

# GODPARENTS

## Not just fiction or fairy tale

*Catholic godparents play a very real-life role in modeling and passing on the Faith to the children of family or friends*

By Michelle Martin

*Our Sunday Visitor*, 28 July 2013

Most stories that involve godparents start with "Once upon a time ..." and end with "happily ever after," with a fair amount of magical fairy dust - not to mention ball gowns and love at first sight - sprinkled in. Or they involve warped tales of misplaced honor and entirely too much gunfire.

Maybe that's why those who help parents prepare for the baptism of their children report that very often, it's difficult to make them understand the very important role godparents should play in the lives of their godchildren. They don't know whether they should ask the brother they love dearly, but who hasn't seen the inside of a church since he stood up in their wedding. Or the college friend who is feeling left out as all of her friends have babies. Or even if they should keep searching until they find someone who would qualify for sainthood if he or she were not still walking the earth.

The good news, according to those who help families prepare for this first sacrament of initiation, is that it doesn't have to be that hard if the parents keep the role of a godparent in mind.

### Important role

Put simply, a godparent is someone who agrees to support the parents on forming their child to the Catholic Faith. Under canon law, a godparent, or, more formally, a baptismal sponsor, must be a practicing Catholic who has received the sacraments of baptism, Communion and confirmation, and, in most cases, is over the age of 16, although the age requirement can be waived if there is a good reason (Canon 874).

The sponsor cannot be the parent of the child or the spouse of an adult seeking baptism, and he or she must not be excommunicated, a heretic, a member of a group in schism with the Church or publicly living in a state of sin. He or she must also intend to fulfill the duties of a godparent and be present to participate in the baptism.

And, while one godparent is all that is strictly required for baptism, if parents choose to have two, they must be a man and a woman. If there is one Catholic godparent, a believing member of another Christian tradition can also be recognized as a Christian witness to the sacrament.

### Role models in faith

The issue of choosing good godparents has been around since at least the 1970s, said Tom Sheridan, author of *The Gift of Godparents: For Those Chosen With Love and Trust to Be Godparents* (Acta Publications, 1997). That's when Sheridan, a deacon of the Diocese of Joliet, Ill., started doing baptismal preparation classes, and it was as much a topic then as it is now.

"I would always tell people it's not an honorific," said Sheridan, who now lives in Florida. "It's a matter of relationship. The people you are choosing are going to be models of life and faith."

That means choosing people who do more than practice their faith; it means choosing people who offer a good example of how to live. "There's an awful lot of people who consider themselves good Catholics or good Christians who are not nice," he said, explaining that the best role models are those whose faith permeates their whole lives, rather than just sending them to church on Sunday.

"You hope for an ongoing relationship," Sheridan said. "There's a sense of the past, a sense of the present and a sense of the future. You choose godparents based on a past relationship with them; there's a sense of the present with the godparent's participation in the sacrament and in the future you hope for an ongoing relationship with the godchild."

One couple who came through the baptismal preparation class at his parish took the opposite tack from those who want to choose friends or relatives who practice their faith rarely, if at all. That couple said they didn't know anyone worthy to sponsor their child, Sheridan said.

"I told them, 'You're not perfect as parents, and you won't find perfect godparents, but surely you have people in your lives who would be good role models of the Faith,'"

Sheridan said. They did eventually find someone, he said.

"It's helpful to find a practicing Catholic who is close to the faith," concurred Father Francis Hoffman, who writes for The Catholic Answer Life column and is one of the hosts on Relevant Radio's "Go Ask Your Father." Father Hoffman, perhaps better known as "Father Rocky," is also Relevant Radio's executive director.

In his experience, he said, it's even better when a child's godparents are a married couple, although that is not re-quired. In doing so, he said, they provide a model for sacramental marriage - hopefully, in addition to the model provided by the child's parents.

"What you want to avoid is choosing the godparents to avoid family problems," he said. "I think it's more common among Catholics who don't really practice the faith. They want to make sure they don't leave out couple so-and-so. But you can make them feel included and pleased in other ways."

That's especially important as young people now are encouraged to choose their godparents - their baptismal sponsors - as their confirmation sponsors, to help them continue growing in the Faith.

While the local pastor must approve the choice of godparents - and some require a letter from the godparents' pastor to make sure they are practicing Catholics - Father Hoffman said that a pastoral approach is required, lest parents choose not to have their children baptized at all. "You want to do all you can to encourage the baptism," he said.

