

The Sacrament of Baptism

Thank you for your interest in the Sacrament of Baptism! If you are expecting a child or have an infant that needs to be baptized, please call the parish office and register for the next baptismal preparation class!

In the meantime, here is some information that might be helpful in preparation for the Baptismal Preparation Class and the Baptism—

Baptism is a Sacrament, which means that it is an outward, visible sign of an invisible reality. The outward, visible sign is water, along with the words, “I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” If this were not an outward, visible sign of an *invisible reality*, we would simply refer to it as a “bath,” rather than as a “Sacrament.” However, when the water and words are offered as a Sacrament, it brings forth the invisible reality of—

- The washing away of original sin, as well as all actual sin if any exists;
- Remitting all punishment due on account of such sins;
- Imprinting the character of a Christian (an indelible mark);
- Making the Baptized a child of God, member of the Church, heir to Paradise, and enabling him/her to receive the other Sacraments.

Jesus Christ instituted this Sacrament, saying, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). And, in the Gospel of John, Jesus told Nicodemus—

“Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?” Jesus answered, “Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

-John 3:3-7

Parents or Guardians

In order to have your children Baptized, you must get a letter of “good standing” from your pastor, noting that you are active, registered members of a parish. If you are not the biological parents of the child, you must be able to show proof of legal guardianship.

Choosing Godparents

Before the baptism of your child, one of the most important issues is the choice of godparents. For some parents the choice seems obvious; for others it is a struggle. For everyone, the godparents play a significant role on the day of the baptism, and they will establish one of the primary relationships in your child's life. No one knows what kind of person your child will be, but you can help develop that personality by surrounding your child with people you love and admire. Among them will be the godparents.

Qualifications for Godparents

One of the most commonly held assumptions about godparents is that they will be responsible for the care of the child if the parents should die. Although many people approach the selection of godparents with this worst-case scenario in mind, the church *does not* define godparenting in that way. Godparents represent the Catholic community and pledge their support to you in raising the child, but you may choose another guardian if you should no longer be able to care for your children.

Expectations of godparents vary from one family to the next. When you choose your child's godparents, talk with them about mutual expectations. Make it clear what you are hoping for, and listen to their ideas. Be sensitive to what the culture is expecting, but personalize what you want for your child. Some things you'll want to consider, include—

Eligibility in the Church: The Church has some very clear guidelines regarding godparents. In addition to the expectations of the culture and of the families involved, the Church adds a few of her own.

- You must designate them, and they must be willing to help your child lead a Christian life in harmony with baptism and fill the obligations connected with it.
- They must be at least sixteen years of age and mature enough to undertake this responsibility.
- They must be Catholics who have received the three sacraments of initiation, namely: Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation.
- They must believe all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches, and truly make a serious effort to live a good moral life worthy of imitation, *in harmony with the faith and the role to be undertaken*. If they have children, they must see to the regular religious instruction of their family.

- They must be actively practicing Catholics, participating at Mass on Sundays and Holy days, and receiving the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation regularly, and have a “letter of good standing” from their pastor.
- They must not be bound by any imposed or declared penalty under Church Law and free to carry out this office. (This means that Catholics living in an invalid marriage [not according to Catholic regulations] and those that are co-habiting [living together without marriage] cannot serve as a godparent).
- They must be someone besides the child’s parents. Furthermore, the liturgy of baptism will expect the following: Godparents will answer this question affirmatively: “Are you ready to help these parents in their duty as Christian mothers and fathers?”; they will renew their baptismal vows; renouncing Satan and professing their faith in our creed; and they may assist in lighting the child’s candle.

The Church does not universally expect anything more. There is nothing in the liturgy or law of the Church requiring that godparents show up for birthday parties, send cards, make regular phone calls, or develop a loving friendship with the child, although all of these would be most praiseworthy was of living out the role of godparent.

The Church prefers that the godparent at Baptism serve again as the sponsor at Confirmation. Since Confirmation generally follows infant baptism by some years, godparents should sustain a relationship with the child and the family throughout that time.

The Church expects you to make this choice for your child. If someone offers or even begs to be the godparent, make sure this is the best person before you say yes.

Dilemmas: The godparent relationship is very important and carries much weight. Coming at the very beginning of the child’s life, the decision may bring some anxiety. Parents face many dilemmas in making the right choice. Here are some frequent concerns:

- *Marriage Outside the Church:* Can a Catholic married outside the church serve as a godparent? The Church expects a godparent to “lead a life in harmony with the faith and the role to be undertaken.” If a person you are considering as a godparent is not married according to the laws and practices of the Catholic Church, or is cohabiting [living together without marriage] then you will need to consider someone else.

