

# Ministry of the Case Sponsor

## Introduction

At the risk of revealing my age, I remember my old elementary school readers. You know the one's Dick and Jane and their old dog Spot. It seems to me that they were always having a lot of fun with the old red wagon. Anyway, there was one story where Dick fell out of his wagon and needed to go to the hospital. I remember pictures of a big building, smiling doctors with stethoscopes around their necks and nurses with those funny hats and white dresses. Everyone was smiling and happy and Dick went home to pet Spot and to ride his red wagon once again.

At this point in my life that is all I knew of what a hospital was. The Dick and Jane book let me know two things; there was this thing called a hospital and that it was supposed to make you feel better. That was it, no more no less and I soon put the idea of the hospital's existence into the back of my mind, I knew it was there, it was supposed to help, but I had no idea of the reality. That is until I was standing up in a rocking chair and fell cutting myself badly enough to have go to the emergency room and then I found out about needles, stitches and that the doctors and nurses were not all smiling, as a matter of fact they were serious professionals who were focused on taking care of my cut. It was a painful lesson, but they gave me a clown puppet when they were done, (A real cloth one with a rubber head, not one of those cheap plastic gloves that pass for hand puppets these days).

The same way as I only had a passing acquaintance with the concept of a hospital the majority of our clients only have a passing acquaintance with the larger church. In general people know that there is an institution with bishops, cardinals, a pope, courts, and a bureaucracy of some sort. However, the majority of the people we serve only encounter the church through their pastors and parishes. They may see the bishop during Confirmation or some other special occasion but there is no real connection to the universal, diocesan or institutional church. It is not until they become involved or need to utilize part of the greater church, (Catholic Charities, Marriage Tribunal, or any of the other various offices), that they come face to face with it.

So it is extremely important that we associated with the Tribunal present a friendly, compassionate, non-judgmental, professional and competent face to our client. It is our job to put them at ease in order to guide them through the process of having their past marriage

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experience reviewed by the Church. Remember as a case sponsor you will be the first face of the bigger church that your Catholic client may ever see. In many other cases your client may be protestant and you will be the first minister of the Catholic Church the client has ever encountered, and there is only one chance to make a good first impression.

This section is designed to help you; decide whether the ministry of case sponsor is one that you wish to be a part of, and make you aware of some of the tools and concerns that are part of the ministry of justice in the Church.

## **Ministry in General**

When I was just starting out in ministry I had the great opportunity to work in a homeless shelter in South Bend Indiana. This was a true shelter and not what people would call a flop house. The shelter provided continual shelter, medical, dental, psychological, educational, and professional assistance to the clients with an eye toward giving them the ability and the tools necessary to leave the streets and re-enter the workforce as productive men and women. All in all it's a very good program and one that I was very happy to be part of. I tell you this because of an incident that happened to me just prior to Christmas of that year.

Many people volunteer to help in the shelter during the holidays and they mean well and after all it is Christmas. However, those of us who were there year around would have loved to have had that many volunteers all year or at least a few more regulars that the residents could get to know and depend on.

At the time I was teaching English and Reading skills in the GRE program there. I was in the middle of tutoring a student when he turns to me and says, "see that woman over there"? I turned and saw a middle aged woman dressed in designer clothes and accessories. She was one of the many people who would come to the shelter during the Christmas season in order to lend a hand. At first glance I saw a woman who felt out of place, was a little scared and you could tell intimidated by the residents. She wasn't a bad person, I mean she was there to help, but you could tell by her dress and body language that she was out of her element and didn't know how to act or how to minister to people from the street.

"She won't be back again" he said, "she's scared and she's only here to help". I asked him what he meant and he told me that although the residents appreciate people coming to the

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shelter, they know that people like this woman felt pity for them, fear them and maybe feel some guilt especially during the Christmas season and that wasn't the kind of help they needed. I still didn't understand and asked him what he meant, (he gave me that you're an idiot look that my mom used to give me), and he said, "she's not like you, she will show up one or two hours and we'll never see her again because she is either afraid of us or doesn't want to get to know us. We all know it! You're here constantly, you listen to us, you know our stories, and you've been here long enough to know about our addictions, life on the street, what took us to the street and to know when we're hurting. We like you and we trust you. Yeah you help but it's a different kind of help, you don't feel sorry for us, you're here with us".

For me that was one of the greatest complements given to me in my life and more importantly one of the greatest lessons I ever learned about ministry. Ministry is not about one person helping another, although that may very well be a part of it; ministry is about walking beside and supporting someone during all parts of their lives. It is listening to their story, their joys, sorrows, triumphs and failures. It's about caring for another human being in God's love in such a way that you sacrifice a part of yourself in order to serve another.

Simply put, ministry is service to another human being. It is not "helping" in the negative sense it is supporting another person through their journey in life. Sometimes the act of ministering to another person is simply listening to their story, at other times it may be a bit more pro or re-active. Remember, no particular ministry is more important than another to the person who is being ministered to, what is important is that the love of God manifests itself through the minister to the People of God strengthening the faith of both parties. That is what we at the Tribunal are about.