### Common misconceptions

Perhaps the most common misconception, according to both Sheridan and Father Hoffman, is that godparents are in some way required or expected to raise the child if the parents die. Parents should give thought to whom they would like their children's guardians to be if it becomes necessary, but they need not be the godparents, whose only job is to assist the parents in raising their godchild in the Faith.

Other misconceptions include the idea that a godparent incurs some kind of financial obligation to his or her godchild - whether it's throwing a party for a baptism, paying for a wedding or more general financial support.

Some of those expectations are cultural, Father Hoffman told OSV. For example, in some Latino communities, the godparents, or *padrinos*, are expected to take on much

more responsibility, up to and including paying for (or helping to pay for) their godchildren's weddings. "That should be part of the conversation," Father Hoffman said.

Sheridan noted that in generations past, in some communities, godparents took on the responsibility of the whole baptism ceremony and celebration - something that rarely happens now, as the Baptismal rite puts the parents front and center, asking baptism for their child and promising to raise them as Catholics.

Perhaps, he said, it made more sense when babies were baptized as soon as possible after birth, and their mothers were still confined to home.



### Prayerful decision

Lisa Hendey, writer and founder of CatholicMom.com, said she has seen and heard from and about many families who don't think clearly about what they are asking from godparents. She and her husband, Greg, have two sons.

"Many new parents choose godparents for the wrong reasons: because they are family or long-term friends or even 'reciprocate' after being chosen as godparents themselves by a couple," she said. "Baptism and the godparent relationship isn't about a 'photo opportunity' on the day the sacrament is celebrated. You are making a life-long decision; so pray carefully, discuss as a couple and perhaps even with your pastor prior to asking someone to godparent your child. Make sure when you discern the right godparents that you carefully explain to them what you hope for in this relationship so that they will understand the true nature of the commitment."

Such communication is vital, because godparents will not know what is expected if no one explains it, and godchildren will not understand the blessings their godparents provide.

"For them to be effective in their role as 'prayer warrior' for my child, it's important that my husband and I fully trust and communicate regularly with our sons' godparents," Hendey said. "We also need to regularly

remind our sons that they have godparents who love and are praying for them, inviting the boys to turn to their godparents when they have concerns, questions of faith or a blessing to celebrate."

Hendey said that when she and her husband were selecting godparents for their sons, they looked for "trusted, committed family members who we knew would pray frequently with and for our sons. The godparents we chose had solid faith lives, a commitment to service and a great love for our boys and for the Catholic Church. We knew that we could trust them (and also learn from them) in the faith-rearing of our children.

"Godparents are another set of faith formation teachers and prayer warriors for your child. You want them to love and care about your child as much as you do, and especially want them to be concerned with the spiritual life of your child."

### **Making the choice**

Christopher and Anne Marie Duquin of Williamsville, N.Y., could not agree more. The couple are the parents of Colin, 6; Ellie, 5; and Patrick, almost 4, and they do baptism preparation for their parish, St. Gregory the Great.

"One of the things we talk about quite a bit is the selection of godparents," said Christopher Duquin. "The person they choose should be the person who exemplifies what it means to live a Catholic life, who lives a life of faith. It's become a lot harder to find people like that these days." All three of the Duquin children have the same godfather, Christopher's brother Thomas. The children have different godmothers, selected from among their aunts.

People don't generally ask whether the person they are considering is the best one for the job. "They come in for the concern of whether this person is going to qualify," Christopher Duquin said.

But, the Duquins said, it's not always necessary to choose two ideal godparents; the Church requires only one actual godparent, anyway. The other can be chosen for family reasons, or even in the hope that being a godparent might help him or her return to the faith, Christopher Duquin suggested. "You run into some people where it's a moment of conversion," he said. "God's grace is going to lead them back to the Church."

People often choose family members - aunts and uncles or cousins their first children, if only because it is expected of them, the Duquins said. There is an argument for that: Those are people who most likely will have a life-

### **PRAY**

"Godparents should pray with their godchildren as frequent as possible and for their godchildren on a daily basis," said Lisa Hendey, founder of the CatholicMom.com blog.

Keep a picture of the child on your desk or on your refrigerator, somewhere you will see it, to remind you to pray, Father Francis Hoffman suggested.

### **ATTEND MASS TOGETHER**

"If the godparents live in near proximity to the child, attending Mass together frequently is a wonderful gift for both parties," Hendey said.

"Additionally, godparents should help in the preparation for and celebration of future sacraments, aiding the child with his or her readiness to receive the fullness of grace in those sacraments.

