

Job Description for an OCIA Sponsor

To be a good sponsor, you don't have to have been a perfect Catholic. You have to be a *practicing* Catholic. Meaning, you're still trying to get it right. What a candidate needs to see is a person of faith, struggling with all the difficulties of living out the gospel. If the sponsor has always been and always will be a perfect Christian, he or she probably doesn't have all that much to offer the candidate. One thing we know for sure about candidates is, they are going to struggle. If the sponsor has never known what it is to get knocked down and get back up again, how can the sponsor guide the candidate through the trials of walking the way of faith? From the brief description given in the OCIA, the role of the sponsor might seem deceptively simple, "Sponsors are persons who have known and assisted the candidates and stand as witnesses to the candidates' moral character, faith, and intention." In that short sentence, however, is a demanding job description. The sponsor is charged with three important tasks: knowing, assisting, witnessing. Each of these three tasks has a three-part goal: the conversion of the candidates' moral character, faith, and intention.

Knowing the OCIA candidate. The first task of the sponsor is to get to know the candidate. This isn't just a casual acquaintance kind of knowing. The sponsor will have to spend many hours with the candidate, sharing faith stories and listening deeply to both what is said and unsaid. The sponsor isn't listening as a judge listens, collecting evidence and weighing facts. Rather, the sponsor listens as a friend or older sibling listens. The sponsor is listening with love and hope and firm belief in the ability of the Holy Spirit to guide the candidate to a deep conversion to Christ. The job of the sponsor is to get to know the candidate well enough to be able to assist the candidate on the journey.

Assisting the OCIA candidate. The sponsor is not a catechist or an "expert" in the faith. But the sponsor is faithful and knows what it takes to remain faithful. As an "older sibling," the sponsor is instrumental in assisting the candidate to gain a sure footing and move confidently forward. Before the Rite of Acceptance, the sponsor assists the candidate with beginning his or her spiritual life and nurturing the first seeds of Christian faith. The sponsor will assist the candidate in repenting of motives or dispositions that do not harmonize with the gospel. The sponsor will assist the candidate in calling upon God in prayer. And the sponsor will introduce the candidate to other Christians in the faith community (see OCIA 42). After the Rite of Acceptance, the sponsor will help the candidate continue his or her journey of conversion to the point that, in both mind and action, the new lifestyle is evident to all. The sponsor will assist the candidate in acquiring the necessary acquaintance with Christian teaching. And the sponsor will help the candidate develop a spirit of faith and charity (see OCIA 120).

Witnessing the conversion of the OCIA candidate. When it comes time to discern if the candidate is ready for celebrating the key transition rites of Acceptance and Election, the sponsor will be one the first to be called upon to witness to the candidate's conversion. If the sponsor has truly known the candidate and diligently assisted him or her on the journey, who better to witness to the candidate's moral character, faith, and intention?

What should sponsors do on Sundays?

Here are nine tasks for sponsors to attend to when caring for their candidates on the Lord's Day.

1. Pick up your candidate for Mass or meet him or her at the entrance to the church. The candidate shouldn't have to walk into church alone.
2. If your candidate misses Mass, make a follow-up call on Sunday afternoon.
3. If you have to miss Mass, find a substitute to be with your candidate.
4. Show your candidate how to bless him or herself with holy water from the font.
5. Introduce your candidate to at least one new parishioner each Sunday.
6. Show your candidate how to genuflect and bow. If the tabernacle is in the sanctuary, behind the altar, you would genuflect before entering your pew. If the tabernacle is off to the side or in a separate space, you bow to the altar before entering your pew.
7. Show your candidate how to use the parish worship aid or hymnal.
8. Always sing and respond to the ritual dialogue to provide a good example for the candidate.
9. After Mass, join your candidate for the catechetical gathering. If there is no catechetical gathering, touch base and say goodbye before going home.

5 Essential Elements of a Sponsor

1. **PRAY.** The first example the OCIA sponsors must give to the candidates is how Christians pray. So perhaps your job description might include some of the following:
 - a. **Worship:** Sponsors are active participants in weekly Sunday Mass and the major worship events of the parish. They are responsible for the attendance of their candidates at these events.
 - b. **Daily prayer:** Sponsors spend some significant, concentrated time in prayer every day (at least 15 minutes). Sponsors are responsible for teaching their candidates how to pray daily.
 - c. **Penitential prayer:** Sponsors regularly examine their consciences and regularly practice the many forms of penance in Christian life (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1434-1439). OCIA sponsors are responsible for teaching their candidates how to practice some of these forms.
 - d. **Intercessory prayer:** Sponsors regularly bring their needs before God (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2629-2636). OCIA sponsors are responsible for teaching their candidates how to petition God for their needs.
2. **WITNESS.** The next example sponsors are to give is how to bear witness to the faith. This might stretch the comfort zone of some sponsors. Generally, Catholics are a little shy about bearing witness to the faith. Here are a few simple things any sponsor can do and can teach their candidates to do.
 - a. **Pray in public:** Sponsors regularly pray before meals, even when eating in public. If they are comfortable doing so, making the sign of the cross before and after the meal prayer is a visible witness to faith.
 - b. **Share a book:** Sponsors regularly read good spiritual books. They bear witness to the faith by sharing these books with friends, colleagues, and family who may benefit from them. If the sponsor is not a reader, the same effect can be accomplished by recommending a movie or a television show that supports Christian values (even if the movie or show is not explicitly Christian).
 - c. **Be joyful:** Sponsors are joyful, even in the midst of trial, because of their confidence and faith in the paschal mystery. By remaining steadfastly joyful in all situations and sharing that joy with others, sponsors bear witness to that faith.
3. **HOPE.** This one is easier for most Catholics. In general, Catholics are hopeful people. Sponsors should be especially hopeful and provide an example of hopefulness to their candidates. When you train sponsors, you might ask them to reflect on the areas of their lives where it is most difficult to find hope. Have them role-play how they will talk with their candidates about that struggle.
4. **BELIEVE IN MIRACLES.** By giving example of following “supernatural inspiration in their deeds,” the OCIA is asking sponsors to show their belief in miracles. I have never met a Catholic who doesn’t have a miracle story. In your training, have the sponsors spend time telling each other their miracle stories and how those miracles have shaped the way they live today. Consider including a requirement to share miracle stories with the candidates in the sponsors’ job description.
5. **PRACTICE LOVE OF NEIGHBOR.** This is both easy and difficult. It is easy to love the neighbors we love. But the OCIA says the sponsors must give example of loving our neighbors “even at the cost of self renunciation.” To show how that’s done, we are most likely going to have to demonstrate how we love those who are difficult to love. In my own attempts at this, it is sometimes all I can do to simply pray for the *desire* to love someone I find unlovable.

Some sacrifice required. Is this an ideal? Of course it is. But the purpose of framing an ideal is not to dismiss it as impractical. We set out the ideal as a goal to strive for. Because it is difficult does not mean it is impossible. If we are going to call the candidates to pick up the cross and follow Christ, can you offer him or her, as your sponsor, anything less than the best you can be?