



## Rethinking the Role of Godparents

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Tradition and current practice on the role of the godparent are very much a mixed bag. On the one hand, we talk about godparenthood as an honor and a sacred responsibility, and godparents are allowed a role in the baptismal liturgy equivalent to that of the parents. Some Christians inherit a strong piety about godparenthood; they feel it's important even if they're not sure what it means, and want to take it seriously. On the other hand, we do very little to help each other understand or practice godparenthood. Godparents receive little or nothing in the way of concrete suggestions of what they might do. Godparenthood is rarely mentioned in most churches outside of the baptismal celebration. In fact, many clergypersons and theologians have written off godparenthood as a lost cause. The argument goes like this: parents treat it as a ceremonial role, picking friends and relations as they would pick bridesmaids and groomsmen, and can't be induced to think of it otherwise. Besides, the godparents often live far away, can't meet with the pastor before or after the baptism, and won't really get to know the child anyway.

The confusion about the meaning of godparenthood, the mixed messages as to its importance, and the resigned attitude of clergy can be found in similar forms and to varying degrees in all churches that have godparents at infant baptism. Where there is a clear understanding of the godparent's role, it usually comes from an ethnic tradition in which godparenthood has social prominence, as in much of

Latin America, rather than from the church's own efforts to define or promote the role.

Before we can talk intelligently about where to go with godparenting, we need to understand the roots of our confusion in ecclesiastical and social history. This is easier to do now than it was a decade ago, thanks to the excellent work of Joseph H. Lynch, the first person to do a comprehensive historical study of godparentage in Europe, combining the evidence from ecclesiastical, literary, anthropological, and social-historical scholarship. Much of the following summary of the history of godparenthood is drawn from his book, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe*.<sup>1</sup>

### I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF GODPARENTAGE

Adult candidates for baptism in the early church had sponsors, Christians who would vouch for their sincerity and good character. It is often assumed that the sponsorship of infants was an adaptation of this practice of adult baptism. Lynch argues to the contrary, that the two roles developed independently, each with its own rationale. Children too young to answer for themselves did not need character witnesses, but they did need, someone to answer for them and

take responsibility for the promises made until the child matured.

In the beginning, a child's sponsor was usually one of its parents. Hippolytus and Augustine both assume this as the norm, though Augustine in a letter states that the role is legitimately sometimes played by another (an orphan may be brought by a relative, a slave child by the master, or a once-exposed child by the dedicated virgin who rescues and raises it). By the beginning of the sixth century, however, there is significant witness to the practice of choosing persons other than the parents to be the sponsors. The pseudo-Dionysius refers to the practice, and, in the Frankish realm, Caesarius preached of the duties of those who "receive a child from the font." Both understand the role as one of teaching and guidance. For Caesarius the dominant metaphor is that the sponsor is the guarantor (we might translate it, co-signer) of the contract with God; the parental metaphor has not yet established itself.

From the existing evidence, it seems likely that the practice of asking someone other than one of the parents to sponsor a child was more a grassroots development than anything else. Parents would invite another person to "receive their child from the font" and thus establish a quasi-familial bond among that person, their child, and themselves, a bond which increasingly had significant social functions in addition to its spiritual benefits. The origins and exact reasons for the shift to non-parent sponsors are not well attested, though the role may have had some precursors in non-Christian initiatory rites. Whatever its origins, the role of non-parent sponsor grew tremendously in importance as a social institution from the fifth century throughout the early middle ages, more and more displacing

<sup>1</sup>Joseph H. Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1986).

the parent-sponsor, until the church actually ruled in the ninth century that parents could not sponsor their own children (due to the marital impediments referred to below). At the same time, non-parent sponsors began to be described as spiritual parents, the parents of the second, spiritual birth.

The institution of non-parental sponsorship created two important social bonds, the relationship between godparent and godchild and that between godparent and the godchild's parents. The role expectations of the godparent toward the godchild involved gift-giving and party-throwing around the baptism 'and ongoing protection, as well as the transmission of spiritual qualities. The protection involved could be a matter of life and death; there are examples of Frankish kings executing a whole group of conspirators, or a rival and all his male heirs, and sparing only the one who was the king's godson.<sup>2</sup> In return, the godchild owed the godparent a special kind of lifelong respect, which could be understood as the duty to accede to any reasonable request; so a person in trouble with a Frankish king once asked the bishop, who was the king's godfather, to plead for his life, on the theory that the king couldn't refuse his godfather.<sup>3</sup>

