

## Theology of Sponsorship



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WHEN YOU HEAR the word “sponsorship” what do you think of?

Most of us probably think in terms of the kind of secular sponsorship we see in the media all the time – people paying to support something, and usually advertising themselves by so doing. That is not what we are here to talk about.

The great canonist Fr Morrissey tells us that the term “sponsorship” is not used in the Code of Canon Law (*Health Progress*, 2007). One commentator went further and said that the words “sponsor” and “sponsorship” “do not have theological, civil or canonical roots” (Dr Mary Grant, *Health Progress*, 2001).

Now I actually disagree with that last statement. I am going out on a limb here and someone might cut it off, but I think it is worth the risk. I believe there is a bit more theological background to the use of the word sponsor than is revealed in that statement.

Let us look at our own experience. How many people here are sponsors? Raise your hands ... How many people here are godparents, or have sponsored a young person at confirmation or has sponsored someone through the Adult Rite of Christian Initiation?

You are all, according to the English translation of the *Code of Canon Law*, “sponsors”.

Now before someone starts to shoot me down, let me say that I am not saying that the kind of sponsorship which we are talking about today is the same as being a sponsor at baptism or confirmation. No they are not the same. But they are not totally different.

I am a philosopher, and philosophers are used to dealing with analogical terms and concepts i.e. ideas and words which although different in meaning also have a certain similarity, what

a modern philosopher called a “family resemblance”. And so in a little while we are going to return to this idea and see if our knowledge of one form of sponsorship does not shed light on the form of sponsorship we are concerned with today.

First of all let us return to a little bit of the history of the emergence of this concept in our context.

Most of the contemporary discussion around sponsorship seems to have focussed around health care, and mostly in the United States. I think education is newer to the idea of sponsorship.

In 1988 the Commission on Catholic Health Care Ministry in the USA issued its landmark report, *Catholic Health Ministry: A New Vision for a New Century*. In that report it said:

“the health ministry of the future will employ new models of sponsorship to ensure continuity and stability. Canonical models based on lay sponsorship will predominate, and there will have been an evolutionary transfer of responsibility as religious congregations withdrew from sponsorship.” (Quoted by Fr Michael Place, *Health Progress*, Jan 2004.)

It was this use of the word “sponsorship” that helped to solidify the use of the word in the context of, first of all health care ministry, and by extension to other ministries.

People began to speak about three distinct but essentially interrelated dimensions of what we call generically “leadership”: sponsorship, governance, and management.

In the past these three were often not clearly distinguished because all three were more or less exercised by the same body. The religious congregation “sponsored” the ministry. In a sense, whatever ministry it was, it was *their* ministry. The religious congregation governed the ministry, usually through the congrega-

tional leadership team, and a member of the congregation ran the show as CEO of the hospital, or principal of the school or “director” of whatever the ministry was. It was a family business.

It was as the congregations withdrew from exercising each of these roles, that their distinctness became more apparent. Generally they withdrew from management first of all, appointing lay executive officers; and then they withdrew from governance, appointing boards of directors to fulfil that role, but they maintained oversight; and then they started to withdraw from sponsorship, establishing in various ways new public juridic persons to take on that role.

As this progression took place, so too did the role of the laity increase. In a sense this was not regarded as too problematic when lay persons stepped into the management role, nor even when they stepped into the governance role. People thought it was good to have lay people with business experience, for example, on the Board of Governors. But then laity started to be appointed to the sponsorship boards, whatever name they might have been given. And then people really began to realise something new was happening, and yes, some Bishops started to get anxious.

And that is when people started to ask the question – just what is the sponsorship role? Who can be a sponsor? In a sense you had a role looking for a description, a definition, *and* for a theology.

Let us return to the idea of considering our understanding of the role of sponsor in the sacraments of initiation, Baptism and Confirmation. It is quite possible that many of us do not fully understand that role ourselves, as our modern culture has tended to downplay the role.

