

Preparing to Serve as a Godparent

By Rev. William S. Chiganos

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.

It is an honor because God is using you to lead a soul into the sphere of redemption. Christ tells us: "Whosoever believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk. 16:16). Through Baptism we receive a full forgiveness of all sin, whether original or actual; we "put on Christ," becoming members of His Body, the Church. The Godparent, along with the parents and guided by the Church, should assist the newly baptized child through the walk of life. Just as natural parents have serious obligations for the care and nurture of their child, so Godparents have important duties in regard to their Godchild, in particular to see to it that the child receives a Christian upbringing.

Before one says "Yes," to assuming the role of Godparent, he or she should make certain that the commitment to the baptized child will be honored. Every Godparent becomes accountable to God as to whether or not he has discharged his duties to the child which he has baptized. Mindful of the sacred task of the Godparent, this information has been parent to provide every Orthodox Christian parent helpful hints in selecting the right person for the new infant and to make the intended Godparent acutely aware of his or her task.

When it all began

The early Church faced the problem that the majority of those who wanted to become her members came from pagan families and therefore lacked even an elementary Christian education and knowledge of the new faith. To remedy this, the Church undertook the task of educating them before their baptism. The systematic instruction, which was a preparatory stage for baptism was called "catechism." During catechism one learned the simple elements of the Christian faith and morals and later in the fourth century one was also given an education of the more profound Christian mysteries, as is made clear in the 4th Prebaptismal Catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem. The candidate had to be introduced by one of the faithful, called "anadochos," and be examined by the "doctors" who were in charge of the catechumens, to ensure that clear spiritual motives led him to enter the Church. The "anadochos" which means one who receives, 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. Eventually, infant baptism become the norm rather than the exception in the Church and the "anadochos" or Godparent was called upon to be the spokesperson for the infant.

The Role of The Godparent During Baptism

The Godparent 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. Every Godparent should try to have the Creed committed to memory prior to the Baptism. 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 good Orthodox Christian example to the Godchild.

Choosing the Godparent

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. The Godparent must bring godliness and holiness to the child. Godparents are parents representing God or parents on God's behalf. Jesus loved to have children come to Him. The Gospels tell of one such incident: "Some people brought their babies to have Jesus place His hands on them. The disciples saw them and scolded them for doing so. Jesus called the Children to Him and said, 'Let the children come to me! Do not forbid them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these'" (Matthew 19:13-14).

The faith of the Godparent is significant. 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 true follower of Christ, when he himself lives a life of unbelief and disobedience!

It goes without saying that **the Godparent cannot be a non-Orthodox person**. How could someone who is not Orthodox provide the proper Orthodox religious education, example and inspiration to his Godchild? It is the Orthodox faith and tradition that the God-parents will pass on, and this is why the God-parent must be of the same faith. 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).

After The Baptism

Your task as Godparent is about to begin. At the close of the service the sponsor solemnly delivers the child into the arms of the mother in front of the congregation. As she receives her child, now baptized, sealed, and illuminated, she kisses the hand of the Godparent as a sign of respect and as a token of the spiritual relationship that is now established between the Godparent and the newly baptized child's family. This is a Christian expression of gratitude and respect.

The Church encourages the Godparent to bring the child regularly for Holy Communion, following the Baptism. The Godparent should also prepare to receive Holy Communion. He will hold each time, the lighted baptismal candle which he carries with him at the conclusion of the Baptismal service.

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.

Godparents are encouraged to call the remembrance the sacred and joyous moment of Baptism. This may be done by remembering the Godchild on the date of Baptism along with birthday anniversaries, Christmas, etc. Significant gift-giving honoring these special occasions could include such objects as icons, medallions, a Bible, and religious books which will be helpful in building up the spiritual life of the child. By now you have to come to realize that the most important quality for the Godparent is to live a Christ-filled life and that he demonstrate his faith as a light-bearer, devoted to receiving salvation for himself and his Godchild. The Godparent is called upon to accept the Divine Commandment 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."

What Must I Consider?

If you hope to be a Godparent some day, it would be well to consider carefully the chief conditions which the Church prescribes in the way of preparation:

- 1) When you are approached and asked to baptize a child, do not answer immediately. Reflect and ask yourself if you could be true to the Baptismal vow.
- 2) The Godparent must be an Orthodox Christian, of good moral character, regular and faithful in attendance at Liturgy and the reception of the Sacraments, and with a sound knowledge of the basic teachings of the Orthodox Church.
- 3) Study the Creed and be prepared to recite it when the Priest calls upon you. The custom of having the Chanter recite it is incorrect. Knowledge of the Creed and familiarity with it constitutes the basic prerequisite for becoming a Godparent.

4) A Godparent should be over the age of 12. There must be at least a fair possibility that the Godparent will live long enough to carry out the obligations assumed.

5) The Church usually permits only one Godparent. Consult with your Priest in advance of the day of the Baptism so that you will be prepared to answer correctly the questions asked during the Service of the Catechumens, the first part of the Sacrament of Baptism.

