THE DAILY BREAD

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Standing at the Font

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

The Question Nobody Prepares You For

Sooner or later, one of two things happens.

Someone you love sits across from you, a little nervous, and asks you to be a godparent. Or you are holding a newborn of your own and you realize you have to decide who that person will be, and you have about six weeks to do it, and you have no idea how to think about it.

Both situations tend to get handled the same way. Quickly, warmly, and on instinct. The choice gets made out of affection, or obligation, or the quiet arithmetic of who stood up in whose wedding. Somebody says yes. Somebody buys an outfit. There is a Sunday afternoon, a small crowd around a font, a little water, a photograph, and a lunch afterward. And then, for an enormous number of people, nothing. The title stays. The role never starts.

This is not because anyone is bad. It is because almost nobody is told what the role actually is. We inherited a word, godparent, and lost most of its content. What survives in the popular imagination is a mix of a birthday card, a legal guardian, and a character from a movie. None of those is what the Church means.

What the Church means is closer to this: at the moment a person is joined to Christ, the Church asks a specific adult to stand up, in public, and pledge to help that person live what has just been done to them. Not to babysit. Not to inherit. To help them get to heaven.

That is the office. It is small, it is lifelong, and it is almost entirely invisible. It is made of prayer that nobody sees, presence that nobody records, and a stubbornness that outlasts the enthusiasm of the day at the font.

This book is about that office. It is for the parent trying to choose well, for the person who was just asked and does not know what they are agreeing to, for the sponsor standing behind a seventeen year old at Confirmation, and for the godparent who has held the title for eleven years and has done almost nothing with it and feels the weight of that.

There is no shame in arriving late to this. There is only the question of what you do now.

CHAPTER ONE

What You Are Actually Being Asked

Before you can understand the godparent, you have to understand what happens at the font. Everything about the role follows from it.

Baptism Is Not a Naming Ceremony

In the ordinary Catholic imagination, baptism is the welcome. The baby is introduced to the community, the family gathers, the name is announced, water makes it official. That picture is not wrong so much as catastrophically small.

Here is what Scripture says is happening. "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" (Rom 6:3-4). Paul does not describe a welcome. He describes a death and a resurrection.

Add the rest. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal 3:27). "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). Something is destroyed and something is created. Original sin is washed away. The Holy Spirit takes up residence. A creature made by God becomes a child of God, an heir, a member of a Body, a temple.

None of that is visible. A baby goes into the water and a baby comes out of the water and to the camera nothing has changed. This is the central difficulty of the whole Christian life, and it shows up at the very first sacrament: the most important thing that will ever happen to this person just happened, and it did not look like anything.

So the Church surrounds it with people. People who know what just happened, and who will keep acting like it is true long after the photographs are filed.

Why the Church Puts Someone Else at the Font

Notice something about infant baptism that should be strange and usually is not. The child cannot believe. The child cannot renounce anything, profess anything, or want anything except to be fed and held. And the Church baptizes anyway.

The Catechism explains why in a single sentence that repays slow reading:

> *Baptism is the sacrament of faith. But faith needs the community of believers. It is only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe.*
>
> — Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1253

The faith that makes this baptism real is not the infant's. It is the Church's. And the Church, at that font, is not an abstraction. It is the specific people standing there. The parents, who will carry the faith into the house. And the godparents, who are there precisely because the Church does not want the child's faith to rest on the parents alone.

That is the logic of the role. Parents die. Parents drift. Parents divorce, get overwhelmed, lose the thread, or simply run out of road. The Church, which has been burying parents for two thousand years, builds in redundancy. It appoints someone from outside the household whose entire assignment is the spiritual life of this one person.

The Catechism puts the expectation plainly: "For the grace of Baptism to unfold, the parents' help is important. So too is the role of the godfather and godmother, who must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized" (CCC 1255).

Firm believers. Able and ready. That is the standard, and it is worth noticing that neither clause is about affection.

A Word About Pledging

The Church's own legal term for this person is not godparent. It is sponsor. The word comes from the Latin spondere, to pledge or to promise, the same root that gives us spouse and respond. A sponsor is someone who stands surety for another. Someone who puts their own name behind a promise that somebody else will have to live out.

The law describes the job this way: insofar as possible, the one to be baptized is to be given a sponsor who assists an adult in Christian initiation, or who together with the parents presents an infant for baptism, and who will help the baptized to lead a Christian life in harmony with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations connected with it (c. 872).

Read that last clause again, because it is the entire job description and most godparents have never seen it. Help the baptized to lead a Christian life. Not attend the party. Not remember the birthday. Help this person live as a Christian, for as long as you both are alive.

The older Latin discipline took the resulting bond so seriously that it counted as real kinship, an impediment to marriage between a godparent and a godchild. The Latin Church no longer holds that, though the Eastern Catholic Churches still do. But the old law tells you how the relationship was understood. Not an honor. A family tie, created by the Church, out of nothing but a promise.