One of the first things about the sponsor is that he or she represents the community of the Church. You might recall that at Baptism the godparents join with the parents in making the profession of faith. They do so as representatives of the community. In a certain sense, what the sponsor says to the parents and/or the person receiving the sacrament, is that you are not alone in this. We, the community, stand with you to help and support you. And when I say that the sponsors represent the community, I do not mean simply the local church community. In a very real sense, the sponsors represent the universal Church, past, present and future. They represent that *communion* which is the whole Church.

So it is that to be a sponsor, according to the Code of Canon Law one has “to be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has received the blessed Eucharist and who lives a life of faith which befits the role to be undertaken.” In other words the sponsor is someone who is in communion with the Church and brings with them the living tradition of the Church.

And what is the role of the sponsor? Speaking of the sponsor for confirmation the *Code of Canon Law* says: “The sponsor’s function is to take care that the person confirmed behaves as a true witness to Christ and faithfully fulfils the duties inherent in this sacrament”. (cn. 892)

So the role of the sponsor is to help the person be faithful to their Christian vocation, and this role is grounded in their own baptism and communion in the Church and the special relationship they have with the person in question.

I think you can see the analogies which exist with our context and understanding of sponsorship. But let me expand on this, otherwise this is going to be a very short paper.

Rather than sponsorship of a person, we are speaking about the sponsorship of a ministry – that is some work being carried out in the name of Jesus Christ and his Church. So the sponsor has a responsibility to ensure that the ministry is carried out in a way which is faithful to its identity as a ministry of the Church conducted in the tradition of its founding congregation. Sponsorship exists for the sake of the ministry, but its particular concern is for *how* the ministry is conducted and *how* it witnesses to the mission of Jesus Christ, whether it be in health, education, welfare or whatever else.

Sponsorship preserves, promotes and symbolises communion, that communion which guarantees the authenticity of the ministry. At the same time, communion undergirds the structures of ecclesial governance and the accountability implicit in sponsorship.

This relationship called sponsorship is itself a vital ministry in the church. Those who sponsor Catholic ministry act publicly on behalf of the church. The sponsors are not delegates of someone else. They are *called* to an ecclesial ministry by virtue of their Baptism and the gifts of the Spirit. And they hold an office within the Church.

I will just expand on that.

Saying that it is a call is to say that it is vocational and it is not something one simply takes upon oneself. Ultimately it is a response to the call of the Spirit in one’s life to fulfil a certain role for a period of time – it is part of one’s personal vocation. As with most examples of call within the Church it will be mediated through existing authorities within the Church and in very human ways. In Mercy Partners it is mediated through the existing Council and the representatives of the Stewards, the congregations that have placed their ministries in Mercy Partners.

In saying that it is an “office” in the Church I am saying it is an official role. It is not simply part of one’s everyday mission. An office in the Church is characterised by:

- > **Being directed towards others.** In the case of sponsorship it is ultimately directed towards those served by the ministry, but it is more immediately directed towards those responsible for carrying on the ministry.
- > **Being vicarious:** enabling us to stand in Jesus’ place.
- > **Having authority:** the right to act.
- > **Having power:** the *practical ability* to do the job.
- > **Having jurisdiction:** a *specific setting or area of life*, in this case the ministries involved.

So sponsorship as an office in the Church has those characteristics.

The Catholic Health Association of the United States suggests the following as key elements of sponsorship:

- > **mission oriented**: sponsors are faithful to the call to build upon the legacy given in the church's rich history and heritage of commitment to the common good, as expressed through works of justice, mercy and compassion
- > **animated**: sponsors encourage, inspire and challenge the ministry to be true to the mission of Jesus
- > **theologically grounded**: sponsors engage in theological reflection about the ministry and articulate its theological grounding
- > **collaborative**: sponsors initiate relationships marked by mutuality, respect, and integrity for the sake of the ministry
- > **church related**: sponsors in communion with church leadership, work in mutually respectful and accountable relationships for the common good
- > **accountable**: sponsors give an account to the church (at large), the communities served, and the congregation(s)/ diocese(s) regarding the quality of service and the ministry's integrity and fidelity to the mission.

