

Being a Godparent Is an Old Practice

Harri and Elina Vahajylkka

The Bible does not mention godparents, but the concept of godparents has existed since the time of the early Christian Church. At that time, it was mostly adults who were baptized, and one person was chosen to support the newly baptized in his or her Christian life and orient him or her to the doctrines of faith. Nowadays, the primary task of a godparent is the same. The main responsibility of Christian upbringing has always been given to the parents. The godparent's duty is to support the parents in that responsibility.

Who to Select for a Godparent?

When we have pondered who to ask to be godparents for our children, we have most of all desired that the godparent be a believer. Through faith he or she thus has the Holy Spirit, which is the best teacher in matters of faith. As Jesus told His disciples: "He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14:26). We have not considered it so important that a godparent be a close relative but rather that the person would be close enough to us that we know him or her from the heart. We have also thought that the godparent should be one who willingly accepts this responsibility. We have not looked for the perfect person for a godparent but rather for one who could serve in this duty with his or her own gifts.

Formally speaking, the godparent must have received adequate baptismal teaching. In practice, this means the person should have completed confirmation school. More important than formal teaching is that there is living faith in the godparent's heart, faith that can be related to the godchild.

Speak Simply and Pray

Providing a Christian upbringing for a child may seem challenging, even difficult. How have you handled this task? I guess that not many of us have kept actual lessons for our godchildren. I think that this instruction is done more as part of daily life.

When we see our small godchild, it is good to remind the child again and again that we are his or her godparents, that our relationship is something special. We can remember the godchild with small gifts, by getting to know him or her personally and by helping the child get to know us. I am happy when I hear that our small godchild William has often recognized me at services when I have served at the pulpit. He willingly comes to greet me and sometimes dares to sit in my lap.

When a child grows up, we can perform our role as a godparent by visiting with him or her. It's nice for godchildren to hear that we have been present in their life from a very early age. The most important

part of Christian upbringing may be that the child notices that the gift of faith is most important in the godparent's life as well. Prayer is a gift, a tool that the godparent might use most often in performing a godparent's duties. God hears the prayer of a believing godparent, even if the godchild lives far away, even on the other side of the world. The godparent's prayer is sometimes only a thought or a wordless sigh. Still, we as godparents wish to remember our godchildren in their different ages and life situations.

Duty Remains throughout Life

The duty of a godparent is a lifelong task. As young ones and as adults too we remember our own godparents. We may keep a more regular connection with some of our godparents, and some of our godchildren, than with others.

We may be more involved with our godchildren in their early lives and less often later on. We might go to see the new baby, we participate in the baptism, we sometimes attend the young one's birthday parties. Adolescence and the time of confirmation school are also important times in the godparent-godchild relationship. As the child grows, childhood faith becomes personal faith.

Christian Doctrine teaches that God calls a person in the time of youth. The young person ponders his or her own faith and relationship with God. It is a sensitive time in many ways. We can pray for God's help that we would be able to encourage our godchild to keep faith and a good conscience. A cross or the Holy Bible as a gift after confirmation school reminds of the most precious gift that a person can own – faith according to the Bible and the salvation offered by Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection.

Even as an adult, a godchild may want to ponder the big questions of temporal life with his or her godparents. Perhaps he or she dreams of a certain occupation or a spouse and a family. These dreams and expectations are safe to share with a believing godparent. At that time, it is good to encourage the godchild to trust in God's guidance. It is also good to do the same when the godchild faces disappointments and trials in life.

Personal Encounters

How can we care for the relationship between a godparent and a godchild? It can be done by reserving time to meet, by traveling together or by keeping contact in another way. When I was traveling a lot for my work, I often stayed at my godparents' home. There we visited a lot about life and faith. This was important even for an adult godchild.

As a minister I have been able to serve our mutual godchildren by officiating at their weddings. I have experienced this as a position of trust and it has brought great mutual joy. Together we have been able to witness how God has blessed this child's life in a new way. I have also met my own godparents at the

communion table where I was able to serve them with the Lord's Supper. This was a very memorable moment.

Eventually comes the moment when we have to say goodbye to our godparent for the last time. Around the casket of our own godparent we feel grateful for the support and guidance we have received. We don't even know how often our godparent has remembered us in prayer and in thoughts. Still we can experience that those prayers along with visits with our godparent have carried us to this day.

Special to Each Other

Pauliina Hillukka

Today I got to make a very nice phone call. For a number of days I had felt joy that I would soon call this dear friend. My husband and I had decided that we would ask her to be our newborn baby's godmother. It was wonderful to hear how happy this made her.

We have already had the opportunity to select godparents for six children. Our most important criteria have been that the godparents are believing and are close to our family. I am very thankful that God has blessed us with a group of friends from which we have always been able to easily find suitable godparents.