Even our language remembers it. The English word gossip comes from the Old English godsibb, meaning god-sibling, the kinship created at the font. The word decayed into small talk. The relationship it named has taken a similar beating.

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So that is what you are being asked. Not to be honored. To be pledged.

CHAPTER TWO

What the Church Actually Requires

Before any of the spiritual work, there is a gate. The Church has requirements for who may serve, and they are more specific than most Catholics realize. Parents discover them about a week before the baptism, usually in an awkward phone call with a parish secretary, and experience them as bureaucracy.

They are not bureaucracy. Each one protects the child.

The Requirements, In Plain Language

The law lists five conditions for a baptismal sponsor (c. 874 §1). A sponsor must:

Be chosen, and actually intend to do the job

The person is designated by the one being baptized, or by the parents, or by the pastor, and must have the aptitude and the intention of fulfilling the function. Intention is a real requirement. A person who has no plan to do anything is not qualified merely by being willing to show up.

Be at least sixteen

Unless the diocesan bishop has set a different age, or the pastor grants an exception for a just cause. The point is not the number. The point is that this is an adult responsibility.

Be a confirmed Catholic who has received the Eucharist and lives a life of faith in keeping with the role

This is the condition that does the most work and causes the most pain. All three sacraments of initiation, and a life that matches. A Catholic who has never been confirmed cannot serve, though a good number of adults in that position simply get confirmed, which is a better outcome than the one they came in for.

Not be bound by a canonical penalty

Rare, and your pastor will tell you if it applies.

Not be the father or mother of the child

The role exists precisely to add someone beyond the parents.

One, or Two, Not Four

There is to be one male sponsor, or one female sponsor, or one of each (c. 873). That is the whole allowance. Not four. Not a committee of siblings. Not an honorary list.

Families push against this constantly, and the pressure is understandable, because naming godparents is one of the few remaining public ways to tell people they matter. But the number is not an oversight. Two is the maximum because responsibility divides badly. When four people share a duty, no one carries it.

Christians Who Are Not Catholic

This one comes up in nearly every family. A beloved brother-in-law is a serious Lutheran. A best friend is a devout Baptist. Can they serve?

The answer is precise. A baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community may take part, but only together with a Catholic sponsor, and then only as a witness of the baptism (c. 874 §2). Witness is a real role with a real place in the register. It is not a consolation prize invented on the spot. But it is not sponsorship, because a sponsor promises to raise someone in a faith they profess.

For the Eastern Orthodox there is a further provision, because of how close the communion is. The Church's ecumenical directory permits a member of an Eastern Church to act as godparent together with a Catholic godparent, at the baptism of a Catholic (Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 98b). Ask your pastor before you assume either way.

What "Lives a Life of Faith" Actually Means

Parishes vary in how they apply this, which frustrates everyone. Some hand out a form. Some ask for a letter from the candidate's own parish confirming they are a registered, practicing Catholic in good standing. Some ask nothing.

Underneath the paperwork the question is simple and not primarily about paperwork. Does this person go to Mass? Do they receive the sacraments? If they are married, is the marriage recognized by the Church? Is there something in their public life that directly contradicts what they would be promising at the font?

That last one is where the hard cases live. The cousin who is a wonderful human being and has not been to Mass since his own Confirmation. The sister living with her boyfriend. The uncle

who married outside the Church and never had it convalidated. These are not questions about whether a person is good. Most of them are good. They are questions about whether the person can honestly promise to help a child live a Catholic life they are not currently living themselves.

If that is your situation and you are the one being asked, you have better options than pretending. You can tell the parents the truth, and you can fix the obstacle. Marriages get convalidated. Adults get confirmed. People come back to the sacraments. A surprising number of reversions have started with exactly this moment, where someone wanted to stand at a font badly enough to get honest first.

Why the Rules Are Not Cruelty

Every one of these conditions comes from a single conviction: that the child is receiving something real, and that the person promising to protect it should actually possess it.

Nobody would ask a person who cannot swim to be a lifeguard as a gesture of affection. The Church is making the same judgment, about a deeper water.

CHAPTER THREE

How to Choose

This chapter is for parents. You have a small window, a long list of people you love, and a decision that will still be in effect when your child is fifty.

The Four Bad Reasons

Most poor choices come from one of four places, and all four feel like virtues at the time.

Obligation

She was in your wedding. He is your only brother. They asked you first for their child. This is the most common driver of the decision and the worst, because it treats an ecclesial office as a social debt. You can honor people in a dozen ways that do not involve assigning them responsibility for a soul.

The ledger

Two sets of grandparents, two siblings each, and a determination to keep everything even across children. Once the decision becomes a fairness problem, the child has disappeared from it entirely.

Generosity

He is doing well and he is good to us. She always sends something. Money is not a spiritual qualification, and a godparent chosen for resources will reliably deliver resources instead of faith, which is exactly the trade you did not want to make.

