

That is why parents must take more care in choosing godparents. If your favorite relative or your Best Friend Forever or the person your family says “deserves” the job happens to be a mature Catholic committed to his faith and to the Church, then that person is a fine choice for your child’s godparent. But if that person is a risky choice, either because of how he lives his life or how he practices his faith, then he is not a good choice. It is far better to stand up to pressure from family and friends now and refuse to make a risky selection for godparent than to wonder what you’re going to do about a flaky godparent later.

Is there anything you can do about a godparent you trusted who turns out to not be all you hoped for in a godparent? It depends on the circumstances.

If it is a personality clash or a strained relationship, the best solution would be to do your best to mend fences for the sake of the child. Unfortunately, we live in a society in which no-fault divorce is applied not just to the sacred bonds of marriage but also to other sacred bonds, and people seem to have no problem declaring others “toxic” and distancing themselves rather than go to the hard work of repairing relationships. If you do your best on your end to fix a relationship, you are not responsible for someone else’s refusal to uphold his or her end of the relationship.

If the godparent has fallen away from the Faith or fallen away from living a moral life, it may not be in the child’s best interests to have that person involved in the child’s religious training. You cannot replace the godparent, but you could ask another Catholic whose spiritual maturity and moral character you trust to act as a religious mentor to your child. Although canon law states that the godparent is the desired person to be the child’s confirmation sponsor (canon 893), another person can be asked to be confirmation sponsor if the

godparent no longer meets the requirements for the role.

The godparent relationship is not a one-way street in which godparents are expected to provide emotional support, spiritual mentorship, and tangible goodies (such as money and gifts) while the children are but receptacles of bounty. Negligent godparents who fail to fork over the goods cannot be stripped of their godparenthood and replaced. Godparents do have responsibilities to their godchildren and deliberate negligence and absenteeism cannot be excused, but godchildren are expected to participate in the relationship by offering their love, prayers, and sacrifices for the sake of their godparents.

In cases where godparents seem not to be living up to the responsibilities they agreed to undertake, perhaps their godchildren ought to be encouraged to offer their prayers and spiritual sacrifices for their godparent. Who knows? Maybe God can use the merits of a godchild’s spiritual offerings to help a negligent or wayward godparent get his or her life back in order.

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## Prayer for a Godchild

May the Lord, Our God, bless you and  
keep you in His care  
May you feel His love around you and  
know He’s always there  
May He guide you as you grow in faith  
and hear your every prayer  
May His angels protect you well  
and watch over you everywhere

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## ROLE OF GODPARENTS

*Fr. William Saunders, Ph.D.*

**Please explain the role of godparents in Catholic baptism. How strictly should the potential godparents adhere to traditional Catholic teaching? If a couple does not know sufficiently "qualified" godparents, is it acceptable for them to act as the godparents themselves?**

The role of the godparent for baptism is rooted in the role of the sponsor in the catechumenate, which originated in the early Church. Recall that until the year 313, 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.

Also, until the Middle Ages, the Sacraments of Initiation — baptism, holy Eucharist, and confirmation — were administered at once.

The role of the sponsor then was to attest to the integrity of the person, oftentimes an adult, seeking admission into the Church as well as to assist him during the catechumenate in preparing for these sacraments and in living a Christian life. For infants, these sponsors would also make the Profession of Faith in the child's name and accept the responsibility of instructing the child in the faith, especially if the parents failed in this duty. About the year 800

when infant baptism was truly the norm, these sponsors were called "patrinus," or "godfather." Traditionally, we identify the sponsor of a child for baptism as the godparent — godmother or godfather, but the technical term remains "sponsor".

According to the Code of Canon Law, "Insofar as possible, one to be baptized is to be given a sponsor who is to assist an adult in Christian initiation, or, together with the parents, to present an infant at the baptism, and who will help the baptized to lead a Christian life in harmony with baptism, and to fulfill faithfully the obligations connected with it" (No. 872). This statement clearly reflects the historical roots of the role of sponsor.

To be a sponsor, a person must be chosen by the person to be baptized, or by the parents or guardians of a child, or, in their absence, by the pastor or minister of the sacrament. The sponsor must not only have the intention of being a sponsor but also meet proper qualifications. The sponsor must have completed his sixteenth year unless the Bishop has established another age for sponsorship, or the pastor or minister judges that a just cause warrants an exception to the rule. He must be a Catholic who has received the sacraments of holy Eucharist and confirmation, and "leads a life in harmony with the faith and the role to be undertaken". Moreover, the sponsor cannot be impeded by some canonical penalty. Ideally, this sponsor at baptism should also be the sponsor for confirmation. Note that the mother and father of the child cannot serve as sponsors. Also note that these are the same requirements for confirmation sponsors. (Cf. Code of Canon Law, No. 874.1)

Strictly speaking, a person only needs one sponsor for baptism — male or female, but may have two sponsors, one male and one female. Here the Code of Canon Law wants to eliminate the practice of having numerous sponsors, as has occurred in some cultures

(No. 873). Also, in the case of an emergency, such as imminent death, no sponsor is needed.

Here we should pause to clarify who qualifies as a Catholic godparent. A Catholic who does not practice the faith by regularly attending Mass or who is in an invalid marriage disqualifies himself from being a godparent. Moreover, if a person is Catholic but antagonistic to the faith, i.e. has the attitude "I am a Catholic but...", and would not be a good example and witness to the faith also disqualifies himself. If a person is not striving to fulfill his own obligations of baptism and confirmation, he will not fulfill the responsibilities of helping another to do so.

As a pastor, I am truly perturbed each time someone comes by the rectory office and wants me to sign a sponsor's certificate and attest that he is a practicing Catholic when I do not recognize him, he has not registered in the parish, and he does not attend Mass faithfully. In justice, I cannot meet such a request. Parents need to find good practicing Catholics for godparents. Sadly, this task can be very difficult in today's world. The best place is to look for relatives, even grandparents, who have a blood relationship with the godchild and have kept the faith over the years. Good friends are also appropriate, but sometimes friendships wane, leaving the godchild without an active godparent. Godparents should be faithful individuals who are ready to accept the responsibility of being a part of a godchild's life for the rest of his life.

What if someone would like to have a faithful Protestant friend as a sponsor? Technically, only Catholics can be godparents or sponsors. A Christian of another denomination, whether Orthodox or Protestant, however, may be a "Christian witness" to the baptism along with the Catholic godparent. The reason for this distinction and restriction is that the godparent not only is taking responsibility for the religious education and spiritual formation of the baptized person, but also is representing the Church, the

community of faith into which the person is being baptized. A Christian who is not Catholic, although perhaps a very holy Christian, cannot fully attest to the beliefs of the Catholic Church.

Likewise, a Catholic can only be a Christian witness for someone who is baptized into another Christian denomination. (Cf. Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, No. 57) In all, godparents serve a special role in the life of the baptized person. Therefore, each parent should choose a godparent not just because of a blood relationship or friendship; rather, a godparent should be a trustworthy witness of the faith who will help the godchild attain salvation.

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## Once a Godparent, Always a Godparent

By Michelle Arnold

Regarding the qualifications for godparenthood, canon law states, in part:

To be admitted to undertake the office of [baptismal] sponsor, a person must: ...be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has received the Blessed Eucharist, and who lives a life of faith which befits the role to be undertaken (canon 874, *Code of Canon Law*).

Because the godparent is an official witness to the baptism of the child, it is not an office for which a "replacement" can be made. It is not possible to go back and "redo" the sacrament of baptism, substituting in new and improved godparents. Once a choice is made, parents are stuck with that choice. For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do you part.