Frequently Asked Questions on Baptism

Why do we get baptised?

We were commanded to be baptised by Jesus himself. He himself, though sinless, was baptized in the Jordan River. After His resurrection he commanded his Apostles saying, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mat. 28:19)

During Holy Baptism a death and resurrection take place. In the Orthodox Church we totally immerse, because such total immersion symbolizes death. What death? The death of the "old, sinful man". After Baptism we are freed from the dominion of sin, even though after Baptism we retain an inclination and tendency toward evil. This inclination and tendency remain so that the Christian may struggle to achieve his rebirth. From the Holy Font, and with the triple immersion in the blessed water, those that are baptized emerge reborn into a new life, resurrected into the life in Christ, children of God, citizens and members of God's Kingdom. The Apostle Paul said, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin". (Romans 6:3-6)

The actual service of Baptism begins with the rejection of Satan and the acceptance of Christ. Before being baptized, the person- or his sponsors or godparents for him- officially proclaims the symbol of Christian faith, the Creed. The baptismal water is then prayed over and blessed as the sign of the goodness of God's creation. The person to be baptised is also prayed over and blessed with sanctified oil as the sign that his creation by God is holy and good. And then, after the solemn proclamation of "Alleluia" (God be praised), the person is immersed three times in water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The baptized person is then clothed with the "garments of salvation",

symbolized by the white baptismal robe. The words of the Apostle Paul are then chanted as the newly-baptized is led in procession around the baptismal font three times as the symbol of his procession to the Kingdom of God and his entrance into eternal life: "For as many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, Alleluia." (Galatians 3:27)

Baptism is a very joyous occasion, because with Baptism we become members of the Church, a Church that will lead us to our salvation and bring us peace and joy.

Can a child be baptised in more than one denomination?

"Some sacraments of the Church may be received only once, others may be received often; still others are not received by everyone in the Church. Baptism belongs to the first category. Like all the sacraments, baptism is a 'mystery' of God's grace working within the Church and in the life of an individual Christian. The important point when looking at baptism is not 'Can I be baptised more than once?', but, 'is the Baptism I have undergone (or will undergo) a 'real' (or 'valid') baptism?' The Orthodox Church holds to the belief that we can be baptised only once. You can only be made a member of the Church once; the Church is one Church there are not many Churches!

The Holy Orthodox Church does not arbitrarily decide on whether a baptism is 'true' or not. The form and action of baptism is fundamental to its nature. We seek to be true to the revelation of God and to the Holy Tradition of our Church. It is this that makes us Orthodox!

Three main criteria determine the 'acceptability' of a baptism: 1. the use of water; 2. baptism in the name of the Trinity; and 3. a 'sacramental' understanding of the nature of baptism. The latter one refers to an understanding and a belief that baptism is primarily an act of God's grace at work in the life of a person. Baptism is not a simple action – a mere 'symbol', nor is it only a response of the faith of a believer. Baptism is truly a mystery through which God washes away sin creating a 'new' creature in Christ and making the new illumined person a member of Christ's body, His Church.

An Orthodox Christian cannot be baptised again. He or she is already a member of the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church' of God. What then do we with this mystery of Grace after we have received it in baptism, well, that is another question that relates to our journey of faith that is the Christian life".

If a person gets baptised in a non canonical Church does that person have to get re-baptised again to get married or be a God-parent in the Ceremony?

This depends on which “Church” the person was “baptised” in. There are some non- canonical groups in Canada at the moment in which the “sacraments” performed are not recognised by any other canonical Orthodox Church in the world. Consequently, all those “baptised” by these groups are deemed as never having been properly baptised and so need to have their “baptism” canonically corrected through the Sacrament of Chrismation in a canonical Church before they can get married or participate as God-parents in other Baptisms or even as Koumbaroi in Orthodox Weddings..

Historically, however, there have been some instances where, although baptisms in these Churches during these years may have been non canonical, the Church hierarchy – after resolving and healing the schism and for pastoral reasons – decided to “canonise” these baptisms through the Sacrament of Chrismation. If there are any concerns or questions about such matters, please speak with your Parish Priest for clarification.

Are we allowed to change godparents after the sacrament of Baptism?

In Greek, the godparent is called anadochos which describes the action of the godparent receiving the newly illumined Christian out of the baptismal waters and into their arms. There is only one person who takes this role and, from that moment onwards, this godparent becomes accountable before God as to how they fulfil their role as a spiritual parent. It is for this reason that the selection of the godparent must be according to spiritual criteria rather than for just social reasons or convenience.

Although the godparent cannot be changed after Baptism, it is hoped that other people in the life of the child – besides the parents and godparents – will also become good spiritual examples and guides in the faith.

Why does the priest stand with the godparent and the child at the front of the Church during the first part of the Baptismal service?

