

Sponsors and Witnesses.

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ONE of the most difficult questions which presents itself to the thoughtful and earnest clergyman of the present day is that of sponsors in baptism. The longer his ministerial experience, and the more varied his spheres of work, the more is the fact impressed on him, reluctantly, perhaps, but certainly, that our present system of choosing, or else quietly ignoring, sponsors in baptism, is working exceedingly badly, or rather not really working at all. The custom is not answering the end for which it was instituted, and very often is only bringing into contempt and derision the sacred ordinance it was intended to solemnize and safeguard. The question is not one of merely academic or antiquarian interest; it is one which touches the very springs of our Church life, and must tell incalculably on the spirituality of both the present and the future.

There are many questions which immediately rise to our minds. Why do we ask for sponsors for children, and witnesses for adults, in holy baptism? Why do they so very seldom correspond to the legal and ancient requirements of the Church? Why are they so difficult to produce? Why do they so seldom attempt to carry out their duties, and seem so hopelessly indifferent to their obligations? Why do we clergy so constantly and necessarily baptize without sponsors, or, at any rate, with those we cannot help knowing are really most unsuitable? These are questions which every thoughtful minister has forced upon his attention with terrible urgency and perpetual frequency. The real truth is that in scarcely a single instance do we, or *can we*, carry out the requirements of our Church in their strict letter and intention.

Let us begin our consideration of the subject by recalling some facts regarding the history and origin of sponsors in baptism before we go on to consider some of the difficulties and

dangers of the present position, and how we may best meet them. Whether the tradition be true that the institution of sponsors began with Bishop Higinus, about A.D. 141, is a matter not of any great consequence, but it is manifest that the peculiar circumstances of the Primitive Church rendered such persons very necessary to the safety and well-being of the Church. Surrounded by bitter and cunning foes, exposed to hypocrisy within and treachery without, it was of the most vital importance that when anyone came forward to offer themselves for baptism, there should be some trustworthy and reliable persons willing to vouch before the assembled Church as to their suitability and sincerity. It was largely the principle of self-preservation which called into practice such a reasonable and simple means of protection.

It may be urged there is no direct Scriptural authority for persons taking on themselves such responsibilities, but while this may be literally true, yet the idea, tendency, and effect of the institution is decidedly Scriptural, and there is nothing contrary to any principle in the Word of God. We can find several analogous commands, though no absolutely identical obligations. But if we cannot produce direct Scriptural warrants for this institution of sponsors, we can certainly show that it was one approved and practised in the earliest and purest ages of the Church. The Apostolical Constitutions, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine, all bear witness to this fact, besides the decrees of early Councils and the testimony of ancient liturgies. We have, then, conclusive and varied proof that this requirement of competent persons to be sponsors was a primitive custom general throughout the Catholic Church, and approved by the most venerated of the early Fathers.

The next question is, What persons did the Church consider most suitable to fulfil this important function? Generally deacons and deaconesses were selected, as being most in touch with the rank and file of the Church, and most capable of judging of the personal character and family surroundings of those desiring baptism, and also best able to see afterwards to their regular

instruction in Christian doctrine. (Is there not a survival of this primitive practice in the old parish clerk being sponsor for half the parish?)

But while the Church, wisely under the circumstances, preferred to have such persons as deacons and deaconesses to guarantee the suitability of candidates for baptism, she as wisely laid down firm rules regarding those who might not act as sponsors. She forbade catechumens, heretics, and penitents to act in this capacity, and usually she required the sponsors to have been confirmed, and thus implied that she desired sponsors to be also communicants, a condition our Church has adopted in her Canons. Parents were not generally allowed to act as god-parents (although St. Augustine certainly seems to imply the contrary), and even if they did so act it was not *as* parents, but only as believers and reliable members of the Church, probably when other trustworthy and suitable persons could not be found, or were unwilling to act. It is to be noted, however, that the earliest Egyptian forms of ritual permitted parents, and many branches of the Church have ignored the point as trivial, or openly consented to it, as does the Prayer-Book of the Irish Church. As time, however, passed on, and the power of the monastic Orders increased, together with their ceaseless encroachments on family and parochial life, the Church evidently felt obliged to limit their influence as far as possible. Monks and nuns were very different people to the primitive deacons and deaconesses; therefore the Council of Auxerre, in A.D. 578, passed a Canon making it illegal for monks or nuns to act as sponsors. The root idea of the whole matter was a very Scriptural and beautiful one. It was that the Church was the spiritual mother of all her children, and therefore was rightly and anxiously careful to safeguard their spiritual interests, and watch over their religious training and education. She avowed that it was as surely her duty as her privilege to see that every one, young or old, admitted to her communion should be properly instructed in the doctrines and duties of their belief. There was, indeed, the most urgent need for such trustworthy and consistent sponsors, in the early ages of the Church especially.

