

The Role of Godparents in the Catholic Church?

Questions:

What is the role of godparents / sponsors?

What are the Catholic Church's norms regarding godparents?

May a Catholic serve as a godparent for a non-Catholic?

May a non-Catholic Christian serve as a godparent for a Catholic?

Finally, may a Catholic have more than one / godfather and godmother?

To understand the role of godparents, we must first understand the purpose and effects of Baptism and Confirmation.

Baptism has two other effects that are social in nature: The person becomes a child of God (cf. Catechism, no. 1265), and he/she becomes a member of the Body of Christ, which is the Church (cf. Catechism, nos. 1267-71).

Confirmation completes Baptism (cf. Catechism, nos. 1303-04). Because it completes Baptism, the social effects of Confirmation are similar to those of Baptism. The person is conformed more perfectly to Christ as a son/daughter of God, is more perfectly united to the Body of Christ, and is strengthened to bear witness to the faith in their daily life.

The godparents' role is directly related to these social effects of Baptism and Confirmation. When a person receives Baptism, God forgives all his/her sins. The Father grants him/her the gift of salvation. However, he/she can lose this gift. Just as the king expected his servants to use their talents for his glory, he took away the talents from the unworthy servant (Lk. 19:11-27). So, God expects us to play our role as well. In short, we must continually conform ourselves to Christ (Phil. 1:27-2:18; Catechism, nos. 1691-96). Thus, Baptism is only the beginning of a new spiritual life, in which we must grow in virtue and grace before God and men. This growth in virtue and grace reflects our status as God's children and as members of the Church.

Godparents as examples of faith: A godparent's role is to assist the growth of the Baptized in his new spiritual life. As sons/daughters of God and members of His family (the Church), the Baptized must live in harmony with the Family of God. A godparent promises to provide an example of faith to "help the Baptized to lead a Christian life in harmony with Baptism, and to fulfill faithfully the obligations connected with it" (canon 872).

If the Baptized is an infant or child whose parents are faithful Catholics, the godparent assists the parents, who are the primary teachers of the faith. If the Baptized is an infant or child whose parents are not faithful to the Church, or if the Baptized is an adult, the godparent must provide a primary role in the spiritual growth of his/her godchild.

The greatest help a godparent provides is an example of faith. The godparent must foster the virtues within himself/herself and provide an example of prayer. As part of this example of faith, the godparent must be involved in the life of his/her godchild. No one is an example unless he/she lives the life of faith. Being actively involved in the life of a godchild fosters a strong relationship and enables the godparent to serve as a role model. The godchild can then better understand his/her status as a child of God.

Requirements:

A Baptized Catholic is to be assigned as a sponsor/godparent” (Canon 872).

- (1) Be a Catholic in full communion with the Church
- (2) Be a catechized Catholic
- (3) Confirmed Catholic (age 18 and up, OR meet age requirements recognized in the diocese where the Baptism takes place)
- (4) Mother/father cannot be godparents for the one to be baptized (GE 3; canon 874 section 1).

A godparent cannot provide an example of faith if he/she does not share the faith. Because a godparent promises to assist in the formation of the newly Baptized and agrees to represent the community of faith and encourage his/her godchild to remain in full communion with the Church, he/she must be in full communion with the Catholic Church himself/herself. That is, a godparent for a Catholic must be a Catholic in good standing. He/she must have received Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation, and he/she must be living a life in harmony with the faith (GE 3; cf. canon 874).

Regarding the first requirement that a godparent be Catholic, there is one exception that concerns the relationship between Eastern Rite Catholics and our brethren in the Orthodox Church.

Regarding the Baptism of an Eastern Catholic, “it is permitted to admit the Christian faithful of another Eastern Non-Catholic Church to the function of a sponsor, but always at the same time with a Catholic sponsor.” provided that there is a good reason for it (family relationship) and he/she also has another Catholic godparent.

Godparents and Witness:

Because Baptism is the Sacrament that unites all Christians (cf. Catechism, no. 1271), and because the Church recognizes the importance of family relationships and close friendships, a Catholic may serve as a “witness” for a non-Catholic in Baptism, but not as a godparent. A Catholic cannot serve as a godparent for someone who has no intention of growing in the Catholic faith. Likewise, a non-Catholic may act as a “witness” at a Catholic Baptism, but only if a Catholic is also acting as godparent for the

Baptized. These pastoral norms allow family relationships to be fostered and the faith to be witnessed to non-Catholics.

The godparents must not be the parents of the Baptized. According to the Church's ancient tradition, a spiritual relationship grows between the godparent and the one baptized. This relationship establishes a bond in faith and carries responsibilities of spiritual parenthood. If a child's natural parents do not raise the Baptized and form him/her in the faith, godparents must fulfill this obligation. Parents already have a parental relationship that is primary and, if they were the godparents, there would be no one designated to assist them or take their place in their absence. Furthermore, this spiritual relationship is so important that the Church recommends that "the one who undertook the role of sponsor/godparent at baptism be sponsor for confirmation" (canon 893 section 2).

Finally, for a Catholic Baptismal candidate, "one sponsor, male or female is sufficient; but there may be two, or one of each sex" (canon 873). Therefore, Catholics can only have one godfather, one godmother, or one of each.

Building the Family of God: Being a godparent is an important duty in the Catholic Church. Often, godparents are chosen from family members and close friends. Quite often, godparents do not live in the same location as their godchild. While this makes it difficult to be a part of the child's life, it is not impossible. At the very least, godparents should send cards on their godchild's Baptism Day, Confirmation Day, Birthday, Christmas, or other significant days in his/her life. Remembering their Baptism and Confirmation encourages the godchild to call upon the grace received from these Sacraments and live a life worthy of a child of God. They should keep in contact by letter, telephone and, if possible, personal visits. Parents should encourage the relationship between their children and their children's godparents. In this way, the children will not consider Baptism or Confirmation simply a nice thing that happens. Rather, they will experience a concrete relationship that bears witness to their status as children of God. Further, they will be encouraged to live life in harmony with the larger family of the Church.