



The Godparent: A Job Description

“GODPARENTING” may be the least understood job in Christianity. Some parents select sponsors in baptism to honour family members or friends; others look for responsible parent-types “just in case.” Few parents, if any, have any real expectation about what godparents should “do” for their child, other than standing with them at the font on the day of baptism. Godparents themselves are often confused about their responsibilities with the result being that many sponsors, some parents, and more than a few clergy wonder whether inviting godparents into relationship with a candidate for baptism is necessary at all.

Yet, with careful education and preparation, godparents can serve as a vital link between the candidate's Christian family and the community of faith into which they are to be baptized.

1. Godparents represent the Church of Jesus Christ, as new members are initiated into the Christian faith and life.

As far back as the Middle Ages, a young man or woman had a series of three sponsors during the period of their initiation into the Church - one for the period of instruction, a second for their baptism, and a third for their confirmation. At each occasion it was the godparent who presented the candidate to the Church for consideration as a member.

Today, parents customarily present their own children for these functions. However, godparents can and still do represent the community of faith at the act of baptism. This does not presuppose that godparents must be members of the congregation into which the candidate is baptized. In fact, the presence of godparents from other families within Christendom underscores

the universality of the Church and the strength of our wider fellowship as Christians.

As those who stand for the Church at Baptism, godparents maintain a vital interest in the spiritual life of the candidate's family, especially as it is expressed in their home. Their ongoing concern is not only the welfare of the individual they sponsor, but also the spiritual atmosphere in which the child is raised. Even if godparents live at a distance, this can be accomplished by daily prayer for the godchild and his or her family, regular contact through letters and visits, and gifts of age-appropriate Christian books and music. I encourage godparents to remember that while friends and relatives remember a child's birthday and other celebrations like Christmas, they have the privilege of making a child's baptismal or confirmation anniversary a special occasion through their attention and remembrance. Thus, a godparent brings the life of faith to the Christian family as a friend and representative of the greater Church.

2. The godparent is the guarantor of education.

In the past, some branches of the Christian Church have traditionally charged godparents with specific tasks focusing on the candidate's education in the Christian faith and life. In some churches, this meant insuring that the child knew the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. In others, it meant providing the candidate with the information necessary for confirmation preparation.

In our time, godparents are rarely a child's primary educator, but the sponsor must maintain a lively interest in the candidate's Christian education and formation. This, of course, assumes that the godparent himself or herself possesses a level of spiritual maturity enabling them to discern the candidate's growth in faith and offer the gift of self to enrich the child's spiritual

development. Resources for this responsibility are limitless, and the abundance of material available to lay folk through churches and Christian bookstores makes sharing the substance of the faith with a godchild a rewarding and exciting charge.

3. A godparent is a mentor, helper, and friend.

When asked if they are willing to stand as a sponsor in baptism, potential godparents should seriously consider whether they are capable of making a lifetime commitment to another human being. Just as parents face a lifetime of commitment to the health and well-being of their children, godparents must expect to exercise their responsibilities of involvement and care for the young people they sponsor. As representatives of the family of believers in Jesus Christ, they must expect to be available to their godchildren at all times for counsel, encouragement, and companionship.

In our time, the concept of spiritual friendship, of companionship on the faith journey, has become extremely popular. Rather than being a new concept, this is, in fact, an old idea, grounded in the type of relationship godparents should have with their godchildren. This experience of faithful companionship should be a comfortable and natural one for Christians, modelling their relationship with their godparents, their first friends in faith.