The dangers of lapsing from the Faith through the horrors of persecution, or the seductions of the world, or the sophistries of heresy, were very tremendous and constant ; and the Church, in her own interests and with a due regard to her Divine Master's honour, sought out loyal, consistent, and truly pious members of her society, who should come forward, and in the face of God and the congregation testify to the sincerity and suitability of the neophyte (or infant), and promise to see that he should be correctly, faithfully, and systematically instructed in " all things that a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul's health," and thus be enabled to lead a godly and a Christian life. That the Church was right in recognizing the healthy influence of older and experienced believers in the training of younger ones is certain, but whether she rightly excluded parents as a rule is open to question. Personally I view sponsors as *religious executors*, appointed that they may safeguard the spiritual interests of the child in the event of the parents' death and personal incapacity, or special circumstances (as in the case of a parent's residence abroad, or adoption of a sinful life, or heretical opinions), but not called on to interfere under ordinary conditions. The fact that godparents generally neglect their duties, and that parents often present themselves as sponsors, does not affect the question of the original intention, and if this primary idea could be resuscitated it might prove of incalculable benefit to the life of the Church. The institution has fallen into disrepute and contempt, because it has been scandalously carried out, but its utility has never been questioned in any branch of the Catholic Church.

The Church of England, during the troublous times of the Reformation, had much and constant intercourse and controversy with those Protestant communities on the Continent which were, amidst fire and sword, persecution and tyranny, forming themselves into organized Churches, whether after the Calvinistic, Lutheran, Zwinglian, or Arminian type, but the need of sponsors in baptism was acknowledged, it may have been because their circumstances were often as perilous as those of the Primitive Church, but so it was ; and, although now the Protestant

non-Episcopal Churches of Europe have discontinued the practice, it has rather died out than has the principle been repudiated. The Episcopal Churches of Europe require sponsors, but, with a curious inconsistency, make no inquiry or rule regarding their faith, which is the reason we so often see royal princes having for their godparents persons of widely different faiths. Our own Reformers were very strong on this subject of sponsors, and their writings bear witness to the strong practical common sense with which they viewed the problems of that changeful and critical period.

The Church of England has always held to the necessity of sponsors both in the old Sarum use and since. The Reformation produced very little change in this particular. In the Prayer-Book of 1549 the address was specially written for the sponsors, but is largely derived from the Liturgy of Cologne. The questions addressed to the sponsors are modified from the Sarum use, and in 1549 were addressed *to the child after* its baptism, but in 1552 were addressed to the sponsors *before* the baptism, and in 1549 the sponsors laid their hands on the head of the child before the putting on of the chrisom, but in 1552 this was withdrawn. It is noticeable also that, while in 1549 the questions were asked of the child, yet in the closing exhortation the minister says, "Forasmuch as these children have promised by you," showing the vicarious position in which the Church regarded the sponsors to stand to the child. The next alteration was in 1661, when the words were added "in the name of this child," and also the demand for obedience, "Wilt thou, then, obediently keep God's holy will and commandments," etc. ? Next, if we inquire as to the *number* of sponsors, we find the Church of England occupies a unique position. It was not till 1661 she fixed the number as three—two of the sex of the child and one of the other sex. I have heard it argued that, though there must be three, there may be more, but I fail to see where the permission comes in.

The Roman and Greek Churches require *one* sponsor, though they permit two, but it must be a male for a male, a

female for a female, and, if two, a male and a female. The sponsors must be Romanists, and anyone over seven years of age can occupy the position.

This action of the Romish Church tends to emphasize the extraordinary and far-reaching doctrine which she teaches of spiritual affinity, which prevents sponsors marrying those for whom they stand, and also most of their relatives, and this idea seems to form the groundwork of the prohibited degrees in marriage. Rome also requires sponsors at confirmation, which need not apparently be the same as those at baptism. I think it is a matter of serious importance for us to consider whether we do wisely to ask and expect (for we seldom get) so many sponsors.

When we come to the Canons of the Church of England, those of 1604, we must consider Canon 29, which is as follows: "No parent shall be urged to be present, nor be admitted to answer as godfather for his own child, nor any godfather or godmother shall be suffered to make any other answer or speech than by the Book of Common Prayer is prescribed in that behalf, neither shall any person be admitted godfather or godmother to any child at christening or confirmation before the said person so undertaking hath received the Holy Communion." This Canon was altered by the Canterbury Convocation in 1865; but the Crown refused to ratify the alteration, and the Convocation of York did not assent to it.

We may well regret its wording, and, I think, also its intention. Surely parents should be persuaded to, not dissuaded from, attending their children's baptism, as their prayers and interest are of such supreme importance; neither ought they to be debarred from acting as proxy for a godparent, if such a one is unable to attend. Who more suitable?

