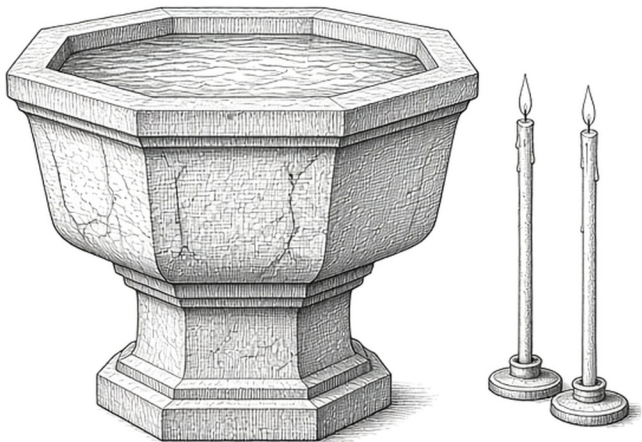




SILENT HOMILIES

The Ones Who Answer

Why we have godparents





SILENT HOMILIES

LITTLE TREASURES

The Ones Who Answer

Why we have godparents

Before You Begin

This is not a book of parish rules, though the rules will appear. It is about an older meaning of a word we still print on baptism cards: godparent.

Before it meant a kind relative with a gift, it meant someone willing to help a baptised person live the Christian faith. First at the font. Then in the years that follow.

If you have been asked to be a godparent, or if you are about to ask someone, read this before you say yes. The responsibility continues long after the baptism day.

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Chapter 1

Not an honorary title

In many families a godparent is chosen the way a wedding witness is chosen. Someone we love. Someone who photographs well. Someone who will remember a birthday. The Church has never forbidden affection. She has never thought affection was enough.

The English word still says something if we listen to it. God-father. God-mother. A parent in God. The older Latin word was sponsor: someone who promises. Another Latin word was *patrinus*: a kind of parent in the faith. The Greek of the early Church was *anadochos*: the one who receives. None of these words mean favourite cousin, though a favourite cousin may be the right person if the other things are true.

A godparent is a practising Catholic chosen to help a baptised person live the Christian faith. That is the simple meaning. The Church is not looking for decoration. She is looking for another adult who will stand with the child in the life of the Church.

A Small Reflection

A godparent is not an honorary title. It is a real responsibility in the child's life of faith.

Affection is a good starting point. It is not the whole of the role. The Church asks for someone who can actually help the child remain close to Christ.

A short prayer

Lord, help us to choose for baptism someone who can keep a promise, not only someone we like. Amen.

Chapter 2

It began with adults

Sponsorship did not start with babies. It started with grown men and women who asked for baptism.

In the first centuries a person who wanted to become a Christian was not usually baptised at once. He or she entered a time of teaching called the catechumenate. A catechumen was a person preparing for baptism. That person needed other Christians who already lived the faith. Those companions were an early form of the sponsor. They introduced the candidate. They vouched for a serious intention. They helped after baptism as well.

Tertullian, writing around the year 200, already speaks of sponsors. He is not describing the modern godparent system. He is one early witness that baptism involved more than the person being washed. Someone stood beside the new Christian and took responsibility for helping them.

As infant baptism became common, the role developed. The child could not speak. Adults had to speak for the child. Augustine and later writers take that practice for granted. The sponsor was no longer mainly introducing an adult convert. The sponsor was helping a child who would have to grow into the faith later.

The names changed. The need did not. Baptism has always been the door into the Church, not only into one family.

A Small Reflection

The role grew from the Church's need for Christians who would accompany others towards baptism and afterwards.

Godparents are not a modern invention for family photographs. They come from a very old instinct: no one should enter the Church alone.

A short prayer

Lord, thank you for the Christians who once stood beside us. Help us to stand beside others in the same way. Amen.

Chapter 3

They answer at the font

The current Order of Baptism of Children keeps the two roles distinct.

The celebrant first speaks to the parents. They have asked for baptism. In doing so they accept the responsibility of bringing the child up in the practice of the faith. They are asked whether they understand what they are undertaking.

Then the celebrant turns to the godparents. They are asked, in these or similar words, whether they are ready to help the parents of this child in their duty as Christian parents.

Later, parents and godparents together renounce sin and profess the faith of the Church. The child is baptised in that faith.

