

CATHOLIC
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HOW TO BE A

Godparent

YOUR QUESTIONS
ANSWERED

It Is an Awesome Responsibility



Dear Godparents,

Congratulations! You have been invited to be a Godparent!

This affirms the joy with which you practice your Catholic faith. You must already be a wonderful witness for Jesus, and now you will take on the role of influencing the growing faith in the life of a child. What an opportunity!

The parents of your Godchild are placing great faith in you. They have invited you to assist them in raising their child in the Catholic faith: from Baptism to First Holy Communion and Confirmation; from the child's first questions about who God is to the tougher questions about how God moves in our lives. From "why did my pet die?" to "why do you go to church?" you will participate in the faith journey of this child, not just for a short time — for a lifetime.

What will you do? How can you prepare? How can you make the most of this tremendous and privileged responsibility? This booklet will help you answer the invitation to reflect God's love to your Godchild.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lorene Hanley Duquin".

Lorene Hanley Duquin

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Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend
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What Are Godparents?

Godparents are helpers in the parenting of faith.

“Baptism is God’s most beautiful and magnificent gift.... We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called *gift* because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; *grace* since it is given even to the guilty; *Baptism* because sin is buried in the water; *anointing* for it is priestly and royal as are those who are anointed; *enlightenment* because it radiates light; *clothing* since it veils our shame; *bath* because it washes; and *seal* as it is our guard and the sign of God’s Lordship.”

St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1216)

Godparents, then, are guardians, after the parents, of the magnificent gift of faith and its flowering in the life of a child. Their example, their words, their love — every expression of their faith — will nurture and unfold the effects of Baptism.

God gives the baptized sanctifying grace, the grace of justification:

- **enabling** them to believe in God, to hope in him, and to love him through the theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity);
- **giving** them the power to live and act under the prompting of the Holy Spirit through the gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, piety, fortitude, and fear of the Lord);
- **allowing** them to grow in goodness through the cardinal (moral) virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance).

“Thus the whole organism of the Christian’s supernatural life has its roots in Baptism” (CCC, 1266).

Godparents work with God’s grace to enable belief in God, hope in God, and love of God.

Godparents work with God to give examples of living as disciples through the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Godparents work with God to allow their Godchild to grow in goodness through the learning and the application of the cardinal virtues.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Baptism is a Sacrament of Initiation. It is called “the doorway to the Church” because it is the first sacrament administered to anyone who wants to become a Christian.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Baptism is “the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit ... and the door which gives access to the other sacraments” (1213).

Baptism frees us from sin and makes us children of God, followers of Christ, members of the Catholic Church, and participants in the mission of the Church.

We baptize because Jesus told us, “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). When we come for Baptism, we are asking the Church to make us part of the Body of Christ.

Baptism is one of the most important gifts we receive. But the Sacrament of Baptism is not just a one-time event. It is the beginning of life as a Catholic Christian and the foundation for faith. The grace of the sacrament remains with us for all time.



What Godparents Do During Baptism

Godparents play an important role during the Sacrament of Baptism. Here are some of the things that happen when a child is baptized:

- ▶ At the beginning of the ceremony, the priest asks the Godparents if they accept the responsibility to help the parents train the child in the Catholic faith, keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, and love God and their neighbors. *The Godparents respond that they will accept this responsibility.*
- ▶ Godparents are asked to trace the Sign of the Cross on the child's forehead as a sign of welcoming the child into the faith community.
- ▶ The priest then anoints the child with the oil of catechumens as a symbol of salvation in Jesus Christ.
- ▶ On behalf of the child, Godparents renew their baptismal promises.
- ▶ The priest pours water over the child's head three times and proclaims, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
- ▶ As a sign of the child's call to share in the ministry of Christ, the child is anointed again with consecrated oil called chrism.
- ▶ A white garment is placed on the child, which symbolizes the putting on of Christ. The child is now a new creation, clothed in Christ, with Christian dignity. *Parents and Godparents are expected to help the child grow into a deeper understanding of this Christian dignity and lay the spiritual foundation for the child to live a faith-filled life.*
- ▶ The priest says, "Receive the light of Christ," and *the Godfather lights the child's baptismal candle from the Easter Candle*, symbolizing that the child has been called out of darkness and into the light. Parents and Godparents are then told, "*This light is entrusted to you to be kept burning brightly.*"
- ▶ Many Godparents bring a holy water container to the ceremony and ask the priest if some of the baptismal water can be saved for the child.

Spend Time in Prayer

Lord Jesus, I have been given an extraordinary responsibility. Thank you for this awesome task. I ask your help to prepare me well.

"Baptism ... gives us new life as adopted children of God. We become sharers of divine life and temples of the Holy Spirit. We are now made righteous by God and live in a state of grace, that is, we live in union with God because of his gracious and loving initiative."

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 193

"By God's gift, through water and the Holy Spirit, we are reborn to everlasting life. In his goodness, may he continue to pour out his blessings upon these sons and daughters of his. May he make them always, wherever they may be, faithful members of his holy people."

Rite of Baptism

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Romans 6:3-4

"Whenever a person is baptized ... there should be at least one person present who will act as sponsor for the one being baptized. The sponsor ... accepts the responsibility of helping the person grow in the Catholic faith. One who acts as a sponsor for an infant or child agrees to help the parents teach their child about the faith and how to live as a practicing Catholic."

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 189

AFTER BAPTISM ...

What's a Godparent to Do?

Be attentive to spiritual milestones in the child's life.

"My Godmother was there when I got to read the first reading at Mass."

Be present for important sacramental moments.

"I wanted Lilly to know how important her First Holy Communion was, and she did know. But when both of her Godparents came and sat down with us before the Mass began, Lilly and I both cried for joy!"

