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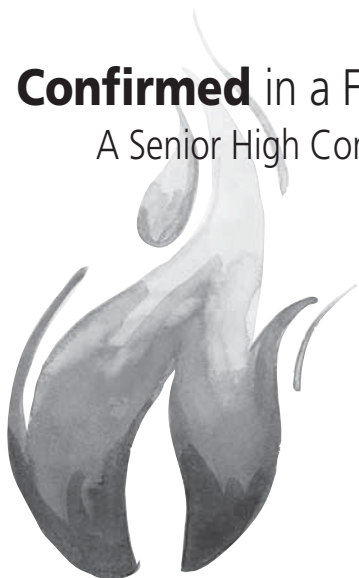
*Confirmed in a  
Faithful  
Community*

A Senior High Confirmation Process

*Sponsor's Guide*

Third Edition

**Confirmed** in a Faithful Community  
A Senior High Confirmation Process



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# Welcome!

You are beginning a grand adventure. You've been asked to walk with a candidate as she or he embarks on the challenging journey toward Confirmation. By accepting that invitation, you will be able to help a young person grow in relationship with both Jesus and the Church. What an honor! What a privilege!

The Confirmation preparation process can be—almost certainly *will* be—a time of spiritual and religious renewal and transformation for both you and the candidate. When it's all over, you will likely echo the words of countless sponsors who have walked this journey before you: "I gained so much more than I ever gave to the candidate." You may even want to take the journey again with another young person.

Okay. Pause for a moment and reflect on how those opening paragraphs struck you. What feelings and thoughts did they generate in you? Here are some possibilities:

- This sounds great!
- This is pretty intimidating stuff.
- My faith is the most important thing in my life. It will be exciting to help a young person discover that too.
- I'm not even sure about my own faith. How can I help lead a young person through all this religious stuff?

You may, in fact, be feeling and thinking all these things at once. Depending on your past experience, just about any thoughts and feelings are justified as you begin this process. This sponsor guidebook will provide you with enough background and direction to make your experience as a sponsor both enjoyable and meaningful.

## About This Guide

This guide is designed to ensure that your experience as a sponsor is a positive one. Here's what you'll find in this guide:

- a discussion about the role of the sponsor within the Confirmation process
- insights into how young people experience and understand matters of faith and religion
- an overview of the process of preparation, with an explanation of both what we do (the content) and why we do it
- practical suggestions for relating to your candidate and ideas for activities to participate in with that young person

All this information is presented as briefly and as clearly as possible. If, after reading this guide, you find that you would like more information about any part of the process, please consult the coordinator of the preparation process in your parish.

## A Closing Thought

The role of the sponsor is both a challenge and a privilege. Walking with a young person through the Confirmation process can be a time of spiritual renewal for both of you. We are grateful that you've said yes to this invitation. And we trust that you will be too.

Count on our prayers for you and your candidate as you walk this journey together. And remember always that the Spirit of God walks with you!



# Confirmation: A Brief History

The Church's theological understanding and pastoral practice of Confirmation have undergone further development in the past three decades, due in part to the Church's recovery of the catechumenal model of initiation. This approach to Confirmation was formalized by the promulgation of the Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA) in 1972. Though intended for the sacramental initiation of unbaptized adults, the theology and pastoral principles of the RCIA are recognized as normative for all the sacraments of initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist—regardless of the age at which those sacraments are in fact celebrated.

## Baptism in the Early Church

Baptism in the early Church was a powerful and moving experience. The ritual used rich symbols and actions that conveyed deep meaning to those who participated. Imagine descending three steps into the waters of the baptismal pool, being immersed three times by the bishop, and then coming out of the water a new creation.

Baptism in the first few centuries of the Church's history was celebrated primarily with adults. Baptism of infant members of Christian families, however, gradually became the normal practice and is still the most common today.

In the early Church, a person preparing for Baptism was called a catechumen. This word comes from a Greek term related to sound and hearing. A catechumen is one who hears Jesus's Good News proclaimed by the Church. The preparation period was called the catechumenate. Lasting about three years, the catechumenate was a time for praying, fasting, studying, and serving others. During this time, the catechumen listened to the word of God and explored the Christian way of life. (In *Confirmed in a*



*Faithful Community's* process of preparation, the period of formation parallels the catechumenate in the early Church.)

The final intense stage of preparation for Baptism in the early Church lasted forty days and evolved into what we know as Lent. (In your candidate's preparation, the period of reflection is intended to parallel this part of the early Church's practice.) Baptism, the final step in the original process, took place during the Easter Vigil—the evening before the Easter celebration of the Resurrection. In the early Church, the Easter Vigil was the only time Baptisms were performed. Even after the actual ceremony, the newly initiated members were expected to pursue further study, and they received more knowledge about the Christian “mysteries.” (The period of mission in your candidate's preparation process parallels this part of the early Church's approach to the sacraments of initiation.)

## **Baptism at the Easter Vigil**

The Easter Vigil ceremony was preceded by ritual bathing on Holy Thursday and by two days of fasting. On the Saturday night of the vigil, all the catechumens gathered—men in one room and women in another. Their sponsors—the persons who had guided them toward their new birth—were there. Because of their parental role, the sponsors were called fathers and mothers by the catechumens. Later, sponsors became known as godparents.