(*Core Elements For Sponsorship: A Reflection Guide*, CHA USA, 2006.)

So now let me sum up my outline of a theology of sponsorship:

- > sponsorship is grounded in baptism and confirmation, and in a call to a particular office in the Church
- > sponsorship is ordered to the carrying out of a ministry or ministries of the Church carried out in the name of Jesus Christ
- > sponsorship's particular service is to support the ministry in conducting its work in communion with the Church<sup>1</sup>
- > the sponsor is accountable to the wider Church.

## PRAXIS

Now let us move from theory to praxis. How does a Sponsor carry on this ministry? Here I am going to talk explicitly about the Council of Mercy Partners. The Council is that which fulfils the role of sponsor.

First of all, a couple of observations about Mercy Partners. We have a couple of features, which although not necessarily unique, does make us different from many of the other new apostolic juridic persons. First of all we include multiple ministries and multiple institutions. We have ministries of health care, aged care, education (and within each of those, diverse institutions) and community services, that last itself consisting of a range of ministries. So whereas most the literature talks about sponsors of a ministry, Mercy Partners Council is sponsor of various ministries. Secondly, Mercy Partners embraces a diversity of charisms and founding traditions – the Sisters of Mercy of Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns, the Presentation Sisters and the Franciscan Sisters. We are a communion of charisms and ministries, and out of which will emerge in time, the charism of Mercy Partners itself.

<sup>1</sup> Since this talk I have changed this to say that the particular service is to guarantee the ministry in conducting its work ... See my talk on the **Role of the Council** at the Mercy Partners Leadership Gathering, March, 2016.

So how do we go about “sponsoring” this complex reality?

There are different aspects to the Council's role, but fundamental to them all is that of support – to support the ministry. We exist for the sake of the ministry.

Sponsorship is a relationship, and so we seek to build relationships. Here again there are diverse relationships. First of all there is the relationship between the Council and individual ministries. One of the ways in which we seek to build this relationship is by appointing a councilor to take a particular interest in and responsibility for each ministry. But as well as the relationship of the ministry to the Council there is the relationship between ministries, and Mercy Partners Council seeks to facilitate those relationships. In the area of health care, our hospitals already have a good working relationship. In other ministries such education, we will explore with you ways in which we might support each other. And finally there is the relationship as a whole, that is, of all the ministries and Mercy Partners Council together. The Council believes that it is important to provide opportunities for representatives of the members of Mercy Partners to come together. This has been one of the side effects of our formation program.

We seek to offer formation opportunities, in particular opportunities which go to the heart of understanding who we are as Catholic ministries within Mercy Partners. We seek to consult with the ministries regarding what formation they need and how best to offer it.

For any of this to be successful we need good communication. We need communication back from the ministries so we know what is happening, not because we are “big brother” but because we are interested and care. And we hope to be a medium of communication for Mercy Partners as a whole. Our newsletter is one of the ways in which we seek to do this.

Then there are the so called Reserve Powers, part of the means by which the Council exercises its stewardship of ensuring that the ministry remains viable as a Catholic ministry. It simply means that there are certain things the governing body of a ministry cannot do without permission of the Council of Mercy Partners.

Finally the Council is accountable. The Council gives an annual report to Rome, a report which has been approved by the Stewards. A copy of that report goes to the Bishops in whose dioceses we have ministries. And a version will also come back to the Boards of the ministries.

In the end, all of this is about us working together as a communion within the communion of the Church to ensure that all of the ministries under the umbrella of Mercy Partners continue to be vibrant Catholic ministries bringing Jesus Christ to our world.

That is a sketch of Mercy Partners theology of sponsorship in practice.