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History of Godparents In The Catholic Church

In the early centuries after Jesus' death and Resurrection (about 300 A.D.), "the Church was under the persecution of the Roman Empire and had to be cautious in conducting its affairs so as to prevent pagan infiltration and persecution" (Fr. William Saunders). In addition, during Medieval times, the Sacraments of Initiation were administered concurrently (e.g., Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation), so the role of Godparents really was twofold. First, Godparents were essential in attesting to the integrity of the individual who was joining the Catholic faith, often because s/he was an adult receiving the Sacraments of Initiation (as in RCIA today). Second, Godparents had to protect the doctrine of the Faith from paganism and persecution in the early days. Finally, Godparents were critical spiritual guides if parents of a child were martyred and had no direction in the Faith.

Around the year 800 A.D., infant Baptism became commonplace, and it was then that the role of Godparent (or more accurately "sponsor") significantly changed to what we understand it to be today. Sponsors were intended to be adults who committed themselves to assist parents of children to teach them the Catholic Faith.

The Role Of Godparent In A Child's Spiritual Formation

The role of a godparent is also a very important part of the Baptismal process and is often highly underestimated. Too often the role the godparent plays in the life of a child is treated much like at a wedding, it's more of a visible sign that a person is supporting the parents. But that's it; nothing much happens after the Baptism.

Godparents should really help the parents commemorate their godchild's Baptism annually, much like a birthday celebration. It's truly beautiful to use the Baptismal candle as a reminder of the joy of welcoming the little one into the Catholic family

rather than allowing it to collect dust in a box at the bottom of a closet. Though the Church doesn't specify what Godparents must do, it's ideal for them to remain in close contact with the sponsored child and parents throughout the years. When it's time for the child to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, the Catholic Church recommends that the Godparent act as the sponsor for the child. Remaining in contact with the child throughout the years makes the Godparent an easy and natural choice for Confirmation sponsor.

Practical Ways Godparents Can Fulfill Their Role

Here are some suggestions on what you as Godparents can do to remain a constant presence in the life of your sponsored child:

1. **Attend as many important family functions as you are able to.** This includes annual birthday celebrations, First Communions, Confirmation, graduations, and maybe even start a new tradition of a Baptism party!
2. **Send occasional cards or notes of encouragement throughout the year to your sponsored child.** Include holy cards or clip inspirational quips and quotes from your favorite saints.
3. **Enroll your sponsored child in perpetual Masses.** There are numerous organizations, such as shrines, that send Mass enrollment cards with your intentions. What a great spiritual gift, especially if it is from an apostolate with the child's given or spiritual name (e.g., The Society of the Little Flower for a girl named Therese).
4. **Offer up a Holy Hour once a month specifically for your sponsored child.** You can send the parents a card stating, "I offered up a holy hour for ____." Bring spiritual gifts to special occasions, such as blessed rosaries, statues, icons, and – my personal favorite – blessed medals of the child's namesake or adopted saint!
5. **Take the child out for special one-on-one time occasionally.** During that time, make a point to ask about your sponsored child's life and incorporate practical spiritual lessons into the conversation. This also builds trust between you and your Godchild.

Essentially, Godparents play a vital role in the life of a Baptized person, whether infant or adult. Having a shared experience with Godparents can have a significant impact on the spiritual growth and interior life of a child. That's not to say that parents aren't the primary spiritual educators for their children, but Godparents often develop special, unique relationships with their Godchildren. Perhaps

children feel more at ease talking about difficult issues with their Godparents rather than their parents. Perhaps Godparents offer a fresh perspective on issues that kids face. Godparents can be mentors, educators, and spiritual support not only to the sponsored person through Baptism, but also to the entire family and even community

Catholic resources used include: Diocese of Rochester directives and policies, *What is the Role of Godparents in the Church?* By Jeannie Ewing, The Mystical Humanity of Christ Publishing