

BAPTISM: GODMOTHER AND GODFATHER

1. History

The institution of godfathers dates back to the first centuries of the Church. Tertullian was the first to make written reference to it around 160 - 222 CE. In the beginning, children were presented for Baptism by their parents. However, someone had to intervene in the case of orphans, slaves or consenting non-Christian parents. As Baptism became recognized as a spiritual birth, gradually the custom of choosing a father, other than the natural father, to introduce a child to the life of grace became the norm. Similarly, the notion of godmother was introduced a little later. Women began to fill this liturgical function around the end of the VII century. Sponsorship was also connected to the catechumenate during the time of persecutions for the sole reason that they did not want to welcome into the Christian community, anyone who might be a traitor or a spy.

2. Role

The Church has often reflected on the ancient custom and necessity of sponsorship or godparenting. We know that Baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life. Therefore, the Church considers the godmother and godfather as the spiritual parents of the baptized person. Moreover, the Church constantly reminds the faithful that godparenting is not primarily an honor but carries with it the responsibility of watching over the spiritual and religious formation of the godchildren. Canon 872 states: *"In so far as possible, a person being baptized is to be assigned a sponsor."* Of course we know very well that parents have priority over the child. We also know that the collaboration of other Christians is indispensable in the discovery of the Church, the community of the baptized. In summary, two facts stand out.

- 1- The role of the godmother and of the godfather is strictly religious. The civil state completely ignores this aspect on the birth certificate. This religious aspect must also be considered separately from guardianship.
- 2- The function comprises the responsibility of assisting the child to develop his or her faith life in order that the person will "live a Christian life ... and faithfully fulfill the duties inherent in baptism." (Canon 872) Thus, the godfather and the godmother are companions and special witnesses. They represent the larger family of Christians into which the newly baptized person is received and invited to grow.

3. Number of Godparents

It seems clear that in the first century having only one godparent was the norm. Towards the VIII Century the generalized practice was to give each person a godmother and a godfather for the specific purpose of distinguishing natural parents from spiritual parents. However, by the XV Century, human nature being what it is, the number of godmothers and godfathers continued to rise. It is said that in the families of nobles, the children sometimes had more than one hundred godfathers and godmothers. The reasons are obvious: prestige, gifts, heritage, vanity, etc.

It was not until the Council of Trent that a regulation was made that there be a sole godfather or godmother, or a combination of one godmother and one godfather. In so doing, the Council wished to respect the analogy between natural parent and spiritual parent, to control the abuses and vain excesses, and to restore the full Christian meaning to the function. The same Council would go as far as stating that even if other people happen to touch the child at the time of the baptismal ablution, they did not become spiritual parents. Today, the same rule still applies (Canon 873) and for the same reasons. As we can see, this rule stems from the wisdom of the secular experience of the Church.

4. Criteria

Canon 874 clearly lists the criteria for becoming a godmother or godfather.

1. be appointed and suited for this role and have the intention of fulfilling it;
2. be not less than 16 years of age (for a just reason, the priest may admit an exception);
3. be a Catholic who has completed his or her Christian Initiation and who lives a life of faith;
4. not labour under a canonical penalty;
5. be neither the father nor the mother of the person to be baptized;

A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community may be admitted only in company with a Catholic sponsor, and then, simply as a witness to the baptism.

5. Registration

Canon 877 is specific about the registration of a baptism: *“The parish priest of the place in which the baptism was conferred must carefully and without delay record in the register of baptism the names of the baptized, the minister, the parents, the sponsor, and if there were such, the witnesses, and the place and date of baptism. He must also enter the date and place of birth.”* It is evident that after the event, once the people concerned have read and signed the register, it is impossible to change the facts.

6. Frequently Asked Questions

- Can we have several godmothers or godfathers? The aforementioned reflection provides some key elements for adequately responding to this question
- Is it permissible to have a witness at Baptism? Canon 874 states yes. However, normally that person should be a baptized non-Catholic.
- Can we change our godfather or godmother? Just as we cannot change our birth parents, neither can we change our spiritual parents. Of course, when a problem arises, we can always find a substitute godparent or mentor to fill the gap. However, this person can never replace the godmother or godfather who accepted this responsibility at the time of the baptism.

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