

Holy Baptism

Preparing to be a Sponsor at a Baptism

"In Him was life and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4)

It is a rule of the Orthodox Faith that every person, child or adult, should have a Godparent at Baptism. To serve as a Godparent is both a special honor and imposes responsibilities which last a lifetime. Have you ever thought what a sacred privilege it is to be a Sponsor?

Too many take the responsibilities of a Sponsor very lightly. Indeed for many people it has become merely a social custom in which social interests become the only important consideration both for the Parents of the child and for the Sponsor.

Before one accepts to become a Sponsor, one should think seriously of the sacred responsibility which they assume for the child that will be baptized. To show indifference in this respect is to commit a grave sin in the sight of God. Every Sponsor becomes accountable to God as to whether or not he/she has discharged his/her duties to the child which he/she has sponsored.

Christ tells us: "Whosoever believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk. 16:16). Through Baptism we receive a full forgiveness of all sin, whether original or actual; we "put on Christ," becoming members of His Body, the Church. The Godparent, along with the parents and guided by the Church, should assist the newly baptized child through the walk of life. Just as natural parents have serious obligations for the care and nurture of their child, so Godparents have important duties in regard to their Godchild, in particular to see to it that the child receives a Christian upbringing.

Before one says "Yes," to assuming the role of Godparent, he or she should make certain that the commitment to the baptized child will be honored. Every Godparent becomes accountable to God as to whether or not he has discharged his duties to the child which he has baptized. Mindful of the sacred task of the Godparent, this booklet has been prepared to provide every Orthodox Christian parent helpful hints in selecting the right person for the new infant and to make the intended Godparent acutely aware of his or her task.

When It all Began

The early Church faced the problem that the majority of those who wanted to become her members came from pagan families and therefore lacked even an elementary Christian education and knowledge of the new faith. To remedy this, the Church undertook the task of educating them before their baptism. The systematic instruction, which was a preparatory stage for baptism was called "catechism." During catechism one learned the simple elements of the Christian faith and morals and later in the fourth century one was also given an education of the more profound Christian mysteries, as is made clear in the 4th Pre-baptismal Catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem. The candidate had to be introduced by one of the faithful, called "anadochos," and be examined by the "doctors" who were in charge of the catechumens, to ensure that clear spiritual motives led him to enter the Church. The "anadochos" which means one who receives, was responsible for the

candidate and played a very important role during the process of his catechesis and even after the candidate had been baptized. Eventually, infant baptism became the norm rather than the exception in the Church and the "anadochos" or Godparent was called upon to be the spokesperson for the infant.

The Sponsor at Baptism

Let us look at what the sponsor does during the sacrament of Baptism. We must remember that the Sponsor is the representative of the infant which is being admitted into the Church of Christ. The Sponsor speaks for the infant and vows that he/she will make certain that the child will grow learning and living the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Sponsor not only accepts the sacred responsibility of guiding the child into the understanding and practice of the teachings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but also vows that he/she will set a good example for the child to follow.

In behalf of the infant, the sponsor makes the renunciation of the Devil. He/she promises that the child will grow later to renounce the Devil, both in word and in deed and to repudiate his tempting influence.

The Sponsor is called upon to answer questions put to him/her by the Priest. The same question is asked three times and three times the sponsor must reply. "Dost thou renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride".

The Sponsor replies: "I Do" three times.

Then the Priest will ask the Sponsor again three times: "Hast thou renounced Satan?" The Sponsor again replies: "I Have".

The renunciation of Satan is followed by these words stated by the Priest: "Blow and spit upon him." The Sponsor replies by blowing three times into the air away from the sanctuary in the direction of the rear of the Church and also spits three times into the air. This is the customary way of expressing contempt for the Devil, as well as banishing him from one's presence.

The sponsor then turns and faces the Sanctuary and responds to the second series of the questions: "Dost thou unite thyself unto Christ?" Sponsor replies "I Do". "Hast thou united thyself unto Christ?" Sponsor: "I Have". Both questions are asked three times. Then the Priest continues with: "Dost thou believe in Him?" The Sponsor replies: "I believe in Him as my King and as my God."

