

Spiritual Parents

The Role of Godparents in the Catholic Church

ISSUE: What is the role of godparents (sponsors)? What are the Catholic Church's norms regarding godparents? May a Catholic serve as a godparent for a non-Catholic? May a non-Catholic Christian serve as a godparent for a Catholic? Finally, may a Catholic have more than one godfather and godmother?

DISCUSSION: To understand the role of godparents, we must first understand the purpose and effects of Baptism and Confirmation. In addition to the forgiveness of all sins (cf. Catechism, no. 1263) and the placement of an indelible mark on the person's soul (cf. Catechism, nos. 1272-74), Baptism has two other effects that are social in nature: The person becomes an adopted son of God (cf. Catechism, no. 1265), and he becomes a member of the Body of Christ, which is the Church (cf. Catechism, nos. 1267-71).

Confirmation completes Baptism (cf. Catechism, nos. 1303-04). Because it completes Baptism, the social effects of Confirmation are similar to those of Baptism. The person is conformed more perfectly to Christ as a son of God, is more perfectly united to the Body of Christ, and is strengthened to bear witness to the faith in daily life. The godparents' role is directly related to these social effects of Baptism and Confirmation.

When a person receives Baptism, God forgives his sins and removes all punishment due to sin. The Father grants him the gift of salvation. However, he can lose this gift. Just as the king expected his servants to use their talents for his glory and took away the talents from the unworthy servant (Lk. 19:11-27), so God expects us to work out our salvation through prayer and acts of charity. In short, we must continually conform ourselves to Christ (Phil. 1:27-2:18; Catechism, nos. 1691-96). Thus, Baptism is only the beginning of a new spiritual life, in which we must grow in virtue and grace before God and man. This growth in virtue and grace reflects our status as God's children by adoption and as members of the Church.

Examples of Faith

A godparent's role is to assist the growth of the baptized in his new spiritual life. As adopted sons of God and members of His family, the Church, the baptized must live in harmony with the Family of God. A godparent promises to provide an example of faith to "help the baptized to lead a Christian life in harmony with baptism, and to fulfill faithfully the obligations connected with it" (canon 872). If the baptized is an infant or child whose parents are faithful Catholics, the godparent assists the parents, who are the primary teachers of the faith (*Gravissimum Educationis* [GE] 3). If the baptized is an infant or child whose parents are not faithful to the Church, or if the baptized is an adult, the godparent must provide a primary role in the spiritual growth of his godchild.

The greatest help a godparent provides is an example of faith. The godparent must foster the virtues within himself and provide an example of prayer. As part of this example of faith, the godparent must be involved in the life of his godchild. No one is an example unless he is seen by those to whom he witnesses. Being actively involved in the life of a godchild fosters a strong relationship and enables the godparent to serve as a role model. The godchild can then better understand his status as a child of God.

Special Requirements

Because this role is so important, a godparent in the Catholic Church must (1) be a Catholic in full communion with the Church; (2) be properly designated and accept the responsibilities; (3) meet age requirements recognized in the diocese where the Baptism takes place; and (4) not be the mother or father of the one baptized (GE 3; canon 874 §1). A godparent cannot provide an example of faith if he does not share the faith. Because a godparent promises to assist in the formation of the newly baptized, and agrees to represent the community of faith and encourage his godchild to remain in full communion with the Church, he must be in full communion with the Catholic Church himself. That is, a godparent for a Catholic must be a Catholic in good standing. He must have received Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation, and he must be living a life in harmony with the faith (GE 3; cf. canon 874). He also must be eligible to receive the sacraments and cannot be bound by any ecclesiastical penalty.

Of particular concern today are Catholics married outside the Church. Because such a person is not living a life in harmony with the teachings and practice of the Church, he is not eligible to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Until he reconciles himself with the Church, he may not act as a godparent.

Regarding the first requirement that a godparent be Catholic, there is one exception that concerns the relationship between Eastern Rite Catholics and our separated brethren in the Orthodox Church. “For a just cause,” regarding the Baptism of an Eastern Catholic, “it is permitted to admit the Christian faithful of another Eastern non-Catholic Church to the function of a sponsor, but always at the same time with a Catholic sponsor.”¹ This means that a Ukrainian Catholic may have a Russian Orthodox godparent, provided that there is a good reason for it (family relationship) and he also has another Catholic godparent.

Godparents and Witnesses

Because Baptism is the sacrament that unites all Christians (cf. Catechism, no. 1271), and because the Church recognizes the importance of family relationships and close friendships, a Catholic may serve as a “witness” for a non-Catholic in Baptism, but not as a godparent. A Catholic cannot serve as a godparent for someone who has no intention of growing in the Catholic faith. Likewise, one non-Catholic may act as a “witness” at a Catholic Baptism, but only if a Catholic is also acting as godparent for the baptized.² These pastoral norms allow family relationships to be fostered and the faith to be witnessed to non-Catholics.

As noted above, it is necessary that the godparents be chosen for that purpose and accept the responsibilities. The godparents must also meet any requirements set forth by the local bishop. These requirements are meant to ensure that the godparent takes the responsibilities seriously and is able to fulfill them.

The godparents must not be the parents of the baptized. According to the Church’s ancient tradition, a spiritual relationship arises between the godparent and the one baptized. This relationship establishes a bond in faith and carries responsibilities of spiritual parenthood. If a child’s natural parents do not raise and form the person in the faith, godparents must fulfill this obligation. Parents already have a parental relationship that is primary and, if they were the godparents, there would be no one designated to assist them or take their place in their absence. This spiritual relationship is so strong that, in former days, the Church would not allow a godparent and godchild to marry. While this prohibition to marriage no longer exists in the Western Church, it does exist in the Eastern Catholic Churches. This means that in the Eastern Catholic Churches, one may not serve as the godparent of a prospective spouse, although this may be dispensed by the local bishop.³ Furthermore, this spiritual relationship is so important that the Church recommends that “the one who undertook the role of sponsor (godparent) at baptism be sponsor for confirmation” (canon 893 §2).

Finally, for a Catholic baptismal candidate, “one sponsor, male or female is sufficient; but there may be two, one of each sex” (canon 873). Therefore, Catholics can only have one godfather, one godmother, or one of each.

Building the Family of God

Being a godparent is an important duty in the Catholic Church. Often, godparents are chosen from family members and close friends. Quite often, godparents do not live in the same locale as their godchild. While this makes it difficult to be a part of the child’s life, it is not impossible. At the very least, godparents should send cards on their godchild’s Baptism day, Confirmation day, birthday, Christmas, or other significant days in his life. Remembering their Baptism and Confirmation encourages the godchild to call upon the grace received from these sacraments and live a life worthy of a child of God. They should keep in contact by letter, telephone and, if possible, personal visits. Parents should encourage the relationship between their children and their children’s godparents. In this way, the children will not consider Baptism or Confirmation simply a nice thing that happens. Rather, they will experience a concrete relationship that bears witness to their status as adopted children of God. Further, they will be encouraged to live life in harmony with the greater family of the Church.

¹ *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, Latin-English Edition* (Washington: Canon Law Society of America, 1990), canon 685 §5.

² Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The 1993 Directory for Ecumenism*, no. 98; cf. canon 874 §2.

³ Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, canon 811 §1.

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. What is the role of a godparent (sponsor)?
2. How do I understand the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation? How does my understanding of these sacraments affect my relationship with my godparents?
3. What can I do to foster a proper spiritual relationship with my godparents?
(For parents) What can I do to foster a proper spiritual relationship between my children and their godparents?
(For godparents) What can I do to foster a proper spiritual relationship with my godchild?

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