- *Church Attendance:* Is the godparent expected to be someone who attends church every Sunday? It makes sense if they do. After all, you are asking this person to assist you in bringing up your child in the Catholic faith. The church reasonably expects parents and godparents to help the child “lead a Christian life in harmony with baptism.” Baptism depends on the faith of the Church, expressed by parents and godparents. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that they live what they say they believe.
- *Number of Godparents:* How many godparents should there be? Church law only requires one godparent; however, you may have two. There may be no more than two.
- *Gender:* What sex should the godparent be? If you choose only one godparent, you are free to choose a male or a female; the godparent in this case need not be the same sex as the child. However, if you wish to have two godparents, there must be one male and one female.
- *Non-Catholics Participation:* Can a non-Catholic serve as a godparent? Technically no, since one of the requirements under Church Law for godparenting is having celebrated baptism, confirmation and Holy Eucharist in the Catholic Church. The reason is that our church sees the godparent as more than a concerned relative or friend who encourages Christian behavior. The godparent will represent the Catholic Community into which the child is being baptized and will help the child grow in that community. For a Catholic baptism, only a Catholic can do that.
- *Christian Witness:* While it is ideal that the parents select two Catholic godparents, the Church only *requires* that there be one godparent. A baptized non-Catholic may serve as a “witness” to the ceremony, as long as a Catholic godparent is present. The non-Catholic who is selected as a witness should be and an active and participating member of his/her Christian community. The sex of the witness need not be opposite that of the godparent. During the ritual, a non-Catholic witness at a Catholic baptism may perform all the parts of the ceremony that a godparent does. His or her name may be entered into the parish baptism register as a witness, together with the name of the godparent.

- *Catholics who do not meet the requirements:* At times, parents will discover that the person they have chosen to serve as a godparent, while Catholic, do not meet all the requirements to serve. In such cases what can be done?
 - The basic rule of thumb is that all godparent requirements must be met as of the day of Baptism. Therefore, someone who is not fully qualified to serve as a godparent (e.g. not yet confirmed) cannot serve until the missing requirement is met.
 - When Catholics do not meet the qualifications to serve as a godparent, we are often asked if a Catholic can be allowed to serve as a “Christian witness?” The term, “Christian witness” is a term that is only mentioned in Canon 874, 2 of the *Code of Canon Law*. That canon describes a “Christian witness” as: “*A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community...*” It is clear that this “witness” was only intended to apply to baptized non-Catholics. There is no provision for Catholics to take on their participation in baptism. Therefore, a Catholic who does not meet the requirements to serve as a godparent, cannot serve as a Christian witness.

- *Repeating Godparents :* Can the same godparents have responsibility for more than one child, even in the same family? Yes. As long as they take seriously their responsibility and intention to help the children grow in faith, godparents may accept several children, just as parents may.

- *Exchanging Godparents:* If you are the godparent for another couple’s child, can they become the godparents for your child? Yes. That’s fine, as long as they meet the other requirements for being a godparent.

- *Family Members as Godparent :* Do the godparents have to come from the family? Not at all. Remember, the Church’s concern is to have someone help raise the child in the faith and represent the Church. Consequently, sometimes the best godparents are not family members at all, but people from your parish. Choosing a parishioner strengthens the bonds of the community’s faith, puts your child in regular contact with the godparents, and makes the connection between baptism and the Church more clear.

- *Distance:* Can someone who lives far away be a godparent? Yes, and many such godparents make a heroic effort to remain connected with their godchildren. But obviously the distance puts them at a disadvantage for living the role in its fullest sense. Someone who has regular contact with the child can normally have a deeper impact and lend more significance to the role.

- *Proxy*: Can someone serve as godparent by proxy? This custom continues to be honored. The original idea was that if godparents could not attend the baptism ceremony, they would send a proxy (someone to stand in the place of the missing godparent). They, not the parents, choose the proxy.
- *Changing Godparents*: If your relationship with the godparents fades or sours after your child is baptized, can you have the record changed in the parish office? No. Like the photographs of the event, the parish baptismal register is a record of what happened, and the godparents' names are part of it. Baptism records cannot be changed. Those names will remain an official part of the baptism registry of the parish. Those names will appear on the baptismal certificate every time you need to provide one.

Closing Thoughts on Choosing Godparents

Here's a suggestion for coming up with godparents—brainstorm a list of names of people you know and trust, who are people of deep faith, and who are eligible to be a godparent for your child. Name as many as you can.

Now imagine that your child is ten years old. You have just cleaned up after the birthday party and everyone else has gone home. Think about the relationship between your child and the godparents. Over the past ten years, how often would the godparents have seen your child? What would they have done together? How would your child's godparents have shared in enriching your child's Catholic faith? Would their relationship with your child have been merely social? Spiritual?

From your list, who are your best choices now? Why? After you chose the godparents of your child have them answer these questions, too, and compare your responses.