

GODPARENT GUIDELINES

Congratulations! Seeing new life, especially a first-born child, causes many parents to think deeply about spiritual matters. The tension around the selection of your child's godparents can open the door to a richer understanding of these essential connections.

Let's begin by putting aside some ideas about godparents. The godparent is not a "replacement parent." Some believe that godparents get custody of god children if their parents die. Others designate godparents as a way of honoring close friends or favorite relatives. By asking someone to serve as a godparent, a parent manifests trust and esteem. Some also hope to secure a permanent relationship with a friend by formally linking the friend to the godchild.

I suspect you chose Kevin as godfather because of friendship and your desire to honor him. These are noble motives, but the role of godparent is not about friendship or good personal example. Rather, the godparent agrees to exercise an office on behalf of the parents and the Catholic Church. Is this religious discrimination?

Civil law recognizes discrimination in employment, housing, banking and so forth. Religious discrimination is wrong also, but not necessarily in matters involving religion itself. It's one thing to refuse to rent your apartment to Lutherans just because they're Lutherans. It's quite another thing to insist that godparents be Roman Catholics. In the first, religion is irrelevant; in the second, it's absolutely crucial.

For example, candidates for ordination must be baptized and confirmed Catholics. Here we have positive distinction favoring Catholics and excluding others. No reasonable person would regard this church law as anti-Protestant. Just as the priest receives an office, so too does the godparent.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that godparents "must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized on the road of Christian life." (ccc 1255) To fulfill such a task, one must hold the beliefs of the Catholic Church and live by them.

Let's say that you hope your daughter will excel at tennis. Imagine that she has such prodigious skill in the sport that you seek a private coach. Surely, you would hire a tennis coach, not a swimming coach. Imagine a swimming coach trying to teach tennis! Perhaps an excellent swimming coach could help her with physical training, general athletic principles and sportsmanship, but not the specifics of tennis.

A godparent is much like a coach. Just as it's unfair to ask a superb swimmer to coach tennis, it's equally unfair to ask someone who is not a committed Catholic to share in the spiritual coaching of a Catholic child. Moreover, it puts the non-Catholic in the awkward position of participating publicly in Catholic rituals, specifically the child's baptism, first Communion, and confirmation. Think of how uncomfortable it would be for a committed Lutheran, whose beliefs about the Eucharist differ from ours, to share in your daughter's first Communion celebration.

As your good friend, Kevin may have an enormously positive influence on your daughter's character and spirituality. However, he's not equipped to 'coach' her in the specifically catholic form of Christian faith.

You also bring up the point that you have encountered priests who allow non-Catholics to serve as godparents. We need to refine our terms here. The church does indeed allow baptized non-Catholics to act as Christian witnesses. Apart from witnessing the event, they have no religious responsibilities toward the child. Though often called godparents, they really aren't. Every baptized person needs at least one baptized and confirmed Catholic godparent. Hence, one can never have two Christian witnesses.

At first glance, some church disciplines, like the ones about godparents, seem unreasonable. However, a careful examination usually shows that such practices make sense. They can guide people to what's truly good for everyone involved - children, parents, godparents, and the whole community of faith.

GODPARENTS.—WHAT IS EXPECTED OF THEM TODAY?

Have you ever wondered why some people have very involved godparents and sponsors, while others don't even know theirs? Perhaps part of the problem is that many godparents and sponsors were chosen for the wrong reasons, or because those same people don't really know what they're supposed to do! Do you?

Most of us at some point have to choose either a godparent for our children or a sponsor for ourselves, but how do we choose these people? Or you yourself may someday be asked to be godparent or sponsor. What is expected of a sponsor or godparent today?

Take for example Julie and John, a happy, "thirty something" couple who have just had their first child. They're really into their Catholic faith, so they're excited to have their baby baptized. A big family celebration is planned, but John and Julie are wondering about godparents. What about John's sister and her husband who helped Julie out so much during her pregnancy? It would be a great way to thank them - but they don't practice their faith. Or how about Julie's best friend, Mary, who is actively involved in a young Catholic adult program, even though Mary's husband is a devout practicing Protestant? Will this be all right with the Church?

This is a big day for your family, and you want to do the right thing. Choosing godparents is a decision not to be taken lightly. Too often parents want to honor a special friend, repay a favor, or encourage a non-relative to have a closer relationship with their child. While all of these motives are well intentioned, they are not ideal. If you want to be happy about your decision, consider the following.

Above all, a godparent serves a special role for one to be baptized, whether it be a child or an adult. Godparents are to represent the Christian Catholic community, the Church. They are to assist in the preparation of adult candidates for Baptism and to be supportive of them afterwards. When it comes to infant Baptism, godparents are to assist the child's parents in raising their child in our Catholic faith so that the child may profess and live it as an adult.

Thus if we remember a few basic things about Baptism - it gives a person both a new and special status as a child of God and it makes a person a member of the Body of Christ, the Church - then what you are looking for are godparents who can truly represent that Christian community. Basically, this means you want at least one active and committed Catholic. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states "... the godfather and godmother

... must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized - child or adult - on the road of Christian life" (#1255). This is the Church's way of saying that being a godparent is truly a ministry in the Church, and not simply an honor.

In fact, the whole Church community or parish bears some responsibility for the development and nurturing of the grace given your child at Baptism. Much of this will come later in parish religious education and even classes for you on adult enrichment.

What does this mean for our friends John and Julie that we mentioned above? As much as Julie and John appreciate all the help that John's sister and brother in law have given them, this is not a good motive for having them be godparents. Rather, John and Julie should choose a firm believer, someone who is truly committed to the Catholic faith in which their new baby will be baptized. Thus, Julie's best friend, Mary, so active in her faith, is a perfect choice. But what about Mary's husband who is not Catholic, since John and Julie want a married couple to be godparents? The Church has a solution for this too!

Since Mary is a practicing Catholic, and a perfect choice as a godmother, she will be the officially designated *godparent*, while her husband - a great Christian and committed to his own faith - can serve as an official witness. This is fully in line with canon law (see #874). Only one godparent is necessary, although both a godfather and a godmother are preferred. So while Mary's husband - a witness - will set an example, it will be Mary's duty as godmother to share specifics of the Catholic faith.

To ensure that a godparent is capable of this, Church law also insists that this person be at least 16 years old (for maturity's sake), fully initiated (having received Confirmation and Eucharist), be someone other than the legal parents and one who leads a life in harmony with the Church.

All this may seem like quite a bit, but the purpose is to ensure that the rich and beautiful faith of the Church is passed on to your child in the most loving and authentic way possible. Hopefully you know by now that the task of choosing godparents is one which should be performed with much prayer, careful thought and with greatest concern for the precious spiritual life of your child.