

# The Godparents in the Orthodox Church

*by deacon Thomas Wilson*

It is a rule of the Orthodox Faith that every person, child or adult, should have a Godparent at Baptism. To serve as a Godparent is both a special honor and imposes responsibilities, which last a lifetime. Along with the parents, the Godparent is charged with the responsibility of assisting in the spiritual development of the child. Whether a blood relative or not, the Godparent becomes a part of the "spiritual family" of that Godchild.

## Selection of a Godparent

The Orthodox Archdiocese of North America advises that the selection of a godparent is an important choice because the godparent is responsible for the spiritual upbringing of your child. You should think of the person as becoming a member of your family and a relationship that will be lifelong. Often family members will be selected as godparents but they can be non-family members as well. In Greek tradition, the best man or Brides Maid of the parents wedding will baptize the couple's first child. It is best, if you wish someone else, you should at least consult with them about your choice.

As the Godparent is the sponsor at baptism, it should be realized that only someone who is **a member in good standing of the Orthodox church, in full sacramental communion, and knows at least the main tenets of the Christian faith and its ethics, as well as the meaning of the mystery of baptism and of the vows which are given in the name of the baptized which are to be conveyed and explained to the latter when he has reached maturity.** Thus, the sponsor at baptism cannot be:

- a. a minor, i.e. a boy younger than 15, or a girl less than 13;
- b. someone ignorant of the faith;
- c. someone guilty of overt sins, or in general a person who in the opinion of the community has fallen in his or her moral life;
- d. **a non-orthodox Christian.** Parents may not be sponsors of their own children; on the contrary, should this occur, the very matrimonial bond of the parents should be dissolved in accordance with Canon 53 of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, since sponsorship creates a spiritual relationship considered by the Church in this canon to be more important than "the union according to the flesh."<sup>1</sup>

## **The Historic Role of the Godparent in the Orthodox Church**

The institution of sponsors (god-parents), who serve as witnesses and guarantors for the faith of the person being baptized and are obligated to edify him in the rules of Christian life, has existed since the first century of the Christian era. Church literature of the second suggests that the sponsors of the first centuries were usually deacons, deaconesses, hermits, virgins, and in general persons dedicated to the service of the Church and thus capable of edifying the newly-baptized in the truths of the Christian faith and its ethical principles. According to the "Apostolic Canons" (3, 16), a male Christian was obliged to take one deacon, and a woman one deaconess as sponsor. This practice has been maintained in the Church ever since, i.e., a person baptized is required to be sponsored by one person of the same sex. According to the Rudder (ch. 50, pt. 2), the person baptized, "when he leaves the saving bath, must be received by one faithful person."

In the early history of the Russian Church, until the fourteenth century, it was customary to have only one sponsor, and it is only in the fifteenth century that the practice of inviting two god-parents--a man and a woman--was established. In the course of time this practice of the Russian Church received legal sanction not only on the basis of established custom, but also through later directives of the Holy Synod, although even to this day in principle only one sponsor is necessary. Our Book of Needs, which contains the service of baptism, mentions only one sponsor in the prayers for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins of the Augmented Litany which is said twice, after the reading of the Gospel and at the conclusion of the Order of Ablution for the eighth day.

### **Baptismal Guidelines**

The following are guidelines for the Godparents sponsoring a baptism. It should be noted that each tradition/jurisdiction may vary on the specifics and the priest doing the baptism will advise the Godparents of the parish practices:

1. The Sponsor (Godfather or Godmother) must be an Orthodox Christian. If the Sponsor is married, the marriage must have been blessed by an Orthodox priest.
2. The role of the Sponsor is directly related to infant baptism. Since the infant is unable to make the necessary confession of faith, the Sponsor stands and vouches for it.
3. The Sponsor should be ready to recite the Nicene Creed either in Greek or English. For three consecutive Sundays after the baptism, the Sponsor should carry the neophyte for the Holy Altar to receive Holy Communion.
4. According to the tradition of the Orthodox church, one name of Orthodox Christian origin should be given to the child at the time of baptism.

