful behavior of her members — one of Jesus' own handpicked apostles betrayed him, another denied that he knew Jesus, all ran when Jesus was arrested, and only one stood at the foot of Jesus' cross.

Encourage the person you are serving to pray for those who have given scandal, and to pray for the holiness of all the Church's members.

... seems not to be getting anywhere?

There are as many reasons for lack of progress as there are participants in the Christian initiation process. Some people seem to relate to the RCIA process as a “hoop to jump through” in order to become Catholic, which may be especially likely if the person's Catholic spouse is pressuring him/her to convert, or if the person is already well-catechized and has learned elsewhere much of what is being taught. Still others attend the catechetical sessions, and go through the first two gateway Rites, but do not engage the process in any other significant way, appearing merely to be “going through the motions.”

It is helpful to keep in mind that any motivation that has brought men and women to begin the Christian initiation process is good, but may need to be purified and matured. Throughout the RCIA process, God's graces are poured out in abundance on all. The proclamation of the Good News, joy-filled catechesis, loving fellowship, participation in reverent and beautiful liturgies, opportunities for heartfelt prayer, compelling testimonies, and service opportunities all “till the soil” and “scatter the seeds” which God will then cause to grow in the heart and mind of the person you are serving.

However, each person progresses at a different pace. A history of being pressured may cause a person to consciously or unconsciously hold back; shyness can hinder a response to offers of fellowship and friendship; one person may need a challenge while another needs a considerable amount of time to reflect and pray before moving forward. Problems with sinful habits may suddenly slow someone who had seemed to make significant progress; for example, encountering the Church's teaching on contraception can

suddenly halt conversion of heart while the person works through whether this is too hard a teaching, or how to persuade a spouse of the validity of this teaching.

The Church anticipates that some people may need to spend, perhaps, several years in the catechumenate. Your hope or expectation of steady, rapid progress may not be borne out, but the person you are serving must work out, alone with God in the silence of his/her own heart, how to respond to Christ's invitation. Your RCIA leader must be your guide and counsel in this kind of situation, while you keep this person constantly in your prayers.

... has problems with attendance?

Some participants seem initially to be interested but, after a while, attend irregularly, or stop coming altogether. Others, who might be physically present, are not really "there."

Failure to attend can be caused by a wide variety of circumstances, including but not limited to failure to progress in conversion of heart (see above). A job conflict, the demands of children at home, a physical handicap, or lack of transportation can all affect attendance. Although it is chiefly the responsibility of the RCIA leader to deal with attendance problems, there are some things you can do to help.

Call to ask if everything is all right. You may discover that he/she has genuine difficulty attending sessions. A generous offer to drive the person you are serving to and from sessions, for example, might be all that is needed. Your RCIA leader must be the judge of how to handle the catechesis of an individual in this situation, and may ask you to help by giving of your time outside the regular catechetical sessions.

... experiences a change in his/her life situation?

Life situations do not remain static. In some cases, a person can start attending the Christian initiation process in one parish, and discover midway through that it cannot be completed there. People finish school, marry, have children, change jobs, move away, retire, fall ill, suffer injury, lose a loved one. A job or military transfer, a need to move to accommodate an impaired parent, an accident requiring long rehabilitation are among the reasons why the process may need to be continued elsewhere, or perhaps put on hold.

You are not in a position to decide what is best for the person for whom you are a godparent or sponsor. In most circumstances, a departure from the parish

will result in replacing you, or perhaps adding another godparent or sponsor. Your willingness to continue as godparent or sponsor, even at a distance, may be deeply appreciated, but you may be unable to provide the needed support at a distance, even by email or telephone. Regardless of what happens, the person you are serving *will* benefit from continued inclusion in your intercessory prayers.

It is also possible that, following completion of initiation or the conclusion of the neophyte year, circumstances force you or your new Catholic to move from the parish. This situation is not nearly so problematic, since you have completed your principal responsibilities in the RCIA process. However, although a person can be initiated in a single, glorious liturgical celebration, his/her life as a Catholic has just begun. If at all possible you should continue your relationship with your new Catholic, even at a distance, realizing that your relationship could, despite the distance between you, yet become one of mutual spiritual exchange, support, and encouragement.

