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**REAWAKENING SPONSORSHIP: A PASTORAL–
THEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL OF GODPARENTS AND
MARRIAGE SPONSORS IN THE SACRAMENTS OF CHRISTIAN
INITIATION AND MATRIMONY WITHIN THE AFRICAN
CULTURAL CONTEXT**

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Abstract

This article looks at the ministry of sponsors and godparents in Baptism and Confirmation, and of marriage sponsors in Matrimony, against the backdrop of African Catholic life. It starts from two scenes every parish will recognise: a child or young person presented for initiation with godparents who look the part on the day but barely stay in touch with the recipient's faith journey afterward, and a bride and groom surrounded by best men, chief bridesmaids, "chairmen," and "chief launchers" who carry the wedding but disappear the moment the reception ends, leaving the couple with no churchly companion through the shaky early years of marriage. Across all three sacraments, the same thing keeps happening: sponsorship shrinks from a ministry of accompaniment into a piece of theatre. Drawing on canon law, the Catechism, Amoris Laetitia, scriptural models of accompaniment, and African communal anthropology, including the customary offices of go-between and witness among the Igala and Igbo, the article argues that baptismal, confirmational, and marital sponsorship are really one ecclesial vocation of witness, mentoring, and staying power. It proposes bringing sponsorship back to life through catechesis, more careful discernment, parish structures of accompaniment, and an inculturated spirituality of ecclesial kinship that runs the whole sacramental distance, from font to nuptial altar.

Keywords: Godparents, Marriage Sponsors, Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony, African Catholicism, Pastoral Theology, Inculturation, *Amoris Laetitia*

Introduction

Amaka was fifteen when she received Confirmation, in a busy urban parish, with real joy on her face. She stood before the bishop as he traced the cross of chrism on her forehead and called down the Holy Spirit, the same gesture the apostles once used on the believers of Samaria (cf. Acts 8:14–17). Beside her stood her sponsor, a respected family friend, who posed for the photographs and stayed for the reception afterward. A few weeks later, Amaka realised something: the person publicly entrusted with her Christian formation had no real interest in it. Her messages asking for guidance went unanswered. Invitations to youth group were turned down. Whatever the liturgy had solemnly marked out that day quietly fell apart.

Something similar happened at Chidera and Emeka's wedding, in the same parish, two years on. It was a lavish white wedding. A best man and chief bridesmaid choreographed the entrance dance, two "chairmen" ran the reception, and a "chief launcher" led the fundraising toast: everyone in matching *aso ebi*, everything posted across the parish's social media. Off to the side stood two quieter figures: an older couple listed in the programme simply as "sponsors," who signed the parish register as witnesses and gave a short toast. Eighteen months later, when money troubles, in-law interference, and the ordinary grind of married life started pulling at the marriage, none of them came back: not the best man, not the chairmen, not even the sponsors. The couple who had stood at the altar surrounded by an entourage were, in the moment that actually mattered, on their own. Like Amaka, they had been given the sign of accompaniment without the substance of it.

Across African Catholic societies, sponsors for Baptism, Confirmation, and Matrimony tend to be picked for social standing, money, friendship, or family obligation rather than spiritual maturity or a genuine willingness to walk with someone. They turn up at the door of the sacrament and then leave the road of discipleship for someone else to walk. A ministry designed to carry Christian formation from the font, through the chrism, to the marriage bed simply stops working.

So, three questions shape this study. What does the Church actually mean when she requires a sponsor for Baptism, Confirmation, and Matrimony? Why does African social life, which is, by most measures, remarkably good at communal responsibility, so often turn out sponsors who show up but don't stay? And what could a parish realistically do to make sponsorship a vocation again rather than a decoration?

