

Preparing to be a Godparent

It is a known practice in the Orthodox Church that every person, child or adult, should have a godparent (sponsor) at the time that they enter into the faith through Holy Baptism and Chrismation. To be a godparent is at the same time a great honour and a tremendous responsibility. God asks each godparent to assist in leading souls along the narrow path which leads to the Kingdom of Heaven. For this reason, the role of the godparent is not to be minimised or trivialised. It is in fact a role that is holy and needs to be taken seriously.

The task of steering a child along the narrow path, and bringing them up according to the law of God is perhaps the greatest of all things in life. St. Theophan the Recluse says that there is no holier act. What better thing can we offer our children than to lead them to our Lord and teach them to imitate Him in their life.

The challenge of raising up a child in the teachings of God is perhaps far greater today than ever before. We are contending against many negative influences that carry with them great appeal. Due to the fallen state that we are in, and the unhealed passions that remain within us, the things that are most harmful are the things that are most enticing. With the many obstacles and temptations, the parents along with the godparents, must help the precious souls entrusted to them through the course of life.

While it is an honour to be asked to be a godparent, one should make sure that the potential sponsor will be committed to the responsibility. The role must be honoured and not taken lightly. Every godparent will be accountable to God as to whether or not he or she has fulfilled their duties. Prospective godparents must know their faith, or at least be in the process of learning their faith and be committed to a life in Christ. One problem today is that people who are called upon to be godparents do not know their faith and are not regular participants in the life of the Church. This is also true for some parents. Consequently a child who is baptized may never know anything about Jesus Christ and the Church.

In the early Church heavy emphasis was placed on the educating of the faithful and those who desired to come into the Christian faith. As Christianity spread in a pagan world, the need to teach individuals before their baptisms became crucial. The systematic instruction, which was a preparatory stage for baptism was and is called "catechism."

During catechism one learned the basic elements of the Christian faith and moral life. We see the importance of these teachings and the teachings themselves in the 4th Prebaptismal Catechesis of St. Cyril of Jerusalem. The candidate had to be introduced by one of the faithful, called *anadochos*, (the godparent to be) and be examined by the "doctors" (the Bishops) who were in charge of the catechumens, to ensure that clear spiritual motives led him to enter the Church. Other than in cases of urgency, baptism was not something that was rushed. Not only did the candidate need to understand the teachings of Christ and the Church, but he also had to be living by them.

The *anadochos* which means one who receives (the person out of the font), was responsible for the candidate and played a very important role during the process of his Catechesis and even after the candidate had been baptized. This obviously took place primarily with adult candidates or young people. However, as the faith spread and as entire families were coming into the Body of Christ, infant baptism became more the norm rather than the exception. With the emergence and common practice of infant baptism, the *anadochos* was called upon to be the spokesperson for the infant at their baptism.

The godparent, therefore, is the representative of the infant who is being admitted into the Church of Christ. He speaks for the infant and vows that he will do all he can to assure that the child will be a true soldier of Christ and a devoted member of His Church. He accepts the sacred responsibility of guiding the child into the understanding and practice of the teachings of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. The godparent makes a public

profession of the Nicene Creed during the Baptism. Likewise, his renunciation of the devil is made on behalf of the candidate for Baptism. The godparent implicitly pledges himself to aid his godchild in whatever necessities that may arise, but most especially in the giving of a good Orthodox Christian example to the Godchild.

How should one go about choosing a Godparent?

1. Parents must exercise the greatest care in the selection of godparents for their children. Certainly they will never select atheists or agnostics, or persons who are lukewarm toward the Church. This would obviously defeat the purpose of having a godparent in terms of their role.
2. The Godparent must bring godliness and holiness to the child. Godparents are parents representing God or parents on God's behalf.
3. Parents should not choose godparents because they feel obligated, or because they think that if they don't ask a certain person or couple that they will be offended. Many, if not most situations, where people who have chosen someone to be a godparent out of guilt or obligation, end up being disastrous.
4. The faith of the godparent and their involvement within the sacramental life of the Church is crucial. The person who confesses Jesus Christ as His Lord cannot ignore and violate in word and deed this faith. How can he promise God that he will make certain that the child will grow to be a true follower of Christ, when he himself lives a life of unbelief and disobedience?
5. It goes without saying that the godparent must be an Orthodox person. How could someone who is not Orthodox provide the proper religious education, example and inspiration to his godchild? It should also be noted that an Orthodox Christian who has not had his or her marriage blessed in the Orthodox Church is excluded from exercising the privilege of serving as a godparent, because they are not considered to be in good standing with the Church.
6. The Church also cautions us to select a person who has reached the age of reason and moral responsibility (at least 12 years of age). It is also good to look for godparents outside of the family. In this way, the family grows and special bonds are created.

What are some other things that are expected of the Godparent?

1. It is a gross misunderstanding to think that the only duty of the godparent is to buy a new outfit and a cross for the infant. Certainly this is a beautiful tradition, but the emphasis must not be on the material but rather the spiritual. Many times people are so concerned with the clothing, the cross, the *martyrika*, (witness pins) and the luncheon afterwards, that they forget the magnitude and the awesomeness of the great mystery and the great gift of Holy Baptism. Both the parents and the godparents should be careful not to fall into this trap, but instead to keep their minds focused on the most important aspect and that is the baptism itself.
2. The godparent should make a faithful commitment to join the struggle with the parents, guided by the Church, to bring the infant carefully and prayerfully along the difficult road to Heaven.
3. After the baptismal service is finished, the godparent delivers the child into the arms of the mother in front of the congregation. As she receives the child, now baptised, sealed and illuminated, she kisses the hand of the godparent as a token of the spiritual relationship that is established between the godparent and the family. This is a Christian expression of gratitude and respect.

4. If the godparent lives in the same city, it is customary for the godparent to bring the infant (or accompany the newly illumined adult) to Holy Communion with the lit baptismal candle for the next three Sundays. After three Sunday's the candle is no longer used, but it is good for the godparent to take the child to communion each week.

5. A faithful godparent will make the effort to maintain close contact with their godchild, building up their relationship. The main focus, however, is the progress of the child in the knowledge and practice of the Christian life. He should at all times model a Christ-like example. For this reason it is important that the godparent stay on top of their own spiritual life. The godparent should pray, fast, read from Holy Scripture, and participate in the sacramental life of the Church. As they grow and mature in the faith, they will in turn be able to offer more and more to their godchild who has been entrusted to them. To neglect their own spiritual life is ultimately to neglect the spiritual life of their godchild.

6. Godparents are encouraged to call to remembrance the sacred and joyous moment of Baptism, which may be done by participating in "Godparents' Sunday", a National Observance by the Greek Orthodox Church in America.

7. Appropriate gift-giving honoring the occasion of the godchild's nameday, birthday or baptism day, could include such things as icons, a Bible, and religious books that will be helpful in building up the spiritual life of the child. These are the most important, but it is not wrong to give other things as well that the child would enjoy and make use of.

8. Most of all, the greatest duty of the godparent is to pray fervently for their godchild that God will always watch over them and guide them throughout his/her life. The Akathist to the Mother of God the Nurturer of Children could be read by the godparent and they could simply replace the word "child" with "godchild".

The role and responsibility of the Godparent can be summed up in the Divine Commandment that is read from the Holy Gospel at the service of Baptism. "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." It is truly an honor to be called upon to be a godparent. May we all live a life close to the Church, seeking help from Christ, that we may fulfill our sacred duty as godparents in a way pleasing to God.

From the newsletter *Agape* published by St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Eugene, Oregon. Posted on July 4, 2006 with the kind permission of Fr. Timothy Pavlatos.