

# GODPARENTS

## A Spiritual Lifeline

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*When I think back on my godparents, I remember warm hugs, smiles, special gifts and treats, and a lot of love. I don't recall a lot of talk about church, the Catholic faith, and formal religion. I do recall my godparents sharing their faith in their own simple way. Because of them, I've kept the faith and grown in it. I knew I was loved.*

*My godparents were close relatives. Our tight-knit family held common values – values that supported solid Christian relationships and permanent marriages. At that time, society did what our own bishops urge: “Put children and families first.”*



### NEED FOR GODPARENTS

Now things are different. Extended families are frequently separated by distance, lifestyle, and values. The nuclear family finds itself isolated. Frequently, one parent rears the children alone.

That's why I am so convinced we need to take another look at godparents and godparenting. Godparents can be an important part of every family, partners with the parents. Hispanics have a beautiful word for parents and godparents—*compadres*. This means they are co-parents. The godparents share the parents' love and responsibility for the child.

In the rite of baptism, the Church recognizes the importance and the role of godparents. The priest,

speaking on behalf of the community, asks the godparents to affirm their commitment to help bring the child up in the Catholic faith. They answer that they are ready—and they should be.

However, sometimes godparents are not ready. In an interview for my book *Godparents*, a woman said she had never felt free to intervene in the lives of her godchildren. She felt she was not sufficiently prepared by the Church or permitted by the parents to do so. She said she suffered a lot of godparent guilt because of what she considered a failure to fulfill her promises. She saw the godchildren growing up without adequate instruction in their faith.

Today, she said, she will not accept an offer to be a godparent unless she has a clear agreement with the parents that she is to be an “active godparent”. This is a healthy attitude for a prospective godparent. Although the Church presumes such an agreement, experience shows that may not be best for the child. The agreement between parents and godparents should be an explicit part of the baptismal preparation program. Then parents and godparents who are serious about their responsibilities can more easily build a healthy and holy relationship for the sake of the child.

Many couples come to marriage—and ultimately bring their children to the baptismal font—without the benefit of a strong faith. For these couples, the parish baptismal preparation program and the baptism itself can be a loving invitation to grow with the rest of the community.

Preparation of the parents for the baptism of their children should, when possible, involve the baby’s godparents. The godparents are being asked to promise God and the community that they will help the parents rear this baby as a Catholic. The parents and godparents can begin together to think about their joint duties during preparation. They can learn to be comfortable when speaking about religion. They can begin to discuss their own faith and their expectations of one another. And they have a chance to discover what they all want for that precious child about to be baptized.

Even if the godparents live far away, they can be involved by phone and mail. Parents can share what they have learned in preparation. Parents and godparents deserve the opportunity to think seriously about what the Church is demanding of them—exemplary lives and active formation of the new Christian.

In order to meet those demands, Catholic parents and godparents must develop four qualities: deep personal faith; family prayer and fellowship; faithfulness to the Church; and honest open communication.

## **FAITH**

Parents and godparents should have a deep personal faith centered in the Eucharist. Parents want what is best for their new baby. Nothing is better for the child than a home in which God is first, a home in which faith and love strengthen family members for their life in a world so often alien to love, justice, and peace.

Sadly, too many Catholics have forgotten the meaning and the power of the Eucharist. At Mass, we are actually present at the Last Supper; we are on Calvary as Jesus dies for us, and we are with Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. That is the mystery of the Mass. It is not just a reminder of what happened so long ago; it is the reality of Jesus’ sacrifice extended by grace throughout time. The act of Redemption is present to us personally. We do not Inherit Redemption from previous generations.

Regular and faithful attendance at Mass leads to awareness of God’s presence in life and an openness to God’s gifts and the promptings of the Spirit. People in communion with God develop a certain wisdom that enables them to see the light at the end of every tunnel—and there are many tunnels in rearing children.

In selecting godparents, Catholic parents want someone who will be serious about their children’s faith and salvation. They seek Catholics who love God, live their faith, and embrace the Eucharist with fervor.

## **PRAYER AND FELLOWSHIP**

Father Peyton said it so well: “The family that prays together stays together.” Married couples who started out their relationship with an active faith usually find it easier to pray and discuss spiritual matters with each other. As a deacon, I’ve baptized children from such families. The baptisms usually are deeply moving and a real encounter with God for everyone.

There are good materials available for developing the habit of family prayer. A wonderful thing about lay spirituality is its embrace of everything in the world. So family prayer works best when it is part

of the flow and nuances of life. Family prayer can be simple and natural. It should never be forced.

One young mother truly wanted her children to be good Catholics. She set about teaching them to pray—five decades of the rosary every day. The children ranged from two to ten years of age. After a few days the children became bored. Prayer was dull. They began to misbehave and resent their mother for forcing them into something they didn't understand or want to do.

