



Sponsorship's Rich, Complex Spirituality

ZENI FOX, PhD

“**S**pirituality” names an important domain of human experience that has contours influenced by varied religious traditions, but it is not always tied to any religious tradition in particular. It is influenced by the vast array of individual experiences of inner life, especially as transformed by the transcendent.¹ These individual expressions sometimes become part of religious traditions, spiritual classics handed on from generation to generation.²

“Sponsorship” names an aspect of Catholic institutional ministerial life that has been evolving over a period of about 30 years. It is a term widely used in Catholic health ministry circles, and Catholic educational ministries and Catholic social service ministries speak of sponsorship, as well. The spirituality of sponsorship is a rich, complex concept, with dimensions that are relevant for individual sponsorship entities and for the members of the sponsor.

Among the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definitions, sponsor is “one who answers for an infant at Baptism; a godfather or godmother.” The dictionary indicates that the word first was used in a religious sense, tied to a very important Christian ritual, and later it held significant social and political meanings. Among them: “one who enters into an engagement, makes a formal promise or pledge, on behalf of another.” One of the dictionary's examples of how the word is used is particularly evocative for today's understanding of sponsorship: “It knits them unto me, and me to them, that bond of sponsorship.”³

The Catholic Health Association's definition of sponsorship gives us a contemporary understanding:

Sponsorship of a health care ministry is a formal relationship between an authorized Catholic organization and a legally formed

system, hospital, clinic, nursing home (or other institution) entered into for the sake of promoting and sustaining Christ's health ministry to people in need. Sponsorship of Catholic health care involves promoting and assuring Jesus' healing mission. Those who sponsor are responsible for the continued viability of the health care ministry, promoting its ongoing mission and animating its life.⁴

These definitions offer several points relevant to a spirituality of sponsorship. In an effort to provide ways of deepening spiritual understandings and lived experience, we can explore the relevant points for the individual sponsor and for the individuals who are members of the sponsor entity.

THE SPONSOR

The ritual of Baptism creates a personal and ecclesial relationship between the infant and sponsor. The relationship of godchild and godparent is larger than a juridical relationship; it is deeply interpersonal. Various Christian cultures emphasize this role as operative throughout the lives of the individuals.

In a similar way, a sponsor has a personal and ecclesial relationship with the entity it serves. The role can be cast in juridical terms, but at the heart of spiritual life in every religious tradition

is relationship — with a transcendent reality and with “the neighbor.” Creating the relational bonds, both among the members of the sponsor and with the sponsored ministry, is a spiritual task. It contributes to the deep collaboration and reverent regard of the other (whether individual person or corporate entity) that mark a spiritually alive group.

The godparents’ responsibility “is to show the candidates how to practice the Gospel in personal and social life, to sustain the candidates in moments of hesitancy and anxiety, to bear witness and to guide the candidates’ progress in the baptismal life.”⁵

Applied to a corporate entity, this spiritual charge is central to the work of sponsorship. Attention to the institution’s “personal and social life” supports the importance of social justice teachings as a guide for the life of the institution. It echoes the sense that the sponsor attend to the vision and tasks inherent in this mandate. Attention to hesitancy and anxiety describes a compassionate approach to the concerns of the institutional ministry; it is an approach that places the sponsor within the circle in a position of support, not outside in a position of judgment. Bearing witness in an institutional setting calls for an agenda of emphasizing hope and love and faith within the sponsor itself and as its work of sponsorship unfolds.

A focus on the task of the sponsor — “promoting and assuring Jesus’ healing mission”⁶ — emphasizes the story of Jesus within the sponsor’s spirituality. The focal point for spiritual reflection should be the image of the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated more than the story of the founders of a particular ministry. The reign of God is a larger reality than the church, and as such it reminds us that the fullness of life, peace and justice it promises will never be completely achieved until the Second Coming. That reality leads to a stance of humbly placing all we do in the hands of God, even as we actively work “for the continued viability of the health care ministry.”⁷

Another way of conceptualizing the role of the sponsor is to say that it has a primary responsibility for fostering the spiritual life of the institution it serves. Sr. Regina Bechtle, SC, writes: “Organizational consultants and religious writers alike affirm that institutions do have a collective spirit, a spirituality that is more than the sum of the individual spiritualities of persons affiliated with

them.”⁸ The first step in being able to foster this life is to believe that it is possible. A profoundly Christian belief underlies it:

Our religious heritage orients us to view institutions as spirits embodied, as places of graced possibility... They are open to the action of grace and of evil. They act, for good or ill, with more or less freedom, to influence the world around them. By words and deeds, policies and behaviors, institutions translate their deepest dreams and desires into real time and space. By what they do and fail to do, they can evoke blessing or blame.⁹

Community is central to this enterprise, and so is the conviction that God already is among us. God, who created all that is and holds all that is in being, is always here — as psychiatrist Carl Jung once said — bidden or unbidden.

... (T)he spirit/Spirit in a community or institution is always already there. It may need to be uncovered, pointed to, coaxed forth, led out, articulated explicitly. *But it was there before us.* We may need to name and claim it, stretch it, push it, strengthen it, make room for it to deepen and grow. *But the spirit/Spirit was and is always already there.*¹⁰

This conviction is lived out (or, more precisely, lived into) when meetings allow time for human connection (community-building) and practices of reflection (prayer, yes, but also modes of decision-making that invite the participation of all, and proceed centered on mission and values). “God’s Spirit shows Herself, embodies Himself, in the way the groups act to make their best intentions real ... The Spirit is present in the community’s honest efforts to live its commitments faithfully, even if the results are not successful according to the world’s standards.”¹¹

MEMBERS OF THE SPONSOR

The individuals who are part of a sponsoring entity come to their role, to the spiritual task entrusted to them, with their personal spiritualities. Certainly, service as a member of a sponsor becomes part of each one’s spiritual path. But, it is important for these individuals also to pay atten-



tion to the path they have walked before taking on this responsibility.