. . . has problems with me, or I have problems with him/her?

If you are appointed as a parish sponsor, it is possible that your personality might be a poor “fit” with the person to whom you have been assigned. The relationship can go wrong and become a hindrance, rather than a help. Another possible problem is that you feel that he/she wants more attention than you are comfortable giving. Tension between you can also be a sign that the Holy Spirit is telling you that something is missing in your efforts, or that the person has not acknowledged some significant issue obstructing his/her conversion.

First seek to work out the problems you are experiencing with the person you are serving. Genuine love, gentle honesty, and tactful language can go a long way toward putting your relationship right. Misunderstandings on one side or the other can be cleared up in a private, face-to-face conversation between the two of you when there is no time pressure and there are no interruptions.

If earnest efforts to improve the relationship do not succeed, you should notify your RCIA leader. The person you are serving may also choose to let your leader know that there are problems. It is then the leader’s task to resolve the situation, even if this requires that you yield your position as godparent or sponsor to someone else. If this happens, you should still include the person you had served in your daily prayers and, if appropriate, be present at the liturgical gateway Rites and his/her reception of the sacraments of initiation.



I always feel . . . the same bold confidence
of becoming a great saint because I don't count
on my merits since I have none . . .

God alone, content with my weak efforts,
will raise me to himself and make me a saint,
clothing me in his infinite merits.¹⁰

~ St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Home Retreat for Godparents and Sponsors

THE OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE THE HOLY SPIRIT as a godparent or sponsor in the conversion of others can be an encouragement in your own journey of conversion. It can be daunting to realize that you might be looked to as a witness to what “being a Catholic” means. This part of the *Handbook* is intended to guide and inspire you in ways that, although helpful to any Christian, may be especially suitable in the RCIA process. St. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to “*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (1 Cor 11:1). Your witness of life as a Catholic allows you to “be Christ” for the person to whom you are a godparent or sponsor, to reinforce the call to holiness which is the vocation of every disciple of Christ.

Like all who are involved in the Christian initiation process, you are called to strive for holiness, as St. Peter wrote: “*As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’*” (1 Pt 1:15–16). Holiness is the seeking of perfection in Christian life, a life devoted to God’s glory and the loving service of others (see CCC 2013). The *aim* of holiness is union with the Triune God in the joy of the Beatific Vision; the *path* to holiness is the call of Jesus to heroic virtue and self-sacrifice: “*If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it*” (Mt 16:24–25).

Every serious Christian often feels as though he or she can never measure up. This section of the *Handbook* can be used as a “spiritual workout” to strengthen and aid in putting your own faith life in better order. The prayers, readings, and meditations can encourage you to take a good look at your own life, and how God has acted in it. This will help you communicate God’s personal, providential care to the person you are serving in the RCIA process.

Use each topic as a prayerful reflection as you begin to serve as a godparent or sponsor, daily or weekly as your schedule permits. Ask for the graces you need to fall deeper in love with Jesus and his Church. Begin each morning with the intention of living the day, with God’s help, as perfectly as possible.

¹⁰ *Story of a Soul*, Chapter IV.

Before you begin, make a good confession and then try to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation regularly, perhaps monthly. (Don't worry if you keep confessing the "same old sins"; the graces of the sacrament will help weaken your attachment to these sins. And do you really want to add new sins to the list?)

Seek to more deeply participate in your Sunday Masses and to more reverently receive the Holy Eucharist. If your schedule permits, try to go to daily Mass. If your parish offers Eucharistic adoration, try to make a Holy Hour weekly, or just stop by to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

Ask for the grace to willingly and faithfully accept all the teachings of the Church — the Mass as a re-presentation of Jesus' one sacrifice on Calvary, not merely a "memorial meal"; the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist; the need for the sacrament of Reconciliation; and moral teachings on life issues, care of the poor, marriage and family, etc., for otherwise you cannot offer an example and be of help as the person you are serving learns the Church's teachings. Any doubts and uncertainties can be brought to prayer and further study.

Find quiet time with the Lord, who loves you as if you were his only Son. The fruits of your prayer will spill over to the person you serve in many surprising ways.