Then the Sponsor recites a confession of Faith, the Nicene Creed. It is a serious violation when the Sponsor is not prepared to recite the Creed of Faith. The practice of having the Cantor or someone else recite it is definitely not permitted. Knowledge of the Creed and familiarity with it constitutes the most important pre-requisite for becoming a Sponsor. It is the height of mockery of Holy Baptism when the Sponsor is unable to recite the Creed, which is the symbol of the Christian Faith.

After the Creed the Priest once again directs the question to the Sponsor: "Hast thou united thyself unto Christ?" The answer which is given is: "I Have". This question and answer are again repeated three times. Then the Priest directs "Bow down also and adore Him." The Sponsor blessing

himself/herself responds: "I bow down before the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, one in Essence and undivided."

The Sponsor pledges himself \ herself to do whatever is necessary to educate his or her Godchild in the Christian Faith and that he or she will set a good example of a Christian to the Godchild.

What Is Expected Of the Godparent?

It is a gross misunderstanding to think that the only duty of the Godparent is to buy a new outfit for the infant. Certainly this is a beautiful tradition, when possible, but the emphasis must not be on the material but rather the spiritual. The Godparent should make a faithful commitment of love and that he will join the struggle with the parents, guided by the Church, to bring the infant carefully and prayerfully along the difficult road to heaven. The essential articles for the Baptism include:

1. A small bottle of olive oil.
2. A bar of soap.
3. A large washable sheet.
4. One (1) large towel.
5. One hand towel.
6. A white suit or a white dress for the infant.
7. A baptismal cross (cross must be an Orthodox cross).
8. Three (3) white candles, one can be traditionally decorated.
9. Sponsor must be prepared to recite the Nicene Creed in Greek or English.

After Baptism

Your task as Godparent is about to begin. At the close of the service the sponsor solemnly delivers the child into the arms of the mother in front of the congregation. As she receives her child, now baptized, sealed, and illuminated, she kisses the hand of the Godparent as a token of the spiritual relationship that is established between the Godparent and the family. This is a Christian expression of gratitude and respect.

For the next three Sundays after the Baptism the Church encourages the Godparent to bring the child for Holy Communion. The Godparent should also prepare to receive Holy Communion with the child. He or she will come each time with the lighted baptismal candle. After the three times the Sponsor still often receives Holy Communion with his or her Godchild.

A faithful Godparent will be a friend in Christ and maintain close contact with his Godchild. The focus at all times is the progress of the child in the knowledge and practice of the Orthodox Faith. He should at all times model a Christ-like example. The relationship between the Godparent and the baptized is so important and so close that the Church forbids marriage between the Godparent and Godchild.

Godparents are encouraged to call to remembrance the sacred and joyous moment of Baptism. This may be done by participating in "Godparents' Sunday" a National Observance by the

Orthodox Church in America, remembering the Godchild on the date of Baptism along with birthday anniversaries, Christmas, etc. Significant gift-giving honoring these special occasions could include such objects as icons, medallions, a Bible, and religious books which will be helpful in building up the spiritual life of the child. By now you have to come to realize that the most important quality for a Godparent is to live a Christ filled life and that he demonstrate his faith as a light-bearer, devoted to receiving salvation for himself and his Godchild. The Godparent is called upon to accept the Divine Commandment read from the Holy Gospel at the service of Baptism, "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

If you hope to be a Godparent some day, it would be well to consider carefully the chief conditions which the Church prescribes in the way of preparation:

1. When you are approached and asked to baptize a child, do not answer immediately. Reflect and ask yourself if you could be true to the Baptismal vow.
2. The Godparent must be an Orthodox Christian, of good moral character, regular and faithful in attendance at Liturgy and the reception of the Sacraments, and with a sound knowledge of the basic teachings of the Orthodox Church.
3. Study the Creed and be prepared to recite it when the Priest calls upon you. The custom of having the Chanter recite it is incorrect. Knowledge of the Creed and familiarity with it constitutes the basic prerequisite for becoming a Godparent.
4. A Godparent should be neither excessively young (under 12) or advanced in years nor in poor health. There must be at least a fair possibility that the Godparent will live long enough to carry out the obligations assumed.
5. The Church recommends one Godparent.

