



Catholic Diocese of Richmond  
Godparent Attestation Form

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Infant Baptism

In response to our increasingly mobile society and the diverse countries of origin represented in our diocese, a new means for verifying the suitability of godparents has been designed in consultation with the judicial vicar. According to this Godparent Attestation Form, the godparent certifies, by means of a signature, that he or she meets the requirements set forth in the *Code of Canon Law*<sup>1</sup>, as listed on the form.

Use of this form will ensure unity of practice for all parishes and campus ministries within the Diocese of Richmond and will facilitate accurate entries in sacramental registers. No additional information from the godparent, or from his or her parish or campus ministry, will be necessary.

Use of this form will also provide opportunities to inform and evangelize parents about the role of godparents, including the importance of marriage and a life of faith.

All parishes and campus ministries in the Diocese of Richmond are directed to use the Godparent Attestation Form for all godparent verification by **August 15, 2019**.

**Should you have questions that go beyond the FAQs listed, please contact the following diocesan employees:**

*We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.*

*We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.*

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**Pope Francis**  
*Amoris laetitia*, no. 37

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Pastors and chaplains with canonical questions should contact the judicial vicar, Msgr. Francis Muench, at 804-355-9155, [fmuench@richmonddiocese.org](mailto:fmuench@richmonddiocese.org).

## Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Infant Baptism: Implementation Concerns

### 1. Who signs the Godparent Attestation Form?

The godparent must sign the Godparent Attestation Form to declare his or her suitability, and willingness, to accept this role.

### 2. What is the purpose of the pastor or his delegate's signature?

The pastor or chaplain of the child to be baptized may request that the prospective godparent's signature be witnessed by his or her pastor, chaplain, or a delegate of either (See FAQ #3 for suitable delegates). This action is meant to guarantee that no one except the godparent is asserting that he or she will be discharging this office, and that he or she understands the Church's requirements. The pastor, chaplain, or delegate is NOT confirming the truth of the person's suitability.

### 3. Who is a suitable delegate of the pastor or chaplain?

A parochial vicar or deacon is competent to act on behalf of a pastor or chaplain in assisting a prospective godparent. So too is a qualified layperson; that is, a member of a parish or campus-ministry staff who has a theological education, who exercises some pastoral responsibility, and whom the pastor or chaplain has designated for this task.

### 4. If I am witnessing a godparent signature, do I need to look up the individual in ParishSoft to confirm his or her status?

No, it is not necessary to verify anything about the individual's Catholic status. When witnessing a signature, you are only ensuring that the person in front of you is in fact the person undertaking the role of godparent. You are not attesting to the person's Catholic status.

### 5. Can you clarify which pastor signs the form and when?

The pastor of the parish where the recipient will be prepared for the sacrament and receive it chooses whether or not to use the pastor signature line. If the pastor opts for the signature line, it is the pastor or delegate of the godparent who signs the form. This principle holds true no matter where the godparent resides.

### 6. How do I know whether or not a pastor signature is required? Can I alter the form?

The attestation form is to be distributed within the context of sacramental preparation. Therefore, the person conducting the preparation should be clear about the expectations of the form when presenting it. If a pastor signature is not required, the minister may write "No pastor signature required," or otherwise cross out the pastor signature line in order to make this clear. The form should not be electronically altered or saved in an alternate form on a parish's website. The diocesan link should be used to distribute all attestation forms:

<https://richmonddiocese.org/office/christian-formation/?tab=16>.

**7. If the chosen godparent is a member of the same parish as the infant to be baptized, must he or she still complete the Godparent Attestation Form?**

Yes. The Godparent Attestation Form is for anyone presenting himself or herself as godparent within the Diocese of Richmond.

**8. Can this form be used outside the Diocese of Richmond if a parishioner needs a generic “Catholic letter in good standing”?**

If no specific parameters have been given by another diocese, the Godparent Attestation Form may be used for someone requesting a letter in good standing. Some parishes have chosen to write a cover letter explaining the practice of the Diocese of Richmond. However, if another diocese requests specific information, that must be provided. It is for each diocese to determine what is needed for a godparent to affirm his or her status in the Catholic Church.

**9. Why is there no place for affixing the parish seal on the Godparent Attestation Form?**

The parish seal is not used because the Godparent Attestation Form is itself the testimony of the godparent that he or she meets the canonical requirements of this role.

The godparent’s name is entered into the Baptism register after the sacrament has been administered. No other information is needed about the godparent beyond his or her legal name.