A note on quotations from St. Francis de Sales and St. Thérèse of Lisieux:

This home retreat incorporates quotations from these two saints, whose spiritual guidance is not based on any specific form of spirituality but instead is universal for all men and women. These saints call us to seek holiness, but do so gently, within the boundaries of the everyday life of most Catholics. As well, they show us that holiness is attainable not only in great accomplishments or in the fiery trial of martyrdom, but also, and most often, by doing the quiet, everyday tasks out of love for God and dedication to the duties and responsibilities of our state in life. This kind of holiness is hidden from the world, known only by those closest to us and by God, who made us from love and for love alone.



Prayer

*Since prayer places our intellect in the brilliance of God's light and exposes our will to the warmth of his Heavenly love, nothing else so effectively purifies our intellect of ignorance and our will of depraved affections.*¹¹ ~ St. Francis de Sales

OPENING PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, open my heart, my mind, and my spirit, that I can listen to your voice and be called into a more intimate walk with you. I don't ask this, Lord, for myself alone, but for the sake of the catechumen/candidate whom I serve/will serve, who is seeking union with your Church. I give you all my efforts in this regard, and ask you to purify them. Holy Spirit, pray in me when I am silent, give me the words to express the concerns of my heart: I am not worthy, I am not faithful enough, I am not holy enough, I am not prayerful enough. Help me to lean on my own baptismal graces. Give me the fire of your love and a hunger to be closer to you. Lord Jesus, fill my mouth with your praise, that I may serve you in this work, as a reflection of you. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Read the following Scripture citations slowly. Then choose one reading and pray according to the instructions for Lectio Divina in the back of this Handbook, asking the Lord to give you the insight you need to strengthen you in your work as a godparent or sponsor.

- ✦ Luke 18:1-8 — Persistence in prayer.
- ✦ Luke 2:22-40 — Devout Simeon and prayerful Anna.
- ✦ Psalm 63:1-8 — Longing for God.

REFLECTION

Holiness begins with prayer, the turning of a humble heart toward the Giver of all happiness, the living God who made us out of love alone and years to receive our love in return.

Jesus prayed and he taught his followers to pray. His own public life was

¹¹ *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part II, Chapter 1: The Necessity of Prayer.

bracketed by intense prayer. After his immersion in the Jordan, he went alone into the wilderness to pray and be tempted, knowing the mission that lay before him. He struggled in his humanity with the same issues that plague all people today: the lure of power, the call to set one's own course, the disordered "hungers" that are often preferred to seeking a closer relationship with God. Depending on and trusting in his Father's love, Jesus resisted Satan and said "yes" to his mission. Near the end of his mission, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was again alone in prayer, bearing the sins of us all. Tempted again by his old adversary, he struggled, said "yes" to the will of his Father to make the ultimate sacrifice of his life — and turned his face to the way of the cross.

I now turn to consider how Jesus is showing me to begin this mission of being a godparent or sponsor. What are my fears, what are my temptations and hungers that stand in the way of my pursuing this task? Am I timid in sharing my faith? Do I submit to God's will? Do I try to listen to God in my prayer, or am I only asking for his favor? Do I make prayer a priority to order all my days?

Jesus invites me to model my prayer on his. He witnesses to me a loving outpouring and submission to the Father. He shows me that if I call my fears and temptations by name and trust that God's will for me is perfect, I will be comforted and led by the Spirit.

RESOLUTIONS

- ✦ I will make a simple act of faith every morning: Lord Jesus, today I give myself to you.
- ✦ I will set aside fifteen minutes to sit quietly in the Lord's presence, if possible in front of the Blessed Sacrament.
- ✦ If possible, I will attend daily Mass.

I will pray for the grace to:

- ⊗ Share how important prayer is to me.
- ⊗ Listen to my catechumen's/candidate's experience of prayer.
- ⊗ Pray with my catechumen/candidate.
- ⊗ Gradually help introduce my catechumen/candidate to Catholic prayer forms.

Before I sleep, I will briefly examine my day, ask forgiveness for where I have failed, and thank God for the day's blessings.