

Choosing Godparents

Part of the excitement surrounding an infant's baptism is deciding on a godmother and godfather. In various cultures, the role of the godparent has taken on many appearances. For some, there is a deep, life-long bond formed as the godparents become a real part of the family. For others, it is merely a passing honor, a tribute to a dear friend or relative but without lasting significance.

In the Roman Catholic rite of baptism until the late 1960s, there was much for the godparents to do within the ceremony. Now it is usually the parents who hold the baby, answer most of the questions and clothe the child in the baptismal garment. But the godparents still have their part in the rite: At the very beginning, they are asked by the priest or deacon if they are ready to help you in your duty as Christian parents; with you, the godparents renounce sin and evil and profess their faith in God; they assist in clothing the child with the baptismal garment and in lighting the baptismal candle.

The introduction to the Rite of Baptism for Children says this of the godparents: "In the baptism of children the godparent should be present to be added spiritually to the immediate family of the one to be baptized and to represent Mother Church. As occasion offers, the godparent will be ready to help the parents bring up their child to profess the faith and to show this by living it."

What is important here?

First, there is to be at least one godparent, and perhaps two, as the parents desire and as local custom suggests.

Second, the godparents are to be present at the rite so that they can make their commitment publicly.

Third, the church continues to understand that the bond between the godparent and the family is very close and asks that the godparent not only be ready to help the parents in the Christian formation of their child, when appropriate, but that the godparent even more be a source of guidance, support and inspiration to the child on his or her journey toward God.

Finally, the godparents speak not only for themselves but for the church.

In deciding on godparents, then, you have some important directions set for you by this brief paragraph from the ritual. There is everything to suggest that it is a serious responsibility to choose well; it is a decision worth much thought, prayer and discussion. When you have decided, it is appropriate that you tell the godparent(s)-to-be what led you to your decision. It is a great honor, but it is also a great responsibility.

You are looking, certainly, for a mature member of the Catholic church, one who has received the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation and eucharist). You are looking for someone who can share with you the task of handing on a faith, someone whose life demonstrates that faith in both great and small ways in everyday living. You are looking for someone you can call on for help. You are looking for someone who knows that being Catholic has to do with prayer, with justice toward the poor, with kindness for friends and strangers and even with many things that are not so popular or common in our society. And you are looking for someone who is willing to have a special relationship with your child and enjoying the child's own developing faith and gifts.

The church-that is, you and the other people who make up your parish- also is looking for these godparents. You will select them, but it is not you they represent at the baptism and thereafter. It is the church. The church is an assembly of baptized people. That same baptism is now offered to your child. We ask one another to take this baptism very seriously, even as we are delighted by it. We ask that you be prepared to speak honestly when you say that you understand and will do all that baptism implies as this child grows up. When you ask people to be godparents, you are asking that they witness this promise of ours for the church. More than that, you are asking that they bring the church to life, that they embody the church-at the baptism liturgy and always afterward in the life of the child. That is what it means that godparents "represent Mother Church" at the baptism.

All of this is not to say that a godparent cannot be a relative or close friend or that the godparent has to be someone deeply involved in activities at the parish church. The godparents most certainly can be relatives, if they can answer to the qualities we have been discussing. And the godparents may not even be greatly involved in the local church: Their Catholic Christianity may be expressed in quite other ways.

So, enjoy this time to consider the possibilities. Talk it over with each other. Consider what will happen if you end up living far away from the godparents. Would this person continue to take an interest in your child's life?

When you have decided and your godparents-to-be have accepted, you may wish to ask them to be more a part of the baptism by making the baptismal garment or by selecting and buying a beautiful candle. It may become your custom over the next years to invite them to your home on the anniversary of the child's baptism for a special celebration of a most important event.

May you choose joyfully and well!

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