5. The day, time, and other arrangements of the baptism must be made with the priest. Please call the church office to discuss these arrangements at least one month before the baptism.
6. The Godparent traditionally provides:
  - A. A complete change of clothes for the child
  - B. One bottle of olive oil
  - C. A cross for the child
  - D. Three candles
  - E. One of each of the following: bar of soap, hand towel, bath towel
  - F. Bringing Child to Eucharist on day of Baptism and Communing with Him/Her
    - a. Necessity of preparing for communion oneself
    - b. Bringing Child next three weeks to communion, with baptismal candle in baptismal garment
    - c. Godparent gives child bath on 3rd day after baptism (no bath prior to this)
    - d. Consistent contact and focus always on spiritual relationship

### **Responsibilities of the Godparent**

The Responsibilities of the Godparent only begin at baptism, the role really expands and hopefully blossoms as the Godparent and Godchild develop a close and loving relationship. As with any relationship, this spiritual one needs to be fostered and cared for in order for it to develop. The best way for this relationship to grow is through prayer. **Pray for your Godchild and his or her parents, and the parents should encourage their child to pray for the Godparents.** By doing this you are encouraging a relationship and giving it the spiritual basis on which to mature.

Here are some practical ideas offered by the Orthodox Church In America website (<http://www.oca.org>):

Celebrate the anniversary of the baptism with a card or a telephone call. Along with learning about the child's patron saint, learn about the saint whose feast day is celebrated on the date of his or her baptism and share the story of that saint's life with your Godchild.

1. Model your faith through your actions. Understand the sacraments as well as the teachings of the church so that you will be able to answer questions that your Godchild may have.
2. Encourage the faith life through the types of gifts that you give your Godchild. Some examples of gifts are a bible, prayer book, books on the lives of saints, prayer rope, etc. By doing this you are giving tools to help your Godchild grow in the faith, and are helping him/her to start a personal library of Orthodox teachings.

3. If you live in close proximity to your Godchild make yourself available to spend time with him or her. Find out when school activities and sports events are scheduled and try to go to a few. Plan a special time, whether for lunch or a trip to the zoo, to be with your Godchild. These times together will only help to make your relationship closer.
4. If you live far away, call, write, or e-mail your Godchild. Send a letter at the beginning of a church season (Advent, Lent, etc.) to let him or her know that you will be praying for him. If possible, plan visits to see your Godchild.
- 5. From the moment of Baptism, your Godchild deserves a very special place in your prayers, for on the day of judgment you will be asked about your Godchild's soul.**
6. A faithful Godparent will be a friend in Christ and maintain close contact with his Godchild. The focus at all times is to progress the child in the knowledge and practice of the Orthodox Faith. He should at all times model a Christ-like example. The relationship between the Godparent and the baptized is so important and so close that the Church forbids marriage between the Godparent and Godchild.
7. Pray through the ups and downs of life with your Godchild. Find out what's troubling or challenging your Godchild, what he or she is excited about or eagerly anticipating, then do your best to talk about God in that context. Encourage your Godchild to pray, pray together, and let your godchild know that you are praying for him or her every day.
8. Make a big deal of your godchild's names day. Celebrate with a special visit and dinner if you're nearby, and give a "spiritually oriented" gift to celebrate, like an age-appropriate book of his patron saint's life, a new icon, etc.
9. Emphasize the spiritual aspects of holidays. Make it a tradition to read the stories of the Nativity and Pascha morning with your godchild, and help his or her parents downplay the material and commercial aspects (Santa, the Easter Bunny, loads of loot in pretty wrapping). Play up the feasts of the Church instead - by bringing candles to be blessed at the Feast of the Presentation and flowers at the Dormition of the Theotokos and sharing them with your godchild, or by baking a birthday cake for the nativities of the Theotokos, Jesus, and St. John the Baptist.
10. Invite your godchild to go with you to Great Vespers, Matins, or weekday services for the feasts if you live close by. Encourage your whole "god-family" to come to Church for services other than the Sunday/resurrectional Divine Liturgy, if they don't do so regularly.
11. Ask what your godchild is learning in Church school... Discuss the lesson of the week, and offer to help with Church school homework, prepare for oratorical competition or catechism bowl, etc. Buy your godchild's first Bible, and update it regularly as his or her reading level increases. Encourage him or her to study the gospel!
12. Help your godchild serve God. Choose a service project to work at regularly together, such as working at a hot-meal program or visiting parishioners in the hospital. Help him or her discover new ways to use God-given talents to help

others - the artistic might design posters or programs for retreats, the musical might record Church music for shut-ins, etc. Encourage your godsons to serve in the altar, too, and "cheer them on" each week.