**10. What is a canonical penalty?**

A canonical penalty is a censure or punishment imposed on Catholics for grave offenses: for example, heresy, which is the intentional rejection of certain aspects of Church teaching—that is, dogmas, which must be believed with “divine and Catholic faith”<sup>2</sup>—or “obstinate persistence in manifest grave sin.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, a canonical penalty is applied in response to a person’s intentional actions that go against Church teaching. Examples include throwing away a consecrated host (Eucharistic species) or using a consecrated host for a sacrilegious purpose<sup>4</sup>, or procuring an abortion<sup>5</sup>. In these and other cases, age and circumstances involving force or fear may excuse the canonical penalty (although the action always remains wrong<sup>6</sup>).

Penalties for these offenses include excommunication from the Church<sup>7</sup> or the withholding of Holy Communion.<sup>8</sup> Canonical penalties are meant to be corrective measures for healing the souls of those punished.

**11. Is this form used when performing an emergency Baptism? How is an emergency Baptism recorded?**

It may not be feasible to provide the attestation form when performing an emergency Baptism. For the purposes of records, the Baptism is to be recorded in the register of the territorial parish where the sacrament was administered. It is the duty of the person who performed the emergency Baptism to inform the pastor of the territorial parish.

**12. Is this, or another form, required for Christian witnesses or proxies?**

No. The attestation form only applies to godparents. Christian witnesses do not need to meet the same requirements as (Catholic) godparents. Christian witnesses need to be 16 years of age and baptized using the trinitarian formula in a non-Catholic tradition. Those who have been baptized Catholic are not permitted to serve as Christian witnesses.

Likewise, proxies also do not need to meet the same requirements as godparents, but must be at least 14 years of age and able to provide testimony about the celebration of the sacrament. Proxies and/or Christian witnesses, in addition to godparents, are recorded in the sacramental records of the parish. (For information on proxies for Confirmation, please see Confirmation FAQ #16.)

**Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Infant Baptism: Pastoral Concerns**

**13. May a stepparent serve as a godparent?**

No, a stepparent may not serve as a godparent. The *Code of Canon Law* distinguishes between the roles of parent and godparent. The role of parent (including stepparent) is to rear the child in the faith. The role of godparent is to assist the one baptized in living the Christian life and in staying true to the baptismal promises. The godparent also represents the expansion of the spiritual family of the one who is baptized.

**14. How should this form be used in a Baptism preparation program?**

Use of the Godparent Attestation Form provides an opportunity to educate the parent about the Church's expectations for godparents. The form should be at the start of the preparation program so that the parents can make an informed choice when choosing godparents.

Likewise, the use of the form can provide a way to help would-be godparents who do not meet the qualifications for the role they seek. In the context of pastoral care, the parish or campus ministry can support and guide such persons, perhaps even facilitating their restoration to communion with the Church.

**15. What if the pastor, chaplain, or delegate knows that some part of the claim on the Attestation Form is NOT true?**

As long as this knowledge is not under the seal of confession, the pastor, chaplain, or delegate should take this opportunity to catechize the prospective godparent.

When someone appears to be unqualified to serve as a godparent, the minister should first explain to him or her the purpose and requirements of this role. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that godparents “must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized child...on the road of Christian life.”<sup>9</sup> The Church seeks a practicing Catholic because a godparent is responsible for helping the child respond to God’s grace.<sup>10</sup> The prospective godparent may not have considered this point, focusing instead on kinship or friendship as the chief qualification for the role.

The pastor or delegate should also explain that, regarding the active faith of a godparent, the Church does not seek moral perfection but rather a sincere effort. This effort must be publicly verifiable (for example, regular Mass attendance and a valid marriage) because the role of a godparent is public. Being a godparent is not a private arrangement since this person also represents the Church. If the prospective godparent were to openly contradict the faith he or she professed, this would weaken the faith of the Christian community. This is what the Church means by scandal: a poor example that leads others into sin.<sup>11</sup>

**16. Cohabitation is not listed on the Attestation Form. How is cohabitation, or any other sin, to be addressed with prospective godparents?**

The Godparent Attestation Form is consistent in asking what the Church asks of a godparent. While there are sins that may prevent someone from being a good witness to the faith, it is for the prospective godparent to determine whether he or she fulfills the criteria of a Catholic in good standing. The Church seeks sincere effort rather than moral perfection with respect to godparents. There is a difference between not leading a life consonant with the teaching of the Church and human imperfection.

