

The Origin and Meaning of Godparents from a Liturgical and Canonical Perspective

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The sacrament of baptism initiates one's sacramental life, making it possible to receive other sacraments. Jesus Christ requires that the newly baptized person grow in the Christian faith. Godparents are especially important in growing in the faith. They are obliged to help to raise a Catholic neophyte; that is why their engagement is so critical. The custom of the godparents' being present during the baptism ceremony and their assistance in the baptized person's religious education has been present since the beginnings of the Catholic Church. When contemplating the topic of the significance of the institution of godparents in the religious education of the newly baptized, one should take into account something very fundamental: the understanding of the essence of this institution to the neophyte's development.

1. The Concept and Significance of Godparents

The Catholic Church follows Jesus' command to preach the Gospel and to give the sacrament of baptism to all people: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit" (Matthew 28: 19). Thus when contemplating the significance of the institution of godparents we cannot forget the Church's teaching on baptism. Baptism constitutes the institution of godparents. The concept of "baptism" comes from the Greek βάπτισμα, which means "immersion"¹ or "cleansing"² and was adopted by the Latin language, which uses the term

1 Cf. L. Torre, *Chrzest*, [in:] *Encyklopedia chrześcijaństwa. Historia i współczesność 2000 lat nadziei*, red. H. Witczyk, Kielce 2000, p. 131.
2 Cf. J. Kudasiewicz, *Chrzest*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 3, Lublin 1979, col. 353.

baptismus to describe baptism, thus focusing on the ritual aspect of the sacrament and on the blotting out of sins.³ Meanwhile, in the Old Polish language the term *christiti*, which derives from Latin, was used. It means: “to make one a Christian” or “to mark one with Christ’s name.”⁴

We have been immersed not only in the Redeemer’s death, but also in His resurrection.⁵ Thanks to this immersion, the Christian lives with Christ.⁶ Pope St. John Paul II taught that the sacrament of baptism is an “immersion” in Christ’s death, whose purpose is to be able to participate in His resurrection.⁷ Immersion or the pouring of water⁸ symbolizes Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. St. Paul the Apostle describes baptism as “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5: 17) and uses the expression “the bath of rebirth and renewal” (Titus 3: 5). The sacrament of baptism was foreshadowed by the baptism of St. John the Baptist in the Jordan River. This served to prepare people for the coming of the Redeemer and foreshadowed baptism established by the One Who will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3: 11; cf. John 1: 33; 3: 5-8).

The sacrament of baptism makes one a member of the Church,⁹ making it possible to receive other important sacraments.¹⁰ It initiates within the person sacramental life in unity with Christ.¹¹ Anyone who has not yet been baptized and is an adult or, if one is a minor, has received the permission of his or her parents or legal guardians can receive the sacrament of baptism

3 Cf. J. Kudasiewicz, *Chrzest*, op. cit., col. 352–353; A. Rojewski, *Triada sakramentalna: chrzest – bierzmowanie – Eucharystia. Aspekt teologiczno-pastoralny*, „Roczniki Liturgiczno-Homiletyczne” 56 (2009), p. 389.

4 Cf. J. Kudasiewicz, *Chrzest*, op. cit., col. 352-353.

5 Cf. R. Juraszek, *Chrzest jest powołaniem do pełni życia*, [in:] *Sakramenty święte w życiu chrześcijańsko-franciszkańskim. Materiały pomocnicze do formacji ciągłej dla FZŚ w Polsce na rok 2006*, Warszawa 2006, p. 17.

6 Cf. Rz 6, 3–12; J. Kudasiewicz, H. Witczyk, *Chrystus zbawia w sakramentach. Misje jubileuszowe*, Kielce 2001, p. 26.

7 John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 20; cf. Romans 6: 3-4).

8 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 854; cf. H. Langkammer, *Mały słownik biblijny*, Wrocław 2006, p. 69.

9 Cf. M. Tschuschke, *Chrzest*, [in:] *Katolicyzm A-Z*, red. Z. Pawlak, Łódź 1989, p. 47; R. Sobański, *Znaczenie pojęcia osoby w kanonicznym porządku prawnym*, „Prawo Kanoniczne” 41 (1997) nr 3-4, p. 7.

10 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 842, § 1; cf. Z. Janczewski, *Ważność sprawowania sakramentów w tajemniczenia chrześcijańskiego uzdrowienia i święceri w porządku prawnym Kościoła katolickiego*, Warszawa 20011, p. 23.

11 Cf. S. Olejnik, *Życie osobiste i współzycie międzyludzkie*, vol. 6, Warszawa 1990, p. 12–13.

upon request.¹² Receiving the sacrament of baptism is a major event in the life of a Christian. Upon receiving the sacrament of baptism, one should make an effort to grow his or her faith in God. Godparents also have an important and responsible task with regards to raising one in the Catholic faith; thus it is essential that they are present alongside the baptized child or neophyte. Right from the Catholic Church's beginnings, there was a custom that the godparents need to be present while a neophyte is baptized.

