

## 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, "thirtysomething" 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?

Adults going through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) may have the same questions. In reality, a lot of Catholics are confused over the difference between a godparent and a sponsor. Let's look at the role of godparents first, then examine the purpose of a sponsor, and finally we'll look at what all of this means for your family, parish or RCIA.

### 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!

### Sponsors for Confirmation

## FOR CONFIRMATION CANDIDATES

### *How to choose a sponsor*

Confirmation can be a great experience, and hopefully you've thought a lot about what this sacrament means, and how the Holy Spirit will affect your life. You'll be required to have a sponsor—someone who will guide you and share the story of faith with you. A good sponsor will make this process a little easier and even more fun.

If all has gone as planned, the best person will be one of your baptismal godparents. The *Catechism* (#1311) and canon law (#892-893) both tell us that you need a sponsor. Having one of your godparents helps us to see how Baptism and Confirmation are connected. Sadly, by the time they get to Confirmation, many young people no longer know their godparents, or they're no longer good role models. Or maybe they just live too far away. These young people will need to choose a new sponsor.

Some advice to the candidates: You're looking for someone you trust, whose faith you admire and who will be there for you. The requirements mentioned for godparents earlier also apply to sponsors: that they be *confirmed Catholics*, at least 16 years old (for maturity) and *practicing members of the Church, while not being your parents*. This means you can choose a relative, friend or someone from your parish as your sponsor. Remember Kevin and his brother Mark of uncertain faith that we mentioned earlier? Let's see how all this applies to them.

As much as Kevin admires his brother, Kevin shouldn't choose Mark as a sponsor. And Mark shouldn't accept either. He isn't a bad person, but Mark has some faith issues he needs to work out first. Right now, Kevin needs someone who is active in church, can share why faith is important to him and who lives close enough to help Kevin with his preparation. So in choosing a sponsor, Kevin needs to take all these things seriously. So do you! Pray about it, and when you think you have the right person, ask him or her to help you grow in faith by being your sponsor!

## FOR SPONSORS

### *Be at your best*

If you have been chosen to be a Confirmation sponsor, congratulations! This person sees in you a profound faith commitment, finds trust and knows you are someone who will care about them and their faith. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? It's not all that complicated, but it does take time, a caring heart and a listening ear. If you're a practicing, mature Catholic, don't get too worried. Here are a few suggestions on how to be the best possible sponsor for your candidate:

- **Be a living model of faith.** At least a part of what this young person admires in you is your faith! If the way you practice your faith is not what it should be, "get it together," so to speak! If you honestly can't, this is understandable, but maybe you should decline the invitation to be a sponsor. Your life doesn't have to become artificially saintly, but your faith should be authentic and sincere.
- **Pray for your candidate and yourself.** As candidates decide to be confirmed, they need spiritual strength. Your prayers for them are important, but don't forget to pray for yourself also, that you can share why you value and practice your Catholicism. Attend Mass together, or even have the courage to come to Reconciliation together.
- **Give of your time and share your gifts.** You'll be asked to spend time together on various activities. This may mean preparing lessons or even working on a Christian service project. You could also share your own experiences or write a letter of encouragement. Let your unique God-given talents and gifts shine! Offer a gift of spiritual significance—a new Bible, rosary or book about our faith or about the saint the candidate has chosen for a Confirmation name—but *be creative and relevant!*
- **Don't miss the ceremony.** Participating in the ceremony is the easiest part of being a sponsor. Your basic job will be to place your hand on your candidate's shoulder, and tell the bishop your candidate's Confirmation name. You're there to be a support, but your role on Confirmation day is only beginning.
- **Don't forget this newly confirmed Catholic.** After Confirmation day, remember birthdays and this anniversary. Send a card or make a phone call. Continue to worship together, or from time to time do some Christian service. Put those "Gifts of the Spirit" into practice.

## Godparents and Sponsors for the RCIA

Almost everything that's been said in the previous section about seeking a godparent for a child applies to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA)—to those making the decision to come into the Church as an adult. The same already mentioned requirements also apply here. There are some differences, however. If you are a catechumen seeking full initiation into the Catholic Church—Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist—your godparent(s) for Baptism at the Easter Vigil should also be your sponsor(s) for Confirmation on that same night.

However, if you are a candidate for Confirmation or a candidate for full initiation into the Catholic Church through a Profession of Faith (for confirmed Protestants becoming Catholic), you'll need to choose a sponsor. Even if you were baptized Catholic, your godparents might not be suitable sponsors at this point: You must decide on the basis of things we've said previously. If you weren't baptized as a Catholic, you need to find someone who is Catholic to be your sponsor in the RCIA process.

You want to look for someone who will share his or her faith, teach you the basics of Catholicism and be willing to pray and "walk" with you weekly during the RCIA process. If you don't know anyone like this, the RCIA coordinator in your parish can provide you with the opportunity to meet such people who would be more than willing to be a companion on your spiritual journey.

There is one other thing to consider here. Often a person in RCIA will want a spouse or a sibling to be godparent and/or sponsor. While there is nothing wrong with this, and no one would deny you the right to choose them, you might want to consider a few things. First, since you are entering a new faith community, having a new person serve in this role—or at least as a second godparent or cosponsor—might help you adjust more easily. You would now have a different contact to introduce you to the family of the Church.

Second, spouses and siblings, for one reason or another, may sometimes be hesitant to talk about sensitive spiritual questions. Many people find having a new spiritual friend or fellow "walker on the journey" to be truly helpful as they make their way to the Easter sacraments. Sometimes it's just nice to have someone else to talk to. The bonds of friendship and trust in such a relationship can be rewarding for you, your spouse and your family!

Finally, make sure that your godparent/sponsor has the time and ability to be with you. For the RCIA to be as meaningful as it can be, you need someone to be with you week after week. If someone far away is special to you, invite that person to be present at the Easter Vigil to celebrate this most special night, but choose a different person as your sponsor—someone who can be with you not only on this night, but at all the other events also.

Godparents and sponsors, the previous sections will help you better understand your role and responsibilities. Working with adults will require more personal commitment to faith sharing. You must also be willing to sacrifice of your time, but I have yet to meet a person who has found being an RCIA sponsor unrewarding.

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