

THE ROLE OF GODPARENT IN THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

When the time for an infant baptism arrives, it is also the time for the parents to select the godparents or the sponsors. This is a matter of tremendous spiritual importance, and the parents should use a number of spiritual criteria to make their choice.

It is the duty and privilege of Catholic parents to pass on the gift of faith to their newly baptized child, and likewise, it is the duty and privilege of godparents to assist the parents with this all-important task. A person cannot give what they do not have. Therefore, the single most important factor is whether the person is an active, practicing Catholic.

To be a godparent, the person must be a fully initiated Catholic, one who is baptized and has received the sacraments of Eucharist and Confirmation (Canon 874.1.3). In order to be of sufficient maturity and capacity, the godparent must be at least sixteen years of age (Canon 847.1.2). And very importantly, it should be a person “who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on” (Canon 874.1.3), or, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, the godparents “must be firm believers” (No. 1255).

A firm believer is someone who has faith and trust in God, is a disciple of Jesus, is a member of the Church, belongs to a parish, prays regularly, attends Mass, is a frequent recipient of the sacraments, attempts to conform their life to the gospel, is growing in virtue, gives good example, and is a loving, generous, and caring person. The godparent’s faith need not be perfect, but it must be a priority and active.

Next, the godparents must be “able and ready to help the newly baptized ... on the road of Christian life” (*Catechism*, No 1255). “Able and ready” means someone who is eager to serve, will joyfully embrace the role, and can be available to have regular contact with the child.

“Help” is offered to facilitate growth in the Catholic faith, and it can be given in a wide variety of ways: to pray with their godchild, pray for their godchild, teach prayers, take their godchild to church, help their godchild prepare for other sacraments, be present for the celebration of future sacraments, possibly serve as the Confirmation sponsor, give good example, offer spiritual support and encouragement, do good works with their godchild, and extend special kindnesses to their godchild. It is extremely beneficial for the godparent to read, explain, and reflect upon Sacred Scripture with their godchild, particularly the life of Jesus, as well as other characters and events of the Bible. It is also worthwhile to discuss the lives of the saints. A godparent helps the godchild to practice and persevere in the faith.

There are several other considerations. There may be one or two godparents: one male sponsor, the godfather; or one female sponsor, the godmother; or one of each (Canon 873). “A sponsor who is married must be married in accord with the laws of the Church” (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, 189). A baptized person from “a non-Catholic ecclesial community,” a different Christian denomination, may only serve as a witness and not as a godparent (C. 874.2). A parent may not be the godparent of their own child, and anyone bound by a canonical penalty may not serve as a godparent (C. 874.1.4).