

As Attila the Hun and his hordes swept toward Paris, St. Genevieve encouraged the people to pray and do penance. The young woman was well known to the Parisians. She had exhibited remarkable piety at an early age and had come to live with her godmother in Paris. She cared for the poor, experienced a miraculous prayer life, and was tasked by the local bishop to care for the consecrated virgins of the city. Now she pleaded with the people to surrender their lives to Providence. Her pleadings were heard by heaven, and Attila and his hordes left Paris unharmed. For this—any many other incredible deeds—she was later declared the patron saint of Paris and continues to intercede and care for the city she so loved.

A small part of Genevieve’s narrative is the quiet role played by her godmother, Lutetia, who cared for her after her parents died. Lutetia helped raise a saint. The good godmother invites us to consider the role godparents play in raising godchildren to be a holy men and women of God.

**What is the purpose of godparents?** The godparents’ purpose is to help the child attain heaven. Godparents are selected by the parents of a child to be baptized. Pursuant to the law of the Church, a godparent (or *sponsor*) must, in pertinent part, ***“be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has already received the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist and who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on” (Can. 874 §1.3).***

The role or “function” of godparents cannot be reduced to some social award. Parents should not feel obligated to select a favorite family member or friend; rather, they ought to seek partners who will join with them in this earthly pilgrimage to help their child attain heaven. The godparents will publicly affirm their commitment to help the parents in their Christian duty to raise the child in accordance with true religion.

**What are the duties of the godparents?** The duties of a godparent are simple: be holy so that you may help lead your godchild into holiness. As with the case of St. Genevieve, there is a tradition that godparents will raise the child if the parents die. Whether to follow such a tradition is at the parents’ discretion.

What is expected by the Church is that the godparents exhibit the virtues necessary to flourish in their purpose. The godparents should live a life of holiness, in obedience to the Church. As Genevieve cared for Paris, so too do the godparents help their godchild attain what is good and avoid what is evil.

The godparent is a spiritual mentor and should be an exemplar of Catholic virtue in both word and deed. As the child matures, it will be important for him to see someone—other than his parents—who treats spiritual goods as the highest goods in this life.

As Pope St. Paul VI warned, the gap between the gospel and the culture is growing. Parents benefit greatly from godparents who will be a light and guide, like the candle lit at baptism, to their child.

Godparents are tasked with assisting the parents in raising the child to be a saint, but unlike the parents, the godparents most commonly do not see the child every day. In fact, godparents may interact with their godchild rather infrequently. How, then, can the godparents best carry out these duties? Overall, one of the most important factors is *intentionality*. Godparents should be about making time for their godchild and about the spiritual goods in his life.

Here are a few practical considerations when trying to be a good godparent:

**Remember your godchild's sacramental anniversaries.** Send him a card or a gift or make a phone call to honor his baptism date and later his confirmation and first Communion anniversaries. Humans are sensory animals. As we see in the liturgy, how we act toward certain things communicates their importance—e.g., standing for the Gospel reading or kneeling before the holy Eucharist. It is the same with birthdays or wedding anniversaries. Gifts, dinners, feasts, and gatherings communicate that this event is important. Godparents should do what they can to communicate that sacramental anniversaries are worthy of remembrance and celebration.

**Help him cultivate a devotion to his patron saint.** Encourage the parents to name the child after a saint and entrust the child to that blessed namesake. Then you can help the child cultivate a devotion by remembering the patronal feast day alongside the sacramental anniversaries and providing gifts that foster a relationship between the child and his patron.

**Build him a spiritual library.** Each year, especially when the child is young, purchase a spiritual classic for your godchild on his baptismal anniversary or patronal feast, and inscribe it. For example, on the child's first baptism anniversary, you could purchase for him the *Confessions* by St. Augustine or the *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* by Ludwig Ott. Repeat this practice each year. By the time the child comes of age and can read such works with interest, he will have a whole library. Imagine a child going to college with a robust collection of spiritual works—each one inscribed as a memento of what is truly important in life.

**Be a spiritual mentor.** The godchild will need someone in his life who is not afraid to discuss and take seriously the things of God. If possible, be present at family functions, and when the child is older, be intentional about asking him about his spiritual life. Cultivate a relationship in which taking him to coffee to discuss his interior life and the challenges of youth would not be odd or misplaced. Maybe, at times, he will not be open to such a relationship, but be sure that he knows that you are open to that conversation. You never know how the Holy Spirit may work and what phone call you may receive one day.

As with all things, prudence must take in the circumstances, and godparents must discern how best to live out their calling. They should always keep in mind, however, that like Lutetia, the godchild to whom God has entrusted them is destined to become a saint.

So, for all godparents and godparents-to-be out there: be intentional. Take seriously the things of God. And may the child, the parents, and you all work together to be holy and attain heaven.

**NOTE: According to Archdiocesan Sacramental Guidelines, godparents must be practicing Catholics who have received all three sacraments of initiation - i.e., Baptism, Holy Communion and Confirmation.** We can proceed however, if only one is Catholic. If the other person is from a Christian denomination other than Roman Catholic, he or she will be listed in our parish records as a Christian Witness to the baptism.

Godparents who are Catholic need to obtain a **Sponsorship Certificate** from the parish to which they belong. The certificate verifies that they meet all the requirements outlined in the **Archdiocesan Sacramental Guidelines**. **NOTE: The sponsorship certificates need to be signed, scanned and emailed back to me no later than one week prior to the date of the baptism.** My email address is [escrivani@newhavencatholic.org](mailto:escrivani@newhavencatholic.org).