Canon 872 gives a sponsor "insofar as possible" to help an adult through Christian initiation, or, alongside the parents, to present an infant for Baptism, and afterward "to help the baptized person live a Christian life in keeping with Baptism and faithfully fulfil its obligations" (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 872). Canon 893 carries this same role over to Confirmation, and Canon 874 lays out conditions that make clear the office is ecclesial and moral, not just social (Code of Canon Law, 1983, cc. 874, 893). The Catechism calls godparents "firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized child or adult on the road of Christian life" (CCC, 1997, no. 1255). Matrimony works a little differently but points the same way. Canon 1063 requires pastors to see that the whole ecclesial community, through preaching, catechesis, personal preparation, a fruitful liturgy, and help after the wedding, assists couples "to preserve and protect the conjugal covenant" and to "lead an ever holier and fuller family life" (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 1063). Pope Francis says much the same thing in pastoral language: marriage preparation "should be a kind of 'initiation' to the sacrament of Matrimony," and the whole community needs to be drawn in more, especially through "the witness of families themselves" (Francis, 2016, §207).

This article's claim is simple, though its consequences are not: turning sponsorship, baptismal, confirmation, or marital, into a ceremonial role is a real and connected form of spiritual neglect. It weakens formation after the sacrament, thins out ecclesial kinship, and leaves the newly initiated and the newly married without the accompaniment the Church actually intends for them. Read against Scripture, canon law, the Catechism, *Amoris Laetitia*, and African communal thought, sponsorship isn't decoration attached to a rite; it's one continuous share in the Church's work of accompaniment, the same work Christ does as shepherd (cf. John 10:11–15) and as the quietly attentive guest at Cana (cf. John 2:1–11). Bringing this ministry back to life, across the whole distance from font to nuptial altar, is not a small pastoral matter.

Methodological Orientation

This study works through contextual analysis, magisterial reflection, and inculturated praxis together, following the familiar "see–judge–act" pattern of Catholic social and pastoral thought, adapted from Donal Dorr's "pastoral circle" (1991): starting from lived sacramental experience, moving to ecclesial judgment, and ending in practical renewal. Three things hold the method together:

Contextual Sensitivity: Taking the "signs of the times seriously" (*Gaudium et Spes*, §4) means looking honestly at what actually happens in parishes: sponsorship and godparenthood at Baptism and Confirmation, and the sponsors, best men, and chief bridesmaids of a wedding, so often shrink into a social obligation, a family courtesy, or an honorary title rather than a real relationship. That honesty surfaces tensions built into everyday sacramental life, from font to nuptial altar.

Magisterial Engagement: These pastoral realities are then read against what the Church actually teaches: the canons on sponsorship and marriage witnesses, the Catechism's account of Christian initiation, and Pope Francis's teaching on family accompaniment in *Amoris Laetitia* (§207). None of this is legalism. It is the Church's disciplined attempt to keep sacramental practice lined up with sacramental meaning.

Inculturation Framework: Following Mbiti (1969) and Bujo (1992), the study puts Catholic sponsorship teaching into conversation with African understandings of communal personhood, elder responsibility, and kinship support, seen concretely in the *Atogba Oya* among the Igala and the *Onye Aka Ebe* among the Igbo. Following Waligbo (1986), that conversation is critical, not sentimental: it affirms sponsorship as genuine accompaniment while pushing back against its slide into patronage, status-seeking, or empty ceremony.

The Ecclesial Meaning of Godparenthood in Baptism and Confirmation

Godparents are not decoration. The Catholic tradition places the sponsor squarely inside the Church's ministry of initiation. Baptism, says the Catechism, is "the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit," joining a person to Christ and to the Church (CCC, 1997, no. 1213). In Baptism, believers are united to Christ's death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:3–4), clothed with Christ (cf. Gal. 3:27), and brought into one body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). Canon 872 puts this theology into practice: as far as possible, someone to be baptized receives a sponsor who assists an adult through initiation, or who, with the parents, presents an infant, and who afterward helps that person "live a Christian life consonant with Baptism and faithfully fulfil its obligations" (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 872). Baptism's meaning needs a face and a relationship to carry it: the sponsor is supposed to be that face.