The child receives baptismal grace from God through the sacrament. The adults do not give the child their own faith as if faith were a coat. The parents and godparents profess the faith of the Church in which the child is being baptised. They promise to help the child learn and live that faith until the child can make it his or her own.

The answers at the font are not a script for the camera. They are a public yes. The register keeps the names because the Church takes the yes seriously.

A Small Reflection

At baptism, the parents accept the first duty. The godparents are asked whether they are ready to help them.

The words at the font are simple. They ask whether we mean what we say. A godparent's first work is to answer truthfully.

A short prayer

*Lord Jesus, when we stand at the font, help us to mean the words we speak.
Amen.*

Chapter 4

The promise does not end on the day

Canon law says what a sponsor is for. As far as possible, a person being baptised is to have a sponsor. For an adult, the sponsor helps in Christian initiation. For an infant, the sponsor presents the child with the parents. In both cases the sponsor helps the baptised person to live a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfil the duties that come from it.

That last sentence is the heart of the role. The duty is not finished when the water has been poured and the candle has been given.

A godparent may later become especially important if the parents cannot give this support. Illness, death, distance or a collapse of faith in the home can make the second adult more needed. That is true. It is not the whole definition, and it is not the same as becoming a legal guardian. The Church does not appoint a godparent mainly because she expects the parents to fail. She appoints one because the child belongs to the Church as well as to the household.

A Small Reflection

A godparent's promise continues after the baptism day.

The child will need the faith again at seven, at fourteen, and later still.
The promise was made for those years as well.

A short prayer

*Lord, help me to remain faithful to the promise I made at the font.
Amen.*

Chapter 5

Parents first, then the Church

Parents have the first responsibility for the faith of their children. Godparents do not replace them. Godparents assist them.

That order matters. The Church is not setting up a rival household. She is placing the child inside a wider family than one kitchen.

Why then ask for someone besides the parents? Because baptism is not a private family moment with holy water. The child is being received into the Church. The Church wants another adult, besides mother and father, who has publicly accepted a share in helping that child live as a Christian.

If the home is strong in faith, the godparent is still a gift. If the home later struggles, the godparent may become an important spiritual support. In both cases the meaning is the same. The child has more than one adult in the Church who has promised to help.

A Small Reflection

Parents have the first responsibility, but the child also belongs to the wider Church.

A good godparent does not take over. A good godparent stands with the parents, prays for the child, and remains available when faith needs another adult.

A short prayer

Lord, bless the parents who bring their children to the font, and bless those who stand with them. Amen.

Chapter 6

Why the Church has rules

The 1983 Code of Canon Law sets out who may be a baptismal sponsor.

There is to be only one male sponsor, or one female sponsor, or one of each.

To be admitted as a sponsor, a person must be chosen for the role and must intend to fulfil it. The person must normally have completed sixteen years of age, unless the bishop of the diocese has set another age, or the parish priest or minister judges that there is a just reason for an exception. The person must be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has received Holy Communion, and who lives a life of faith in keeping with the role. The person must not be under a canonical penalty that has been imposed or declared. The person must not be the father or mother of the one being baptised.

A baptised person who belongs to a non-Catholic Christian community cannot be a Catholic sponsor. That person may stand as a Christian witness together with a Catholic sponsor. An unbaptised person cannot take either of those roles.

The rules exist because the role is real. They are not meant to insult families. They are meant to protect the child.

What does “a life of faith in keeping with the role” mean in practice? It means the person should genuinely live as a Catholic. Sunday Mass is part of that. So are the sacraments, prayer, and living according to the Church’s faith. Attendance alone does not settle everything. The Church is asking whether this person can actually help a child remain Catholic.

A Small Reflection

The Church has requirements because the role is real, not ceremonial.

If the person cannot keep the promise, affection is still affection. It is not yet a reason to write the name in the register as sponsor.

A short prayer

Lord, give families the courage to choose according to the faith, and give priests the patience to explain why. Amen.

Chapter 7

A spiritual bond

For many centuries the Church treated the bond between godparent and godchild as a kind of kinship. People spoke of spiritual relationship. In older Latin law that relationship was even an impediment to marriage. A godparent could not marry the godchild. The law was changed for the Latin Church when the 1983 Code came into force. Spiritual relationship is no longer a marriage impediment for Latin Catholics.

The Eastern Catholic Churches still recognise a marriage impediment arising from baptism between the sponsor, the baptised person and the parents.