The sacrament of baptism is strictly tied to the institution of godparents.¹³ Regardless of if one is a child or adult, the custom of having godparents while being baptized dates back to the beginnings of Christianity.¹⁴ There were various terms for godparents in the Christian tradition. They were called: "witnesses to baptism," "guarantors," and "patrons." Starting in the eighth century, they were referred to by the Latin term *patrini et matrinae*, which means godfather and godmother.¹⁵ Both the 1917¹⁶ and 1983 Codes of Canon Law,¹⁷ as well as the 1990 Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches,¹⁸ use the Latin term *patrini* for godparents. Over the centuries, the number of persons chosen to be godparents evolved.

In the first century AD, the entire Christian community served as godparents. However, there was also the practice of having one person whom we would now call a godparent. One of the sources confirming the existence of godparents in the early years of Christianity is St. Hippolytus of Rome, who said that one of the members of the Christian community would take an unbaptized person who wanted to accept the Christian faith. Such a person would present the unbaptized to the catechumens' teacher and testify that

12 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 864; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1247; W. Góralski, R. Mazurowski, *Sakramenty pełnego wtajemniczenia chrześcijańskiego w życiu wiernych świeckich w świetle uchwał synodów diecezjalnych w Polsce w latach 1983–1999*, „Prawo Kanoniczne” 43 (2000) nr 1–2, p. 14.

13 For more on this topic, see: R. Kantor, *Chrzestny, czyli kto? Kanoniczna pozycja rodziców chrzestnych*, „Currenda” 6 (2011), p. 765–774.

14 Cf. J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, [in:] *Komentarz do Kodeksu Prawa Kanonicznego*, vol. 3.2: *Księga IV. Uświęcające zadanie Kościoła. Część I. Sakramenty. Część II. Pozostałe akty kultu Bożego. Część III. Miejsca i czasy święte*, red. J. Krukowski, Pallottinum 2011, p. 58.

15 Cf. M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach świętych*, vol. 1: *Normy ogólne i sakrament chrztu*, Warszawa 1983, p. 281.

16 Codex Iuris Canonici 1917, can. 765-769.

17 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 872-874.

18 Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium, can. 684-685.

he or she was capable of listening to the Sacred Scriptures.¹⁹ Our modern-day expression “godparent” was not yet used; however, the nature of his or her service indicated a godparent in the broader sense.²⁰ He or she accompanied the unbaptized person in learning the Christian faith. Having led him or her to the catechumenate, this accompanying person would aid the neophyte right up through receiving the sacrament of baptism. He or she played an important role in the catechesis in which someone who wanted to receive baptism participated.²¹ It has been indicated that in the case of unbaptized adults he or she was active in the catechumen’s Christian formation.²² In the last phase of preparations for baptism, when the candidate was judged worthy of receiving the sacrament of baptism, the Christian who led him or her to the community of the faithful publicly testified to his or her exemplary life.²³ After the catechumen had gone through formation, the godparent became the guarantor of his or her faith in Jesus Christ with regards to the entire Christian community.

In the eighth century, two people were godparents: a man and a woman. Starting in the thirteenth century, there were even three godparents: two men and one woman for boys and two women and one man for girls.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Council of Trent established the number of godparents who could be present at the sacrament of baptism, decreeing that they could be two at most: a man and a woman. In 1614, Pope Paul V reminded that the number of godparents could not exceed two and that they could not be of the same sex because only a man and a woman could be parents. This precept is also binding in contemporary canon law.²⁵

The development of the grace of baptism in a child requires significant efforts on the part of the parents. They are also obliged to bear witness to faith in God in their lives with respect to the neophyte. In addition to the child’s parents, his or her godparents are especially obliged to be witnesses to faith;

19 Saint Hippolyte, *La Tradition Apostolique*, Paris 1968, nr 5; cf. M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach*, op. cit., p. 278.

20 Cf. P. Hemperek, *Chrzestni rodzice*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka*, op. cit., vol. 3, col. 378.

21 Cf. M. Dujarier, *Instytucja rodziców chrześniych*, „*Concilium*” 1–10 (1966–1967), p. 66.

22 Cf. M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach*, op. cit., p. 278.

23 Saint Hippolyte, *La Tradition Apostolique*, op. cit., nr 20; cf. M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach*, op. cit., p. 278.

24 Cf. P. Hemperek, *Chrzestni rodzice*, op. cit., col. 378.

25 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 873; cf. T. Pawluk, *Prawo kanoniczne według Kodeksu Jana Pawła II*, vol. 2: *Lud Boży jego nauczanie i uświęcanie*, Olsztyn 1986, p. 369.

that is why they are required to be exemplary Catholics.²⁶ The same is in the case of adults receiving the sacrament of baptism. They should receive aid from their godparents in their religious formation.

