

Orthodox Godparents

An integral part of our Orthodox Faith is the position and privilege of being and having a Godparent. We all may not be one, but if we're baptized Orthodox Christians we all have one. Whether we call them Noms or Noms our Godparents were those who sponsored our entry into the Orthodox Church, either as infants or adults in life.

In Greek the term for Godparent is *givosforos*, which signifies that the godparent is the person who receives in his/her arms the newly baptized infant. A Godparent must have been baptized in the Orthodox Church, be in full sacramental and canonical communion and be a member in good standing of a local Orthodox parish. It is totally unthinkable to allow a non-Orthodox Godparent in the Orthodox Church. This will become obvious as we explore their role in our Tradition.

There is a rich Orthodox Tradition governing the responsibilities and role of the Godparents. Not only did they sponsor our entry into the Church, but in the case of infants they affirm our denial of Satan and acceptance of Christ, and are the first to recite the Creed, or give statement of faith on our behalf. If we think about it, this may sound a bit presumptuous. But being that the Orthodox Church rightly insists on infant baptism, the Godparent accepts the responsibility to make sure their Godchild lives up to the professions of faith made at baptism since infants can't answer for themselves.

The physical sign of this union and relationship between Godparents and newly Baptized Christian is when the Godfather or Godmother anoints the side body of the infant with the oil of gladness. This seals the spiritual relationship between Godparent and Godchild and it is considered a sacred act. So sacred is the bond regarded in the Church, that the Godparent is seen as a spiritual relative, so much so in fact that there are Canonical prohibitions to marriage when there is a Baptismal bond. Traditionally, by Orthodox practice, an infant is named on the eighth day of life in a special service. As this service has fallen into disuse, an infant is not given a name until he/she is Baptized. In Orthodox countries, infants aren't even registered with civil authorities until they are Baptized. It has long been the prerogative of the Godparent to name the child at

Baptism. Today, however, Godparents consult with the parents as to which name to name their child. However, Godparents still give the name during the Baptism Service. This further involves the Godparents in the lives of the family and reinforces their co-responsibility for the spiritual Orthodox upbringing of the child. It has also been part of our tradition that if something were to happen to the parents, the Godparents would take responsibility for the upbringing of their Godchildren.

It's unfortunate that these rich traditions have become all but lost today. Many times we see the role of a Godparent as a social one - the opportunity to become koumbaros to strengthen friendships and to ignore the spiritual obligations. It is not enough to just appoint Godparents for our children or in the case of Orthodox converts, just to pick anyone. It's important to consider the spiritual responsibilities and obligations as well.

As Godparents it is our responsibility to make sure our Godchildren make it to Church on Sunday, attend Sunday School and get a proper Orthodox upbringing. It's not enough just to make sure we don't forget a Birthday or Christmas present... why not try including a religious book, or icon, or perhaps a Name-day Card on their Name-day? It's time we bring our relationship to the level it should be. This is a responsibility we must take seriously!