Fun

Everybody loves him. He is great with kids. Warmth is genuinely valuable in this role, and it is not the same thing as faith. The question is not whether your child will enjoy this person at seven. It is whether this person will be any use to them at seventeen.

The Questions That Actually Sort It

Ask these, in this order, about each name you are considering.

Does this person practice the faith when nobody is watching?

Not: are they Catholic on paper. Do they go to Mass, receive the sacraments, and pray? You usually know the answer without asking.

Would I want my child to end up like this person at forty?

This is the sharpest question in the list, because a godparent's real influence is not what they say. It is what they model. You are proposing a picture of an adult Catholic life. Look hard at the picture.

Will this person still be in our life in fifteen years?

Not geographically. Relationally. Friendships shift. Some people orbit close for three years and vanish. Some will be at your funeral. You are choosing for the long arc.

Can I actually tell this person the truth?

Godparenting works through candor. If your child struggles at nineteen, will you be able to call this person and say so? Will they be able to say something to your child that you cannot?

Would this person pray for my child if I never asked again?

That is the floor of the role. If the honest answer is no, you have your answer.

What to Do When the Obvious Person Is Not Eligible

This is the hardest conversation in the whole process, and families routinely avoid it by lying to the parish, which starts the relationship with a false record and helps no one.

Better paths, in order:

First, talk to the person. Some obstacles are fixable and the person may want them fixed. An unconfirmed adult can be confirmed. A civil marriage can often be convalidated. Ask, gently, well before the date.

Second, use the witness provision if it fits. A baptized Christian who is not Catholic can be enrolled as a witness alongside a Catholic godparent. It is real and it is honest.

Third, honor them another way. Ask them to be the one who carries the baptismal candle, or reads, or hosts. Ask them to be a guardian in your will, which is an entirely separate and genuinely important thing. Tell them plainly that you love them and that this particular role has requirements neither of you set.

The temptation is to treat any of this as an insult. It is not an insult. It is the difference between a title and a task.

How to Ask

Ask in person if you can. Ask early, not three weeks out. And ask for the actual thing, out loud, so that the person understands what they are agreeing to.

Something like this works: "We want you to be Teresa's godmother. That means we are asking you to pray for her for the rest of your life, to help us raise her Catholic, and to be a person she can come to about God when she does not want to come to us. Will you do that?"

Say it that way and two things happen. The people who say yes know what they said. And occasionally, someone tells you honestly that they cannot, which is a gift, delivered before the fact instead of ten years after it.

CHAPTER FOUR

How to Say Yes, and When to Say No

Now the other side of the table. Somebody asked you.

The instinct is to say yes immediately, because the request is affectionate and hesitation looks like rejection. Resist the instinct for a day. This is a promise, and promises deserve a pause.

What You Are Agreeing To

Strip away the party and you are agreeing to four things.

You are agreeing to pray for this person for the rest of your life. Not occasionally. As a fixed feature of your prayer.

You are agreeing to know them. A godparent who is a stranger cannot help anyone. Presence is part of the pledge, and presence takes calendar space.

You are agreeing to represent the faith in their life, which means living it yourself, which means this decision will make demands on your own practice. A godparent is a person who has agreed to be watched.

You are agreeing to still be there when it gets complicated. The teenage years. The falling away, if it comes. The hard family seasons when everyone else takes sides.

Reasons That Are Not Disqualifying

Distance. Your godchild will be shaped by whether a real Catholic adult loves them and prays for them, not by mileage. Some of the best godparents are eight hundred miles away and never miss a baptism anniversary.

Feeling unqualified. Everyone is unqualified. The requirement is not expertise. It is a practicing faith and an intention to show up.

Not being good with children. You will not be good with children for very long. They grow up, and the part of the job that lasts sixty years is the part you do as adults.

Your own past. A person who has fallen and come back is often the most useful godparent a child can have, because they know the road in both directions.

Reasons to Say No

You are not eligible and you are not going to fix it. Say so, kindly and without drama, and let the parents choose someone else.

You know you will not do it. There is a version of yes that is really a wish to avoid an awkward moment. That version costs a child a godparent. Ten years from now nobody will remember the awkward conversation, and everyone will notice the empty chair.

You cannot agree to raise the child Catholic because you do not believe it. That is an honest position and it should be stated honestly. Ask to be a witness if that fits, or simply ask to be a friend of the family who is not making a promise in church.

How to Decline Without Wounding Anyone

Be quick, be warm, be specific, and offer something real.

"I am so honored that you asked. I have to be honest with you: I have not been practicing, and I would be promising something I am not living. I do not want to do that to Teresa or to you. I would love to be there, and if you would let me, I want to be the one who takes her camping when she is ten."

That conversation is uncomfortable for about ninety seconds. Then it is over, and nobody has built a decade on a fiction.

If You Say Yes

Do one thing immediately, before the day arrives, while the weight of it is still fresh. Write down the date of the baptism, and write down what you intend to do. A sentence is enough. "I will pray for him every morning, I will call on his baptism day, and I will see him at least twice a year."