Persons belonging to non-Catholic Christian communities and other religious are not allowed to be godparents. The only exception is that a person belonging to one of the Eastern Orthodox Churches can be a godparent as long as the other is a Catholic.²⁷ The same rules pertain to Catholic godparents in the Orthodox Churches. In this case, the Christian formation of an Orthodox neophyte rests above all on the godparent from the Orthodox Church.²⁸ If the Orthodox godparent is a man, the Catholic one should be a woman. If the woman belongs to an Orthodox Church, the man should be a Catholic. An Orthodox Christian can be a godparent only if there is an appropriate reason. In such a case, it must be ensured that the person who is baptized will be raised Catholic.²⁹ One of the godparents can be Orthodox if that is the desire of the child's parents or of the catechumen.³⁰ The decision to choose a member of an Eastern Orthodox Church to be a godparent should be justified in the

26 Cf. M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, [in:] *Słownik prawa kanonicznego*, red. idem, Warszawa 2004, col. 33; J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 62.

27 Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium, can. 811, 3°; cf. Pontificium Consilium ad Unitatem Christianorum Fovendam, *Directorium oecumenicum noviter compositum* (23.03.1993), 98b, „Acta Apostolicae Sedis” 85 (1993), p. 1039–1119; E. Tejero, *Rozdział IV. Chrzestni*, [in:] *Kodeks Prawa Kanonicznego. Komentarz. Powszechne i partykularne ustawodawstwo Kościoła katolickiego. Podstawowe akty polskiego prawa wyznaniowego*, red. P. Majer, Kraków 2011, p. 670.

28 Cf. Secretariatus ad Christianorum Unitatem Fovendam, *Directorium ad ea quae a Concilio Vaticano Secundo de re oecumenica promulgata sunt exsequenda* (14.05.1967), 48, „Acta Apostolicae Sedis” 59 (1967), p. 574–592; Pontificium Consilium ad Unitatem Christianorum Fovendam, *Directorium oecumenicum noviter compositum* (23.03.1993), 98b; Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium, can. 685, § 3.

29 Pontificium Consilium ad Unitatem Christianorum Fovendam, *Directorium oecumenicum noviter compositum* (23.03.1993), 98b; cf. Secretariatus ad Christianorum Unitatem Fovendam, *Directorium ad ea quae a Concilio Vaticano Secundo de re oecumenica promulgata sunt exsequenda* (14.05.1967), nr 45; Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętemu dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5b, [in:] *Dokumenty duszpastersko-liturgiczne Episkopatu Polski (1966–1998)*, red. C. Krakowiak, L. Adamowicz, Lublin 1999; P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, [in:] *Komentarz do Kodeksu Prawa Kanonicznego z 1983 r.*, vol. 3.1: *Księga III. Nauczycielskie zadanie Kościoła. Księga IV. Uświęcające zadanie Kościoła*, red. idem [et al.], Lublin 1986, p. 96.

30 *Obrzędy chrztu dzieci dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, Katowice 2009, 10c; cf. *Realizacja podstawowych zadań kościelnych: nauczania, uświęcania, rządzenia*, Tarnów 2001, p. 39. *Realizacja podstawowych zadań kościelnych: nauczania, uświęcania, rządzenia*, Tarnów 2001, p. 39.

presence of the parish priest who is to offer the sacrament of baptism.³¹ The Orthodox candidate for a godparent must fulfill his or her Christian duties in his or her Church in an exemplary fashion. This also pertains to receiving other sacraments of Christian initiation and the intention of fulfilling the duties resulting from being a godparent.³²

Christians from Protestant communities can only be witnesses during a Catholic's birth, and only alongside Catholic godparents.³³ A witness's only task is to attest to the fact that a baptism had taken place. In addition to being a witness to a baptism, a godparent also has responsibilities and rights resulting from his or her function. Members of Protestant or Orthodox churches who are not worthy of exercising the responsibilities of witnesses should not be selected. In order to avoid this, a witness should present a document from his or her priest or pastor saying that he or she is religious and enjoys a good reputation. It should be underlined that a Catholic cannot be a witness to a baptism.

Godparents and witnesses at baptisms have similar tasks. For this reason, Church law recommends that, if possible, godparents be their godchildren's confirmation sponsors.³⁴ The duties of a godparent and of a confirmation sponsor are identical; for this reason, it can be more effective if the same person performs both functions.³⁵

2. A Godparent's Rights and Duties

Just like a child's biological parents, godparents should be properly prepared and instructed on the meaning of the sacrament of baptism as well as about

31 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; cf. J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 62.

