**Christmation and sponsors**

When infants or adults are brought to the baptismal or christmation font, they not only come with parents and friends, but also their sponsors—traditionally in churches, a man and a woman.  These sponsors have liturgical duties to perform during the service, such as holding the child, and making the responses when the priest requires that the child renounce Satan and unite himself to Christ.  But there are other duties as well, which remain after the service is over.

The sponsors in Baptism are guarantors pledging to the Church that the baby to be baptized will be brought up in the faith of that Church; therefore they must be members of the Holy Orthodox Church. Among the other duties of sponsors is the duty of seeing that their godchildren receive Holy Communion frequently, that they attend Sunday School and church regularly, that they learn their prayers and fulfill all the other requirements of the Orthodox Faith.

what’s the point of having sponsors?  One might begin an answer by looking at how sponsorship functioned in the early Church Thus in the early Church the function of the sponsors was to witness to the propriety of the baptism by testifying that the catechumenal candidate was indeed living a Christian life.  (Presumably in cases of infant baptism, the issue was whether or not the parents of the infant candidate were living a Christian life.)

At very least then, sponsors function as vestigial witnesses to the nature of Christian discipleship.  Baptism or chrismation is not simply a “get it over with” sort of thing, like a child’s first vaccination.  It is the beginning of a life of commitment to Christ and of striving for holiness.  The presence of sponsors reveals that something is required of the candidate after the service is all over, and that this requirement is life-long.  Baptism is thus like enrollment in school—the process of enrollment is important, but it is essentially meaningless unless one follows it up by actually going to school, attending classes, studying, and taking exams.

Enrollment in school looks forward to the day of graduation; baptism looks forward to the day when we die and step into the Kingdom.

Our baptism (or chrismation) should not be seen simply as a one-time event, but rather as a milestone within our overall relationship with Christ and His Church. As with any relationship, our relationship with Christ and His Church develops over time, but it can be described in terms of four successive phases that a person goes through: the visitor, the inquirer, the catechumen, and finally the baptized, chrismated member. These terms may have been slightly different during different periods in the life of the Church, but the same basic progression has been followed since the beginning of the Church.

Like a marriage, the baptized, chrismated member does not simply stop their growing into their relationship once they have joined the body of Christ. They will continue to deepen their relationship with Christ through those practices they began as catechumens: following a personal prayer rule, observing the fasting practices of the Church, giving regularly to the parish, and attending the services of the Church on a consistent basis. Also, by virtue of their chrismation, they will partake in some ministry of the Church, extending the work of God’s Kingdom into the world.

What I have described in these four phases has focused upon the specifics of how a person interacts with the life of a parish over time. I need to make the important point that we, as Orthodox Christians, believe that the local Church is the Body of Christ. We are not simply talking about the formalities of joining an organization. Rather, we are talking in a specific way about growing in our relationship with Christ Himself.

As we each reflect upon our own experiences of baptism and chrismation, we will find those fruits of our faith that we can share with those around us with enthusiasm. We have made the choice to be here. Why? There is something compelling there for each of us and we can share that with those who aren’t with us yet. Amen.