That note is the difference between a godparent and a title. Almost everything in the rest of this book is downstream of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Confirmation Sponsor

There is a second version of this role, and it is widely misunderstood because it looks like a smaller thing. It is not.

At Confirmation, the candidate has a sponsor. The law is brief about it: insofar as possible, there is to be a sponsor for the person to be confirmed, and the sponsor is to take care that the confirmed person behaves as a true witness of Christ and faithfully fulfills the obligations inherent in this sacrament (c. 892).

Take care that the confirmed person behaves as a true witness of Christ. That is an extraordinary sentence to hand a person and then never mention again.

The Same Requirements, The Same Weight

A Confirmation sponsor must meet the same conditions as a baptismal sponsor (c. 893 §1). Sixteen, confirmed, receiving the Eucharist, living a life of faith in keeping with the role, not under penalty, and not the parent of the candidate.

The parent exclusion surprises people every year. Many parishes field the same request each spring from a mother who wants to sponsor her own son. The answer is no, and the reason is the same as at baptism: the sacrament is deliberately widening the circle of adults responsible for this soul.

It Should Usually Be the Godparent

Here is the detail that almost nobody knows. The Church's preference is that the Confirmation sponsor be the same person who stood at the font: it is desirable that the one who undertook the role of sponsor at baptism be sponsor for Confirmation (c. 893 §2). The Catechism says the same thing, noting that candidates fittingly seek the spiritual help of a sponsor and that it is appropriate for this to be one of the baptismal godparents, to bring out the unity of the two sacraments (CCC 1311).

The logic is beautiful once you see it. Confirmation completes what baptism began. The same hand on the shoulder at both ends of that arc says something true about the whole Christian life: it is one thing, continued, not a series of unrelated events with different casts.

Most families never consider it. If your godchild is coming up on Confirmation, you have a standing invitation from the law of the Church to be there in exactly the same role. Mention it early, because by the time a parish hands out the sponsor forms, the teenager has usually asked a friend's older brother.

The Difference That Matters

There is one real difference between the two roles, and it changes everything about how you do the job.

At baptism, the child had no say. At Confirmation, the candidate chooses you.

That means the relationship is not assigned, it is requested. A fifteen year old is telling you that among all the adults they know, you are the one they want standing behind them at the most explicitly religious moment of their young life. Whatever your doubts about your qualifications, they have already rendered their verdict.

It also means the work is immediate, not deferred. A baptismal godparent plays a long game. A Confirmation sponsor has a job this year.

What a Sponsor Actually Does

Before

Meet with them. Not once, at the required parish session. Three or four times, in a diner, on a drive, somewhere without an agenda. Ask what they actually think. Teenagers preparing for Confirmation are usually carrying real questions and a well-founded suspicion that adults want performance instead of honesty. Be the adult who wants honesty.

Ask about the saint's name they are choosing, and then actually read about that saint so you can talk about them like a person rather than a category.

Tell them your own story without varnish. The part where it was boring. The part where you left, if you left. The part where something changed. Nothing you can say about the Church is more persuasive at that age than the fact that a normal adult finds it true.

During

You stand behind them with your hand on their shoulder. That is the visible part, and it is a good image of the whole role: present, behind, steadying, not speaking.

After

This is where nearly every sponsor fails, because the culture treats Confirmation as a graduation and the sponsor as a ceremonial escort. Plenty of newly confirmed teenagers stop attending Mass within a year, and it is not a mystery. The program ended, the adults went away, and the message landed.

Decide in advance what you will do in the year after. A text on the anniversary. A standing lunch. A question every few months that is not "how is church." The sponsor who is still there in November is doing something the whole program could not do in eight months.

If You Are the Teenager Choosing

Pick the adult whose faith you would want at thirty five. Not the coolest one. Not the one who will make the fewest demands. The one whose life makes the faith look true.

CHAPTER SIX

The Promise You Made Out Loud

If you have already stood at a font, you made promises there. Most people cannot remember them. It is worth recovering exactly what was said, because the whole role is contained in a few short exchanges.

The Question Put to You

Early in the rite, after the child is welcomed and signed with the cross, the celebrant turns to the godparents and asks a direct question:

> *Are you ready to help the parents of this child in their duty?*
> *We are.*
>
> — Order of Baptism of Children

Two words. No qualifiers, no term limit, no conditions about proximity or convenience or how the family behaves at Christmas. We are.

Notice what the question actually asks. Not are you willing to be honored. Not do you promise to remember the birthday. Are you ready to help the parents in their duty. The duty in question is the one the parents accept a moment earlier: to bring this child up in the practice of the faith, to keep God's commandments, to love God and neighbor.

You said you were ready to help with that. That is the promise. Everything practical in the rest of this book is just an attempt to keep it.

The Words You Said for Someone Who Could Not Speak

Later, at the font, comes the part that should stop any thoughtful adult cold.