32 Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 874, § 1, 2°–3°; Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5d; *Obrzędy chrztu dzieci dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, 10; L. Adamowicz, *Wprowadzenie do prawa o sakramentach świętych według Kodeksu Prawa Kanonicznego oraz Kodeksu Kanonów Kościołów Wschodnich*, Lublin 1999, p. 78.

33 *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 874, § 2.

34 *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 893, § 1–2; cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1311; M. Pastuszko, *Świadkowie bierzmowania (kanony 892–893 §§ 1–2)*, „Prawo Kanoniczne” 49 (2006) nr 1–2, p. 136; M. Saj, *Prawne skutki związku niesakramentalnego*, „Ateneum Kapłańskie” 162 (2014) z. 2 (630), p. 319.

35 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1311; cf. T. Pawluk, *Prawo kanoniczne...*, op. cit., p. 376.

their rights and duties. The parish vicar and other priests selected by him - and, in some cases, lay Catholics - are responsible for instructing godparents.³⁶ Every person receiving the sacrament of baptism should be accompanied by two godparents: a man and a woman.³⁷ This is related to the hope that the Christian faith will grow in the life of the newly baptized person thanks to the efforts of both the child's parents and godparents. They assist in raising a child Catholic because this task above all rests on the parents. Godparents are only guarantors and assistants in a neophyte's religious formation. As guarantors, they promise to do everything so that the newly baptized grow in their Catholic faith.³⁸

The time preceding a child's birth should be utilized both by godparents and the whole family to especially prepare for the baptism ceremony. The preparations themselves can take numerous pastoral forms. Baptismal catechesis should be held in every parish,³⁹ and homilies on the topic of baptism should be preached there, too. All this should lead to a heightened awareness of the meaning of the gift of the sacrament of baptism in family life and in the life of the entire Catholic Church.⁴⁰

During the baptism ceremony, godparents and biological parents vow to raise the child in the Catholic faith and to respect Catholic morality. This means that they commit to bring the baptized child or neophyte closer to knowing God. They declare that on their part they will fulfill God's laws and the Church's teachings and prepare the child for further sacramental life.⁴¹ Godparents are official representatives of the Catholic Church, which the neophyte joins, and thus they should be Catholics who are conscious of their membership

36 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 851, 2°; cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 3; J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 39.

37 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 872–873; cf. J. Białobok, *Instytucja rodziców chrzestnych w ustawodawstwie Kościoła zachodniego. Studium historyczno-prawne*, Lublin 2001; idem, *Instytucja rodziców chrzestnych w Kodeksie Prawa Kanonicznego*, „Currenda” 112 (1962), p. 253–270.

38 *Obrzędy chrztu dzieci dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, 6; cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 872; Codex Iuris Canonici 1917, can. 769; W. Góralski, R. Mazurowski, *Sakramenty pełnego...*, op. cit., p. 17.

39 Cf. W. Góralski, R. Mazurowski, *Sakramenty pełnego...*, op. cit., p. 18.

40 Cf. *Wtajemniczenie chrześcijańskie*, 8, [in:] *Obrzędy chrztu dzieci dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, Katowice 2009.

41 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 2; cf. M. Tschuschke, *Chrzest*, op. cit., p. 47; M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach...*, op. cit., p. 281.

in the Church as well as the resultant rights and duties that result from it.⁴² Their task is to accompany the child's parents or the catechumen during the baptism ceremony and later should aid the child in growing in the Catholic faith. This duty is expressed in the question asked by the bishop, priest, or deacon administering the sacrament about the godparent's readiness to aid the child's parents in exercising their duties. Godparents publicly respond to this question in the presence of the Church community gathered at the ceremony. By responding to this question they confirm that they are aware of the responsibilities resulting from choosing to be a godparent.⁴³ It should be emphasized that thanks to the sacrament of baptism the baptized becomes the godparent's spiritual child.⁴⁴

Godparents' aid in raising their godchildren in the Christian faith above all consists of giving an example.⁴⁵ The requirements that the Catholic Church asks of godparents are intended to guarantee that the newly baptized person receives a proper religious upbringing. Their responsibilities are also the result of the godparents' own baptism, which is why godparents cannot be selected on a whim, without much thought. On the contrary, they must be properly prepared to be godparents.⁴⁶ Potential godparents should have the appropriate predispositions.⁴⁷ The priest should advise the child's parents or the catechumen to seek out potential godparents from amongst their relatives or other believers from their surroundings. This incentive exists so that the baptized child can frequently be in touch with his or her godparents, while the godparents themselves can attend to the newly baptized person's religious

42 Cf. A. Skowronek, *Z teologii chrztu*, [in:] *Sakrament chrztu. Liturgia. Teologia. Pismo Święte*, red. idem, Katowice 1973, p. 68.

43 *Obrzędy chrztu dzieci dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, 116.