The second bond, that between godparent and parents, was of at least equal social importance. In fact, there were terms in Latin for "coparents" (*commater, compater*), terms describing the relationship between godparent and parent of the same child, by the late sixth century, while precise terms describing the relationship between godparent and godchild did not appear until the eighth century (*matrina/patrinus* for godparent and *filiola/filiolus* for godchild).<sup>4</sup>

Coparents were expected to protect one another and to act altruistically toward each other. Asking someone to sponsor your child became a powerful way to bring a helpful outsider into the kinship system and to make alliances. Pope Paul I so badly wanted to establish the alliance of coparentage with Pepin, the Frankish ruler, even though he couldn't be at Pepin's daughter's baptism, that he ritually made himself her godfather in absentia (by having the towel in which she was received from the font sent to him!).<sup>5</sup> In fact, the social uses of the alliance created by baptismal sponsorship were so significant that there was a tendency to multiply the opportunities for transacting such alliances, both by finding other occasions for sponsorship (chiefly confirmation) and by increasing the number of sponsors named for each child at baptism (a development the official church fought).

By the time of Charlemagne, coparenthood/godparenthood was an extremely important and popular institution in the society. The Carolingian reformers capitalized on this to further their goal of Christian education of the laity. First, they picked up on Caesarius's formulation of the godparent's duties, which included teaching the godchild the Lord's Prayer and the (Apostles') Creed and providing moral guidance; this became the classical western statement of

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 181, 188.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 187.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 255.

godparental duties.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of this job description, they then made *knowing* the Lord's Prayer and the Creed a prerequisite for standing as godparent. Charlemagne himself was known to quiz godparents at the font and send them home if they couldn't say the Lord's Prayer and Creed.<sup>7</sup> The Lord's Prayer, Creed, and short texts on baptism were translated into the vernacular. People were exhorted and examined about their godparental duties in sermons, in confessional preparation, and in episcopal visitations. In the same period, the role of the godparent in the baptismal liturgy increased, gradually displacing the parents at every step in the process.

While the Carolingian reform laid the groundwork for the formulation of godparental duties we inherited, another early medieval development which had an equally decisive impact on the later history of godparenting has hardly any relevance for us. This is the issue of sexual taboos and marital impediments associated with godparenting. Laws against sex in godparental relationships may have in the first instance been about sexual abuse; the first (imperial) law on the subject outlaws sex between godfather and goddaughter. However, there gradually developed a belief that godparenthood created spiritual family bonds that precluded sex or marriage. This understanding developed in the Byzantine church and spread through Rome into the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon areas, where it met some resistance.<sup>8</sup> Sponsorship-created relationships fell more and more under this incest ban as time went on: godparent/ godchild, parent/ godparent, parent/ godparent's child, godparent's child/ godchild ("spiritual siblings"), etc. Most of the ink spent on godparenthood in official church writings from the medieval period on is devoted to incest laws.

Through the medieval period the social institution of godparenthood/ coparenthood flourished and grew more elaborate and complex. By the tenth century in the Frankish realm, godparents had become responsible for naming the child. The social responsibilities of godparenthood became in some areas quite burdensome. In 1288 the Council at Lille tried to

outlaw all godparental gifts save the *alba* (the baptismal garment, the most traditional godparent's gift), because the expense of godparenthood had become so great that children were going unbaptized when their parents could find no one willing to fill the role!<sup>9</sup>

By the sixteenth century, everyone in the west agreed on the need for reform, due to the overemphasis on gift-giving and the impenetrable tangle of marital

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.,319.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 323.

<sup>8</sup>In the western areas, the (single) godparent was for a long time always of the same sex as the child; this is one reason there wasn't an issue about marriage between godchild and godparent. But that's not the whole story. The whole concept of spiritual kinship precluding sex or marriage came as foreign to the Franks and Anglo-Saxons. There are letters from Boniface to other churchmen on the subject, after he got in trouble for permitting a marriage between spiritual siblings; he respectfully requests ecclesiastical authorities for the ban, but it's clear that he thinks the whole idea is bonkers. Aren't we all brothers and sisters of Christ? (This is almost exactly what Luther would say on the subject.)

<sup>9</sup>Derrick S. Bailey, *Sponsors at Baptism and Confirmation: An Historical Introduction to Anglican Practice* (London: SPCK, 1952) 49-50.

taboos. Trent reduced the number of marital impediments, and the churches of the reformation abolished them entirely. The reformers who supported infant baptism also maintained the role of godparent, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Luther, while noting that sponsorship was a human addition to the sacrament, recognized its antiquity and its continuing usefulness. Calvin downplayed the role of sponsors, theologically and liturgically, in order to place the emphasis on the parents' own responsibility. In the high middle ages, the Ave Maria had been added to the Lord's Prayer and the Creed in the list of texts the godparent was to teach the child; in the reformation churches the Ave Maria was dropped and replaced with the ten commandments, a catechetical choice rather than a liturgical one.