13. Encourage both boys and girls to attend seminary, and explore the monastic lifestyle, if they show interest. Mention the priesthood as a "career choice" to your godsons, and help them learn more about what our Orthodox clergy do - and how important their calling to guide others in the Faith is to all of us!
14. Make your godchild "one of the family". Include your godchild, and his or her parents and siblings, in your own family's "social" events: reunions, picnics, camping trips, and zoo and museum outings.
15. Spend time together. Keep in touch by phone, e-mail, or postcard if your godchildren are out of state or across the globe. Prayer and love in Christ know no distance!

### **Working together: Godparent and Parent**

It is important for the Godparent to work with your godchild's parents. Talk with your godchild's parents often about his or her life, spiritual and otherwise, and ask how you can help. Parents can often use another perspective -- and another willing hand -- as they guide their children to adulthood. Parents choose Godparents who will reinforce them, people to whom our children can turn when the parents are not cool enough to listen to them, and when they need to hear difficult truths from someone who loves them.

Parents may be unsure whether they are too strict or too lenient, Godparents are a good sounding board for discussing this when it pertains to the Godchild. Parents may wish to make the Godparents the child's emergency contact person after the parents so the secular world relies appropriately on the Godparent when crisis hits.

Parents should light candles and pray for their children's Godparents every time they enter a church, say their family and personal prayers. Likewise the Godparents should pray not only for their Godchild but the Godchild's parents as well.

### **The Responsibility of the Godchild**

Godparent and Godchild should develop a close and loving relationship. As with any relationship, this spiritual one needs to be fostered and cared for in order for it to develop. The best way for this relationship to grow is through prayer. Pray for your Godparent and his/her family. By doing this you are encouraging a relationship and giving it the spiritual basis on which to mature.

When greeting one's Godparent, you should feel the love and familiarity that you have with your own parents. It is NOT inappropriate to hug or kiss your godparents, as you would your own parents.

A Godchild should light candles and pray for their Godparents every time they enter a church, say their family prayers, and say their personal prayers. The Godchild should observe the Godparents names day. Celebrate it with a special visit and dinner if you're nearby, and give a "spiritually oriented" gift to celebrate, like a spiritual book of the Godparent's patron saint's life, a new icon, etc.

Keep in touch by phone, e-mail, or postcard if your Godparent lives out of state or across the globe. Prayer and love in Christ know no distance!

There will come a time in which your Godparents have aged and are less able to be fully present with you do to illness or perhaps a nursing home placement. Remember to continue to pray for them and visit or write them often to maintain your relationship. Ask for their advice even though you have grown up.

Finally there will come a day in which your Godparents will repose in the Lord, maintain your image of your Godparents in your mind to help brings peace and memories of love and wisdom. Pray for your Godparents and offer memorial services in their memory, do works and offer alms in their name. And pray for them as they will continue to do for you in heaven.

### **What If Godparents Don't Work Out?**

Although great care and many prayers are put forth by the parents in choosing the Godparent for their child, sometimes after the baptism the relationship does not grow. It's sad to have your child want to disown their "missing-in-action" godparent, but it can happen. If after repeated efforts the godparent does not respond and since it is so important for our children to have the influence of a "godparent," ask yourself, "Who among my closest Orthodox friends could relate to my child and serve as a spiritual mentor?" Discuss the situation with your spiritual father/parish priest. Ask God to guide your efforts. Ask that person to consider the task and to pray about it. If that person agrees, let your child know that this individual is there for him/her. If the person does not consent, keep on praying and asking. Have faith that God will provide for your child's spiritual needs.