Confirmation completes what Baptism begins. The Catechism describes it as "necessary for the completion of baptismal grace," giving "a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith" (CCC, 1997, no. 1285). Scripture backs this up: believers "will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" to be witnesses (cf. Acts 1:8), and the Apostles lay hands on the newly

baptized so that they receive the Spirit (cf. Acts 8:14–17; Acts 19:1–7). Canon 893 simply extends Canon 872's sponsor to Confirmation, under the same conditions set out in Canon 874 (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 893). Baptism and Confirmation share one ministry of accompaniment, not two separate ones. Canon 874's conditions show this role was never meant to be casual. A sponsor must be designated by the candidate or the parents, have both the aptitude and the intention to do the job, be at least sixteen (barring exception), be a confirmed Catholic who has received the Eucharist, live a life that fits the role, and not be under canonical penalty or be the candidate's own father or mother (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 874). Doctrine, sacramental practice, moral credibility, spiritual availability: none of these is optional.

The Catechism sums it up: godparents must be "firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized child or adult on the road of Christian life" (CCC, 1997, no. 1255). A sponsor, in other words, is a job, not a title: a witness to faith, a companion in growth, proof that being joined to Christ always means being joined to a living community too.

The Ecclesial Meaning of Sponsorship in Matrimony

Baptismal and confirmation sponsorship is written into the code in plain terms. Matrimony works through a different logic, and it takes some unpacking to see how the two line up. Canon law names two witnesses required for a valid marriage: "Only those marriages are valid which are contracted before the local ordinary, pastor, or a priest or deacon delegated by either of them, who assist, and before two witnesses" (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 1108, §1). But canonists are quick to point out that these witnesses carry no responsibility "to attest to the faith of those entering marriage or to assist them in living out its obligations"; their job is purely juridical, confirming that the wedding happened legitimately (Beal, Coriden, & Green, 2000, commentary on c. 1108). So Matrimony has legal witnesses, but no canonically named godparent, the way Baptism and Confirmation do.

That gap is more apparent than real. The Church has simply put the obligation somewhere else. Canon 1063 requires "pastors of souls," and through them the whole ecclesial community, to see that Christian couples are helped to keep their marriage in a Christian spirit and to grow in it: naming, among other things, "help offered to the married, so that, faithfully preserving and protecting the conjugal covenant, they may day by day come to lead holier and fuller lives in their families" (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 1063, 4°). Canon 872 hands this job to a named individual for Baptism; Canon 1063 hands it to the whole community for Matrimony. Either way, the point is the same: no one is supposed to receive or live out a sacrament by themselves.

Recent magisterial teaching has been putting a face on this communal obligation. The introduction to the Order of Celebrating Matrimony says marriage preparation and celebration belong, at least partly, to "the entire ecclesial community," and Pope Francis, echoing the Synod fathers, called for the whole community to get more involved "by stressing the witness of families themselves" (Francis, 2016, §207; cf. Diocese of Lansing, 2019). That is exactly the space now filled, in some parishes, by the sponsor couple or marriage mentor couple, an experienced, sacramentally married pair who walk an engaged couple through preparation and then keep walking with them afterward. Some parishes call this ministry "Marriage Godparents" outright, deliberately reaching for the weight of baptismal language to describe a couple who "act as a lifeline" for the newly married and help keep them tied into parish life (San Diego Diocese, Marriage Formation Resources, n.d.). Baptismal godparents witness a person joining Christ. Marriage sponsors witness, and are meant to sustain, a couple joining the *sacramentum caritatis*, the sacrament of charity binding husband, wife, and Christ together.

Canons 872, 893, 1063, and 1108 side by side and one conviction runs through all of them: faith is never a solitary possession, and the Church builds structures to make sure of it: named sponsors at the font and at Confirmation, a communal obligation written into the marriage covenant, because grace, however freely given, is normally received and kept alive through other people. When a parish

lets that communal obligation stay an abstraction instead of putting a real mentor couple behind it, Matrimony risks becoming what an unaccompanied Baptism already is: richly celebrated, poorly sustained.