We have always had one request for the godparents: that they would remember the godchild in prayer, and also us parents, that we would be preserved in faith.

At its best, the relationship between a godchild and godparent is life-long. I have been able to upkeep a close relationship with my godparents since I was a small child. I barely remember birthday or Christmas gifts, but what I do remember from my childhood and what I still feel is that I am special to them.

I have considered my own godparents a good example for me. Visits in their home about life, the way and the journey are precious memories I carry with me.

I have been called into the role of a godmother twenty-two times. Each time the duty has been a welcome one and I have accepted it gratefully. It is easy to be happy about small godchildren, and I feel that they are important examples to me of a child's faith. My oldest godchildren are entering their time of youth and I pray to God for wisdom to help them when the need arises and to walk alongside them in life.

O Jesus, keep our children within Your sweet embrace and journey with them daily, and shield them with Your grace. These arms are Your blest kingdom in which You lift and bear, this home that You provide them where they receive Your care.

These words of song of Zion 428 contain my greatest wishes as a godmother. That the heavenly Father would protect all my godchildren so that they would remain as God's children and would once make it to heaven. This wish has already come true for two of my godchildren. Along with sorrow and longing, I feel great thankfulness that they have reached heaven's home.

I Hold Them in My Heart

Lori Loukusa

My first godchild was a baby brother to one of my best friends. He was from a believing home where I as a teenager had spent many days and even nights with this busy and happy family. I remember feeling so excited that these special parents in my life had asked me for this duty. My second godchild was the cutest baby girl, the firstborn to a young couple I had gotten close to, also as a teenager. I visited them often – we had many precious visits. When I look back at this time, however, I realize I had no idea then how special and important of a duty this actually was, to be a godmother. And how I later would feel so inadequate, knowing I had fulfilled this duty so poorly.

When my husband and I got married, we each inherited a few godchildren. Our first godchild together, my oldest nephew, was born one month after we were married. Life then got busy and one by one our own children were given as gifts from God. Yet it warmed my heart each time we were asked: *Will you be godparents* (or like we sometimes say in Finnish – *kummis*) *for our little one?* These were all special times and all special godchildren, yet our duty as godparents was often lost in the busy shuffle of life. I remember wondering when I got a package together to give a dear godchild for a confirmation gift: *does he even know us? Does he even remember that we are his godparents?* It was humbling to admit that this was a possibility.

We realized after some years that a little Christmas gift, though it adds to the hubbub of the already-busy season, helps to create a bond between our godchild and my husband and me. I remember too how special it was when godchildren remembered us with school pictures, sometimes a little handmade gift. We have a precious letter in safekeeping, written in a little girl's handwriting, sent to Pentti after he suffered a stroke years ago. And just last year, when we had a misfortunate car accident, an adult goddaughter sent a card: *I've been thinking about you.*

Godchildren bring great joy, but sorrow can come as well. Angels came suddenly to take our little godson, just under three years old, from his loving family. His parents and his siblings were left with sorrow and longing and a huge empty place. Their family's photo on the dining room wall spoke to me through the years when we visited this home. My eyes were drawn to our cute little godson, reminding

of the sad day we heard the news of his death. Yet the photo spoke to me too of God's great love and care, that He has a plan for each of His own – even when we don't understand. And a little one – who will never know sin or temptation – is safe in heaven.

Our oldest godson, our nephew – a believing husband and father – died from cancer almost 41 years after we held him in our arms on his special baptismal day. We shared in his family's sorrow, yet we rejoiced that his suffering had ended and he had received the greatest victory anyone could ever receive. We remember his family with many prayers.

Another married godson and his wife, who live far away, also lost a young son. When we had a chance to see them in our home congregation some months after his death, words were weak to express our sympathy and let them know we remembered them in prayer, yet we were thankful God gave this opportunity.

When a dear goddaughter denied living faith and later married, we wondered: should we give her a Bible for a wedding gift? Would she know that we remembered her and prayed that God's Word could also touch her heart? I remember not knowing what we should do.

My prayer today is that God will continue to help me, my husband – and all of us – to remember this God-given duty of being a godparent, to carry these dear ones in prayer and in our weak ways endeavor to help them on their way to heaven. I pray that they can overlook my many shortcomings and know that if I haven't personally reached out to them as I would wish, I still hold them in my heart.

Discussion Points

1. What kind of memories do you have of your own godparents?
2. What were your thoughts when you were called to serve as a sponsor or godparent?
3. What do you think are the most important things about being a godparent?
4. How can you support your godchild temporally and spiritually?
5. Share teachings that you have received and mutual experiences with your godparent.
6. What does a Christian upbringing mean to you?