The Creed

I believe in one God, Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth and of everything visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all Ages. Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through Whom all things were made.

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit, and of the Virgin Mary, and became Man.

And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried.

And arose on the third day according to the Scriptures.

And ascended into Heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father.

And He shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead; Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified; Who spoke through the Prophets.

In One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. I await for the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the Ages to come. Amen.

Sacrament of Baptism in the Greek Orthodox Church

The Loving Outreach of God

Some time ago Life magazine carried a photograph illustrating "A Baby's Momentous First Five Minutes." It was a photograph of a mother's hand reaching out to her newborn child. The photograph illustrated beautifully a mother's love reaching to embrace her baby. So it is that every time an infant is baptized, the hand of God's love reaches out to embrace that baby and bestow upon it the kiss of His love. It is divine love that stands behind the Sacrament of Baptism.

Why Infant Baptism?

Baptizing infants before they know what is going on is an expression of God's great love for us. It shows that God loves us and accepts Us before we can ever know Him or love Him. It shows that we are wanted and loved by God from the very moment of our birth.

To say that a person must reach the age of reason and believe in Christ before he may be baptized is to make God's grace in some way dependent on man's intelligence. But God's grace is not dependent on any act of ours, intellectual or otherwise; it is a pure gift of His love.

Baptism as a Covenant

Every baptism is a covenant, that is, an agreement, between God and man. God promises to be our Father and we promise to be His children. In the past God entered into agreement with Noah, Abraham, Moses and others. Now through baptism He approaches and wishes to make an agreement with every person who comes into the world. It is an agreement of love which God initiates. He says in effect, "I will be your Father, your Savior. and you will be my son, my daughter."

A Personal Response

Baptism demands a personal response on the part of the baptized child when it grows up. The child must accept what God did for him or her in baptism. For baptism is not a divine pass that will get us into heaven automatically. Dr. Nikos Nissiotis has said, "A baptized Christian, especially in the Churches in which infant baptism is practiced, needs to make a personal decision regarding the Christian faith which he has passively inherited from his Christian environment." Without this personal decision baptism becomes only a "form."

We Are Attached to Christ

Through baptism Christ cleanses us of sin. He calls us His own sons and daughters. He makes us heirs of all His riches. He makes us members of His family. As members of God's family we are all related to each other and responsible for each other. Yet baptism is more even than all this. Through baptism we are attached to Christ. We become members of His body. Each baptized Christian becomes an extension of Christ. We become other Christs in the world. We become His eyes, His hands, His tongue, His feet. Christ has chosen to work in the world through us the members of His body. It is our special responsibility as baptized Christians to let Christ be present wherever we ourselves are stationed in the world as baptized Christians.

Explanation of the Sacrament

The many gestures involved in the performance of the Sacrament of Baptism in the Eastern Orthodox Church are not mere forms devoid of meaning. Christianity is life. Each action in the Sacrament of Baptism expresses what Christ is actually doing for us through this sacrament.

Exorcisms

The first act of the baptismal service begins in the narthex (entrance) of the church. This is to show that the one being received is not yet a member of the Church. The purpose of baptism is to bring him into the Church. To enter into the temple of God is to be with Christ, to become a member of His body.

The priest then calls upon the sponsor to renounce the devil and all his works for the child: "Do you renounce Satan, and all his angels, and all his works, and all his services, and all his pride?" Fr. Alexander Schmemmann explains the meaning of this renunciation when he says, "The first act of the Christian life is a renunciation, a challenge. No one can be Christ's until he has, first, faced Evil, and then become ready to fight it. . . . The exorcisms mean this: to face Evil, to acknowledge its reality, to know its power, and to proclaim the power of God to destroy it. The exorcisms announce the forthcoming baptism as an act of victory."

The renouncing of Satan is done facing the west because the west is where the sun disappears and was regarded by the ancient Greeks as the place of the gates of Hades. Then the priest faces east whence the light of the sun rises and asks the godparent to accept for the child Him who is the Light of the World, "Do you unite yourself to Christ?" The renunciation of Satan and the union with Christ express our faith that the newly baptized child has been transferred from one master to another, from Satan to Christ.