Another family does it differently. Family prayer consists mainly of Mass on Sunday and holy days and of grace before meals. The parents also pray with the children for special needs in the family, and they do so rather casually. As the kids are about to pop out the door to meet the school bus, the mother hugs the children and says something like, "Oh, and let's pray for Billy's test today. Jesus, please help Billy to be calm and to do well on his test." That's it. Prayer is not forced. It's as normal as a mother's hug, as intimate as daily need.

That is real worship—to accept God on God's terms. Those terms are that God loves us every minute of every day and is with us in all things.

Godparents can follow the parents' lead. On birthdays and the anniversary of the child's baptism, at ball games and music recitals, godparents and parents can help children see God's presence through their own presence, God's love through their own love. Godparents can be as comfortable in praying with children as they are in hugging them. After all, for a child, prayer is an invitation to be hugged by God.

Christian fellowship is living together in the joy of faith. Fellowship in the family, life prayer, should be normal, natural, easy. It is not so much organized as it is part of the order of life. If the family is praying together, there will be fellowship—joy in faith. Godparents can be part of that fellowship (although their presence should never detract from the parents' roles).

When the couple discovers they are expecting, that is the moment to pray in joyful gratitude to God

and to ask God's protection of the pregnancy, the birth and health of the baby, and the marriage. It is also the time to begin thinking about godparents and asking God to help in the selection of the right godparents.

Here is a possible prayer for such an occasion:

*Dear Jesus, thank you for this new life! We are so excited about our baby. We want to be good parents and bring this child up as a good Christian. Good Jesus, please protect us all through this pregnancy; give us a healthy baby and a safe birth. And, Jesus, help us find the right godparents for our child, godparents who will be serious about their responsibility to help us in rearing this child. Thank you, Lord!*

As soon as the godparents agree to help in rearing the child as a Catholic, parents and godparents can firmly establish the tone of their relationship by praying together. They might wish to use this simple prayer:

*Dear Lord, we rejoice in this new life. Help us as parents and godparents to be faithful to you, to be committed Christians who will love this child and give him (her) the best example possible. Bless our relationship with love. Unite us in faith, and help us learn to put you first in all concerns. Help us always, Jesus, to seek your wisdom and your will through prayer.*

### **FAITHFULNESS TO THE CHURCH**

Another important quality of good parents and godparents is staunch fidelity to the Church and its teachings. Some Catholics apparently don't know what it means to be Catholic. We hear all kinds of horror tales about Catholics who do not know that God is one that there are three Persons in that one God. We hear about Catholics who do not understand that the Eucharist is the Real Presence. There are many Catholics who participate in immoral lifestyles without a thought to what God has said about who we are as human beings.

In such a climate, Pope John Paul II's teaching on moral theology, *The Splendor of Truth*, is a godsend. Pope John Paul calls us first of all into a

personal relationship with Jesus. He asks us to revisit the meaning of being created in God's image and reminds us of the natural ability to discern good from evil. He urges us to form consciences in keeping with God's revelation through Scripture and Jesus. He reminds us that the Church teaches with the authority of Christ.

Pope John Paul defines true human freedom as being free from sin and at peace with God. An important thing to remember about God is that God wants what is best for us. The Ten Commandments, for example, are not divine oppression of the human spirit. The Ten Commandments and the teachings of the Church help Catholics learn discipline and establish order in their lives. That's holiness—through God's grace to control our passions, appetites, and emotions, and to do good and achieve justice.

#### **HONEST AND OPEN COMMUNICATION**

The initial agreement between parents and godparents will wither and die if it is not nourished by prayer and good communication. Relationships don't just happen. Parents must remind godparents that they want their help in directing their child's spiritual growth. Parents deserve to know when the godparent feels uneasy or concerned. Both parties must give one another permission to bring up even very sensitive matters. This kind of honesty, rooted in mutual faith, prayer, and charity, will help the godfamily avoid serious pitfalls.

The United States Bishops pastoral message to families, "Follow the Way of Love," is a magnificent document to guide families in developing a strong Christian lifestyle. It is perhaps the most practical and readable document the bishops have ever produced. I recommend it to parents, godparents, and parishes.

There is so much more to be said about godparents and godparenting. In my book *Godparents*, I provide reflection questions for parents and godparents to help them develop a strong faith relationship. The book also treats the relationship between godparents and their godchildren at different stages in their development. However, the best resource for godparenting should be the local Catholic parish, where baptismal preparation and baptism take place.

Let's take godparents seriously. A tremendous resource and support for both parents and children, godparents can provide the missing element for the extended family. With their help, the family can be a strong, moral, and evangelistic influence in society. ♦

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