Scriptural Foundations of Spiritual and Marital Accompaniment

"Godparent" and "marriage sponsor" are late, technical words, but the reality behind them is old and thoroughly biblical. Scripture treats both faith and married life as things that grow through relationships of guidance, witness, correction, and presence, never as things a person simply holds alone. Take Barnabas. After Saul's conversion, nobody trusts him, except Barnabas, who takes it on himself to bring Saul to the apostles and vouch for what happened to him on the road: "Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord" (cf. Acts 9:26–27). Later, Barnabas goes looking for Saul again and brings him to Antioch, where the two of them teach side by side (cf. Acts 11:25–26). He is, in effect, the bridge between a new believer and the community that has to receive him, which is close to exactly what a baptismal sponsor is for. Paul does something similar with Timothy and Titus. He calls Timothy "my true child in the faith" (cf. 1 Tim. 1:2) and traces his "sincere faith" back through his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15). Titus gets the same title: "my true child in a common faith" (cf. Tit. 1:4). These are relationships of spiritual parenthood, sustained over time, not far at all from what a sponsor's office is meant to be.

Marriage has its own witnesses too. At Cana, when the wine runs dry, Mary is the one who notices before anyone else says a word, and she acts: "They have no wine" (cf. John 2:3). She isn't presiding, isn't named a witness, but her attentiveness is exactly the posture a marriage sponsor should have: watching quietly, ready to step in so the couple's joy doesn't run out. John the Baptist gives a related picture when he calls himself "the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice" (cf. John 3:29). That friend doesn't compete with the marriage and doesn't wander off from it either: he simply stays nearby, glad about a joy that isn't his own. And Priscilla and Aquila go further still: a married couple doing ministry together, who take the gifted but half-taught Apollos aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately" (cf. Acts 18:24–26). That is the sponsor couple in embryo: spouses whose own marriage becomes a resource for forming someone else, not as clergy, but as fellow travellers.

Then there is the Good Shepherd, who ties both threads together. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep" (cf. John 10:11–15). A shepherd knows his flock by name, calls them, stays with them when things get dangerous. Every ministry of accompaniment, at the font, at Confirmation, at the altar, is answerable to that same standard. Sponsorship, in whatever form, is a small share in that shepherding, carried out through ordinary things: attention, moral steadiness, prayer. Hebrews assumes Christian life is never a solo act: believers should "consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together ... but encouraging one another" (cf. Heb. 10:24–25). Godparents and marriage sponsors both answer to that call: helping the newly initiated and the newly married actually live out, day to day, what the sacrament made them.

The African Context: Communal Personhood, Sacramental Kinship, and the Wisdom of the Go-Between

African anthropology has a great deal to say here: both about what sponsorship could be at its best and about how it goes wrong. Personhood, in many African societies, is not something an individual has on their own; it's something lived out communally. Mbiti's (1969) famous line, "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," makes the point directly: a person only exists as part of a web running through family, clan, community, and ancestors (pp. 108–110). Bujo (1992) calls this "vital participation": life and moral identity shared across the community, carried by elders and tradition (pp. 45–60).

A child, in this world, belongs to its parents, obviously, but just as much to an extended network of kin, elders, mentors, and benefactors who take responsibility for its formation, discipline, identity, support. If anything, marriage runs on an even more explicit version of the same logic. Among the Igala, the *Atogba Oya*, the mediator engaged by the groom's family, investigates both families, negotiates consent and bride-price, and, according to Yusufu and Murtla (2022), keeps playing an "omnibus role" after the wedding in many communities: guiding the couple, settling their quarrels, all while custom insists he give them "total and absolute space" and not meddle beyond what's needed (pp. 373–377). Among the Igbo, the *Onye Aka Ebe*, literally, the witness, does something parallel: entrusted with negotiating and safeguarding the bride-price, he stays on afterward "to serve as a liaison between the parties," helping settle disputes between husband and wife, and between the couple and their wider families (Onwuzurigbo, 1990, pp. 461–462). Among the *Ohafia*, elders and family representatives stay active after the *Igbankwu* rite too, mediating conflict and guarding the marriage's dignity long after the ceremony has ended (Ohazurume & Ottuh, 2025, pp. 370–374). None of this is quaint leftover custom. It is a working system of marital accompaniment that African societies have kept running for generations, often, if we're honest, more reliably than the average parish keeps its own sponsors engaged.

