

17. A Guide to Choosing and Serving as Godparents

Being a godparent is a high calling and a great responsibility. Thus, it is not something to be entered into lightly, but with prayerful consideration of the duties involved.

Traditionally, godparents might take and raise a child if for any reason the parents could not do so. Godparents are considered to have a close familial relationship with their godchildren. For that reason, marriages are forbidden for god-relatives, as for blood relatives. While parents may choose someone who is already a relative (e.g. an aunt or uncle), they may also consider forging a new spiritual kinship with another family in the parish, or with another faithful Orthodox Christian through god-parenthood.

In any case, parents need to choose at least one godparent for the child. There can be two Orthodox godparents — a godfather and a godmother — or either one or the other. The godparent, if there is only one, must be the same sex as the child. If a family selects a second godparent who is not Orthodox, they should keep in mind that this person is technically a “witness.” It is the Orthodox godparent who must say the Creed for the child and receive the child from the baptismal font. If godparents are married, they must have a marriage blessed by the Church. If they are from another Orthodox parish, they need to have their parish priest send a letter confirming that they are communicants in good standing. Godparents are expected to have made a recent confession prior to the baptism.

The duties of the godparent(s) are first and foremost to pray for the godchild, as well as to help raise the child in the Orthodox faith. This includes encouraging the parents to make sure the child attends services and receives Holy Communion. Later, it will mean encouraging the family to teach the child about the faith (through, for example, giving children’s books on the Orthodox faith to the family, and so on). As the child grows up, and in the case of adults joining the Orthodox Church, godparents would encourage the godchild to embrace his or her faith, and would, of course, continue to pray for him or her. Parents choosing godparents, and catechumens seeking sponsors, should therefore be seeking someone who would take these duties seriously.

At the baptism itself, the godparents normally hold the child throughout the service, or in the case of an adult being baptized and/or chrismated, stand beside the baptizand. For a child, either the godparent or someone else should be prepared to undress and dress the child. The Orthodox godparent receiving the child out of the font should be prepared with a white towel (in some cases a white sheet is also used) to dry off the child while avoiding getting the holy oil on the godparent’s clothing. Towels should be rinsed afterwards and the water poured in an appropriate place outside. The godparent(s) would also hold the baptismal candle(s) during the procession around the font.

The godparent(s) will often provide the baptismal cross and candle, and sometimes the baptismal gown. An icon of the patron Saint is not required, but commonly given to the newly baptized. An infant should have a communion bib, which the godparent(s) may also provide. Before leaving the church, parents and godparents should make sure to fill out a form for the baptismal certificate, which will be sent by mail to the parents. Whenever possible, a godparent should bring the child to receive communion — please see “On Preparing For & Receiving Communion.”