“The service of Baptism is divided into two main parts. The first, the ‘Prayers at the Making of a Catechumen’ is a preparation service to begin the candidate on the path of ‘enlightenment’ that ultimately leads to baptism and the beginning of a ‘new life in Christ’. A ‘Catechumen’ is someone undergoing ‘instruction’ in the faith. In the ancient Church the ‘Catechumenate’ was divided into a number of levels, each one considered a higher state of enlightenment than the one before it.

The structure of the building of an Orthodox Church is divided into a number of

areas beginning at the doors that provide entry from the outside (the 'world'). Upon entering one turns one's back to the world and faces the Altar area, which represents the very presence of God and heaven itself. The symbolism here is that as we move closer to the Altar (the symbol of the presence of God), we place ourselves further from the world (the realm of Satan and the darkness of sin).

It is a strong and fitting symbol for the one undergoing entry into the 'Catechumenate' to stand just inside the main body of the Church away from the world, but still far from the 'Kingdom of Heaven'.

The Catechumen begins a journey of faith that (hopefully) will lead to salvation and living in the presence of God. The journey in and with Christ and aided by the spiritual guidance of the godparent is symbolised by the 'Prayers at the Making of a Catechumen' being said near the doors of the Church, beginning the Christian journey that has God as its purpose and focus."

Can I have two sponsors (godparents) for my child?

It depends on their faith and relationship. For example, a married couple can certainly share the duties, or two persons of the same Orthodox Christian faith.. Historically, only one Orthodox godparent per neophyte (the person being baptised) has been the tradition. Baptism is a rite of passage into the Church which is the family of Christ. The sponsor is the person who introduces one to the Church and promises to ensure one's spiritual upbringing. Many people may help in that upbringing, but he is the one who put himself forward as the one to take full responsibility. Similarly, only one person may sponsor another to migrate to Australia. One person takes responsibility. This does not exclude others from participating in the child's life, but usually only one person or couple is the sponsor.

Can I have two names for my child?

Your child may have as many names as you desire, but usually the Baptismal name used should be the one by which you will call your child by name, and by which your child will be known by others. Your child has only one identity. The child's name is part of its identity, even if you baptise with two, the child will usually only use one name. The other name will be lost. Baptism is also about receiving one's identity in the body of the Church, that is, among the people who make up the Church. Two or more names is a false notion and is not permitted in baptism. On the birth certificate you can put as many names as you like, but nothing will be different. The child will still only have one name. So it is best to be truthful to the child and to everyone else who has expectations in relation to the child's name.

Requirements of the God-Parents or Sponsors

- The Sponsor (koumbaros/koumbara – Godmother/Godfather) must be an Orthodox Christian and must be a member in good standing of the Greek Orthodox Church. If the sponsor is married, their marriage must have been blessed in the Orthodox Church. They should provide a copy of both their Baptismal Certificate as well as their Ecclesiastical Marriage Certificate in order to certify that these Ceremonies have been blessed in the Orthodox Church.
- If the sponsor has been married or baptized outside the Orthodox Church or with an Orthodox Church not in Spiritual Communion with our Holy Metropolis, he/she is unfortunately not eligible to serve as a sponsor.
- If the Orthodox Sponsor (koumbaros/koumbara-godfather/godmother) has been divorced, they must provide an Orthodox Ecclesiastical Divorce Certificate to serve as a sponsor. If they do not have this Document, please speak consult with the Parish Priest to have this issued.
- If you wish any non-Orthodox Christian parties to participate in the Ceremony in any manner as Honourary God-Parents, please speak with me about this in advance so that I may explain their role in the Ceremony.
- The Orthodox Sponsor should be prepared to recite the Nicene Creed in either English or Greek during the Ceremony. They may read it from a text if they have not memorized it. See the separate Attachment for the text.
- After the Baptism, the Orthodox Sponsor should be prepared to bring their God-Child to Church for 3 consecutive Sundays (if possible), so that the newly-baptized Child may receive Holy Communion.

The Godparent (Orthodox Sponsor) Provides the following Items:

- Gold Cross for child
- 1 Large candle (Decorated Lambada)
- 1 medium sized bottle of Olive Oil (NOT Vegetable or Canola Oil)
- 2 small white candles (you can purchase them from the Church)
- 1 bar of soap
- 2 medium sized white hand towels
- 1 large white bath towel
- 1 twin white bed sheet (the Ladopano)
- 1 new Baptismal Outfit that is traditionally white
- White undergarments and T-shirt
- 1 cap (the Lado-kapelo) to soak up the Oil and 1 White Hat or Bonnet
- 1 pair of shoes (usually white)
- Martyriatika (little crosses with a pin and ribbon) for the guests attending.

THANK OFFERINGS

Any Thank Offerings (honoraria) for the Priest, Chanter and Neokoros (Assistant) is left to the discretion of the Godparents and/or the Parents. They should be discreetly offered, if desired, after the Ceremony.

FURTHER CLARIFICATION

If you have any other questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact Fr. Peter at 416-378-7428 or by E-mail: fatherpeter@sympatico.ca