Allowing our path to “speak to us” can be quite revealing. In a course for Catholic-school principals, I invited participants to prepare for a class by tracing the influences that had brought them to being part of the class and illustrating their journey in a way that could be shared. They noted many different experiences as part of the story — from childhood, adolescence, adult life, both gifts and challenges. Doing the assignment, then sharing the story with others, often brought a realization: My path is, indeed, a path, and it was informed by grace. For many, it was a case of “bringing to the level of conscious awareness that which was already present by grace.”¹² This awareness heightens the ability to truly bring one’s personal spiritual gifts to the world, and, therefore, of course, to the work of the sponsor.

The *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem)* from Vatican II provides official teaching that emphasizes such a perspective. The Holy Spirit gives laypeople “special gifts” . . . “so that each and all, putting at the service of others the grace received, may be “good stewards of God’s varied gifts.” Special gifts, grace received, are concepts too seldom explored as part of the reality of laypeople’s lives. Furthermore, “From the reception of these charisms, even the most ordinary ones, there arises for each of the faithful the *right and duty of exercising them* [italics added] in the Church and in the world.”¹³ Charisms! It is in the ordinary life of everyday that these gifts are received and used.¹⁴

This lay spirituality will take its particular character from the circumstances of one’s state in life (married and family life, celibacy, widowhood), from one’s state of health and from one’s professional and social activity. Whatever the circumstances, each one has received suitable talents and these should be cultivated, as should also the personal gifts (s)he has from the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

In addition to the contours of one’s personal spirituality defined by the parameters of each one’s everyday life, the Second Vatican Council gives guidance to the social dimension of spirituality, which has particular relevance for sponsorship.

That men and women, working in harmony, should renew the temporal order and make it increasingly more perfect: such is God’s design for the world . . . Lay people ought to take [this] on themselves as their distinctive task. . . [T]hey must bring to their cooperation with others their own special competence, and act on their own responsibility; everywhere and always they have to seek the justice of the kingdom of God.¹⁶

In these teachings, there is a mandate for laypersons to recognize their gifts, ordinary gifts received in the living of their lives, and their charisms, special gifts of grace that give them wisdom, or vision, or prophetic voice. As members of the sponsor, it gives them the right and responsibility to use their gifts for the entity they sponsor, but also for the larger world beyond the immediate circumference of the sponsored work.

CONCLUSION

A characteristic of the Catholic community of the East and the West is that there are many varieties of historically developed spiritual paths. Catholic institutional ministries often have been deeply influenced by one of these great traditions — Vincentian, for example, or Ignatian. Today, members of a sponsor often are laypeople whose spiritual paths may have developed idiosyncratically, as well as having been influenced by one or more of the great traditions. This calls for a new honoring of diversity in the spirituality of sponsorship, as different spiritual gifts, different charisms, are present because of the shaping forces of the individual circumstances of the states of life of lay members. There is an invitation here to all members of a sponsor to “Let Your Life Speak.”¹⁷

ZENI FOX is professor emerita of pastoral theology, Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey. She is a member of the Ascension Sponsor.

NOTES

1. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 276. In his study, Fowler explores the human side of faith. He posits that

all people relate to “centers of value that give our lives meaning.” In religious terms, this references the experience of the divine or ultimate reality, by whatever name a particular tradition calls it.

2. From the Jewish tradition, the Psalms, and from the Christian tradition, the songs and prayers of St. Francis, are well-known examples.

3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, under the word “Sponsor.”

4. The Catholic Health Association, “Sponsorship Overview,” www.chausa.org/sponsorship/overview (accessed Feb. 9, 2017).

5. *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, n. 11.

6. The Catholic Health Association, “Sponsorship Overview.”

7. The Catholic Health Association, “Sponsorship Overview.”

8. Regina Bechtle, “Giving the Spirit a Home: Reflections on the Spirituality of Institutions,” in *Called and Chosen: Toward a Spirituality for Lay Leaders*, ed. Zeni Fox and Regina Bechtle (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Little-

field, Inc., 2005), 99.

9. “Giving the Spirit a Home,” 100.

10. “Giving the Spirit a Home,” 103; italics in the original.

11. “Giving the Spirit a Home,” 105. Bechtle offers further suggestions for leaders as “tenders of the Spirit in organizations,” which have implications for the work of a sponsor. Compare: 105-10.

12. A guiding principle in the work of theologian Karl Rahner.

13. *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, article 3.

14. A clarification is needed here about the definition of laypersons informing this article. It is not the canonical definition, which includes vowed religious, but a sociological one, which describes all other laypeople.

15. *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, article 4.

16. *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*, article 7.

17. The title of Parker Palmer’s book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

L YOLA

INSTITUTE OF PASTORAL STUDIES CHICAGO • ROME • ONLINE

Loyola’s new MA in Health Care Mission Leadership—under the direction of renowned scholar M. Therese Lysaught—is designed to help senior leaders cultivate and protect the mission and identity of their organizations. Bringing faith, spirituality, and justice to the world—that’s what a Jesuit education is all about.

REGISTER FOR AN ONLINE INFORMATION SESSION

Tuesday, May 16, 2017 • 11:30 a.m. (CST)

Tuesday, June 13, 2017 • 1 p.m. (CST)

LUC.edu/healthjournal



JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, May-June 2017
Copyright © 2017 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