The Sign of the Cross

The priest then makes the sign of the cross on the child's body. This is repeated often during the service. Essentially the cross is the sign of victory which puts the devil to flight. In the old days slaves were branded, as are animals today, to show to what master they belong. Today the sign of the cross brands us as belonging to Christ.

The Creed

The godparent is then asked to confess faith in Christ in behalf of the infant. At this point the godparent reads the confession of faith contained in the Nicene Creed. The "symbolon tis pisteos," as it is called in Greek, was a true symbol or sign of recognition among the early Christians- it was the password that distinguished the true members of God's family. By reading the Creed the godparent confesses the true faith.

The Naming

From the moment the child is received into the Church, emphasis is placed on his individuality. He is given his own particular name by which he shall be distinguished from every other child of God. This expresses our belief that the child has the dignity of his own selfhood in the eyes of God. It is the Church's acceptance of him as an individual in his own right. The new name expresses also the new life received through baptism.

The Baptismal Font

The baptismal font in the language of the Church Fathers is the Divine Womb whence we receive the second birth as children of God. Baptism is truly a birth. "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12, 13).

The Triple Immersion

We believe that Christ died for our sins. To show that we, and not Christ, are worthy of death because of our sins, we are immersed in the baptismal font. The immersion in water symbolizes death, since a person cannot live long under water. Through baptism we share mysteriously in Christ's death. As St. Paul says, "We were buried therefore with him [Christ] by baptism into death so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." The baptized person rises out of the baptismal font a new man, cleansed of every sin and promising, like St. Paul, to surrender his life to Christ, his Savior: "He died for all that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him who died for them." The triple immersion symbolizes the three days our Lord spent in the tomb as well as the Holy Trinity since the baptismal formula used in the Orthodox Church is: "The servant of God is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The Water

Water is used for cleansing. In baptism it expresses the fact that through this sacrament Christ cleanses us from original and personal sin.

Describing what occurs at baptism Saint John Chrysostom writes, "When you come to the sacred initiation, the eyes of the flesh see water; the eyes of faith behold the Spirit. Those eyes see the body being baptized; these see the old man being buried. The eyes of the flesh see the flesh being washed, the eyes of the spirit see the soul being cleansed. The eyes of the body see the body

emerging from the water; the eyes of faith see the new man come forth brightly shining from that new purification. Our bodily eyes see the priest as, from above, he lays his right hand on the head and touches (him who is being baptized) our spiritual eyes' see the great High Priest (Jesus) as He stretches forth His invisible hand to touch his head. For, at that moment, the one who baptizes is not a man, but the only-begotten Son of God."

The Naked Infant

The infant is baptized in its naked state to denote that just as we came out of our mother's womb naked so we emerge naked out of the womb of God (the baptismal font). The removal of all clothes also signifies the old slough of sin which will be cast off entirely through baptism. Nakedness without shame refers also to the original state of man in Paradise where he was not ashamed of the body which God had created and had called good.

The Anointing with Oil

Olive oil is blessed and then applied by the priest to the various members of the child's body: hands, feet, ears, mouth, in order to dedicate them to the service of Christ. The sponsor then anoints the entire body of the infant with olive oil. This custom had its beginning among the ancient Greek wrestlers who anointed their bodies with olive oil to make it difficult for the opponent to maintain a grip on them. In baptism the child is anointed with olive oil to express our prayer that with Christ's help the infant may be able to elude the grip of sin.

New Clothes

The new clothes signify the entirely new life that we receive after we are "buried with Jesus in his death" (Rom. 6:4). In the early church the newly baptized did not put on the old clothing he had taken off. He put on a new white robe, which was worn at all the services during Easter week. (Most baptisms were performed on Holy Saturday.) The white robe expresses the purity of the soul that has been washed from sin. It recalls also the shining robe in which Christ appeared at the Transfiguration. There is now a likeness between the one baptized and the transfigured Lord. Nay, it is more than a likeness. Saint Paul calls it a putting on of Christ: "For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:26, 27). Baptism is more than an external cleansing. It is a deeply rooted transformation. St. Gregory of Nyssa states that the white robe worn after baptism symbolizes the garment of light which was man's before the Fall: "Thou hast driven us out of paradise and called us back. Thou hast taken away the fig leaves, that garment of our misery, and clothed us once more with the robe of glory."