44 *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1917, can. 769; cf. M. Sopoćko, *Obowiązki rodziców chrzestnych*, „Ateneum Kapłańskie” 38 (1936), p. 183.

45 Cf. A. Skowronek, *Z teologii chrztu*, op. cit., p. 68; B. Glinkowski, *Chrzest*, Poznań 2001, p. 30 (Prawo Kościoła na co dzień).

46 Cf. W. Mazurowski, *Warto wiedzieć – o prawie Kościoła w pytaniach i odpowiedziach*, Pelplin 2013, p. 15.

47 Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 851, 2°; W. Mazurowski, *Warto wiedzieć...*, op. cit., p. 15.

development.⁴⁸ It is imprudent to choose someone whom one does not know well⁴⁹ or to choose someone because of his or her wealth.⁵⁰

In exceptional situations, godparents are even required to take the place of the child's parents in the child's Catholic upbringing.⁵¹ Such a situation occurs when one of the parents dies or is deprived of his or her parental rights. If the child's parents forsake becoming the child's legal guardians, the child's godparents should attempt at gaining legal custody over the child. The godparents' function consists of aiding the child's parents and being ready to exercise their responsibilities if such a need arises.⁵² If biological parents offer their child a good Catholic upbringing, the role of the godparent consists solely of accompanying them. They can be compared to stewards in family life.⁵³

In order to exercise their duties well, godparents should be witnesses to Jesus Christ.⁵⁴ One such form of bearing witness is the godparent's attitude to life, which is a gift from God. Thus godparents have the responsibility to protect life at every stage. Human life should be defended and respected from the moment of conception until natural death.⁵⁵ People who are candidates to be godparents and who harm human life, even if it is by supporting abortion, euthanasia, or *in vitro* fertilization are not worthy of being godparents, which is why they should not be chosen by the child's parents or catechumen, nor should priests allow them to exercise this function.

48 Cf. S. Czerwik, *Wprowadzenie do odnowionego obrzędu chrztu dzieci*, [in:] *Sakrament chrztu. Liturgia. Teologia. Pismo Święte*, red. A. Skowronek, Katowice 1973, p. 87; M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach...*, op. cit., p. 295.

49 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; cf. B. Glinkowski, *Chrzest. Prawo...*, op. cit., p. 32; M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach...*, op. cit., p. 295.

50 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; cf. F. Wycisk, *Rola wychowawcza rodziców chrześniych*, „Homo Dei” 29 (1960), p. 715.

51 Cf. M. Tschuschke, *Chrzest*, op. cit., p. 47.

52 Cf. S. Czerwik, *Wprowadzenie do odnowionego...*, op. cit., p. 87.

53 Cf. A. Skowronek, *Z teologii chrztu...*, op. cit., p. 67.

54 Cf. B. Glinkowski, *Chrzest. Prawo...*, op. cit., p. 30.

55 Cf. W. Tabaczyński, *Prawo do życia*, [in:] *Słownik małżeństwa i rodziny*, red. E. Ozorowski, Warszawa-Łomianki 1999, p. 367.

3. The Requirements to Become a Godparent

Godparents should be model Catholics because they are especially responsible for the holistic development of the newly baptized person. Church law has requirements for potential godparents to be valid and suitable. They are: choosing and accepting this role; living in accordance with the Catholic faith and Catholic morality; having reached an appropriate age; having received the sacraments of initiation; and not having incurred any canonical penalties. The biological parents of the child or adult being baptized cannot be their godparents. They must have completed their religious education at school and their parish and cannot have any addictions that deprive them of their consciousness and free will.

The first condition of exercising the duties of godparents is the selection of appropriate persons by the child's parents⁵⁶ or, in the case of adults, the person who is to be baptized.⁵⁷ This is expressed in the request directed towards potential godparents that relates to their service. Every candidate for baptism should have two godparents.⁵⁸ Godparents can never be two people of the same sex. Canon law does not permit a larger number of godparents than two.⁵⁹ In exceptional situations, when the selection of two godparents is impossible, only one godparent suffices: a man or a woman.⁶⁰

Accepting the request to be a godparent is essential for the function to be valid. One cannot be a valid godparent if he or she is coerced into being a godparent or does not want to become one. The condition of the validity of this function in the Church is for the decision to become a godparent to be voluntary. Accepting the request to be a godparent is tied to the intention to

56 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 1°; cf. Codex Iuris Canonici 1917, can. 765, 4°; E. Szafrowski, *Podręcznik prawa...*, op. cit., p. 147; W. Góralski, R. Mazurowski, *Sakramenty pełnego...*, op. cit., p. 17.

57 Cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 1°; E. Szafrowski, *Podręcznik prawa...*, op. cit., p. 147; J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 61.