At the start of the Easter Vigil ceremony, the catechumens faced the West, the place of sunset and darkness. They stretched out their arms and denounced Satan. Then suddenly they turned to the East and shouted their commitment to Christ. This physical turnabout by the catechumens marked their spiritual turnabout, or conversion. The East was considered the place of light, of the rising sun, and of new life. (Throughout the Middle Ages, churches were built facing the East.)

Next, the catechumens went to a room with a pool that was often modeled after the Roman public baths. They stripped off their old clothing, had oil poured over their bodies, and stepped down into the waist-deep waters. The bishop submerged the

catechumens in the water, usually three times—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The catechumens then emerged from the other side of the pool and received new white robes. The bishop anointed them, again with oil, and embraced them in a sign of peace and welcome.

Finally, the catechumens were led into the room where the Eucharist was celebrated. For the first time, on Easter Sunday, they participated in the total Eucharistic celebration. Before Baptism the catechumens attended Mass only until the end of the homily. As a matter of fact, the first part of the Mass was called the Mass of the Catechumens because the prayers, readings, and homily were intended to instruct the catechumens. What a joy it must have been for the newly baptized, after three years of preparation, to share the Eucharist with their friends and family for the first time! And what a joy for the rest of the community to welcome these long-awaited newcomers to their special Easter meal!

The process of preparing for initiation at the Easter Vigil demanded a great deal of time and dedication from those who wanted to become members of the Church. Remember, though, that just prior to this time, the Church had been an illegal, persecuted group. Accepting a candidate presented a grave risk to the whole community.

At the same time, the leaders realized that Baptism was meant to be a sustained joy, not just a moment of excitement. Developing a joyful, loving community demanded a profound initiation. In recent years the Church has revised the adult Rite of Christian Initiation to recapture the sacrifice, spirit, and joy of the ritual in the early Church.

### **Three Sacraments of Initiation**

Originally Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist were combined into one initiation ritual. Later on, so many candidates sought initiation into the Church that the bishops had difficulty presiding at all the rituals. Yet it was considered essential that the bishops conduct them.

To handle the increased numbers of converts, the Eastern Church decided to allow their priests to baptize, confirm, and celebrate the Eucharist with the initiates. In the East, Confirmation is administered immediately after Baptism and is followed by participation in the Eucharist; this tradition highlights the unity of the three sacraments of Christian initiation (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1318). In the West, the priests baptized initiates but delayed the rest of the ceremony until the bishop was available to “confirm” the initiation. Eventually in the Western Church, the baptized members began to participate in the Eucharist before Confirmation. Until recently, the sacraments of initiation remained separate and were celebrated in the sequence of Baptism, the Eucharist, and Confirmation.

(This section is adapted from Thomas Zanzig with Maura Thompson Hagarty, *Candidate's Handbook*, third edition, *Confirmed in a Faithful Community*, pp. 97–99)



# The Role of the Sponsor

In the early Church, the adult convert's sponsor and that convert's baptismal godparent had different roles. The sponsor, who already knew the potential convert, went before the community to witness to the candidate's moral character, faith, and genuine intention to join the Church. The godparent was the Christian who actually walked through the catechumenal process with the candidate, a process that normally took several years. At times, of course, one person assumed the roles of both sponsor and godparent.

In the RCIA, the role of godparent roughly parallels that of the Confirmation sponsor. The RCIA describes the godparent's role in this way:

Godparents are persons chosen by the candidates on the basis of example, good qualities, and friendship, delegated by the local Christian community, and approved by the priest. It is the responsibility of godparents to show the candidates how to practice the Gospel in personal and social life, to sustain the candidates in moments of hesitancy and anxiety, to bear witness, and to guide the candidates' progress in the baptismal life. . . . They continue to be important during the time after reception of the sacraments when the neophytes [the newly initiated] need to be assisted so that they remain true to their baptismal promises. (RCIA, no. 11)

Today, many dioceses and parishes base their expectations of Confirmation sponsors on this understanding of the RCIA godparent. Consider the following description of the role, taken from the Confirmation guidelines of one diocese:

The sponsor is

- a model of how a person of faith lives in today's world
- a friend or relative who knows the candidate and can witness to the maturing faith of the candidate before the community

- a guide, a confidant, and a listener
- a learner who is interested in personal growth as she or he walks the faith journey with the candidate
- one who will continue after Confirmation to walk the faith journey with the candidate and invite her or him into fuller participation in parish life and service

Some sponsors (again, you may be one of them) may well enter the preparation process thinking that their role will be largely ceremonial, not too demanding. Then they'll read a description of the role like the one cited and break into a cold sweat. These are the folks described early in this guide, the ones who say: "Why did I ever say yes to this? What have I gotten myself into?" Here we provide a response to those questions that alleviates such concerns and helps such sponsors relax but at the same time remains true to the directives of the Church and the ideal of the sponsor that the Church holds up for us.

## **So, What's the Point?**

What if, when you were recruited by a candidate, you expected a largely ceremonial role, only to discover that your role is much more active and involved? How do you feel as you review guidelines for sponsors like those above? How can you look at the ideal characteristics of the sponsor and not feel inadequate, or worse, hypocritical? Following are a few observations that will help put these issues in perspective.

## **Look to Canon Law**

First of all, be aware that the official Church policies regarding Confirmation sponsors are actually much narrower and far less intimidating than the ideals reflected in many diocesan guidelines. According to canon law, sponsors must have the following qualifications (based on canon 893, which in turn refers to canon 874, a description of the qualifications for baptismal sponsors):