The celebrant asks the parents and godparents to renounce sin on the child's behalf. Do you renounce sin, so as to live in the freedom of the children of God. Do you renounce the lure of evil. Do you renounce Satan. And then the profession: do you believe in God, the Father almighty. Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

You answered I do. Out loud. In the voice of a person who could not yet speak.

That is not a formality. It is the Church taking with complete seriousness the truth that this child will be raised in somebody's faith, and asking who is willing to put theirs on the record.

The Candle

Near the end, a candle is lit from the Easter candle and handed to the parents and godparents, with the instruction that this light is entrusted to them, to be kept burning brightly, so that the child may walk always as a child of the light.

Entrusted to you. Kept burning. The Church does not say the child will manage the flame. It says you will, until they can.

There are two ways to hold that image. One is sentimental, and it dies at the reception. The other is operational: somebody has to keep this lit, and for the next fifteen years, that somebody is partly me.

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What a Promise Is Worth When Nobody Is Checking

Here is the uncomfortable truth about the godparent role, and it is the reason this book exists. No one will ever audit you.

There is no annual review, no parish follow-up, no mechanism whatsoever for discovering that a godparent has done nothing at all. The parents will not complain, because they are busy and because it would be awkward. The child will not know what they missed, because they will have nothing to compare it to. The role is uniquely easy to abandon without consequence.

Which means the entire thing runs on private integrity. You will do it because you said you would, in a church, in front of witnesses, on behalf of someone too small to hold you to it.

That is precisely the kind of promise that reveals a person. Anyone can keep a promise that is enforced.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Work of Prayer

If you do only one thing as a godparent, do this one. And if you do everything else and not this, you have missed the job entirely.

Why Prayer Is the Real Work

There is a temptation to treat prayer as the part you say you will do while looking for the real assignment. Reverse it. Prayer is the assignment. Everything else, the visits, the gifts, the conversations, is support work around it.

Two reasons.

The first is simple realism about influence. You cannot make anyone believe. Not your godchild, not your own children, not anyone. Faith is a gift from God, given in freedom and received in freedom. What you can do is ask the One who gives it, repeatedly, by name, for years. Intercession is not the weak option. It is the only option that operates on the part of the problem you cannot reach.

The second is that Christ modeled it precisely this way. To Peter, hours before Peter failed him: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail" (Lk 22:32). Jesus did not prevent the fall. He prayed, in advance, for the recovery. That is the shape of a godparent's work.

When Jesus Saw Their Faith

There is a scene in Mark's Gospel that every godparent should keep in mind.

A paralyzed man cannot get to Jesus. The house is packed. Four friends carry him to the roof, dig through it, and lower him down on his mat into the room. And then Mark writes the line:

> *"And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, My son, your sins are forgiven."* Mk 2:5

Their faith. Not his. The man on the mat contributes nothing in the story except his need. Four people who believed carried him to a place where Christ could act, and Christ acted.

That is a godparent. You cannot believe for your godchild in the sense of replacing their freedom. You can carry them, by prayer, to the place where grace does what grace does.

A Rule You Can Actually Keep

Ambition kills prayer commitments. A godparent who resolves to pray a daily Rosary for each of four godchildren will last about nine days. Build something small enough to survive a bad month.

Name them daily

One sentence, attached to something you already do. At the morning offering. In the car at the same traffic light. Before the first email of the day. "Lord, bless Teresa, keep her close to you, make her a saint." Ten seconds. Every day. For sixty years that is a formidable wall of prayer around one person.

Take their baptism day

Not the birthday. Everyone has the birthday. Take the anniversary of the baptism, which almost nobody marks, and make it yours. Put it in your calendar as a repeating event today. Have a Mass offered for them, which costs almost nothing and is the most substantial gift available to a Catholic. Then text them, or their parents, and say what the day is.

A child who grows up receiving one message a year from an adult who remembers the day they were baptized learns something about how the Church counts time.

Give them a decade

If you pray the Rosary, assign one decade a week to your godchild by name. If you do not pray the Rosary, this is a reasonable place to start, because it is five minutes and it has somewhere to put a person.

Fast for them occasionally

Fasting is prayer with your body, and it is the traditional escalation when something matters. A skipped meal on a Friday, offered specifically for one person, is a real act. If your godchild is in a hard season, this is the lever.

Praying Scripture for a Person

When you do not know what to ask, ask what Paul asked. His letters are full of prayers for people he loved, and they are more useful than anything you will invent.

"That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you" (Eph 1:17-18).

Put your godchild's name in it. Pray it once a week for a year and see whether your sense of what you are asking for does not deepen considerably.

When You Have No Words

There will be seasons when you are praying for a person who has stopped speaking to you, or who is making choices that frighten you, and the words dry up entirely.

Two options, both ancient.

Say the name. Simply hold the person before God without explanation. God does not require the briefing.

