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The Great Joy of Being a Godparent

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For me, being a godparent is a great blessing and also a great responsibility. It is a blessing because it has given me the opportunity to have spiritual children and to become part of my godchildren's families. It is a responsibility because of the promises I made. At the baptism ceremonies of my godchildren, I promised God to help their parents bring them up as faithful Catholics. I also promised their parents I would do so when they asked me to be a godmother.

Being a godparent to someone is a lifelong commitment that begins at the godchild's baptism. During the baptism ceremony, the priest or deacon asks the godparents: "Are you ready to help the parents of this child in their duty as Christian parents?" He later addresses the parents and godparents, reminding them of the responsibility they are assuming: "On your part, you must make it your constant care to bring him/her up in the practice of the faith. See that the divine life which God gives him/her is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in his/her heart." (Rite of Baptism for Children)

In order to become a godmother or godfather, a person must be a baptized member of the Catholic Church, sixteen years old or older, having been confirmed, and having received Holy Communion. The godparent must also "have the aptitude and intention of fulfilling this function" and "lead a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on." (Canon Law 874) The godparent's role is to help "the baptized person to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations inherent in it." (Canon Law 872)

I have four godchildren. My first godchild, my cousin's son, is now nineteen years old. I had the joy of seeing him receive his first Holy Communion, and of becoming his sponsor for confirmation. I have two more godsons, ages six and three, and a two year old goddaughter. These godchildren are the children of good friends, who are great examples of Catholic spouses and parents. All of my godchildren are very special to me, and I am committed to praying for them every day, and encouraging them in their faith.

Based on my experience, I think that godparents can best fulfill their duties by prayer, by good example, and by being a good friend to their godchildren's families. Prayer is an important responsibility for a godparent. They need to remember to pray for their godchildren and their families every day. They can also offer up Masses for them, and ask for the intercession of their patron saints. I think it is also important to pray *with* your godchildren when you have the opportunity. Whenever I visit my two younger godsons, who live in another state, I always go to Mass with their families. I also go to Mass on some Sundays throughout the year with my goddaughter's family, who live nearby. In order to encourage one's godchildren to live as faithful Catholics, godparents must continue to be practicing Catholics themselves and strive to lead virtuous lives, which will enable them to be good examples to their godchildren.

It is also necessary to have a real relationship with one's godchildren and their parents. It is not enough to send cards for holidays; godparents need to keep in touch with their godchildren's parents, and if possible, spend time with their godchildren and their families.

As their godchildren grow older, godparents can teach them about Catholicism in informal ways, such as telling them the story of a saint, or explaining the significance of a holy day in the liturgical year. Godparents can offer guidance in living as Catholics as their godchildren become adults and teenagers.

Godparents can also support their godchildren's parents in their vocation of Catholic marriage and parenthood, and encourage their godchildren's sisters and brothers in their faith as well. In the Rite of Baptism for Children, it is written that "...godparents are to be present in order to represent both the expanded spiritual family of the one to be baptized, and the role of the Church as a mother." (8) I have found that becoming a godparent does make you part of your godchildren's spiritual family. My cousin and I have developed a family relationship based on our faith since I became her son's godmother and I usually spend holidays with her family. (We have another connection: my mother was her godmother, and her parents are my godparents.)

My friends who are the parents of my godchildren have welcomed me as part of their families. I have been invited to my godchildren's family birthday parties, and have gotten to know their sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. I had the wonderful experience this May of attending a Mass in which my goddaughter's older sister received her first Holy Communion, and going to her family party. I was happy to be with the family on this special day and be a witness to my goddaughter of the importance of receiving Jesus in the Eucharist. Just as I have tried to support my cousin and friends in their faith, they have supported me in my life of faith through their prayers and encouragement, which also helps me in my role as a godmother.

The Catechism refers to the Church as "the family of God." Being a godparent is one way Catholics can experience being part of this great family.

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By Louise Merrie

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