Since the sixteenth century, the social institution of godparenthood/coparenthood has gradually decreased in importance in western European societies. Coparenthood became so unimportant in the English-speaking world that we no longer have words for the relationship between parent and godparent (but look up in the OED the words "cummer" and "gossip"!). Coparenthood has survived in southern and eastern Europe, and has become a crucial kinship-friendship structure in Latin America and the Philippines. The godparent/godchild relationship itself has become socially negligible in most Protestant societies in the last 200 years. In the 1950s Alois Stenzel observed that the assignation of responsibility for religious nurture onto the godparents had become "a liturgical lie."<sup>10</sup>

The twentieth century has brought some developments in godparenting in other parts of the church, but not much in Lutheranism. The liturgical movement has helped raise awareness of the centrality of baptism to the Christian life. Liturgical scholars have focused mostly on the ancient pattern of adult initiation and its application to our cultural situation; even their interest in sponsorship has had no spillover onto the question of the sponsoring of children. The Roman Catholic 1969 revised rite of the baptism of children intentionally decreased the role of godparents, in order to emphasize the role of parents as the primary catechists of their own children,<sup>11</sup> Roman Catholic canon law with regard to godparenthood has been greatly simplified. The 1917 revised code abolished many of the marital taboos, and in the 1983 revision they have

disappeared entirely. The only ones who still maintain the marital/sexual impediments are the Eastern Orthodox. In other ways, too, the Orthodox retain ancient traditions. They have only one sponsor per baptizee (the Roman Catholics require one, allow a maximum of two), and a local Greek Orthodox priest tells me the sponsors pay for the baptismal gown (the godparental Ur-gift).

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship*, 40.

<sup>11</sup>The renunciation and creedal questions are answered by parents and godparents together; the only thing the godparents do alone is answer one question about assisting the parents in their responsibility. It is recommended that parents hold the baby rather than godparents. The candle may be lit by “someone from the child’s family (e.g., the father or godfather)” (mother/godmother is listed first with reference to holding the baby). See *The Rites of the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Pueblo, 1976).

## II. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Obviously, we have three directions among which to choose: we can continue along the road of benign neglect and mixed messages; we can intentionally downplay the role of godparents liturgically and pastorally; or we can find new ways to promote, define, and support godparenting in our situation. There are at least three points that can be made as a rationale for promoting godparenthood.

First, bringing a baptized child up in the faith is not just a responsibility of the parents, but of the whole Christian community. Some people argue, against the prominence of godparents, that assigning special responsibility for spiritual nurture to the godparents either obscures the primary responsibility of parents in this regard or lets the rest of the community off the hook. With respect to displacing parents, I would argue that the church can recognize the obvious primacy of parental responsibility and authority, and support and celebrate that, while it also recognizes a supporting role with a spiritual focus. In regard to the communal responsibility, it seems to me that outside of traditional village cultures, the baptismal charge, while it needs to be placed on the whole community, will not be fulfilled unless it is institutionalized in individual relationships (Sunday school teacher, godparent, confirmation mentor, youth group leader, etc.). I have been an active member of my medium-sized congregation for eight years, and I don’t even know most of the members by name. In addition, American mobility means that even strong intracongregational child-adult relationships will rarely last throughout a child’s growing up. Godparenthood is an institution that incarnates the greater community’s care for the child in away that is not locality-dependent.

A second and related argument is that children need concerned adults in their lives in addition to their parent(s). Geographical mobility, the isolation of the nuclear family in our society, and the growing numbers of single-parent families are factors that make this need more acute and harder to fill. Such concerns have motivated the development of programs creating relationships between kids and “confirmation mentors,” “church grandparents,” and the like. It would be natural to build on the existing role of godparent to help meet this need, if we hadn’t already despaired of rescuing it from its purely ceremonial status.

