

# Information for Parents and Godparents at an Infant's Baptism

Sts. Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Cathedral  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

## ADVANCE PREPARATION

Baptisms are scheduled by calling the church office (216-932-3300). At least one parent must be a member in good standing of the Orthodox Church, showing evidence of their membership in an Orthodox parish. If you are a member of Sts. Constantine and Helen, you need to be current in your stewardship commitment. If you are a member of another Orthodox Church, please bring written verification from that church that you are a member in good standing.

Regarding godparents (sponsors), a strict interpretation of Orthodox rules indicates that there is only one godparent at a baptism, and that this person is of necessity an Orthodox Christian who practices his/her faith, is married within the Orthodox Church (if married), and will be a good role model for his/her godchild. There is a common practice of having more than one godparent, but anyone after the first godparent is, strictly speaking, an "honorary godparent." Within the service they are treated almost alike. They respond together to the questions posed to them in the preliminary service in the narthex; they take turns holding the child; they stand together at the font.

The first godparent must have proof that he/she is in good standing in the Orthodox Church. In the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America this is done by means of a letter from the godparent's priest on church letterhead certifying this. Please ask the godparent to have his/her priest send it in advance of the baptism date.

Items necessary for the Baptism include a small bottle of olive oil, a bar of soap, two or three candles, a small hand towel, a large bath towel, a white sheet, the cross and clothing of the baby. The godparent usually takes responsibility for these items. Please bring these items 10-15 minutes early so that they can be set up before the service starts.

The church has two baptismal fonts. The regular baptismal font is located in a space appropriate to 30-35 people. It is a nice, intimate space. If you anticipate more people in attendance, please request the portable font, which is then placed in the center of the church.

## BAPTISM DAY

Promptness is encouraged. Please make your plans so that you are ready at the appointed time. The Baptismal Service takes 50-55 minutes.

During the course of the service, someone is needed to (1) undress the child, wrap him/her in the large towel, and bring the child, large towel and sheet to the baptismal font, and (2) after the act of baptism take the child and dress in baptismal clothes. Usually this task is done by grandmothers or aunts, but anyone can be designated for this.

The baptismal papers are signed before the service. We would like you to send the necessary information in advance, so that the papers may be ready for signature then. Please fill in the required form and send to the church as soon as possible.

The candles brought to the ceremony are lit after the immersion and while the child is being dressed. In theory the godparent holds both the newly baptized child and the largest candle, but in practice this candle is usually held by someone else. Often children such as older siblings or cousins hold candles, and there is no limit to how many children with candles may participate, but please bear in mind their ages and number. A group of 3-year-olds holding lit candles may seem cute, but it is not necessarily a good idea.

#### AFTERWARDS

Several blessed oils are used in the service and may come in contact with the child's clothing. The parents are asked to wash these clothes within a few days of the service in some pan or vessel and pour the wash and rinse water outside in

a place where people do not walk, such as in the shrubs or in a potted plant. This is considered the respectful way to dispose of blessed oils, rather than letting them go into the sewer system.

It is customary for the godparents to accompany their new godchild to Liturgy on the next three consecutive Sundays. They bring the child to Holy Communion with the lit baptismal candle in their possession. After the third Sunday, most people choose to leave the lit baptismal candle at the candle stand in the church Narthex.

The baptismal certificate is presented at the day of the ceremony or mailed soon afterwards. Please store it with the child's birth certificate. It is not needed often, but it is needed for certain legal or religious purposes.

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## WHO SHOULD SERVE AS A SPONSOR?

Dr. Lewis J. Patsavos, Professor of Canon Law

The importance of the sponsor's role in the sacraments of baptism and matrimony cannot be overstated. The Church expects that the person who serves as sponsor be a practicing Orthodox Christian whose life corresponds to its teachings. Therefore, someone who has married outside the Orthodox Church or abandoned its teachings may not serve as sponsor.

To understand the Church's view, it is necessary to know the sponsor's role in context, particularly at the baptism. A Sponsor's presence at baptism dates to the early Church when initiation of adults into the Faith was common. It was the sponsor who guaranteed the sincere intentions and orthodox belief of the person about to be baptized. The sponsor, then, had to be a person of integrity with credible testimony and a real commitment to instructing another in the faith. With the appearance and prevalence of infant baptism, the sponsor's role has become purely functional. Now, all that is required is the mere recitation of the creed in place of the infant and the formal promise to nurture it in the Orthodox faith. Obviously, even the ceremonial role assumed by sponsors makes it absolutely

necessary that they be identifiable Orthodox Christians. Consequently, non-Christians, non-Orthodox, schismatics and those excommunicated are forbidden to be sponsors. Also forbidden to act as sponsors, but for different reasons, are the parents, clergy, minors, the mentally impaired and persons of ill repute.

Great care should be taken in selecting a sponsor for the sacraments of baptism or matrimony. Although the original role of the sponsor may now be perfunctory, restoration of some of the sponsor's spiritual responsibilities is certainly in order and long overdue. This holds true especially for the sponsor at baptism. The person entrusted with the sacred responsibility of professing the Orthodox faith in behalf of one about to be baptized ought to exemplify all that this entails. Such expectation will help assure a special kind of relationship not only between the sponsor and godchild, but also between the sponsor and the godchild's parents. Sponsorial relationships arising from baptism and matrimony should serve to expand one's spiritual bonds with others. The more persons from a community engaged in a spiritual commitment, the more spiritually alive and aware that community can become.

Such relationships, when pursued properly, can serve to foster spiritual renewal in our parishes. However, such a goal is defeated when one restricts the choice of sponsors to blood relatives or to those with whom one is already related spiritually. There may be instances when this is unavoidable, but it should never be the norm. Let us, for example, cite the case of a couple who has sponsored one or more children of the same family as godparents. It is not uncommon for such a couple, when they have their own children, to ask the parents of their godchildren to sponsor their children. However, to do so is to forfeit the opportunity to increase the number of members in one's spiritual family. Furthermore, it gives the impression of being closed, self-absorbed and exclusive; conditions incompatible with the all-embracing openness expected of a Christian.

In the same way, while it is the natural inclination to ask siblings and other blood relations to be sponsors, this, too, restricts a person's spiritual family to those with whom one already has close bonds. It would be more appropriate to nurture a spiritual relationship with those who are not one's kin. We should not perpetuate the notion that sponsorship is simply a social manner. On the contrary, an Orthodox Christian should carefully select sponsors whose counsel and support can be trusted as godly, pious and faithful to the traditions of the Orthodox Church. In this way, one finds spiritual stability in troubled times and is bound into a measure of accountability to the sponsor. The canonical basis of who should be a sponsor is found in ecclesiastical custom. Behind this custom there exist reasons, which make it understandable. Following custom out of empty habit, without explanation or understanding, contributes to one's disenchantment and eventually leads to the violation of ecclesiastical practice. We offer the above explanation in the interest of preserving the long-standing and tested ecclesiastical practice regarding sponsors.