58 *Obrzędy chrztu dzieci dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, 6; cf. *Wtajemniczenie chrześcijańskie*, 8; Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 873; Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, op. cit., col. 33; E. Szafrowski, *Podręcznik prawa...*, op. cit., p. 146.

59 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 873; cf. Codex Iuris Canonici 1917, can. 762–764; F. Bączkiewicz, *Prawo kanoniczne. Podręcznik dla duchowieństwa*, vol. 2: *Prawo małżeńskie*, przejrzeni i poprawili J. Baron, W. Stawinoga, Opole 1960, p. 13; P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 95.

60 *Obrzędy chrztu dzieci dostosowane do zwyczajów diecezji polskich*, 8; cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 873; M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, op. cit., col. 33; P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 95.

fulfill the duties in this capacity with respect to the person who is about to be baptized.⁶¹ Coercion in this respect makes one an invalid godparent, because the candidate for a godparent has not voluntarily decided to exercise his or her duties related to that function. For this reason, people with intellectual disabilities cannot become godparents, as they are not fully aware of the rights and duties related to this function.⁶² In exceptional situations, when the right to make a free decision has been neglected by the catechumen or the child's parents or legal guardians, the parish priest and person administering the sacrament of baptism can choose the godparent.⁶³ From a practical point of view, it can be difficult for the priest, and especially the person administering the sacrament, to find someone who could be a godparent right before the baptism ceremony.

People living in a state of mortal sin also cannot be godparents. This prohibition also pertains to unmarried persons living together as well as the divorced and remarried.⁶⁴ This also pertains to persons of the same sex living together in a state of mortal sin. When selecting godparents, the child's biological parents should take into account the witness they give in their lives, as godparents are required to live lives that do not cause scandal among Catholics and to serve as role models for the neophyte.⁶⁵ Before the baptism ceremony, godparents should be in a state of grace, which is why they are first required to participate in the sacrament of confession in order to fully participate in the liturgy by receiving Holy Communion.⁶⁶ Godparents should be members of the Catholic Church who can publicly bear honest witness to their faith during the sacramental liturgy.⁶⁷ The only exception is when an Orthodox Christian becomes a godparent.

61 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 1°; cf. E. Tejero, *Rozdział IV. Chrzestni*, op. cit., p. 670; T. Pawluk, *Prawo kanoniczne...*, op. cit., p. 369.

62 Codex Iuris Canonici 1917, can. 765, 1°; cf. M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach*, op. cit., p. 292.

63 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 1°; cf. M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, op. cit., col. 33; P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 95–96.

64 Cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 3°; Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 61.

65 Cf. M. Tschuschke, *Chrzest*, op. cit., p. 47; J. Glapiak, *Praktyczny przewodnik po przepisach prawa kościelnego*, Poznań 2012, p. 31.

66 Cf. R. Kantor, *Rola i zadania wikariusza parafialnego. Studium kanoniczno-pastoralne*, Tarnów 2011, p. 85.

67 *Wtajemniczenie chrześcijańskie*, 9; cf. P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 95.

Another requirement of godparents is that they have reached the appropriate age. Potential godparents are required to be sufficiently mature in order to exercise their duties. According to canon law, godparents should be at least sixteen years old; however, there is a possibility to decide upon a different age.⁶⁸ One should always bear in mind that godparents should be sufficiently mature so that they can be able to exercise the responsibilities resulting from their function well.⁶⁹ In exceptional situations, the diocesan bishop can establish an older or younger minimum age for godparents, while a bishops' conference can establish that age in all the dioceses in a country or region.⁷⁰ According to canon law, in exceptional situations, when there is sufficient cause, the parish priest or even the person administering the sacrament of baptism can choose a younger godparent.⁷¹ Allowing people younger than a certain age to become godparents is possible as long as they meet all the remaining conditions expressed in canon law. With regards to lowering the minimum age of a potential godparent that has been established by a diocesan bishop, the parish priest is required to direct a request to the competent ecclesiastical authorities.⁷²

Persons who have been selected to be godparents should have at least received the sacraments of Christian initiation; otherwise, they cannot be allowed to exercise this function.⁷³ These sacraments are closely related, because they lead Catholics to full religious maturity.⁷⁴ They cause them to become active in the life of Jesus Christ and the Church initiated by the sacrament of holy baptism, which is complemented by the sacrament of confirmation and achieves its pinnacle in participation in the Eucharist.⁷⁵

68 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 2°; cf. J. Borucki, *Recepcja kościelnego prawa powszechnego w ustawodawstwie i działalności duszpasterskiej Diecezji Włocławskiej po Soborze Watykańskim II*, Włocławek 2012, p. 104.

69 Cf. M. Tschuschke, *Chrzest*, op. cit., p. 47.

70 Cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 2°; E. Tejero, *Rozdział IV. Chrzestni*, op. cit., p. 670; P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 96.