A third reason for promoting godparenthood is that it is one way of promoting the awareness of baptism. The liturgical movement has helped much of the church refocus on baptism as not just an entry rite, but the ongoing defining core of Christian identity, the paschal

pattern of all Christian life. Lutherans like to believe that the sacramental focus of their theology on baptism and the Lord’s Supper has made them less neglectful of baptism than others; certainly Luther’s writings on baptism call all of us to emphasize its centrality to Christian life and its lifelong character (we are baptized more and more each day, said Luther, until our baptism is completed by our death and fulfilled at the last day). To remember our baptism by crossing ourselves in the Name, confessing our sins, saying the Creed or shouting at the Devil, “But I am baptized!” are all ways for Luther of remembering the gracious promise of God—and remembering that promise in order to trust

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it is the heart of Christian life. I would argue that godparenthood as an institution can help increase people’s awareness of the importance of baptism, and that a godparent’s job description can be formulated as helping the child remember that she or he is baptized. Merely explaining the meaning of the term “godparent” to the child brings up the subject of baptism; the godparent as godparent is *per se* a reminder of baptism. Beyond that, godparents may be helped to remind the child of baptism in many ways, from recognizing baptismal anniversaries to giving water-y presents.

### III. HOW MIGHT WE PROMOTE THE GODPARENTAL ROLE?

Pastoral wisdom argues against taking any tack that will alienate people, such as trying to lay down the law in a negative fashion (telling a parent he can’t choose his sister because she doesn’t go to church enough). Likewise, admonishing godparents about their responsibilities will not be terribly productive if we don’t help them see how they might carry out those responsibilities. In this light, I can think of four approaches we might take.

First, we can do better at helping parents consider the choice of godparents for their children. The best way to do this is to convey a clearer sense of what sorts of things a good godparent might do for and with the godchild; then criteria can be justified on the basis of that hoped-for relationship (faithfulness and the ability to relate meaningfully with a child). Parents want the best for their children, and the child’s own benefit will motivate them much more successfully than the church’s expectations. One way to free some parents to choose at least one godparent who might actually talk to the child about baptism is to allow them to name more than two; after the obligatory aunt-and-uncle, say, the third godparent might be chosen on the basis of whether she or he is “godparent material.”

Second, we can help godparents imagine concretely how to live out their role as the child grows up. If they can’t meet with the pastor outside of the baptism, the minimum should be a personal letter to each godparent that talks about the meaning of godparenting (not just a printed pamphlet). The congregation should develop a hand-out that lists ideas on how to godparent. Many people have a hard time imagining how to talk to a child about religion or how to do anything of a spiritual character that is not sickly pious. The key thing is to present all sorts of ideas, hoping that a few will feel natural and doable to the individual godparent. There are a few good resources to consult, distribute to godparents, or place in the congregational library.<sup>12</sup>

Third, we can make sure each godparent does something active in the baptismal liturgy, beyond standing there and joining in the responses. The LBW inten-

<sup>12</sup>The main one now available is my own recent work, *The Godparent Book* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993), a book of concrete suggestions of things to do. Henry Libersat's *Godparents* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1991) is a charismatic Catholic take on the subject. Short books on the meaning of baptism, such as Martin Marty's *Baptism* (1962, 1977), could also be given to godparents. Long-distance godparents may find helpful ideas on relationship-forming in books written for long-distance grandparents or for noncustodial parents.

tionally left it unspecified who would hold the baby when, receive the lit candle, etc. (the word "sponsor" is defined in the *Manual on the Liturgy* to include parents and godparents), to allow for the various parochial traditions. I would argue that having the godparents do these things creates the relationship for them ritually in a more vivid way than if they're just standing there like groomsmen.

Fourth, we can find ways to increase the visibility of the godparental role in the daily life of the church. People can be invited to speak or bring to the minister petitions "for your family members, godchildren, or friends" when they are in need of prayer. The godchildren of congregational members should be regularly included in the church's prayers as a group (if congregational practice includes calling out names, godparents can name their godchildren aloud at this point). Some congregations already invite godparents to take a special role in the "confirmation" rite of baptismal affirmation, blessing the young person or standing behind her or him with the parents. One Sunday a year, or even just one Sunday every three-year cycle, might be given a godparental focus. In my congregation we did this one year on Baptism of Jesus Sunday. People wore name tags with their godchildren's names (some husbands had to ask their wives!) and sermon and prayers focused on godparenthood. One retired man told the pastor that he much appreciated the liturgy that day; he took godparenthood seriously, but no one in the church had ever recognized or mentioned to him his role in any way since the baptism! Many of the Greek Orthodox parishes in this country celebrate a Godparent/Godchild Sunday yearly; at the Columbus (Ohio) cathedral there is a congregational affirmation of baptismal vows, and godparents go to communion with their godchildren. Some such celebration could be one way of honoring and supporting the relationship of godparenthood in our congregations.

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