The Candles

However dark may be the night that surrounds us, baptism remains the sacrament of entrance into light. It opens the eyes of the soul to see Christ, the light of the world (John 1:19). It makes us sons of light (I Thess. 5:5).

In the early Church the baptismal candle was always kept by the one baptized. It was given to the newly baptized with the scriptural admonition: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may

see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). The baptismal candle was brought to Church on feast days, on the anniversary of one's baptism and for the midnight Easter liturgy. If the person was married, the same candle was lighted at the wedding. If he was ordained, he would light it at his ordination. When the final hour of life approached it was lighted again as the soul went forth to meet its Judge. It was a constant reminder for the Christian to live and die by the light of Christ.

The Sacrament of Chrismation or Confirmation

In the Orthodox Church the Sacrament of Confirmation is administered immediately following baptism as in the early Church. It is considered the fulfillment of baptism. Human nature purified by baptism is made ready to receive the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit. As Fr. Schmemmann says, "Confirmation is thus the personal Pentecost of man, his entrance into the life of the Holy Spirit, his ordination as truly and fully man. . . His whole body is anointed, sealed, sanctified, dedicated to the new life: 'the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit,' says the priest as he anoints the newly baptized on the brow, and on the eyes, and the nostrils, and the lips, and on both ears, and the breast and on the hands, and the feet. . . The whole man is now made the temple of God. . ."

The Greek word for Confirmation is *chrisma*," which means anointing. The one anointed with "chrisma" becomes "Christos," that is, the anointed one, which is the meaning of the name Christ. Thus, by this sacrament we are made Christians or other Christs. Chrismation is the ordination of the laity. According to Orthodox belief every baptized lay person is ordained a priest by this sacrament he receives the gift of the Holy Spirit to become a deputy or an ambassador for Christ in this world.

The Eucharist

Immediately following Baptism the neophyte receives the precious Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and, in the case of an infant, is brought to Church regularly after baptism to receive the sacrament. The new life in Christ, given in baptism, is renewed again and again in the Eucharist. In the Orthodox Church every baptized and confirmed infant becomes a full member of the Church and is entitled to receive Holy Communion. As nature provides milk for the nourishment of the infant after birth so God provides Holy Communion for the infant immediately following baptism in order to provide nourishment for the spiritual life the neophyte has received through baptism.

The Cutting of Hair

After confirming the child, the priest cuts three locks of hair from the child's head. This is an expression of gratitude from the child, who having received an abundance of blessings through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation and having nothing to give to God in return, offers part of its hair, which is symbolic of strength (see Samson in the Old Testament). The child, therefore, promises to serve God with all its strength. In the words of Father Schmemmann, the cutting of the hair "is a sign that the life which now begins is a life of offering and sacrifice." It is significant that boys in ancient Greece dedicated their hair to the gods upon reaching manhood. Some Christian monks today cut off most of their hair as a sign of their dedication to God.

A Religious Dance

A religious dance is made around the baptismal font with the priest accompanied by the sponsor who holds the newly baptized infant. This reflects the belief that at this moment the angels in heaven are dancing, expressing their joy that a new soul has been registered in the Book of Life. The priest sings, "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). This expresses our belief that through baptism the child has "put on Christ." Tradition states that at this moment God assigns a guardian angel to stay with the newly baptized person until the end of his earthly life.

Your Presence at This Baptismal Service should serve as an occasion for you to re-affirm your baptismal vows. Carried before the baptismal font, you, too, once vowed through your sponsor that you would renounce the devil and become a child of God, believing, obeying, loving and serving Him. God promised to be your Father, to forgive your sins, to provide for your needs and to bring you to heaven. Baptism is a solemn promise between God and His children. God never breaks His promise. Have you remained loyal to yours? Baptism is thus a matter of daily concern.

It signifies that the "Old Adam" in us, that is, our old evil nature, is to be drowned and destroyed by daily sorrow and repentance, and that the new life, planted in us by the Holy Spirit in baptism, should daily come forth and grow.

The Epistle Lesson (Romans 6:3-11)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

The Gospel Lesson (Matthew 28:16-20)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."