### **REACH OUT ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS**

"I love to keep in touch with them (my godchildren) throughout the year, remembering major events like their birthdays and feast days, but also sharing with them the seasons of the liturgical calendar," Hendey said. "One special tradition I have with my godchildren is sending them an Advent calendar each year."

Some parishes have programs to foster such communication, by, for example, reminding godparents to send letters, Sheridan said.

## **GODPARENTING TIPS**

*What can godparents do to foster faith-filled relationships with their godchildren?*

*Here are some suggestions:*

### **NOURISH YOUR OWN SPIRITUAL LIFE**

"I must continually work at nurturing my own faith life, so that I can be a trustworthy role-model and faith teacher for the children," Hendey said.

If possible, do something of a spiritual nature every year with your godchild. Make a pilgrimage to a shrine, or participate in eucharistic adoration, Father Hoffman said.

Remember that your role is not just to provide an example for the child, but also to support the parents. "Anyone who has been a parent knows how difficult that role can be," Sheridan wrote in *The Gift of Godparents*. "Parents - if they are to be good, patient, loving, teaching ones - need all the support that godparents can offer.

"Be for this child and his or her parents someone special, someone who cares enough to be part of an important ritual of welcome into the Faith, someone whose presence means more than presents, someone this child's - your godchild's - parents can trust, can turn to, can be honest with, can count on no matter what else is going on in the world."

long connection to their godchildren. Those are also the people who will be most likely to be involved in making decisions for the children should their parents not be able to care for them. "When something happens, you gravitate to the family," Anne Marie Duquin said.

But the argument can work the other way as well: if the child's relatives will maintain lifelong connections anyway, and serve as an example of how to live as a faithful Catholic, why not choose someone from outside the family, who can provide another example, strengthening the circle of faith around the child? Christopher Duquin said it works well when parents choose someone in the parish, someone the family sees every week at Mass, especially if they live far away from the rest of their family members.

And if people do grow apart over the years, the parents - who are, after all, their children's first teachers - can work to surround their families with examples of good Catholic faith lives. In the Duquin's case, the children's Uncle Thomas has been an ideal godparent, not only attending Mass, but making a point to do so with his godchildren and their parents. He moved closer to the family and spends time not only with the parents, but with the children. "He comes over to spend time with them so they get to know him," Christopher Duquin said. "He prays with us, and he does prayers before bed with the children."

"He's the perfect godfather," Anne Marie Duquin said of her brother-in-law, a doctor who isn't married and doesn't have children of his own.

### No guarantees

One encouraging trend Father Hoffman has seen is that young Catholic parents who have participated in faith-based groups like FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) tend to choose godparents from their peers who are similarly committed to the Faith.

Even so, there are no guarantees that the people who seem like the best choices at the moment will be around for the godchild's entire faith journey. "Sometimes life is rich, and difficulties come up," he said. Sheridan, the father of five grown children, has seen that happen in his own family.

"We've had the gamut with the godparents' relationships with our kids," he said. The family lost track of their oldest daughter's godparents, who divorced and drifted away. Other sets of godparents maintained contact, he said. "They have, through the years, provided a presence for our children," he said.

That's what Hendey wants for her boys, and she's doing everything she can to foster that. "I want my sons to be able to fully rely upon their godparents for spiritual support," she said. "This means that I need to nurture that relationship from a very early age, keeping the godparents up to date on the life of my child. Frequent time together or letters and photos if they live far away help the godparents to be a part of the milestones in my child's life but also - and perhaps more importantly - the joys and challenges he faces on a daily basis."

*Michelle Martin writes from Illinois.*

#### ***Godparents participate in the lives of their godchildren in diverse ways around the world.***

**Italy:** Called *comare* and *compare*, godparents are treated with the highest respect. In many cases, the best man and maid of honor at a couple's wedding automatically become the godparents of the firstborn child.

**Mexico:** Once a person takes on the role of godparent, he or she assumes not only the responsibility of helping out with the religious upbringing of the child, but plays an important role in the life of the child.

Godparents are known as *compadres* and *comadres*, signifying that they share the role in raising their godchild with his or her parents. During the baptismal celebration, a godfather often throws coins into the air - called *el bolo* - signifying prosperity for the newly baptized baby.

**Poland:** A common Polish tradition is for the godparents to provide clothing for their godchild to wear during the baptism. This sometimes can extend further to purchasing clothing for first Communion or even a wedding dress.

**Philippines:** A child may have several sets of godparents, called *ninang* and *ninongs*. Children visit their godparents on Christmas Day to pay their respects, often receiving gifts in return.