



**FR. CHARLES
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**QUESTIONS &
ANSWERS**

Godparent must be active in faith

QUESTION: I am anticipating the birth of a child and am looking forward to its baptism in the Catholic Church. My sister left the Catholic Church several years ago and became a Lutheran. I understand that non-Catholics can be Christian witnesses at baptism and presume that my sister can do so. But recently I have gotten a few different opinions on this. Can you help clarify this situation?

ANSWER: The general law of the church requires only one godparent for baptism. That person must be a practicing Catholic. In addition, church law (canon 874.2) provides that a baptized person who belongs to a non-Catholic ecclesial community may be asked to serve not as a godparent but as a "Christian witness," provided that a suitable Catholic godparent is chosen and present.

It is expected that the "Christian witness" be a baptized Christian who is practicing his or her faith. That person acts as an example of Christian faith for the parents of the child. As the Rite of Baptism makes clear, the parents are the primary educators of the children in the

ways of faith. But the good example of others is always helpful.

The specific issue raised by the question posed above is addressed on Page 35 of "The Sacraments of Initiation: Policies for the Diocese of Pittsburgh" (June 1995). There, without additional comment, it says: "Catholics who have abandoned the Catholic faith are not to serve as Christian witnesses."

I understand that some may look upon this directive and wonder if a person leaves the Catholic Church and becomes a Lutheran, for example, why they should not have all the rights of a Lutheran and thereby be able to act as a Christian witness at a Catholic baptism. There is, however, an important distinction being made by the above diocesan directive.

Generally, it is presumed that a person baptized and formed in Catholic faith remain so for life. If a person chooses to leave the Catholic faith and join another faith community they must also be aware that there are consequences to their action.

In that context, it seems that the diocesan directive does not permit a "former" Catholic to act as a Christian witness for a Catholic baptism because that person would be required to "witness" to and see significance in something that they at some point in their life no longer valued.

While this matter may appear complex, it does point out the significance of one's decisions about one's faith community. It also highlights the importance of parents carefully selecting godparents (or Christian witnesses) for their child's baptism.

I do hear some people say it is difficult for them to find a practicing Catholic to act as a godparent. While that is understandable, in that some people move to this area with all their family and friends living elsewhere. In those instances it is helpful to remember that only one godparent is needed. The parish priest may also be of assistance in that situation.

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