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### **The Ministry**

A confrere of mine once asked me of all the professions available to me why I chose canon law. I told him the reason was simple, reconciliation. The ministry of justice, especially in the marriage tribunal, gives me the opportunity by seeking the truth to aid those who have fallen away from the Church and the Sacraments due to some irregularity.

This is particularly true in the ministry of justice as applied to the marriage tribunal. One thing that must be remembered in this particular ministry is that you as a case sponsor will be intimately involved with your clients, the majority of whom have at one time entered into marriages that did not work and in many cases suffered through a painful divorce. As a case sponsor you will be privy to the intimate details of all the aspects of a persons failed marriage and it is important that you listen to the client's story both with compassion and professionalism in order that you might best help them prepare their case for review by the court. You must also realize that you may hear your clients speak about aspects of their life's journey that you may not agree with or in some cases the stories may shock you. Through it all it is important to realize that these experiences are part of the story that has brought them to this point in their lives. Therefore it is extremely important that you be able to listen to your clients without judging or condemning them for their pasts.

In Tribunal ministry it is also important to realize that if your client is a Catholic they may suffer from a feeling of ostracization and neglect when it comes to the Church. In many cases this is due to mis-information regarding the law and doctrine of the Church regarding divorce. Unfortunately others may have had a bad experience with other ministers of the Church before, during or after the divorce. As a Case Sponsor you will be in a position to assist them in this process, and by doing so hopefully help them realize that even in their current circumstances that the Church does care about them and reassure them that they are loved by God.

Another element of being a good case sponsor is a competency regarding the paperwork required by the Tribunal to open a case. You will be assisting your clients in filling out these forms as well as helping them to ascertain which may be the appropriate grounds in which to petition the Tribunal to examine the marriage. You will also need to read and examine your client's questionnaire in light of their story as related to you in order that the Tribunal has all the

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information necessary in order to begin the case. You will also need to understand which documents must accompany the petition.

It is also important to remember that the ministry of case sponsor, although involving a good deal of procedure and paperwork is also a ministry in which you will have direct contact with your client. You'll need to hear the client, understand the emotions and pain that many clients will come to you with. Remember listening is a good thing, many of our clients are not going through this process for any other reason but to bring closure to a chaotic episode in their lives, and you will be the one who will be there walking beside them during this process.

It is important that you also understand that holding their hand is not enough. In order to be an affective case sponsor you will need to become proficient in the fundamentals of the process and a portion of the law, and be able to utilize them on behalf of the client at the beginning of the process. This would include proficiency in the initial procedure, document collection needed for the transmittal of the petition as well as being able to discuss with your client appropriate witnesses and determining what the witness would be able/willing to testify about.

As I stated before the ministry of justice is, particularly in the instance of a marriage tribunal, can be a ministry of healing and reconciliation. As the last canon of the code states, (c. 1752), "the salvation of souls, which in the Church must always be the supreme law".

The questions often arises, if the supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls, why then do we even bother with the judicial process, why don't we just recognize their divorces and let them marry in the Church instead of living together in sin? The answer to this question in a word is "Sacrament". Those of us who remember the Baltimore Catechism remember that a Sacrament is "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace". In the matter of marriage, it is:

the consent by which the spouses mutually give and receive one another is sealed by God himself. From their covenant arises "an institution confirmed by divine law...even in the eyes of society"... Thus the marriage has been established by God Himself in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved. This bond, which results from the free human act of the spouses and their consummation of the marriage, is a reality, henceforth irrevocable, and give rise to a covenant guaranteed by God's fidelity.

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The church does not have the power to contravene this disposition of divine wisdom, (Catechism of the Catholic Church, p. 409).

Canon 1055 states:

The matrimonial covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.

In essence, marriage as a Sacrament of the Church is the vehicle of grace that brings about the salvation of souls; it was instituted by Christ to this end. It is the duty of the faithful in general and the Tribunal in particular to defend the dignity of the Sacrament of marriage. The church presumes that **all** marriages are valid, and does make provisions for those that were not by allowing tribunals to investigate failed marriage in order to see if the consent of the couples was fundamentally flawed. If it was the union was invalid and non binding on the individuals.

## **Being a Minister to Yourself**

Do to the nature of ministry, and especially in those ministries where the minister is exposed to some of the baser events of a persons' life, there is sometimes a need to decompress, de-brief and to find God in any given situation. There is also a constant need to be in constant dialogue with another person in order to evaluate how you are finding God in your given ministry.

It is strongly recommended that you talk to your pastor regarding spiritual direction. He may be willing to be your director or he may know of someone who he could recommend to you. In choosing your spiritual director, please be aware that they must understand the nature of the internal forum and confidentiality necessary for you to confide in them. Also when discussing your ministry it is important that you speak in generalities and that you not provide your director with names and other pertinent and confidential case information.