

Welcoming a new child into your family is one of the greatest moments of family life. You who are called by God to be parents will have to make many important decisions concerning your children throughout their lives. One of them is the choice of Godparents, those special people who will assist you in raising your children in the faith. There is often, however, a great deal of confusion over just what a Godparent is and who is eligible to fulfill this role. Traditions, customs and family sensitivities often dictate differing “rules” and guidelines as to who should or who “must” be selected to be a child’s Godparent. These expectations, however, sometimes contradict the Church’s understanding of a Godparent and the requirements that must be fulfilled in order for someone to qualify for this position. As a result, parents sometimes discover that the person they’ve already asked to be their child’s Godparent is not eligible to do so, and they find themselves in the rather awkward position of having to withdraw their invitation to be their child’s Godparent. This of course can be embarrassing to the parents and is sometimes taken as an insult by the would-be Godparent. We ask you to read the following information which explains what a Godparent is according to Church law in order to avoid such awkward moments as well as to help you choose the best Godparents for your child.



First, let's mention what Godparents are *not*. They are not people who will raise the child in case something happens to you. That is a legal guardian. (They may in fact be the

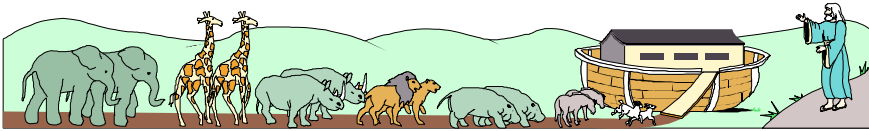
people you'd like to fulfill this role, but this is a matter of civil law, and has nothing to do with the role of a Godparent.) They are also not automatically the Best Man and Maid-of-Honor from your wedding. A Godparent is a sponsor, one who will assist you by word and example in raising your child to be a faithful Catholic. It is the responsibility of the Godparents to show your child how to practice the Gospel in personal and social life, to sustain your child in moments of hesitancy and anxiety, to bear witness, and to guide your child’s progress in the baptismal life. They are role models for your child of how to be a good Catholic, so that if at any time your child is uncertain about how to follow Jesus, he need only look to his Godparents for an example. At the baptism, they will be asked with you to renew their baptismal promises and profess their faith in Jesus and the Catholic Church. This understanding therefore places some obligations upon Godparents. The laws of the Catholic Church concerning Godparents are as follows:

The 1983 Code of Canon Law clearly states that Godparents must be mature enough to undertake this responsibility. In the Archdiocese of New York, it is stipulated that they must be at least fourteen years old. They must be fully initiated Catholics, having received the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion; they must not be bound by any canonical penalty, and they must not be the mother or the father of the one to be baptized. They must also be practicing their faith, which means they actively participate in Mass every Sunday and on every Holyday of Obligation, and are not living in any situations or involved in any activities that the Church teaches are sinful. If they are married, they must be validly married in the eyes of the Church.

In general, there are two areas of conflict people often have with the Godparents they have chosen: First of all, they must be Catholic. In certain situations, particularly where one of the parents is a non-Catholic Christian, out of respect for the non-Catholic member, one of the Godparents may be a *practicing* member of a non-Catholic Christian denomination, provided the other Godparent is a practicing Catholic. (This person is technically not a Godparent but a Christian Witness, although the role will be fulfilled in the same manner.) Only one Christian Witness is permissible. There must always be one Catholic Godparent. **Under NO CIRCUMSTANCES WHATSOEVER can a non-Christian act as a Godparent or witness at a baptism.** Church law only requires you to have one Godparent for your child. You may have as many as two (which is traditional). It is not permitted to have more than two Godparents. If you choose to have two Godparents, they must be one male and one female. It is not permissible to have two Godfathers or two Godmothers, or one Godfather and two Godmothers, etc.

Secondly, both Godparents and Christian Witnesses must be regularly practicing their faith. All prospective Godparents are required to acquire a sponsor certificate from the parish where they are currently registered and attending Mass every Sunday. It is a frequent problem that people choose someone who is not practicing his faith to be a Godparent. This causes considerable difficulty when this individual contacts a parish and asks for a sponsor certificate. Usually this person is unknown to his local parish, is not registered, and cannot receive a certificate. In some cases, he will be asked to sign a form certifying before God that he is a practicing Catholic, or that he

promises to make whatever changes in his life are necessary for him to be so. If the person is not willing to begin practicing his faith, he will not be able to sign the form and will not be able to fulfill the role of a Godparent. (And when you think about it, if someone is not practicing his Catholic faith and refuses to do so in the future in order to be your child's Godparent, do you really want to choose that person? Your child will be the one who loses out in the long run.) **A Catholic who is living a life not consistent with the Catholic faith cannot act as a Godparent at a baptism.** It is also not possible for a Catholic whose life is not consistent with the faith to be admitted merely as a Christian Witness. Finally, Godparents should be people willing to continue their role in your child's life after the day of baptism, and should be someone your child will grow up seeing on a regular basis. If you are unsure about the eligibility of certain people or if you have any questions, it is always wise to speak with a priest before you ask someone to be a Godparent, so that the offer does not have to be embarrassingly withdrawn because the person you selected is ineligible. Remember, the Godparent is not merely someone to stand next to you on the day of baptism, but is someone who is promising to be a spiritual guide for your child throughout his life, and to be a living witness to your child of his Catholic faith by his word and example. The priests at Sacred Heart Church will always be more than happy to help you in your decision to choose the Godparents who would be the best Godparents for your child, people who will truly be assisting you in your duty as Catholic parents.



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Sacred Heart Church, Suffern, New York