**17. What pastoral means are available to restore a person to the status befitting the role of a godparent?**

The pastor or delegate should bear in mind that when it comes to serving as a godparent, not all cases are the same. Some problematic situations can be remedied more easily than others.

**A. Age**

A person must typically be at least sixteen years old to serve as a godparent.<sup>12</sup> The Church recognizes that a person at this age can have the necessary spiritual maturity to help a person being baptized.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, canon law allows a pastor or the minister of Baptism to grant “an exception for a just cause.”<sup>14</sup> Examples of just cause include the proximity of a person’s birthday and evidence of maturity despite a younger age.

**B. Mass attendance**

Failing to regularly attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation is a common obstacle to serving as a godparent. The minister should first ascertain why the person does not regularly attend Mass, and then help him or her to do so. Notably, if a person cannot attend Mass because of necessary work, or some other grave obligation (for example, caring for a loved one), then he or she is excused. In such cases, the person should still make an effort to pray and read the biblical readings for Mass.<sup>15</sup>

In other cases, a person may not be aware that attending a Mass on Saturday evening (that is, an anticipated or vigil Mass) fulfills the Sunday obligation.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the person may not realize that he or she could attend a Mass in another parish at a different time, or even in a different language (for example, Spanish), to fulfill the obligation.

More commonly, the prospective godparent has options for attending Mass but for whatever reason does not do so. In this case, the minister should explain the importance and meaning of Mass—it is a participation in the saving Death and Resurrection of Christ<sup>17</sup>—and encourage the person to attend. Next, the pastor or delegate should ask the person if he or she is willing to try to fulfill this obligation in the future. If the person expresses a willingness to do so, this commitment is sufficient for him or her to serve as a godparent. The minister should also encourage the person to receive the Sacrament of Penance, emphasizing the spiritual benefits of Reconciliation.<sup>18</sup>

**C. Missing sacraments**

If the prospective godparent lacks a Sacrament of Christian Initiation—Baptism, First Holy Communion, or more commonly, Confirmation—the minister should explain to him or her the importance of these sacraments: that they initiate a person into the Church by means of participation in Christ’s Paschal Mystery.<sup>19</sup> The pastor, chaplain, or delegate should also assure the person that he or she could receive these sacraments given the proper disposition and necessary preparation.<sup>20</sup> In the case of a missing sacrament, it is best to explain that the person should not serve as a godparent until his or her Christian initiation has been completed.<sup>21</sup> The reason is that the prospective godparent must himself or herself be fully rooted in the Church in order to help someone else undergo initiation.

**D. Irregular marriages**

An irregular marriage—one the Church does not recognize as valid—constitutes another obstacle to serving as a godparent.<sup>22</sup> Because an irregular marriage cannot always be rectified quickly or easily, a person in this situation should be counseled not to serve as a godparent until the matter has been resolved.<sup>23</sup> Since any marriage is a deeply personal matter, the minister must tread carefully in these circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

The pastor, chaplain, or delegate should understand that it is no longer common knowledge that, for a Catholic to be validly married, he or she must contract marriage in the presence of a priest or deacon (unless a dispensation from canonical form has been obtained, or unless the spouses were not Catholic at the time of the wedding and subsequently entered

the Catholic Church).<sup>25</sup> This means that a prospective godparent may be surprised to learn that he or she does not meet the qualifications for the role being sought.

If a person was married in the Church, then obtained a divorce, but has not since remarried, he or she would still be eligible to serve as a godparent (assuming the other requirements have been met). Here it should be remembered that the Church permits spouses to separate for a grave reason.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to misconception, it is not a civil divorce that renders a person ineligible for serving as a godparent; rather, it is either a second marriage, without an annulment and involving spousal intimacy, or cohabitation that includes sexual relations.

The minister should carefully and lovingly explain that someone in an irregular marriage is not excommunicated from the Church, as is often believed; on the contrary, the person very much belongs to the Christian community.<sup>27</sup> Although the person is not normally permitted to receive the Sacrament of Penance or Holy Communion<sup>28</sup>, he or she may and should still attend Mass, as the obligation to do so remains.<sup>29</sup> The person should also be invited to participate in the parish's other activities.<sup>30</sup> The grace of God continues to work in the life of a person who is in an irregular marriage, helping him or her to do good, to love his or her companion, and to serve the local community.<sup>31</sup> The pastor or delegate should also strive to affirm the value of a person's current marriage<sup>32</sup>—unless the person has indicated otherwise—and encourage him or her to be married in the Church, as this form of marriage will bolster the couple's commitment to each other and permit the reception of the sacraments.<sup>33</sup>

Sometimes a person in an irregular marriage indicates that he or she lacks a sacrament of Christian Initiation, typically Confirmation. (This is because the age for Confirmation varies from place to place, and the person may have lapsed from the practice of the faith during adolescence.) Often enough, a question arises on the spot: Should the person in an irregular marriage first be confirmed, which the Church recommends prior to marriage<sup>34</sup>, before being married in the Church? Since the reception of Confirmation, like other sacraments, requires a proper disposition<sup>35</sup>, the marriage situation must be resolved first. Then the person is permitted to receive Confirmation.

