

## CANON 874, §2

### RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHRISTIAN WITNESS AT BAPTISM

*Can you please explain to me what the Christian witness at baptism, mentioned in canon 874, §2, does? I can find no descriptions of his or her duties or qualifications.*

#### OPINION

The “Christian witness” at baptism, referred to in canon 874, §2, is an ersatz office. It has no duties in the universal law; consequently, there are no qualifications set down for the role.

The term “witness,” which in common parlance has become referred to as the “Christian witness” at baptism, first appeared in the 1980 *Schema Codicis Iuris Canonici* (c. 828, §2), perhaps as a gesture of inclusion toward Protestant Christians who, unlike the Eastern Orthodox, were not eligible for service as sponsors at Catholic baptism under the 1967 *Ecumenical Directory* and who, it was foreseen, would not be eligible to serve as sponsors under the revised law.<sup>1</sup>

While the 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* also sets out no qualifications or duties for this witness (the Directory still does not use the term “Christian witness”), one might discern for the baptized non-Catholic “witness” that some obligation of good Christian example might be implied, in that the witness was likely chosen out of respect for “ties of blood or friendship” (no. 98, a). Common sense suggests that the closer two individuals are, the higher their duty of good example to one another. In any case, as stated above, the so-called “Christian witness” at baptism has no designated role during the *Rite of Baptism* and, unlike parents and sponsors, has no specific on-going responsibilities in law toward the one baptized.

Note that the witness of baptism who is to be summoned in default of a sponsor’s attendance at the rite (c. 875) need not be a Christian to serve in that capacity; likewise, the “one witness” whose word could be taken later as proof of baptism (c. 876) need not be a Christian. If, nevertheless, besides the one or two

<sup>1</sup> Edward N. Peters, *Incrementa in Progressu 1983 Codicis Iuris Canonici: A Legislative History of the 1983 Code of Canon Law* (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur, 2005), 874; Kevin T. Hart, Commentary on Canon 874, in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, eds. John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2000), 1063.

sponsors envisioned by the law, a witness (Christian or otherwise) in fact attended the celebration of baptism, his or her name should be recorded per canon 877, §1.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Molina Meliá, Commentary on Canon 874, in *Código de Derecho Canónico: Edición bilingüe, fuentes y comentarios de todos los cánones*, 8th ed., ed. Antonio Benlloch Poveda (Valencia, Spain: Edicep, 1994), 406.