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Godparents

Encouragement of godparents such as Barbara Young and Michael Pierce (top right) have helped parents such as Mark and Mary Jo Rzacca (top left) provide spiritual guidance for their children through the ages. In these photos, Amanda Rzacca, 9, celebrates her baptism, first Communion and March 15 birthday.



Role models nurture children

For Tristin Alexander, choosing Roger Mathews to be his godparent was easy.

"He's nice and he takes care of me," Tristin, 13, summed up.

When his grades slip, Mathews encourages him to study. When he's down, "he helps me feel better," Tristin said.

Tristin is going through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Children at Rochester's St. Andrew Church and looking forward to his baptism at the Easter Vigil.

Mathews, 36, had moved in across the street from Tristin's family three years ago. He was planting bulbs

out front when Tristin came over to introduce himself. They became good friends, and Tristin has enjoyed working on the house with Mathews. One Sunday he asked Mathews where he was going, and when Mathews said church, Tristin asked if he could go along.

"I just wanted to learn about God," the youth said. Now, he said, "It's like I'm starting a new life."

He's already set his hopes on becoming an altar server.

Mathews is taking his godparenting seriously. He takes Tristin to class and Mass, answers most of his questions

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Sponsors give in varied ways

As far as Barbara Carroll is concerned, once you are a godparent, "You commit to walk the journey."

Just because a godchild grows up doesn't mean the child doesn't need you, said the diocesan coordinator of sacramental catechesis.

"Do I talk to them every day? No," she said. "Do I remember them in a special way on their birthday? Yes. And at other moments in their life."

There aren't any specifics on how a godparents should bear witness and "help a godchild on the road of Christian life," as the Catechism of the Catholic Church defines their duty.

"I don't think we have something in our church structure that keeps involving them to pay attention to their godchild," noted Sister Marie Clare Stoé, SSND, pastoral associate for the Catholic Community of Mt. Morris and Nunda. She did note that at confirmation the church does suggest calling upon one's godparents to be sponsors, however.

Deacon Tom Sheridan, religious affairs writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, in his 1995 book, *The Gift of Godparents*, suggests ways godparents can make the most of their role:

- "You can begin by recognizing that being a godparent isn't only about religion ... Mostly, it's about faith. And there is a difference.

- "Godparents don't have to take a religious knowledge test or recite the Ten Commandments - although it's important that the commandments, the beatitudes, and God's great law of love serve as guides for a godparent's own life."

- Send a card and gift on the anniversary of your godchild's baptism.

- Presence will mean the most, and not only for "churchy" events. Babysit, take the godchild to a ballgame or the park.

- Demonstrate Christian values and examples in your own life.

- Take part in your parish's adult religious education program and share what you learn.

- Encourage your godchild to go on a teen retreat. Offer to work with the team developing it.

- Work in a soup kitchen, food pantry or nursing home and bring your godchild along.

Despite their own roles within the church, neither Sister Lucy Walawender, RSM, social ministry coordinator for St. Anthony/St. Patrick's Cluster in Elmira, nor Father Robert J. Kennedy, assistant professor at St. Bernard's Institute, for instance, say they make it their mission as godparents to talk about religion to their godchildren.

"I know her parents both are good practicing Christians, Catholics who take their faith seriously," Sister Walawender said of her godchild, Elaine Rzacca.

"Uncle Greg" Pierce sends his goddaughter Hilary Rzacca birthday cards, books and other gifts, and is "always in touch with her," though miles away in Chicago, according to the sisters' mother, Mary Jo Rzacca.

And Hilary's godmother, Stacey MacGregor of Greece, always "seems to make a special moment for her" when visiting the family, Mary Jo Rzacca said.

Story by Kathleen Schwar