

What is the Role of Godparents in the Church?

by [Jeannie Ewing](#)

My husband and I used to teach the Baptism class for new parents at our parish. During that time, we would discuss the role of Godparents and how to prudently select holy, spiritual role models for their children. Regrettably, it's very difficult in our modern day to find two practicing Catholics, both male and female, who we confidently believe would attend to our children's spiritual development in our absence. So what exactly is a Godparent supposed to do or be? How can we discern a good fit for our children, and why do we have Godparents, anyway? I will explore the answers to these questions in this article as foundational information about the importance of Godparents and their role in our children's lives.

History of The Naming Of Godparents In The Catholic Church

In the early centuries after Jesus' death and Resurrection (about 300 A.D.), "the Church was under the persecution of the Roman Empire and had to be cautious in conducting its affairs so as to prevent pagan infiltration and persecution" (Fr. William Saunders). In addition, during Medieval times, the Sacraments of Initiation were administered concurrently (e.g., Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation), so the role of Godparents really was twofold. First, Godparents were essential in attesting to the integrity of the individual who was joining the Catholic faith, often because s/he was an adult receiving the Sacraments of Initiation (as in RCIA today). Second, Godparents had to protect the doctrine of the Faith from paganism and persecution in the early days. Finally, Godparents were critical spiritual guides if parents of a child were martyred and had no direction in the Faith.

Around the year 800 A.D., infant Baptism became commonplace, and it was then that the role of Godparent (or more accurately "sponsor") significantly changed to what we understand it to be today. Sponsors were intended to be adults who committed themselves to assist parents of children to teach them the Catholic Faith.

What to Look For In Potential Sponsors

The Catholic Church requires that sponsors fit the following basic credentials: S/he must be at least 16 years old, and at least one of the two sponsors must be a practicing Catholic in good standing with the Church (but it's preferable if both are practicing Catholics). [NOTE: *One sponsor can be what is called a Christian Witness – someone who has been baptized in another Christian faith and will be recorded as such in the Baptismal Registry.*] Truthfully, the Church does not require that a child have two sponsors, but traditionally this is what most people select – one male and one female.

It's important to realize that sponsors are people striving for holiness in their own lives. Oftentimes parents would lament over the difficulty in choosing Godparents for their child, because they believed they had to ask a family member in order to avoid inadvertently offending someone close to them. But my husband and I would ask them, "What's more important to you: keeping the peace and not offending someone, or asking a person who truly seems spiritually called to help you raise a holy child?"

Ideally, Godparents should be people who are people you spend time with and trust very deeply, people you know well and recognize as faithful Catholics. You want to approach a person or people who would naturally fit into your family as spiritual parents for your children – not only if something unfortunate or drastic happened to you, but also to mentor and support you when you experience a particular spiritual darkness or aridity. When in doubt, pray for discernment. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you who would be solid spiritual role models for your child.



The Role of Godparents in a Child's Spiritual Formation

I'm not sure many people recognize the depth of commitment involved in witnessing a Baptism as a Godparent. It seems it's more for the sake of tradition or perhaps, much like at a wedding, it's more of a visible sign that a person is supporting the parents. But then nothing much happens after the Baptism.

My Godparents were always present in my life from infancy onward. They attended every major milestone in my life, from First Communion to graduations and everything in between. They often sent me letters and holy cards or perhaps spent time with me to encourage and mentor me through tough situations that I felt a bit awkward discussing with my parents. They were solid examples of spiritual teachers, and I always knew they loved me as their own children.

Godparents should really help the parents commemorate their godchild's Baptism annually, much like a birthday celebration. It's truly beautiful to use the Baptismal candle as a reminder of the joy of welcoming the little one into the Catholic family rather than allowing it to collect dust in a box at the bottom of a closet. Though the Church doesn't specify what Godparents must do, it's ideal for them to remain in close contact with the sponsored child and parents throughout the years.

Practical Ways Godparents Can Fulfill Their Role

Here are some suggestions on what you as Godparents can do to remain a constant presence in the life of your sponsored child:

1. **Enroll your sponsored child in perpetual Masses.** There are numerous organizations, such as shrines, that send Mass enrollment cards with your intentions. What a great spiritual gift, especially if it is from an apostolate with the child's given or spiritual name (e.g., The Society of the Little Flower for a girl named Therese).
2. **Attend as many important family functions as you are able to.** This includes annual birthday celebrations, First Communions, Confirmation, graduations, and maybe even start a new tradition of a Baptism party!
3. **Send occasional cards or notes of encouragement throughout the year to your sponsored child.** Include holy cards or clip inspirational quips and quotes from your favorite saints.
4. **Offer up a Holy Hour once a month specifically for your sponsored child.** You can send the parents a card stating, "I offered up a holy hour for _____." Bring spiritual gifts to special occasions, such as blessed rosaries, statues, icons, and – my personal favorite – blessed medals of the child's namesake or adopted saint!
5. **Take the child out for special one-on-one time occasionally.** During that time, make a point to ask about your sponsored child's life and incorporate practical spiritual lessons into the conversation. This also builds trust between you and your Godchild.

Essentially, Godparents play a vital role in the life of a Baptized person, whether infant or adult. Most people I've spoken with have shared that their Godparents had a significant impact on their spiritual growth and interior life. That's not to say that parents aren't the primary spiritual educators for their children, but Godparents often develop special, unique relationships with their Godchildren. Perhaps children feel more at ease talking about difficult issues with their Godparents rather than their parents. Perhaps Godparents offer a fresh perspective on issues that kids face. Godparents can be mentors, educators, and spiritual support not only to the sponsored person through Baptism, but also to the entire family and even community.