These patterns say something about the logic of sacramental sponsorship itself. The godparent, and the marriage sponsor too, is a sacramental version of a truth Africa already knows: growth in life, virtue, and fidelity needs company beyond the nuclear family. Elders matter here specifically. In many African settings, they function as moral guides and keepers of memory: leading prayers, settling disputes, handing wisdom down through proverb and story and example (Mbiti, 1969, pp. 1–5). Bujo (1992) notes that elders carry the link between the living and the ancestors, which is exactly what gives them their weight in moral formation (pp. 15–30). A godfather, godmother, or marriage sponsor, understood properly, isn't someone who shows up for a ceremony. They are someone who stands inside a person's or a couple's life as a trusted elder in the things of God.

The same culture that makes this possible can also wreck it. Where patronage runs deep, or where the pressure to provide materially is heavy, the choice of godparents and marriage sponsors gets driven by calculation rather than conviction. Families reach for people with influence, money, prestige, or, at weddings, for whoever can fund the reception, coordinate the *aso ebi*, or add glamour as "chairman," "chairlady," or "chief launcher," hoping for some return, educational or economic or reputational. Once that happens, sponsorship in both sacraments shifts shape at the same time: the sponsor becomes a patron or a performer instead of a witness, an entertainer instead of a companion in discipleship or covenant. What should have stayed an ecclesial relationship of faith gets pulled into the economy of status and obligation.

None of this comes from bad intentions. It comes, usually, from real family pressure and a genuinely good instinct about shared responsibility gone slightly astray. Still, it needs correcting. The Church can affirm the African conviction that a child, or a newly married couple, deserves a wide circle of care, while still insisting that in the sacramental order the deciding factor is not wealth or fashion or influence but faith, maturity, and a real willingness to accompany (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 874; c. 1063). Inculturation, here, means taking the wisdom already present in the *Atogba Oya* and the *Onye Aka Ebe*, their patience, their staying power, their skill at settling disputes, and redirecting it toward Christ, away from patronage and performance.

The Contemporary Crisis: From Ministry to Ceremony

The core problem today is simple to name: sponsorship, in every sacrament that requires it, has become a one-day show. Baptismal and confirmation sponsors turn up for the ceremony and then drop out of the child's actual Christian life. Marriage sponsors, best men, and chief bridesmaids turn up resplendently for the wedding and then drop out of the couple's actual married life. A birthday message here, an anniversary greeting there, maybe. Prayer, moral guidance, real presence, rarely.

What survives is a photograph and a memory. What's missing is the relationship itself. This costs the Church more than it might seem. First, it undercuts the whole point of the sacraments. Baptism joins a person to Christ's Body and gives them a vocation to holiness and mission (CCC, 1997, nos. 1213, 1270); Confirmation strengthens that vocation for witness (CCC, 1997, no. 1285); Matrimony makes a couple a living sign of Christ's covenant with the Church (Eph. 5:25–32, NRSVCE). If initiation and marriage both means being joined to a believing community, then the sponsor is supposed to be that community made visible and personal. Take the sponsor away in practice, and the sign itself goes hollow: the rite says this person, or this couple, will be helped to live the faith, and the pastoral reality, too often, says otherwise.

