

Dear Fr. Kerper

Can a non-Catholic be a godparent for my child?

►► **Dear Father Kerper:** Six months ago, my wife and I had our first child. I wanted my best friend Kevin to be the godfather. The priest told us that this wasn't permitted because Kevin's a Lutheran. This seems like discrimination. I also know that priests have allowed Protestants to be godparents. I don't get it. The church's rules seem arbitrary and unfair.

Congratulations! Seeing new life, especially a first-born child, causes many parents to think deeply about spiritual matters. The tension around the selection of your child's godfather can open the door to a richer understanding of these essential connections.

Let's begin by putting aside some ideas about godparents. The godparent is not a "replacement parent." Some believe that godparents get custody of godchildren if their parents die. Others designate godparents as a way of honoring close friends or favorite relatives. By asking someone to serve as a godparent, a parent manifests trust and esteem. Some also hope to secure a permanent relationship with a friend by formally linking the friend to the godchild.

I suspect you chose Kevin as godfather because of friendship and your desire to honor him. These are noble motives, but the role of godparent is not about friendship or good personal example. Rather, the godparent agrees to exercise an office on behalf of the parents and the Catholic Church. Is this religious discrimination?

Civil law recognizes discrimination in employment, housing, banking and so forth. Religious discrimination is wrong also, but not necessarily in matters involving religion itself. It's one thing to refuse to rent your apartment to Lutherans just because they're Lutherans. It's quite another thing to insist that godparents be Roman Catholics. In the first, religion is irrelevant; in the second, it's absolutely crucial.

For example, candidates for ordination must be baptized and confirmed Catholics. Here we have positive distinction favoring Catholics and excluding others. No reasonable person would regard this church law as anti-Protestant. Just as the priest receives an office, so too does the godparent.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that godparents "must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized on the road of Christian life." (CCC 1255) To fulfill such a task, one must hold the beliefs of the Catholic Church and live by them.

Let's say that you hope your daughter will excel at tennis. Imagine that she has such prodigious skill in the sport that you seek a private coach. Surely, you would hire a tennis coach, not a swimming coach. Imagine a swimming coach trying to teach tennis! Perhaps an excellent swimming coach could help her with physical training, general athletic principles and sportsmanship, but not the specifics of tennis.

A godparent is much like a coach. Just as it's unfair to ask a superb swimmer to coach tennis, it's equally unfair to ask someone who is not a committed Catholic to share in the spiritual coaching of a Catholic child. Moreover, it puts the non-Catholic in the awkward position of participating publicly in Catholic rituals, specifically the child's baptism, first Communion, and confirmation. Think of how uncomfortable it would be for a committed Lutheran, whose beliefs about the Eucharist differ from ours, to share in your daughter's first Communion celebration.

As your good friend, Kevin may have an enormously positive influence on your daughter's character and spirituality. However, he's not equipped to "coach" her in the specifically Catholic



form of Christian faith.

You also bring up the point that you have encountered priests who allow non-Catholics to serve as godparents. We need to refine our terms here. The church does indeed allow baptized non-Catholics to act as Christian witnesses. Apart from witnessing the event, they have no religious responsibilities toward the child. Though often called godparents, they really aren't. Every baptized person needs at least one baptized and confirmed Catholic godparent. Hence, one can never have two Christian witnesses.

At first glance, some church disciplines, like the ones about godparents, seem unreasonable. However, a careful examination usually shows that such practices make sense. They can guide people to what's truly good for everyone involved – children, parents, godparents, and the whole community of faith.

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