71 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 2°; cf. M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, op. cit., col. 33; E. Szafrowski, *Podręcznik prawa...*, op. cit., p. 147.

72 Cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 87, § 1; L. Adamowicz, *Wprowadzenie do prawa...*, op. cit., p. 79.

73 Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 874, § 1, 3°; cf. M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, op. cit., col. 33; P. Hemperek, *Chrzestni rodzice*, op. cit., col. 378.

74 Cf. *Wtajemniczenie chrześcijańskie*, 2; Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium*, 31; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1285; A. Rojewski, *Triada sakramentalna...*, p. 388.

75 Cf. M. Tschuschke, *Chrzest*, op. cit., p. 48; A. F. Dziuba, *Sakrament bierzmowania w dynamice wiary*, „Studia Pelpińskie” 16 (1985), p. 267.

By receiving the sacrament of holy baptism, one becomes subject to the regulations of the Catholic Church.⁷⁶ The rights that a baptized person receives can be limited only when one violates canon law, consciously and voluntarily, which is also related to a punishment.⁷⁷ Potential godparents should also be free of any sentences by ecclesiastical courts or other competent Church authorities.⁷⁸ In canon law, one must have committed a crime to receive a punishment, which should also be levied in order to avoid scandal among the faithful.⁷⁹ Ecclesiastical punishments such as excommunication, an interdict, or, in the case of priests, suspensions, are corrective in nature.⁸⁰ They above all serve to correct and fix the harm and scandal that a Catholic has caused. As long as a Catholic faces an ecclesiastical punishment, he or she cannot be a godparent.

Another necessary condition is that the godparent is not the baptized child's or catechumen's biological father or mother.⁸¹ This prohibition is related to the divergent rights and duties that parents and godparents have. The duty to raise a child in the faith above all rests on the child's parents,⁸² while godparents do not serve to take over the child's parents' duties. Instead, their task is to guarantee that they will bring up the newly baptized person if his or her parents neglect or are unable to do so. Only in exceptional situations, when the child's biological parents neglect their child's formation, are godparents required to intervene in order to allow for the parents of the neophyte to properly form their godchildren. Otherwise, if there is such a necessity, they should aid in bringing up the children.⁸³

A very important component of the development of one's religious life is that one gains knowledge about God, which lead the Catholic to deepen his or her faith. For this reason, parents are required to ensure that their children

76 Cf. B. W. Zubert, *Chrzest – podstawą nowej podmiotowości prawnej*, [in:] *Pro iure et vita. Wybór pism*, red. E. Szczot, Lublin 2005, p. 559–571.

77 Cf. J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 98.

78 *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 874, § 1, 4^o; cf. M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, op. cit., col. 33; P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 96.

79 Cf. J. Syryjczyk, *Kanoniczne prawo karne. Część szczególna*, Warszawa 2003, p. 182.

80 Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 1331–1335; John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 84; J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 100.

81 Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 874, § 1, 5^o; M. Sitarz, *Chrzestny*, op. cit., col. 33; P. Hemperek, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 96.

82 Cf. M. Sopoćko, *Obowiązki rodziców...*, op. cit., p. 184.

83 Cf. F. Wycisk, *Rola wychowawcza...*, op. cit., p. 715; M. Sopoćko, *Obowiązki rodziców...*, op. cit., p. 184.

receive religious knowledge.⁸⁴ This is related to another requirement that the Catholic Church presents to potential godparents: that they have completed religious education in their schools and parishes. Thus people who through their own fault and neglect were not catechized should not be godparents.⁸⁵ If something as important as the faith has been neglected, this attests to the lack of maturity on the part of such persons. Thus they are incapable of transmitting the Catholic faith and morality to the newly baptized person.

Not deepening one's faith shows contempt for the Redeemer. Thus Catholics who fail to do so are not suitable for the honorable and responsible function of being godparents. They disqualify themselves from exercising the duties of godparents well. Meanwhile, persons who because of their age are still receiving their religious education and reliably participate in catechesis are allowed to become godparents. Participation in catechesis also attests to faith in God. A Catholic who participates in catechesis becomes a witness to faith. It is also his or her public confession of the Christian faith.⁸⁶

Persons who are addicted to drugs or other substances that deprive them of their free will should not become godparents.⁸⁷ Persons who are addicted to the point that they are deprived of having a will and being conscious are not able to give good witness to the Christian life. They cannot fully recognize the responsibilities or rights of godparents; thus it is recommended that the problem of addiction be taken into consideration when godparents are selected.⁸⁸ Addicts who undergo therapy can become godparents. The struggle against an addiction is a symptom of a person's mature attitude and awareness of the state in which he or she is. If the priest has doubts with respect to the proposed godparent's will and awareness of this function, he can propose that the proposed candidate is tested by a specialist, who can then declare how much he or she is impacted by the addiction. If the priest decides that a proposed candidate cannot exercise the duties of a godparent because of

84 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Dyrektorium katechetyczne Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce*, Kraków 2001, 128; A. M. Czaja, *Rodzice chrzestni. Studium kanoniczno-pastoralne*, Brodnica-Toruń 2015, p. 46–47.