Help the parents guide the child in matters of faith and morals.

"Dear Tommy, your mom told me you stood up for your little sister when she was being picked on. I'm very proud of you, and I know God is proud of you."

Pray for the child.

"Bless Sarah today, Lord. I offer this prayer for her."

Set a good example of what it means to be a faithful Catholic.

"Let's go! I'm going with you on your canned food drive. I can help out, too."

Provide a listening ear for the child to talk about God or the Church.

"When you think about what is happening in your life right now, what do you think God is trying to tell you?"

Be an important person in the child's life.

"My godfather took me and my parents on a long drive. We ended up at this little old church way out in the country. It's where he was baptized. It was cool. We walked around and talked..."

"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."

— Ephesians 4:1–6

Understanding a Child's Faith Development

and How Godparents Can Help!

Experienced Faith (Infancy Through Pre-School)

The foundations of faith are laid at this impressionable age when children are totally dependent on others. It is during this time that children begin to imitate the actions of their parents: *This is what we do in our family.*

- They learn to make the Sign of the Cross.
- They learn to say prayers — even if they do not yet understand the meaning of the words — in the morning, before meals, and at bedtime.
- They learn about God through religious picture books and songs.
- They learn by going to Mass and experiencing the sights and sounds and smells of liturgical celebrations — even though they can't yet comprehend what is happening.
- They learn that all of this is in some way connected to a loving and caring God.



How Godparents Can Help

- Attend baptismal classes with the parents.
- Give the child a meaningful baptismal gift, such as religious jewelry, a crucifix, a picture Bible, a framed prayer, a picture of Jesus, his or her patron saint, or a guardian angel.
- Send the child a card, letter, or gift every year on holidays, birthdays, and on the anniversary of the child's Baptism.
- Attend Mass with the family.
- Visit often. Take time to read religious picture books to the child.
- Bring CDs of religious music. Sing with the child.
- Pray with the child.
- Pray for the child.

Affiliative Faith (Childhood and Early Adolescence)

During this stage a child's faith continues to develop through association with the Catholic community. The child learns by imitating adults and other children in the parish: *This is what we believe, and this is what we do in our parish.*

- They attend faith formation sessions, where they learn Catholic beliefs and values.
- They participate in parish social events for children.
- They get involved in parish service opportunities.
- They celebrate Confirmation, First Reconciliation, and First Communion.
- They are invited to participate in liturgical ministries, such as altar server for parish liturgies, music ministry, lector, and greeter.
- They learn about God and the Catholic Church from experiences with other adults and children in the parish.
- They begin to feel a sense of belonging, and through that sense of belonging they begin to experience a sense of purpose.
- They begin to develop a more personal relationship with God.

How Godparents Can Help

- Talk to the child about what he or she is learning in religious education.
- If you can't visit often, send cards and letters often.
- Share your experience of growing up Catholic.
- Take the child to Mass in the parish where you grew up.
- Be present when the child celebrates sacraments.
- Give the child special keepsakes such as a Rosary, a statue, a prayer book, religious jewelry, or a youth Bible.
- Encourage the child to use his or her gifts and talents in parish ministries.
- Pray with the child.
- Pray for the child.

Just as children grow mentally and physically, they also go through stages in their spiritual development. In his classic book *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, Rev. John H. Westerhoff describes four stages of spiritual development.

Here's a recap of those stages and some helpful tips of how you can support your Godchild as he or she grows in faith:



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Searching Faith (Late Adolescence and Young Adulthood)

During this stage teens and young adults begin to search for answers beyond the people in their families and their parish: *I'm not sure what I believe or where I belong.*

- They may begin to question what they have been taught.
- They may refuse to blindly accept what other people say.
- They look for ways to test their own beliefs.
- They may experiment with other faiths or spiritualities.
- They may seem to reject everything that they experienced as children.
- They may upset family members, who don't understand that this can be a necessary stage in which the young person casts off a superficial childhood faith and begins to develop a deeper, more personal faith.

How Godparents Can Help

- Ask the teen or young adult if he or she is struggling with questions or doubts.
- Be a good listener.
- Share your experience of questioning your faith and how it was eventually resolved.
- Be a good example of what it means to be Catholic. Give the teen or young adult Catholic books that will help during this stage.
- Go to Mass together.
- Encourage the teen or young adult to keep a spiritual journal.
- Get involved in a Catholic service project together. Make sure the teen or young adult knows that you care and will always be available.
- Continue to pray with your Godchild.
- Continue to pray for your Godchild.

Owned Faith (Adulthood)

During this stage adults internalize their beliefs and develop a strong, personal relationship with God and the Church that guides their lives, inspires their actions, and gives meaning and purpose to their existence: *This is what I believe and this is where I belong.*

- They own their Catholic beliefs.
- They apply their Catholic values to their lives.
- They develop a strong, personal relationship with God.
- They take responsibility for their relationship with God.
- They see beyond themselves and understand the need to reach out to others.
- They see the value in being part of the community.
- They understand that faith guides their lives, inspires their actions, and gives a sense of meaning and purpose to their existence.

How Godparents Can Help

- Continue to send cards and notes.
- Be present for your Godchild's wedding and the Baptism of his or her children.
- Continue to share your faith.
- Continue to affirm your Godchild's faith.
- Continue to pray for your Godchild.



PRAYER FOR A GODCHILD



Lord Jesus,

You encouraged children to come to you, and you made them living members of your Church. Help me to encourage my Godchild to enter into your loving embrace. Help my Godchild to grow in faith, to keep the commandments, to love you, and to love others as you love them. Send your Spirit to help my Godchild resist temptation and follow your will. Strengthen my relationship with my Godchild. Give me the grace I need to become a good example of a joyful Catholic in the world today. I ask this in your name. Amen.

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