



On Being a Godparent

You have been asked by someone close to you to stand with them at the baptism of their child. This is an honor, and forges a special bond in your life with this young person – a blessing to you and to them.

In the Episcopal Church, a godparent is also called a sponsor. In the Webster's dictionary, the first definition of a sponsor is someone who supports an activity done for charity by pledging money in advance.

That's not you, especially the part about the money. Godparents are no longer financially beholden to their godchildren. The last two definitions are very fitting though. Webster's finally says a sponsor is a godparent, and a person who makes himself or herself responsible for another. This is your calling, your vocation, to be responsible for this child's spiritual growth in the Christian way.

In the liturgy at baptism, after we have been intentionally gathered in God's presence and have heard from the scriptures, the response to God's word comes in the sermon and in the baptism. A sermon applies the scriptures to touch the lives of all. A baptism is a specific response, an affirmation reaching out to God in response to God's reaching to us through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

When an older child or an adult is baptized, the sponsor simply presents that person. Hopefully, the sponsor will have been involved in the preparation; at the very least, you've been praying for your candidate, and responding to their questions about your own Christian journey. Your sponsorship does not end there, however. Think of your ministry to your candidate as a kind of partnership. Attend worship with them and invite them to other experiences that have the potential to enrich their lives and strengthen their faith in God through Christ Jesus. Help the candidate reflect on those experiences by honest conversation. Keep them in your prayers, and support them with your care when their life's journey encounters difficult paths. Your ministry to your candidate is similar to the kind of sponsorship found in twelve-step programs. You are on the same road, perhaps having traveled more ground. By sharing the wisdom you've found, you will enrich and guide them in their lives.

When an infant or a younger child is baptized, the godparent or sponsor makes promises in that child's name. It is as if, with the parents, you are the child's voice and their intent to live in the Christian way. You also respond to two questions about your ministry as a godparent.

- Q. Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life?
- A. *I will, with God's help.*
- Q. Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?
- A. *I will, with God's help.*

The activity you undertake is charitable, for in love you are helping to shape the life of another Christian. You are not pledging money, as you would to another charitable cause, you are pledging your time and your witness – that is, the testimony of your life as a servant of God, following the pattern of Christ Jesus as your Lord. You will be an example for how someone in our day and age lives out faith in God, through your choices and moral standards, in your

relationships, your words and actions. Notice the active words in the questions you will be asked; your responsibility is to help this child grow up in Christ's image.

You may know the story in the gospel, when challenging Jesus in the Temple, some faithful Pharisees approached him asking whether it was lawful for those faithful to God to pay taxes to Caesar. He asked to see a coin and asked them whose image, whose likeness appeared on it. They replied, "Caesar's." That's when he told them to give to Caesar what was Caesar's, and to God what is God's. I hear an important message in that story. You see, humanity is made in the image of God; each human face an icon of God's likeness. To grow up in Christ's image is to grow into the complete human God desires each of us to be: generous and just, as God is, loving and forgiving, compassionate to the unfortunate, and merciful to the broken, using all one's gifts and skills to join in the process of creative, life-giving work and community.

When you make the promises in your godchild's name, you'll renounce Satan, and all the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, all sinful desires that draw us away from the love of God. You'll also affirm that Jesus Christ is Savior, in whose grace and love one can trust, whom we follow and obey (listen to) as Lord. Using these concepts, you are to support your godchild in un-naming the powers that destroy our lives and choosing the power of love that nurtures and sustains life. These are powerful images, which you can communicate by helping your godchild attend worship regularly, receiving Christian education for the nurture of their young faith. As a baptized member of Christ's body, your godchild is empowered with the Holy Spirit. It is your responsibility to listen for the word of God coming from the mouths of babes. God's wisdom is already at work – let them teach you to pray, to talk to God as a trustworthy friend.

As a godparent, you can prepare for your ministry by reading the service of baptism and the catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church, and your order of service, catechism or confessions in your denomination's prayer books. The catechism, pages 844-862, is the outline of faith – not a complete statement of belief, but a point of departure for the discerning mind. What the Church believes about baptism is found both on page 858 and in the service of Holy Baptism, which begins on page 299.

The baptism service is held in the context of the community's celebration on Sundays, usually on the primary occasions that highlight the theology of baptism. Reborn into Christ's death and resurrection, baptism is most appropriate at the Easter Vigil. Baptized in the forgiveness of sins and anointed with the Holy Spirit, we celebrate the Lord's baptism and ours on the first Sunday after the Epiphany (January 6). Baptized as saints, as God's holy ones, chosen and beloved, we celebrate baptism on All Saints' Day (November 1) or the Sunday following. In baptism we are given the Holy Spirit to inspire our lives, so we baptize on the feast of Pentecost, 50 days after Easter. The service of baptism is held when the main community gathers, to remind us that we are born into our families and baptized into our church family. The community makes a promise to uphold your godchild in his or her promises and support them in their Christian life.

Baptism is almost always a service that includes Holy Communion. Communion is the repeatable part of the baptism, for receiving the sacrament of Christ's body and blood in the consecrated bread and wine renews the forgiveness once received in baptism and fortifies the grace and comfort of Christ's presence with us. The Episcopal Church allows all who are baptized to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. Your godchild can receive on that special day – a small crumb or drip of wine if they are not yet eating solids. It is a serious, simple, joyful meal, shared in the hope of God's power transforming us. Hopefully, there will

never be a time when your godchild is not fed by grace in worship. As they mature, they will learn what it means to receive communion. That can be a part of your witness to them, when they are old enough to talk about it with you.

On a Practical Note

- ✠ Remember your godchild's birthday and baptismal anniversary. Celebrate their life and new life, not in a material way, but in a special way that highlights your connection to them.
- ✠ Pray for your godchild. Remember those occasions along life's path that can be difficult, and let them know you are praying for them.
- ✠ Support your godchild's parents. Encourage them in parenting that demonstrates Christian faith. If they are not attending church regularly, help them to find the right community that inspires and encourages them as a family. You might think of special rituals or customs that you can do to observe major Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost).
- ✠ Be someone your godchild can come to when they need support, advice, or a listening heart.
- ✠ Nurture your own spiritual life so that you have something to share with them.
- ✠ Be ready to give an age appropriate Bible so that the parables of our faith are stories your godchild hears regularly.
- ✠ When they are old enough, join them in serving others for Christ's sake.

Being a godparent or a sponsor is an honor, for your friend or relative has chosen you to have this special relationship with their child. May God bless you in this ministry.

A Prayer for your Godchild

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon N., your servant the forgiveness of sin, and have raised *him/her* to the new life of grace. Give *him/her* an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

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