

Godparents and Sponsors

What Is Expected of Them Today?

by William F. Wegher

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? This *Update* will help us to better understand these roles.

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 a 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?

Or take Kevin, an eighth-grader who will be confirmed at the end of the school year. He has asked his cool older brother, Mark, who goes to college 300 miles away, to be his Confirmation sponsor. Mark, who looks like he just stepped out of the latest teen TV show, knows how much Kevin idolizes him, but he feels a bit uneasy about being a sponsor. Mark respects Kevin's faith and his decision to be confirmed, but he really hasn't gone to church or practiced his faith these last few years. Should Mark be honest with Kevin, and "just say no"? Should he not say anything and just accept? Or should Mark accept, but take a new, more serious look at his own faith?

Godparents for Infant Baptism

FOR PARENTS

How to choose godparents

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 nonrelative 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 Christian parenting.

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.

FOR GODPARENTS

Be at your best

If you think that the role of parents in *choosing* godparents is a serious one, so is the role of *being* a godparent. Being chosen is an honor, and says a lot about the parents' perception of you.

I remember how excited and humbled I was when my brother and sister-in-law asked me to be the godfather for their first baby. Even though I'm a priest, I had to consider the investment of time and energy it would require of me. So remember not to rush into anything too quickly here! Make sure that you have the *time*, the *willingness* and the *faith* to live out this *sacred vocation*.

A vocation is a calling, an appeal to live something out in your life. These parents are calling you to be something special for their child: to set an example, help teach their child about the Catholic faith, have a lifelong relationship of prayer, faith sharing and love. Before accepting this invitation, take some time to pray and reflect on your ability to do this.

You should ask, "Can I share my faith unashamedly? Do I live close enough to really get to know my godchild? Am I an active member of my local Catholic parish?" If you are from another parish, you'll probably be asked for a letter from your home parish attesting to your active faith in the Church. If you're an active Catholic, getting such a letter from your pastor will be easy. If you're not, maybe you need to question your fitness to serve as a godparent at this time. But if you are able to say yes to these questions and if your faith makes you ready to accept this honorable vocation, here are a few helpful hints to assist you in being the best godparent that you can be:

- **Prepare with the parents.** In most parishes, the parents will be required to attend a Baptism preparation class to reflect on many of the things mentioned in this article. If you're able, you should be there too! Your willingness to be with the parents now says a lot about your willingness to be present to your godchild in the future.
- **Be there on the "big day":** Be available for the Baptism ceremony. This may even mean missing less important events. Besides saying, "We are," when the priest asks if you are ready to assist the parents in raising the child in the practice of the faith, you will have the opportunity to clothe the child in the white baptismal garment, and to light the baptismal candle. Take seriously the profound yet beautiful words: "Parents and godparents, this light has been entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly." You may also be asked to write a touching intercession for the Prayers of the Faithful on behalf of your godchild. Later at a family party, you could make a toast or say a meaningful prayer for your godchild and your role in his or her life.
- **Don't forget the "big day"!** Hopefully you will always remember your godchild's biological birthday, but don't forget this "birthday" into the Body of Christ. Make a phone call or send a card. Better yet, suggest having a get-together to honor this day each year. Bring out and light the baptismal candle, recalling the Light of Christ burning in the heart and soul of your godchild. Or, create a photo album to be shared with your godchild when he or she gets older.
- **Pray for your godchild.** Keep your godchild in your daily prayers. The constant prayer of godparents never hurt anyone! On occasion, take time to celebrate Eucharist together, for it is, after all, the source and summit of our faith lives.
- **Share the faith that's been shared with you.** When your godchild is young, introduce him or her to a children's edition of the Bible. Teach about his or her patron or name saint. Attend and offer encouragement at the child's first Communion or share your own faith story as our godchild approaches Confirmation. Continue your lifelong relationship by participating in your godchild's wedding. Remember, being a godparent is about more than an infant Baptism ceremony!