

A Friend Along the Way: Sponsors and Sponsoring Families in the OCIA

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New Kids on the Block

Everyone needs a friend. And when you are the new kid on the block, you really need a friend. Children in the OCIA are like the “new kids on the block.” They are new to the Church, and they need friends in the parish. Our parish believes that you would make a good friend for a child in the OCIA.

The Order of Christian Initiation of Adults

Before we say more about being a sponsor in the OCIA, let’s briefly explain what the OCIA is. Then we’ll explain what a sponsor in the OCIA does.

To begin, it’s really pretty simple. The OCIA is the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. It’s a Church document that describes how we initiate people into the Catholic Church.

The OCIA prepares adults and children who are over the age of seven to receive the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. But it is much more than a sacramental preparation program or a “learn about the Catholic Church” program. It’s a wondrous journey of faith that leads children and adults alike to a deeper relationship with our loving God. As children and adults journey along the pathway that we call the OCIA, they pass through various periods, or steps, and stages. The journey of the OCIA candidates progresses gradually within the parish community. There are liturgical rites that mark their progress toward Christ. You have probably seen some of these liturgical rituals celebrated in the parish.

Parish Sponsors

In addition, you may have noticed that children and adults who are seeking initiation are accompanied by folks from the parish. These parish “sponsors” walk alongside the children and adults who are seeking Christian initiation.

The sponsors are “friends from the parish” who help the OCIA candidates along the way.

You, and possibly your family, are being asked to sponsor a child in the OCIA process. If you accept the invitation to sponsor a child, you will most likely be sponsoring her or his family too. Before we discuss the specific responsibilities of a sponsor, let’s talk about the children and families in the OCIA.

Children and Families in the OCIA

Children who participate in the OCIA are typically age seven and older. The Church believes that children who have reached the age of seven are capable of developing their own personal faith and so they should be fully initiated. Thus, unbaptized children and children seeking to join the Catholic Church participate in the OCIA, just like adults, although we adapt the process to meet their needs.

Often, the children who participate in OCIA have a little bit of history with the Catholic Church. Frequently, one of the child’s parents is Catholic and is returning to the Church now that the child is older. Or, sometimes the blending of two families is what prompts parents to bring their children for initiation. Sometimes it’s the child herself or himself who has the desire to learn more about God and become a part of the Church.

Whatever the reason, a common thread in most children’s stories is that they are new or returning to the Church. Therefore they need a friend in the parish who will welcome them and make them feel at home. This is where the sponsor enters into the child’s journey of faith.

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The Responsibilities of a Parish Sponsor

► SAFE ENVIRONMENT TRAINING

Before we say anything else about ministering to children, we must make this point clear. Anyone who works with children in any way is required to take diocesan-approved safe environment training. Your OCIA coordinator will give you the details. Safe environment training is required by every diocese and ensures the safety of children.

Once you have completed the safe environment training, you can begin to develop a sponsor relationship with the child candidate and her or his family. (Children and adults in the OCIA are usually called candidates or catechumens).

► BE A FRIEND

The most important part of being a sponsor for a child and his or her family is that you are a friend from the parish. As described above, often both the child in the OCIA (the candidate) and the parent are new to the parish. Maybe the parent has been away from Church entirely and this is why the child has had little or no religious formation. In this instance, or any instance, there is nothing more hospitable and reassuring than a welcoming, warm, and friendly parishioner.

As the parish sponsor, we hope you will develop a relationship with the candidate and her or his family. Get to know the family you are sponsoring. Later in this article, you will be given some tips regarding things you might do with your OCIA family.

► BE A COMPANION AND GUIDE

In addition to being a friend, the sponsor/sponsor family serves as a companion on the journey of Christian initiation. This means being there for the family that is new or returning to the Church. It means you are the family's first connection to the parish. It means that you walk with the candidate and her or his family as they learn about the Catholic Christian way of life.

The candidate will learn a great deal about the Catholic way of life from you and your family. By being a living example of what it means to be a practicing Catholic or a practicing Catholic family, you will show the candidate the Christian way of life. By your example, you will be a “guide” to Christian living. As you walk with the candidate and his or her family, and as they see you do things like go to Mass every Sunday, participate in parish life, pray at meals, and help at the food pantry, they will begin to follow your example.

Here are some other things you might do as a sponsor or sponsor family:

- ✂ Exchange phone numbers and email addresses so you can keep in touch through texting, calling, and emailing.
- ✂ Attend OCIA sessions with the candidate.
- ✂ Go to Mass together.
- ✂ Meet after Mass for juice or coffee and donuts.
- ✂ Go the parish picnic or spaghetti dinner together.
- ✂ Invite them to work with you at the food pantry, clothes closet, or soup kitchen.
- ✂ Invite them to work on a parish project with you.
- ✂ Meet at the park to play on the playground or walk the trails.
- ✂ Eat a meal together.
- ✂ Check in often and ask, “How’s it going?”
- ✂ Talk about your family’s Catholic traditions.
- ✂ Be a good listener.
- ✂ Pray for your candidate. Pray with your candidate.

► BE A WITNESS

As a parish sponsor or sponsoring family you will also have a role to play when the parish worships and celebrates. In other words, you have a role in the liturgical rites of the OCIA. When the Church officially welcomes

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the OCIA candidates in the Rite for Entrance into the Catechumenate, you will stand with the child and the parents.

As the parents present their child for acceptance by the parish community, the sponsor stands in support of the parents and says to the parish community, “We know this child who is asking for Baptism, and we can testify to this child’s desire and good intentions.” You may even be asked to say a personal word or two about the candidate you are helping to introduce to the parish.

All in all, you are a witness to the parish community that the child you are sponsoring has grown in faith and has a desire to learn more about Jesus and the Church. In order to do this sincerely, you have to build a relationship with the child and her or his family. And, at its core, relationships are what the OCIA is all about—our relationship with Jesus, with the Church, and with one another.