The change in Latin law does not mean the bond is imaginary. It means the Church no longer treats it as a bar to marriage. The spiritual meaning remains. Someone stood for you at the font. You carry that person's name in your baptismal record. That is not nothing.

The relationship is not ownership. It is companionship in the faith.

A Small Reflection

Godparenthood creates a real spiritual bond even where the old legal effects no longer remain.

The Latin Church no longer treats it as an obstacle to marriage. She still treats it as a relationship that should be honoured in prayer and in ordinary care.

A short prayer

Lord, bless godparents and godchildren, and help them remain close in faith. Amen.

Chapter 8

The same companionship at Confirmation

Confirmation also has a sponsor. Canon law says that, as far as possible, the person being confirmed is to have a sponsor. The sponsor is to take care that the confirmed person lives as a true witness of Christ and faithfully fulfils the duties that come from this sacrament.

The requirements are the same as for a baptismal sponsor. The Church also says that it is desirable to choose as sponsor the person who undertook the same role at baptism. That keeps one companionship across both sacraments.

Sometimes another sponsor is chosen for a good pastoral reason. That does not automatically mean the first godparent has failed. Distance, illness or a real change in circumstances can make another choice wise. The hope remains the same. The young person should not walk through Confirmation without an adult in the Church who will stay interested afterwards.

A Small Reflection

Confirmation can renew the same spiritual companionship begun at baptism.

The Confirmation day is short. The years after it are long. That is why the Church prefers, when she can, to keep the same companion.

A short prayer

Lord, bless those who stand at Confirmation, and help them to remain when the day is over. Amen.

Chapter 9

How the promise is kept

A godparent does not need a programme. A few ordinary habits are enough.

Pray for the person by name. Remember the anniversary of the baptism if you can. Be present for First Communion or Confirmation when it is possible. Ask, without fuss, how Mass and prayer are going. Support the parents. Do not interfere where you have no right to interfere.

Living far away does not end the role. A letter, a message, a visit when you are nearby, a Mass offered quietly: these are real. What damages the promise is not miles. It is forgetting.

If you have not been a good godparent until now, begin again. Pray. Make contact. Ask how their faith is. It is not too late to take the role more seriously. The Church does not ask you to have been perfect from the start. She asks you not to treat the name as finished business.

A Small Reflection

Godparenthood is kept through small acts of prayer, presence and encouragement.

The child does not need a speech. The child needs an adult who has not disappeared, and who still cares whether Christ is part of the story.

A short prayer

Lord, if I have been absent, help me to begin again. If I am present, help me to stay. Amen.

Chapter 10

How to choose, and how to say yes

Parents should choose someone for faith, not only because the person is close to the family.

Ask simple questions. Does this person live as a Catholic in a way that fits the role? Would they help the child remain in the Church? Would they tell the truth about God when that is not fashionable? Affection that fails those questions is still affection. It is not yet a sponsor.

If you are being asked, you are allowed to say no. An honest no is a kindness. If you do not think you can take the role seriously, it is better to say no. A weak yes leaves a name in the register and little else.

The Church is not asking for a perfect person. She is asking for someone who genuinely lives the Catholic faith. Choose, if you can, someone who will still be living that faith when the child is twenty. Then go to the font and answer. The work after that is to remain.

A Small Reflection

Choose someone for faith, not simply because they are close to the family.

A favourite relative may be the right person. The right test is not the family tree. The right test is whether this adult can help the child live as a Catholic.

A short prayer

Jesus, when we are asked, give us the courage to answer only if we mean to remain. Amen.

A last word

A godparent's role begins at the font, but it does not end there. The child grows, changes and may sometimes drift from faith. The promise remains: pray, stay interested, encourage, and be ready to help the person remain close to Christ.

If this little book has helped you, keep it. Give it to someone who has just been asked, or who is about to ask.

Holy Family of Nazareth, pray for us. St John the Baptist, pray for us.

A prayer

*Holy Family of Nazareth, pray for us. St John the Baptist, pray for us.
Lord Jesus, keep our yes at the font alive in the years that follow. Amen.*

A word of thanks

These pages are free to read.

If they have helped you, a gift through Silent Homilies is welcome. Please give only if you wish, and only if you can. It is never a charge for a blessing.

Printing this book

This booklet is designed in A5 format.

For best results print double-sided on A5 paper, flipped on the short edge. Recommended paper: 80–100 gsm.

Written to be read in one or two sittings.