

HANDING ON THE GIFT OF FAITH

HOW CAN YOU BE A GOOD GODPARENT?

BY WOODEENE KOENIG-BRICKER

Being a godparent is one of those not-so-well-understood honors and responsibilities that some of us are asked to undertake on behalf of the children of family and friends. While we may be willing, we don't always know what becoming a godparent entails.

When You May Not be a Godparent

- ❖ You do not intend to take the duties seriously
- ❖ Are non-Catholic
- ❖ Have not been baptized, confirmed and received the Eucharist
- ❖ Are not living in accord with the teachings of the Church
- ❖ Are a member of a religious community
- ❖ Deny some truth which “must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2089)
- ❖ Are in an invalid marriage (outside the Church, remarried without an annulment etc.)

The role of godparent developed out of the task of sponsor in the catechumenate during the early Church. The function of the sponsor was to insure that a person was ready to receive all three Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation—and then to help him or her live out the Christian life. In the early Middle Ages, when infant baptism became firmly established, a sponsor was called a “*patrinus*” or “godfather,” a term that is retained in popular use although the proper term still is sponsor. While the early Church understood that a sponsor or godparent had a definite, hands-on-function, all too often today being a godparent is viewed as a ceremonial honor such as when Bono of the rock band *U2* was named godparent to Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt’s twins, children unlikely ever to see the inside of a church, much less be baptized or confirmed. Or godparenting is seen as being a real-life fairy godmother who swoops in bestowing gifts on special occasions. Or it is thought to be akin to the role of a civil guardian who would take over the rearing of a child if the parents were to die.

Actually, none of those is even close to the actual function of a godparent. Essentially, a godparent is a person who aids and assists in the spiritual development of a child (sometimes an adult convert who is a “child” in the faith.) As Canon Law puts it: “Insofar as possible, one to be baptized is to be given a sponsor who is to assist an adult in Christian initiation, or, together with the parents, to present an infant at the baptism, and who will help the baptized to lead a Christian life in harmony with baptism, and to fulfill faithfully the obligations connected with it.” (Canon No. 872)

Certain requirements and responsibilities regarding godparents must be met according to Church law, but a practical question still remains: What makes a good godparent?

A PERSON OF DEEP FAITH

First and foremost, a godparent must be a person of deep faith. His or her responsibility is to help assist in developing and establishing faith in another, so it is essential that he or she understands Catholic teaching and lives the faith on a deep, personal daily basis. You cannot help to pass on that which you do not fully and completely believe yourself. It's not enough merely to know the faith; a godparent must live that faith. That means the usual of attending Mass on Sunday and observing the laws of the Church, but it also means being a person who is committed to his or her own ongoing spiritual growth and development through study, prayer, the sacraments and the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

Requirements for Being Godparent

- ❖ Be not less than sixteen years of age, unless a different age has been stipulated by the diocesan bishop, or unless the parish priest or the minister considers that there is a just reason for an exception to be made (Canon 874.1.2);
- ❖ Be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has received the blessed Eucharist, and who lives a life of faith which befits the role to be undertaken (Canon 874.1.3);
- ❖ Not labor under a canonical penalty, whether imposed or declared (Canon 874.1.4);
- ❖ Not be either the father or the mother of the person to be baptized (Canon 874.1.5);
- ❖ A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community may be admitted only in company with a Catholic sponsor, and then simply as a witness to the baptism (Canon 874.2).

A good godparent is also, in so far as possible, positively involved in the ongoing faith experience of their godchild. This doesn't mean merely being physically present at Baptism or Confirmation, but taking an active role as practical in preparation for first reconciliation and first Communion as well as later in life with marriage or Holy Orders. This probably will mean being encouraging, supportive and enthusiastic, but in cases where the parents can't or won't take the child to religious education classes or accompany them to sacramental preparation, godparents need to be willing to step in and take a more direct role.

As children grow older, commemorating the day of Baptism and/or Confirmation with a call, visit, card or appropriate gift can help keep those spiritual ties intact. In short, a good godparent walks along the entire journey of faith with a godchild; not just waves at the beginning or cheers from the sidelines.

A SAFE HAVEN

One of the areas where a godparent can be particularly valuable is to become a safe haven for discussion of doubts and questions, especially as godchildren grow into their teens. Parents naturally get nervous when their children question teachings of the Church or moral issues, so a godparent can become a person who will listen and talk about emotionally charged issues without becoming defensive (or offensive.) Teens may find topics like the Church's teaching on sex before marriage, contraception and homosexuality easier to discuss with a non-parent, although issues like how we know Jesus is really God, what it means to be saved and why being a Catholic is important can also be areas for investigation with a godparent.

Another arena where a good godparent can make a difference is in exposure to sacramentals and devotional practices. While it's not necessary to inundate godchildren with religious gewgaws, making sure they have a well-made rosary, a medal of their patron saint, a Catholic Bible and a crucifix is certainly an important duty of godparents.

The same is true of devotions. Assuring that godchildren know how to pray the rosary, say the Stations of the Cross and are exposed to saints, novenas and seasonal practices like the Advent wreath are other ways godparents can be proactive without intruding in a godchild's life.

Of course, many of these activities presuppose that godparents live close enough to godchildren to be physically present on a regular basis, which isn't always true in today's mobile society. That's why the single most important action a good godparent can undertake on behalf of a godchild is regular, sustained prayer. As Alfred, Lord Tennyson said, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." While it is true that parents are the primary teachers of the faith, godparents can make an enormous difference in how that faith takes root by their ongoing uplifting of their godchildren in prayer.

If you are asked to become a godparent (or are thinking about selecting one), remember that this role is to be taken seriously, for the actions of a good godparent can literally make an eternal difference in a child's life.

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