Second, it strips parents, catechists, and newlyweds of an ally they actually need. Parents already carrying heavy economic and emotional loads could use reinforcement in faith of their own; young couples facing money trouble, in-law tension, and the ordinary friction of two lives merging could use an experienced Christian couple to talk to. A committed baptismal sponsor could back up family prayer, push toward Mass and confession, walk through hard moral questions. A committed marriage sponsor could support the couple's prayer life, model how to handle conflict, and act as a go-between at exactly the moments, as African custom already anticipates through the *Atogba Oya* and the *Onye Aka Ebe*, when a marriage is most fragile. Take that sponsor away, and nobody picks up the slack.

Third, both the child's growth and the marriage's resilience suffer for it. Young people need adult models of Christian life beyond their own parents; young couples need models of Christian marriage beyond their own families of origin, who may hand down old patterns of conflict rather than tested wisdom. Hebrews tells believers to "encourage one another" and not to skip meeting together (Heb. 10:24–25, NRSVCE), a reminder that discipleship at every stage of life runs on real encouragement, not just good intentions. When sponsorship collapses into ceremony, plenty of young Catholics end up sacramentally initiated but relationally on their own, and plenty of young Catholic couples end up sacramentally married but pastorally unaccompanied.

Put simply: hollowing out sponsorship, at the Baptism, at Confirmation, at Matrimony, is not a minor lapse in custom. It is a real, connected form of spiritual neglect, blocking exactly the channel through which post-sacramental growth and marital stability were supposed to flow. Zoom out, and this neglect feeds a wider fragility in African society, where plenty of people have received the rites of the Church without ever getting the stable, relational guidance needed to live out what those rites signified.

Pastoral and Spiritual Implications

Get sponsorship right, in any sacrament, and the effects run deep. For someone receiving Baptism or Confirmation, a real godparent is proof that the Church's care doesn't end when the rite does. For a newly married couple, a real marriage sponsor is that same proof: that the Church's care for the covenant doesn't stop once the register is signed. Through prayer, conversation, and simple presence, both kinds of sponsor can help the people entrusted to them read their own lives through faith, connecting doctrine to lived experience. That kind of accompaniment matters most exactly when things get hard: moral crisis, grief, a fork in someone's vocation, drifting from the Church, or, for a couple, money trouble, childlessness, in-law conflict, the ordinary fading of romance every marriage eventually meets.

For parents, a real godparent is a partner, not a rival, echoing Paul's own recognition that faith gets handed down through family and mentors together (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15, NRSVCE). For a young couple, a real marriage sponsor is likewise a partner, not the meddler African custom itself warns against (Yusufu & Murtla, 2022, p. 376): someone who strengthens the couple's own ability to decide things, rather than a family that keeps trying to run the marriage from the outside. That kind of partnership matters more than ever in societies dealing with migration, family fragmentation, urban

life, and the pressures of education, all of which can quietly erode the ordinary structures of religious and marital formation.

Parishes gain, too. Sponsors who actually stay involved widen the Church's whole capacity to accompany people: a layer of lay ministry that is personal, sustainable, and grounded in real relationship, working alongside clergy and catechists who are often stretched across large congregations. Renewing sponsorship, baptismal, confirmational, marital, together, could become one real piece of a broader strategy for formation and evangelisation, especially in dioceses already short on vocations. Society feels it too. More children and young people growing up with steady Christian mentors, more young couples entering marriage with an experienced Christian couple beside them through the hard early years, this doesn't just help individuals. It builds conscience and strengthens family life more broadly. Recovered properly across the whole sacramental arc, sponsorship becomes a quiet form of social and spiritual capital, reinforcing the moral fabric of communities dealing with corruption, violence, family breakdown, and confusion about right and wrong (Magesa, 1997, pp. 37–58).

A Pastoral Reawakening of Sponsorship

These deliberate pastoral practices are put forward as practical steps to the reawakening of sacramental sponsorship:

9.1 Catechesis and Formation

Parishes need real catechesis on what sponsorship actually means, in every sacrament that calls for it. Parents, candidates, engaged couples, and the people proposed as godparents or marriage sponsors all need to hear clearly that this is a ministry of accompaniment rooted in Baptism, Confirmation, and the Church's own pastoral care for Matrimony.