Or say the prayer of the father in Mark's Gospel, who brought his afflicted son to Christ and said the truest sentence in the New Testament: "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mk 9:24). It works for your own faith and theirs at the same time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Presence Over the Years

Prayer is the spine. Presence is the body. And presence has to change shape as the person grows, because what a four year old needs from you and what a twenty four year old needs from you have almost nothing in common.

Here is the arc, stage by stage, with the actual practices that work.

The First Years

In the early years, your godchild has no idea who you are and no capacity to receive anything spiritual from you directly. This is the stage godparents most often waste, because there is nothing visible to do.

Do these things anyway. Pray daily, starting now, before there is any relationship to motivate it. Show up when you can. Support the parents, who are exhausted and who are doing the actual formation. And begin the annual rhythms you intend to keep, so they are habits by the time the child is old enough to notice them.

One practice worth starting immediately: write a letter every year on the baptism anniversary, and keep them. Not for the child now. For the child at eighteen, or at thirty, when you hand over a stack of twenty letters from an adult who was praying for them before they could talk. There is very little you can give a young person that lands harder than evidence that they were held in mind for their entire life.

The School Years

Somewhere around six or seven, your godchild becomes a person you can actually talk to, and the job changes.

Be the adult who talks about God without pressure

Parents cannot do this, because everything a parent says about faith arrives inside the whole apparatus of parental authority. You are outside that. When you mention prayer, or a saint, or what you believe about the Eucharist, it lands as information from the world rather than instruction from the household. That is a unique asset and most godparents never spend it.

You do not have to catechize. Just refuse to be a Catholic who never mentions it. Say grace when you are together. Tell them you prayed for them, out loud, casually. Mention a saint's feast the way you would mention a birthday.

Give things that mean something

The default godparent gift is a toy that a child already has in another color. You can do better, and it does not require money.

A good children's Bible. A well-made book of saints. A saint medal of their patron, explained. Their own rosary, and fifteen minutes teaching them to use it. A first missal at First Communion. An icon for their room. Later on, a serious book.

The rule of thumb: give things that will still be in the house in ten years, and explain them when you give them.

Take the sacramental milestones

First Communion and First Reconciliation are yours to mark. Go if you can travel. If you cannot, the card and the phone call and the Mass offered for them make the point.

The Teenage Years

This is the stretch that justifies the entire institution of godparenting, and it is when most godparents have long since gone quiet.

Something happens in adolescence: the parents' voice, on faith specifically, goes temporarily dead. Not because the parents are wrong, but because the teenager's whole developmental project is differentiating from them. Everything a parent says about God gets filed as parental programming.

You are not a parent. That is the entire point of you.

Keep the relationship, not the agenda

The godparent who becomes an evangelist at this stage loses the relationship and accomplishes nothing. The godparent who stays a trusted adult keeps the door open for the day it matters.

Practically: take them to lunch. Ask real questions and let the answers be unsatisfying. Do not report back to their parents, except where safety requires it, and be clear with the teenager about where that line is. Be unshockable.

Answer the hard questions honestly

Somewhere in here they will test you. Why does God let children die. Why should I go to Mass if it is boring. What about the scandals. Why can't I sleep with my girlfriend.

The worst answer is a slogan. The second worst is panic. The best is honesty, including the honesty of "I do not know, and it has bothered me too, and here is what I have come to." A teenager can smell a rehearsed answer from across a table, and they can also tell when an adult is telling them the truth about something difficult.

Be there for Confirmation

Be the sponsor if you can, per the previous chapter. If someone else is the sponsor, be present anyway.

The Adult Years

The role does not end when your godchild turns eighteen. It changes into something that looks like friendship and functions like intercession.

What it looks like: you remember. You keep calling. You are the person who shows up for the wedding, the first baby, the hospital stay, the funeral of their parent. You are still praying every day, and after thirty years the accumulated weight of that prayer is not nothing.

What it does not look like: commentary on their choices. An adult godchild who is not practicing does not need your disappointment. They need to know that a serious Catholic adult loves them unconditionally and is not going anywhere. That is the thing that eventually gets remembered.

Distance Is Not an Excuse

Most of what is described here works from anywhere. Prayer is location independent. Letters, calls, texts on the baptism anniversary, a Mass offered in your parish for a child who lives two thousand miles away, all of it counts.

The two things distance genuinely costs you are spontaneity and physical presence at milestones. Buy them back deliberately. One visit a year, or one trip they take to you when they are old enough, will carry more weight than proximity does for a godparent who lives across town and never calls.

CHAPTER NINE

When It Costs You Something

Everything described so far is manageable. Prayer, letters, lunches, visits. A godparent could do all of it for twenty years without ever being asked for anything that hurts.

Then something happens, and the role reveals what it actually is.

The Kinds of Suffering This Role Involves

Their suffering

The child gets sick. The parents divorce. A sibling dies. Your godchild, at nine or nineteen, is handed something too heavy, and you watch it from a position of almost total powerlessness.