The restriction that the godparents shall be a communicant seems to me a wise and practical one, as insuring, as far as human foresight can, that the godparent shall be a sincere, active, and acknowledged member of the Christian Church; but it does not appear to prohibit Nonconformists from being god-

parents if they are willing so to act. The expression "godfather or godmother" at christening *or confirmation* is worthy of note, as it implies that a godparent is expected to be present at the child's confirmation, and so personally see that the promise made at baptism that the child "shall be brought to the Bishop to be confirmed" is really and truly carried into effect.

Seeing, then, that this custom of sponsors is of great antiquity, and has been of proved utility, we need to ask, Has it become obsolete? Is the requirement now needless owing to our changed conditions of life? There seems to me only two courses open to the Church—either she must abandon the requirement of three sponsors, and relax the stringency of her rules, or she must stiffen her demands and see them carried out in their literal exactness. In view of the growing worldliness of the Church, and the terribly perfunctory and mechanical view held regarding baptism, as a mere fashionable excuse for a social merry-making, or else as some mysterious process by which certain spiritual benefits are conferred irrespective of conditions or character, it appears to me that the duty of the Church is to raise the national sentiment and inculcate a high ideal regarding this Sacrament. The difference now shown in reverence with regard to the two Sacraments instituted by Christ is not only alarming; it is appalling. No ritual is considered too gorgeous, no ceremonial too extravagant, no language too extreme, when it is employed to direct attention and inspire reverence with regard to Holy Communion, or the Supper of the Lord; but the other Sacrament is treated with scant reverence—any time, any service, any congregation, any apparel or vestment is good enough. Nothing special is asked as regards preparation or condition; nothing is done or attempted to impress on people the idea that the two Sacraments stand on an equal level of Divine institution, and are equally worthy of most reverent and thoughtful reception, and should be safeguarded by well-considered restrictions and restraints.

We have our Baptism Service in large parishes certainly

either on week-day evenings, when scant congregations attend, on Sunday afternoons when only children are present, or else at times specially arranged when no one is present except the infants and the one or two adults who come with them, and these adults absolutely ignorant of their duties as sponsors—often quite ignorant of their Prayer-Books and the answers they are required to give.

Now, can we get three sponsors, in these days, all communicants, for each child? I think *not*. Very rarely are three of any sort forthcoming in our poor or large parishes. Usually we must christen with one sponsor, and that the mother or a friend, or not christen at all. Probably many will say: "Well, let the child be baptized, anyhow!" But how, then, are we to teach the child what its godfathers and godmothers promised for it in its baptism, when it never had any godparents to promise anything on its behalf? Who is responsible to bring it to confirmation? And if we make baptism such a merely mechanical act, can we impress on the child the indispensable requirement of repentance and faith before it can benefit by the Sacrament? But I take no such low view of this Divinely appointed Sacrament. I believe it is pledge of a Divine promise and covenant, fraught with eternal blessings if received under the proper conditions. Now, this being so, it appears to me we cannot be too urgent in our demand for proper and pious godparents (or godparent) to see that the child is taught what baptism is, what it involves, and what it requires. It is no good advocating a doctrine of perfection; the present conditions of our home life do not lend themselves to it. But why not have not less than one *godparent*, nor more than three—male for male, female for female—and that one a qualified communicant? Then have the name of the godparent, or godparents, entered in the Baptism Register with the parents' names, and then at confirmation require the godparent to sign a requisition to the Bishop, asking for confirmation for the godchild—this to be countersigned by the clergyman. It would keep the godparent in touch with the child, and show there was something real and practical in the spiritual relationship. If we are going to check and dissipate

the loose views of baptism which are so sadly common, we must take some trouble, and the Bishops and other dignitaries should take more trouble too.

Why should clergy baptize any child brought to them as a mere matter of course? Why not demand at least one godparent, who can and must produce a certificate of confirmation, or a letter testimonial from his or her clergyman, saying they are communicants, and of pious life and conversation? Is it impossible to impress upon persons coming forward as godparents that the office is not fully discharged by the gift of a silver spoon and fork or some valuable or invaluable presents, but really means a very solemn duty and responsibility, and must be so regarded? It will be necessary to refuse some godparents, to decline to baptize some children, to face the usual cries of "want of charity," priestly arrogance and intolerance, etc.; but in the end it will pay in the highest and noblest sense; we shall raise to its proper level the initiatory Sacrament; we shall show a due regard to the spiritual interest of the children; we shall lay the foundation of a better, more serious, more suitable view of confirmation and all its attendant duties and privileges; we shall have done our best, as far as human foresight can, to provide that all children brought to holy baptism shall be truly brought up in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