9.2 Discernment in Choosing Sponsors

Choosing a sponsor, for any sacrament, needs more thought than it usually gets. Pastors and catechists can help families and couples ask the right questions. For godparents, straight from Canon 874: Is this a practising Catholic, someone who goes to Mass and receives the sacraments? Have they made their own Confirmation and First Communion? Does their life actually match the faith they are witnessing to? Are they genuinely willing and available to stay involved after the ceremony (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 874)? For marriage sponsors, a similar set of questions, built on Canon 1063 and the criteria parish "sponsor couple" programmes already use: Is this a sacramentally married, practising Catholic couple whose own marriage is a credible witness? Will they meet with the engaged couple during preparation and stay reachable after the wedding? Will they support the couple's own decisions rather than pull the marriage into wider family politics?

9.3 Parish Structures for Ongoing Accompaniment

Parishes need actual structures to keep sponsor relationships alive in both settings. For Baptism and Confirmation: a follow-up meeting three or six months after the sacrament, an annual "Godparents and Godchildren Day" with Mass and a renewal of promises, invitations for sponsors to join youth retreats or catechetical events. For Matrimony: parishes can borrow the "sponsor couple" or "marriage mentor couple" model already working in some dioceses, where a trained married couple walks with an engaged couple through preparation and then stays in touch through the first year or two of marriage (Diocese of Saint Petersburg, n.d.; Diocese of Lansing, 2019). Annual reunions, anniversary check-ins from the parish office, and eventually inviting marriage sponsors to become godparents for the couple's own children, all of this can weave both kinds of sponsorship into one continuous thread running through a family's sacramental life.

9.4 Formation of Clergy and Pastoral Agents

Seminaries and pastoral institutes need to teach the theology and practice of sponsorship, baptismal and marital alike, as part of forming clergy and lay ministers. John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis* insists priestly formation must build a real capacity for unhurried, personal presence to the people entrusted to pastoral care (John Paul II, 1992, no. 43). That same capacity is needed to guide families choosing godparents and couples choosing marriage sponsors. Future priests and catechists need to learn to preach sponsorship as one ecclesial vocation, apply the canons with pastoral sense, and treat both kinds of sponsor as genuine partners in evangelisation.

9.5 An Inculturated Spirituality of Sponsorship

Finally, both forms of sponsorship need a spirituality that actually speaks to African life. African theologians and pastoral leaders can write prayers, songs, and catechetical material that present the godparent as an ecclesial elder, a "faith-relative" in God's household, and the marriage sponsor as a baptised counterpart to the *Atogba Oya* or *Onye Aka Ebe*: a go-between not for bride-price but for grace, there not just to make the wedding happen but to help the marriage last. Drawing on images of elders, ancestors, and communal discernment, this kind of spirituality can speak fluently in African cultural symbols while staying shaped, unmistakably, by the Gospel (Bujo, 1992; Mbiti, 1969).

Conclusion

Godfather, godmother, marriage sponsor: these are not side roles attached to a ceremony. They are one spiritually serious ministry, built into how the Church understands Christian initiation and vocation. Canon law and the Catechism make it plain that a baptismal or confirmation sponsor exists to help someone live the faith and carry its obligations (Code of Canon Law, 1983, cc. 872, 893; CCC, 1997, no. 1255). Canon 1063 and Pope Francis make it equally plain that the whole ecclesial community, given a face in mentor and sponsor couples, owes the newly married that same quality of accompaniment (Code of Canon Law, 1983, c. 1063; Francis, 2016, §207). Reawakening sponsorship, in this fuller sense, is not optional. It calls for catechesis, real discernment, canonical seriousness, cultural imagination, and a renewed commitment from godparents and marriage sponsors alike.

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