Their leaving

This is the common one, and nobody warns you. Somewhere between sixteen and twenty five, a great many baptized Catholics stop practicing. You stood at a font and promised to help this person live a Christian life, and now they do not want one. The promise does not expire, but there is suddenly nothing obvious to do with it.

Your exclusion

Families fracture. A divorce puts you on the wrong side of a custody arrangement. A falling out with the parents costs you the child. You are still bound by a promise to a person you are no longer permitted to see.

Your own suffering

And then, separately, your own life gets hard. Illness, loss, failure, the ordinary grinding difficulties of adulthood. What does that have to do with godparenting? More than you would think.

What the Church Says You Can Do With Suffering

Here is the teaching that turns the last of those into an asset, and it is one of the strangest and most powerful things Catholicism holds.

Paul writes to the Colossians:

> *"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."* Col 1:24

Read carefully, because it is easy to misread. Nothing is lacking in the saving work of Christ. The Cross is sufficient, complete, and not in need of supplement. What Paul is describing is participation: that Christ, having saved us, allows us to be joined to his suffering rather than merely spectating it, and that the suffering of a member of the Body can be offered for the good of other members.

This is what Catholics mean by offering it up, a phrase that has been trivialized into a way of telling children to stop complaining. It is not that. It is the claim that your pain, which is otherwise pure waste, can be deliberately attached to the Cross and spent on somebody else.

How to Actually Offer Something

It is more concrete than it sounds.

Name the suffering. The specific one. The chronic pain, the layoff, the grief, the humiliation, the bad month.

Name the person. Your godchild, by name.

Say it. "Lord, I unite this to your Cross, and I offer it for Teresa, for her faith." That is the whole mechanism. Say it in the morning, or say it in the moment when it hits hardest.

Then let it go. You will not get a receipt. This is entirely a work of faith, and its results are not observable, and that is exactly why it is worth something.

Suffering is not good. Christianity does not teach that it is. It teaches that God can make it fruitful, and that nothing offered in love is wasted. For a godparent facing a godchild who has walked away, that is not a consolation prize. It is a weapon.

The Long Obedience

The patron of everyone in this position is not a godparent at all. She is a mother.

Monica prayed for her son Augustine for years, through a stretch that ran well over a decade. He left the faith, took up a philosophy she considered garbage, moved cities partly to get away from her, and lived with a woman for years. She followed him. She wept. She asked a bishop to

intervene, and by Augustine's own account the bishop finally sent her away with the line she carried for the rest of her life:

> *Go thy ways and God bless thee, for it is not possible that the son of these tears should perish.*
>
> , The bishop to Monica, in Augustine, Confessions, Book III (Pusey translation)

He converted in his early thirties and was baptized at the Easter Vigil of 387. She died within months of it. And the boy she had refused to give up on became one of the most important figures in the history of Christian thought.

The lesson is not that persistence guarantees an outcome. Freedom is real, and some prayers are answered in ways we do not get to see. The lesson is about time scale. Monica's prayer looked like failure for most of her adult life. A godparent who gives up after three years is not making a judgment about their godchild. They are making a judgment about how long God is allowed to take.

What Not to Do When They Leave

Do not lecture. The lecture has already been delivered by someone else, usually badly, and yours will land in the same file.

Do not make every conversation about it. If you become the person who always brings up church, you will become the person they stop calling, and you will have traded a relationship for a series of speeches.

Do not moralize about their life. Especially not the parts that are obvious. They know what the Church teaches. Almost nobody leaves because they were insufficiently informed.

Do not pretend it does not matter. That is the opposite failure, and it is not kindness, it is abdication. They should know, once, clearly, that you believe this is the most important thing in the world and that you pray for them daily. Say it with affection and without conditions, and then do not say it again for a long time.

What to Do Instead

Stay. Stay in the relationship. Stay warm. Stay interested in their actual life, their work and their people and their troubles, without an agenda attached.

Keep praying, every single day, by name.

Offer your hard things for them, deliberately.

And be the kind of Catholic that makes the faith look like something a reasonable person could hold. For the person who has drifted, the most persuasive argument available is an adult they trust who is visibly, unremarkably, joyfully serious about God.

That is not passivity. That is a campaign, conducted over decades, on terms you do not control.

CHAPTER TEN

Starting Late

A large number of the people reading this are in the same position. You are somebody's godparent. You have been for years. And you have done essentially nothing.

Maybe you did not know there was anything to do. Maybe life happened, or the family moved, or you drifted from the faith yourself and had nothing to offer. Maybe the relationship with the parents got complicated and the child went with it.

This chapter is short, because the answer is short.

The Bond Did Not Lapse

Whatever you did or did not do, the relationship the Church established at that font still exists. It is not a contract that voids on breach. Your godchild is still your godchild. The promise is still on the record, and the only question in front of you is what happens next.

Do Not Open With an Apology

The instinct is to make contact with a confession: I have been a terrible godparent, I am so sorry, I should have been there. Resist it, at least as an opening move.