85 Cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; W. Góralski, R. Mazurowski, *Sakramenty pełnego...*, op. cit., p. 17; J. Krzywdą, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 61.

86 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Dyrektorium katechetyczne Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce*, 21; cf. A. M. Czaja, *Rodzice chrzestni...*, p. 47–48.

87 Cf. S. Olejnik, *Teologia moralna...*, op. cit., p. 93–117.

88 Cf. *I Synod Diecezji Elckiej 1997–1999*, 603, Elk 1999; A. M. Czaja, *Rodzice chrzestni...*, p. 48–49.

his or her addiction, he cannot allow him or her to exercise this important and responsible function.⁸⁹

The priest should carefully check if the candidates for godparents presented by the child's parents or by the catechumen meet all the conditions expressed in canon law. If the parish priest of the place where the sacrament will be administered does not know the proposed godparents, he is required for those who seek to be godparents attesting to their religiosity and morality. Such a document is presented by the priest in the place where they live only when they meet all the basic requirements of godparents.⁹⁰ If there is a situation in which the parish priest of the person who would like to be a godparent cannot produce such a document, he is required to immediately inform the child's parents (or, in the case of adults, the neophyte).

If a priest refuses to present such a document, it means that such a person is not worthy of exercising the duties of a godparent. The parish priest in the place where the sacrament of baptism takes place should learn about the reasons for the refusal to produce such a document. Before choosing godparents, the child's parents should find out if the former are worthy of exercising this function.⁹¹ If the child's parents or the adult person who is to be baptized err in choosing godparents, not knowing that the potential godparent do not respect the Catholic faith and morals in their lives, the potential godparents themselves should decline to accept the invitation to be godparents for the good of the child and of the catechumen. If the parish priest does not have any reservations about the proposed godparents with regards to the legal and moral requirements, he should accept the godparents proposed by the child or catechumen.⁹² They become full godparents from the moment when they receive the priest's approval.

89 Cf. A. M. Czaja, *Rodzice chrzestni...*, p. 49.

90 Cf. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; J. Krzywda, *Część I. Sakramenty*, op. cit., p. 61.

91 Cf. *Komunikat Kurii w sprawie rodziców chrzestnych*, [in:] *Prawodawstwo kościoła w Polsce 1961–1970*, vol. 2, z. 3. *Ustawodawstwo diecezjalne*, red. T. Pieronek, Warszawa 1974, p. 263–264.

92 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja duszpasterska Episkopatu o udzieleniu sakramentu chrztu świętego dzieciom* (15.12.1975), 5; cf. B. Glinkowski, *Chrzest. Prawo...*, op. cit., p. 30; M. Pastuszko, *Prawo o sakramentach...*, op. cit., p. 78.

Conclusion

Having accepted the invitation to become godparents and having received confirmation from their parish priest, godparents receive rights and duties with regards to the persons who receive the sacrament of baptism. Every candidate for the sacrament of baptism should have two godparents. In exceptional situations, one godparent is sufficient. The basic task of godparents is to support parents in their concern that their child is raised in the Christian faith and expresses it in his or her life. The same pertains to adult neophytes. The choice of godparents should be informed, as they should be mature and exemplary Catholics. Godparents should not take over the child's parents in ensuring the child's religious education, because this is above all the biological parents' responsibility. Godparents have the duty to intervene when they see that their godchildren are not properly raised in the faith and Catholic morality or they are being harmed. The child's parents or the catechumen authorize the godparents to do so at the very moment when they select them to exercise this function. When choosing godparents, the child's parents or the catechumen should take into account the reputation that the potential godparents enjoy in their place of residence. Godparents are required to lead lives that do not cause scandal among the faithful. People who do not fulfill the basic requirements of the Catholic life should be made aware that they preclude themselves from exercising the honorable duties of godparents.

Abstract

The Origin and Meaning of the Ministry of Godparents from a Liturgical and Canonical Perspective

The aim of this study is a deeper explanation and clarification of liturgical and canonical norms concerning the institution of godparents. This article can contribute to a better understanding of the importance of godparents in the development of the spiritual life of the baptized. In summary, one can draw some basic conclusions. Godparents are the guarantors and helpers in the development of faith and Catholic morality. Therefore, every candidate for the sacrament of baptism should have two godparents. In exceptional cases, just one godparent is enough. Two persons of the same sex can never be godparents for one person.

Keywords: Baptism; godparents; convert; sacrament

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