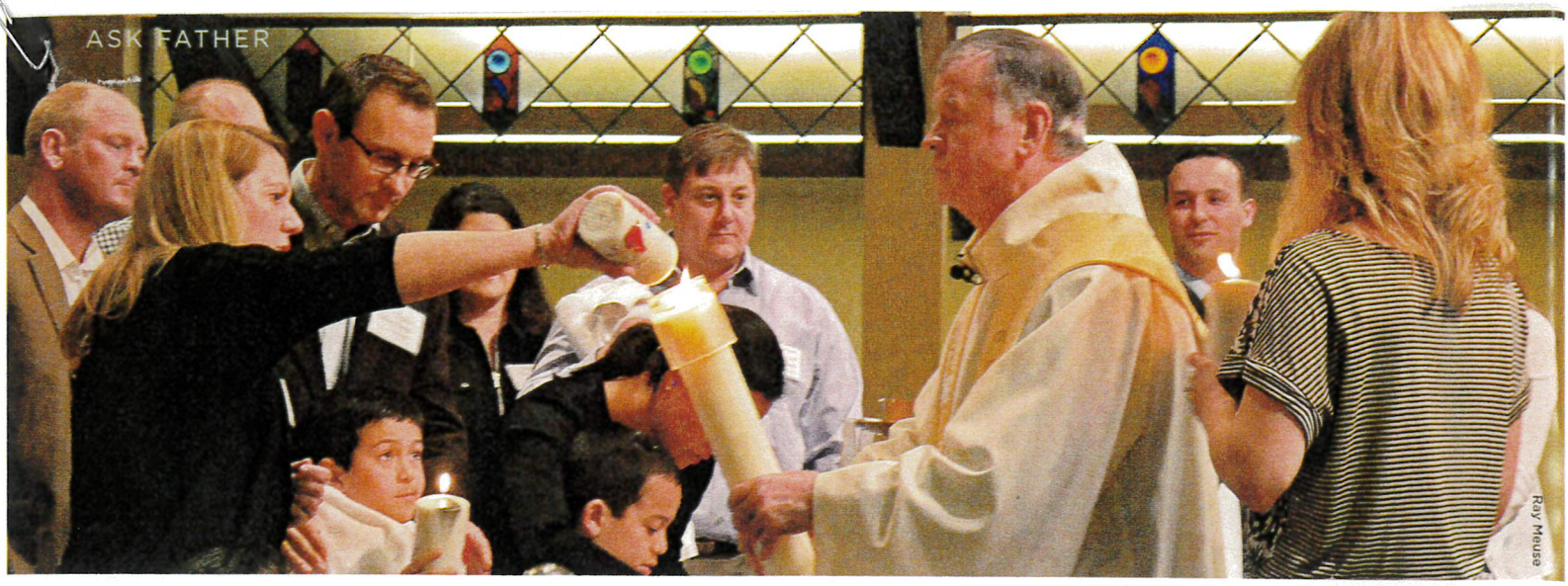
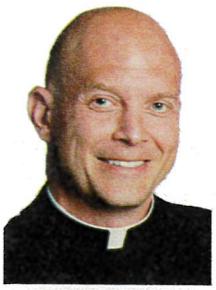


Do godparents have to be married in the church?

Q We recently approached our pastor about having our child baptized. I said we wanted my older brother to be the godparent, but our pastor told us that even though he had received all of his sacraments of initiation, he was disqualified from being the sponsor because he was not married in the church. Needless to say, we are disappointed and upset. Was our pastor right in coming to this decision?

A When I first entered seminary, one of the first things I had to do was to find a spiritual director. This began first and foremost with prayer: "God, who do you want my spiritual director to be?" When the answer came, I made an appointment and sat down with him for the initial interview. I wanted to find out if he was a true man of prayer and someone who had the wisdom and knowledge to lead me in the spiritual life to greater holiness, through word and example of life. In many ways, the relationship between a seminarian and his spiritual director is the most important one during the years of seminary, and the spiritual director is the key person who helps a seminarian discover if he is being called to the priesthood.



FATHER CAL CHRISTIANSEN

I share this story because I feel strongly that you as parents should have similar criteria for your child's godparent. It shouldn't just be an important person in your family but rather, first and foremost, someone who is going to help your child become a saint — sort of like a lifelong spiritual director. A godparent has a very special and privileged spiritual role in the life of their godchild; this is why the church has some demanding requirements for him or her.

What are those requirements? They are clearly laid out in the church's canon law, which tells us that the primary role of the sponsor is to help "the baptized person to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations inherent in it." (Canon 872) The prerequisites for this primary responsibility are clear: "To be permitted to take on the function of sponsor the person must … be a Catholic who has been confirmed and has already received the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist and who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on." (Canon 874)

The key phrase here in relation to your question is "who leads a life of faith in keeping with the function to be taken on." Although I hate to throw more canon law at you, there is another crucial law that we need to know: Baptized Catholics have the obligation to be married in the church or to obtain formal permission to be married outside of it. (see Canons 1108-1129)

That baptized Catholics are married in the church is important for two reasons. At a pastoral level, it allows the church and her ministers to help the couple properly discern their calling and readiness for marriage. Secondly, it allows the couple to receive the proper formation that they will need in order to make the lifelong commitment to each other on their wedding day. Your pastor decided that because your brother chose not to follow this process and obligation as a baptized Catholic, he should not be your child's godparent.

At the beginning of the Rite of Baptism, the priest or suitable minister asks the godparents: "Are you ready to help the parents of this child in their duty as Christian parents?" They respond: "We are." As we can see, the church understands this sacred responsibility to come in the form of both word and example of life, especially in regard to marriage.

A relatively simple solution to this dilemma would be to talk with your brother about having his marriage convalidated (blessed) by the church, thus making it a sacramental marriage so he would be able to take the privileged role of godparent in your child's life.

May God's blessings be with you today and always! Ω

Father Cal Christiansen is pastor of St. Pius X Parish in Mountlake Terrace. Send your questions for "Ask Father" to editor@seattlearch.org.