Two reasons. It puts the other person in the position of having to comfort you, which reverses the roles. And it makes the reconnection about your guilt rather than about them.

Just start. A text on the baptism anniversary. A note for a birthday that mentions you have been praying for them. A call that asks about their life. If the relationship reopens and an honest conversation about the missing years becomes natural, have it then, briefly and without theatrics.

The First Week, Month, and Year

This week: start praying for them daily, by name. Find the baptism date and put it in your calendar. If you cannot find it, ask the parents, which is itself a decent reason to make contact.

This month: make one piece of contact with no agenda. Ask a real question about their life.

This year: have one Mass offered for them on the baptism anniversary. Write one letter. See them once if it is possible.

That is a complete restart, and it takes less total effort than most people spend on a weekend.

If You Are the One Who Drifted

Some godparents went quiet because their own faith did. If that is you, the honest order of operations is: go to Confession, get back to Mass, and then take up the role. You cannot hand on what you are not holding.

And it is worth saying plainly that a godchild is a good reason to come back. Not the deepest reason, but a real one. A surprising number of returns to the sacraments have started with a person realizing they had promised something on behalf of a child and wanted to be able to keep it.

If You Are the Parent Looking at a Godparent Who Vanished

You cannot change the sacramental record, and you should not try. The names in the baptismal register stay.

But nothing prevents you from asking another serious Catholic adult to function in the child's life the way a godparent would. Call them a spiritual mentor, or a confirmation sponsor when the time comes, or nothing at all. The canonical role and the actual work are not the same thing, and your child needs the work.

And where the original godparent is reachable, a low-key invitation sometimes accomplishes more than a decade of disappointment. "We are having Teresa's baptism anniversary dinner on the ninth. You are her godmother. We would love for you to come." People rise to being wanted more often than they rise to being reproached.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Rule of Life for Godparents

If you take nothing else from this book, take these seven. They are the whole job, reduced to things you can actually do.

1. Pray for them every day, by name

Not when you think of them. Every day, attached to something you already do, in one sentence if that is all you have. This is the floor and it is also the ceiling. Everything else in this list exists to support it.

2. Own the baptism anniversary

Put it in your calendar as a repeating event. Have a Mass offered. Send something, even a text. You are the only person in this child's life likely to mark the day they were made a Christian, and marking it teaches them, over twenty years, that the day meant something.

3. Be a practicing Catholic they can see

You promised to help someone live a Christian life. The most powerful instrument you have is an ordinary adult life visibly organized around Christ. Go to Mass. Go to Confession. Let them see that a normal person, with a job and a mortgage and problems, actually believes this.

4. Stay in the relationship, whatever it costs

Distance, divorce, silence, disagreement, drift. Keep showing up in whatever way remains open. The godparent's main tactical advantage is longevity. You cannot use it if you leave.

5. Talk about God without pressure

Be the adult in their life who mentions faith the way people mention anything else they love, without a sermon attached. Answer hard questions honestly, including with I do not know. Never trade the relationship for a speech.

6. Give things that last

Bibles, saints, medals, missals, rosaries, serious books, and your time. Explain what you give. Skip the toy that will be gone by spring.

7. Offer your suffering for them

When your own life gets hard, spend it. Name the pain, name your godchild, unite it to the Cross, and let it go. It is the one resource you will have in abundance and the one nobody else in their life is likely to be spending on them.

✦ ✦ ✦

None of these require money, proximity, eloquence, or unusual holiness. They require memory and stubbornness. That is the whole skill set.

CLOSING

The Name at the Font

Go back, at the end, to the room where this started.

A font. A small crowd. A child who will not remember any of it. Someone pours water and says the words, and in that moment, with nothing visible to show for it, a human being is joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and made a child of God forever.

And the Church, which could have left that between the family and God, deliberately does not. It turns and asks someone else to stand up. It asks for a name, and it writes that name in a book that will outlive everyone in the room. It asks a question out loud: are you ready to help.

Somebody said we are.

If that was you, then you are not primarily an honored guest at a past event. You are a person with a standing assignment, attached to a specific soul, with no expiration date and no oversight. The parish will not check on you. The parents will not ask. Your godchild may never know what you did or did not do until the whole thing is revealed at the end, when all the hidden work gets read out.

That is the strange dignity of this role. It runs entirely on what you do when nobody is looking, for someone who cannot hold you to it, over a period long enough that you will not see most of the results.

Which is to say it runs on faith, which is what you professed at the font on their behalf in the first place.

You do not need to be holy to do this well. You need to remember a name and refuse to stop saying it. The prayers you say tonight for a person who does not know you are praying, in a language nobody hears, for an outcome you cannot verify, are real. They are held. They are working on something.

So pray for them tonight. Say the name out loud. Then say it again tomorrow, and keep saying it for the rest of your life, and trust the God who claimed them at that font to finish what he started there.

You promised to help. This is how you help.