

Godparenting

Something we get asked a lot: “Can I (or my spouse/son/daughter) be a godparent for Baptism or sponsor for Confirmation?” It can get challenging at times. The Church has standards but after working in a Catholic high school for seven years (and one REALLY interesting encounter with some seniors), I’ve realized that we might not have communicated those standards very effectively. So here goes. And don’t be surprised if this shows up once or five times again in the bulletin (hey, sometimes we need filler ☺)

First off, understand this: the standards we use for Godparents AREN’T the ones we apply to parents. Parents might be spotty in Church attendance; they might not have a marriage recognized by the Church; they might not have all their initiation sacraments. If they show some goodwill and some, even minimal, enthusiasm for raising their child in the Catholic faith, we will baptize their child. Now you may see why the Church is looking for good Godparents.

Some of the standards are pretty straightforward. One, the person must be Catholic. (If you’re going to say, “Hey Father! I know a non-Catholic who was the godparent at some baptism,” that’s another animal, namely a Christian Witness. I’ll cover that some other time. Promise ☺). Two, the person must be fully initiated themselves; that means having received the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation. Three, the prospective godparent/sponsor must be of age. Canon Law says 16 years old; looking for some maturity here you know. This one, however, pastors can waive if they think the younger person is mature enough to carry out the role.

After that, admittedly, the standards can get a bit subjective. Canon Law says that the person should be one “...who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on; 4/ not be bound by any canonical penalty legitimately imposed or declared...” (from Canon 874) How do most parishes in Philly understand that? Well, one, they assume the person is registered in their parish. And when you turn 21 or so and still work under your parents’ registration, that raises an eyebrow or two. How independent are we in so many other things (ok, health insurance notwithstanding!) but we go

under Mommy and Daddy’s umbrella with our life of discipleship? Two, parishes will see leading a life of faith in that the person PRACTICES their faith, i.e. that they go to Church. Now, here some priests will differ on what “practice” means. Some will want every weekend with minimal absence. Some will be happy with twice a month or so. Most, honestly, will not be too enthused about Chreasters. A godparent’s role is one of example and encouragement in the Faith. So if you’re not setting a good example, that’s a concern.

The other part of “leading a life of faith” involves marriage. If married, is the prospective sponsor’s marriage recognized by the Church? Note that the marriage didn’t necessarily have to HAPPEN in a Catholic Church; it’s possible that the ceremony was in another Church. It’s also possible that the ceremony you remember was not in a Church at all but the couple had their marriage convalidated (or “blessed”) by the Church later. Validity is what’s important here. And this is one of those situations that becomes more cut and dried. Since marriage is such a public reality, priests don’t have leeway to grant certificate of eligibility if the marriage isn’t recognized by the Church.

If some of these standards seem excessively burdensome, look again at the second paragraph. The Church can’t pick parents. We work with what we have. The Church, however, is concerned about the spiritual life of the newly baptized and those being confirmed. And yes, in our culture the idea of “godparent” is “the one whom we want to raise/care for our children if God-forbid something happens to us.” I understand that, but that is quite frankly NOT the Church’s understanding of being a sponsor. Being a sponsor is being someone who helps raise a child in faith or supports a young person’s journey in that faith. So those are the standards that we’re using when someone asks the question.

Two final points: one; only a pastor/priest of your parish can sign a certificate of eligibility. I can’t “sign off” on someone who isn’t a parishioner here at OLSH. So you 23+ year olds who haven’t been living at home the past two years, please take note. You should register at the parish where you’re living and establish a relationship with them even if you know you’re going to be moving in a year or three. Let’s be honest; you’ll do that with your internet service; why not with your discipleship?

Two: I know it's too easy to read this article about the Church's admittedly higher than minimal standards and say "Hey Father! What about all those priests who obviously were the last people I'd want as sponsors for my child or even AROUND my child? The person I want my not be a good Catholic but at least he/she is a good PERSON!" You're right; those priests and others weren't good Catholics or good people. They hurt a lot of others around them; their victims, their victims' families and friends and also their brother priests and the Church community herself. However, in this as in so many other aspects of our lives, bad (or even criminal) messengers do not make a bad MESSAGE. Corrupt judges do not mean all law is bad; malpracticing doctors do not invalidate medicine's lessons; cops on the take don't mean we should run stop signs with impunity.

The message of the Church is one of a journey of faith and discipleship into which we grow with the help of our Church family, our own family and our sponsors. If we want to grow in this relationship with Christ, don't we want the best people who can help us grow in faith?