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Advisory Opinion

18. Canon 893

Step-Parent as Sponsor at Confirmation

Realizing that the canons concerning sponsors at confirmation preclude a parent from serving in this capacity, can a step-parent serve as a sponsor? (The step-parent has not legally adopted the child/candidate.)

OPINION

It is presumed that this case involves the child of a natural parent and his or her spouse, being referred to here as “step-parent.” The norms for confirmation sponsors are found in canons 892 and 893, which state the desirability of having a sponsor, their function, the conditions for serving as such. In noting requirements for sponsors, canon 893 simply makes reference to those conditions necessary for baptismal sponsors as prescribed in canon 874. Therefore, by reference, the exclusion of parents from the role of sponsor for confirmation is found in canon 874, 5): To be admitted to the role of sponsor, a person must not be the father or the mother of the one to be [confirmed].

In addition to the biological facts by which parenthood is established, legal adoption establishes a relationship of child to parent that is equivalent to that of natural parents. Therefore, birth or adoptive parents would be excluded from the role of confirmation sponsor. In the case of a step-parent, while a legal relationship exists between the husband and wife, there is no such legal relationship with the child. Bonds of affection and care may certainly mark the relationship, but the legal effects, canonically and civilly, of parenthood are not present. Therefore, it would seem that there is no prohibition in law against a step-parent serving as a sponsor. Further argumentation for this position can be found in the norm of canon 18. It would seem that the confirmation candidate could argue for a right to choose a sponsor who fulfills the norm of law. Therefore, a law which restricts this right, as in the case of establishing prohibitions against serving as a sponsor, must be strictly interpreted. A step-parent is not the father or mother and therefore is not included among those excluded from the role of sponsor.

When we look to the purpose and function of sponsors, we may gain some additional insight. According to the *Rite of Confirmation*, sponsors “help [the candidates] fulfill their baptismal promises faithfully.” In this role, they assist the parents who hold the primary responsibility for seeing to their children’s faith development. In the discussion surrounding the drafting of the canon on confirmation sponsors, the issue of parents’ serving in this capacity was discussed. The Code Commission determined that the role of the confirmation sponsor was secondary to that of parents; sponsors were to assist parents not supplant them in their responsibility for their children’s spiritual development.

A step-parent ideally assists a natural parent in the fulfillment of the various parental roles and responsibilities. It would seem, therefore, not only possible but also desirable that the step-parent in the case cited serve as a confirmation sponsor. Such a role would “sacramentalize” the already existent relationships between child and step-parent as well as between the spouses in their relationship with the child. Since the law is not retroactive, if, at a later date, the step-parent were to adopt the child, no difficulty would exist. The role would shift from a secondary and auxiliary one to a primary one shared equally with the natural parent.

Barbara Anne Cusack, J.C.D.