The same principle applies to a baptized Catholic who has not received First Holy Communion. (An unbaptized adult who has frequented the Catholic Church or a Catholic who was baptized as an infant but has remained uncatechized, should undergo the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA]). A Catholic in an irregular marriage may receive the Sacrament of Penance and Holy Communion if (1) he or she has committed to living "as brother and sister" (that is, in continence) with his or her spouse; and (2) if the couple's marriage status is unknown, such that the reception of Holy Communion would not cause scandal to the community.

In the case of an irregular marriage, the minister must assess why the marriage is invalid and then briefly explain to the prospective godparent what steps would be necessary for him or her to be married in the Church. Rather than entering into a long conversation at this

point, when the person may feel overwhelmed in trying to understand the Church's teaching on marriage and may be disappointed at not meeting the qualifications for being a godparent, the minister should encourage the person to make an appointment for a subsequent meeting. Practically speaking, the minister should seek to facilitate such a meeting by exchanging contact information with the person.

It may be that a person's marriage simply lacks canonical form (that is, marriage in the presence of a priest or deacon). In this case, at a subsequent meeting, a priest or deacon could assist the person in obtaining an (administrative) annulment and then begin the process for preparing him or her to have the marriage convalidated. If, by contrast, one of the parties to the marriage was married previously, a dissolution or (formal-case) annulment may be necessary. In cases of doubt, the priest, chaplain, or delegate should contact the Diocesan Tribunal.

### **18. Are there any other pastoral measures encouraged to restore the member fully to the Christian community?**

If someone is eligible to be a godparent because his or situation can be remedied with relative ease, the minister should encourage the person to receive the Sacrament of Penance (also known as Confession or Reconciliation) in preparation for the sacred role, briefly mentioning its spiritual benefits.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See *Code of Canon Law*, canons 874 §1 and 893 §1.

<sup>2</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 751.

<sup>3</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 915.

<sup>4</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1367.

<sup>5</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1398.

<sup>6</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1323.

<sup>7</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1331.

<sup>8</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 915.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1780, 1783-1785; Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family, *Amoris laetitia* (2016), no. 37.

<sup>10</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canons 872, 892; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1255, 1311; *Rite of Baptism for Children*, no. 8; *Order for Celebrating Confirmation*, no. 5; *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; Christian Initiation: General Instruction*, nos. 8-10; Introduction, no. 11.

<sup>11</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2284-2285.

<sup>12</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1, 2°.

<sup>13</sup> See *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, no. 10, 2°.

<sup>14</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1, 2°.

<sup>15</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1248 §2.

<sup>16</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1248 §1.

<sup>17</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1364-1368.

<sup>18</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1468-1470; *Rite of Penance*, no. 7.

<sup>19</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1212.



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<sup>20</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 843.

<sup>21</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1, 3°.

<sup>22</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 874 §1, 3°.

<sup>23</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1650.

<sup>24</sup> See Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 296.

<sup>25</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canons 1059, 1108, §1, 1117, 1127, §2.

<sup>26</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1649; *Code of Canon Law*, canons 1151-1153.

<sup>27</sup> See Pope St. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, *Familiaris consortio* (1981), no. 84; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1651; Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, nos. 243, 299, 306, 312.

<sup>28</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canons 916, 987; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1650.

A Catholic in an irregular marriage may receive the Sacrament of Penance and Holy Communion if (1) he or she has committed to living “as brother and sister” (that is, in continence) with his or her spouse; and (2) if the couple’s marriage status is unknown such that the reception of Holy Communion would not cause scandal to the community (Pope St. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 84; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1650; Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 305).

<sup>29</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1247.

<sup>30</sup> See Pope St. John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 84; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1651; Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* no. 299.

<sup>31</sup> See Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 291.

<sup>32</sup> See Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, nos. 292-294.

<sup>33</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1631.

<sup>34</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1065 §1.

<sup>35</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, canon 889 §2.

<sup>36</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1468-1470; *Rite of Penance*, no. 7.