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Social customs and demographic change: the case of godparenthood in Catholic Europe

(extended abstract)

It is a well-known fact that demographic change can alter the inner dynamics of a society. However, this kind of influences is also clearly underexplored: or, more precisely, has attracted study on a fairly limited selection of topics (for example, marriage).

This contribution aims at shedding some light on an almost unexplored topic: godparenthood. In Catholic Europe, baptism was thought capable of generating a specific kind of kinship ("spiritual" kinship) between godparents on one side, the baptized child and his/her parents on the other. Spiritual kinship ties implied many impediments to marriage. The notion of spiritual kinship was cancelled by the Catholic Church during the 20th century (entirely disappearing only with the new Code of Canon Law of 1983), but godparents remained as essential actors at baptism.

In the past, godparents had been considered useful relations, to be chosen according to the parents' interest much more than for fostering the well-being of the newborn, let alone ensuring his or her Christian education. During the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period they were usually chosen outside kin, but this situation began to change in the late 18th and the 19th century, when kinsmen began to be chosen as godfathers and godmothers more and more frequently. This process, which in the 19th century was surely influenced by the spread of the new "bourgeois" ideology of

the family suggesting intimacy, love and affection (and not economic interest, or at least not blatantly) as "relational virtues" within kinship, was completed only in the following century.

This contribution makes use of the results of surveys, completed by the authors themselves, about the selection of godparents in nowadays Italy and France. These surveys have been conduced by asking to baptized people to specify the characteristics of their godfather and godmother (was his or her godparent a relation? Of which kind? Or was he or she a friend, or colleague, or neighbour, etc., of the parents?); to detail the structure of family and kinship group at the time of his or her baptism (how many living uncles, aunts, godparents?, etc); and to provide a wealth of other information. The resulting databases are sizeable: about 700 cases for Italy; about 400 for France.

This data shows clearly the absolute prevalence of selection of godparents among kinsmen. In Italy for example, relations account for 75-80% of all godparents, with a marked prevalence of uncles and aunts. If we take into account the structure of the family, the conclusion is that uncles and aunts, as a rule, are selected if available, with more "open" strategies of selection appearing only when all uncles and aunts have been satisfied (the share of godparent uncles and aunts decreases from the first child to the second; from the second to the third; etc.), or when there are no uncles and aunts to be chosen.

This model of selection, clearly prevalent and corresponding to a specific social custom, in Italy is however doomed. A consequence of being a "lowest-low fertility" country which is often overlooked is that uncles and aunts start disappearing as soon as the lone-child generations reach reproductive age. The aforementioned social custom concerning godparenthood, then, will prove unsustainable, and new strategies of selection are bound to emerge: even considering the tendency to the decrease in the share of baptized children in Italy, which is still a slow process involving a minority (at the beginning of the 21st century, about 80% of newborns were still baptized before reaching one year of age).

The contribution compares the godparenthood models of Italy and France (also taking into account regional variations) and provides a quantitative analysis of the strategies of selection. It then

underlines both similarities and differences, and tries to provide an explanation which takes into account the different history of godparenthood in the two countries. It also evaluates the implications of the different demographic trends of Italy and France, which are going to prove much more disruptive of social customs in the case of the former than the latter. Lastly, it formulates hypothesis about future developments that take into account demographic as well as social, cultural and economic aspects.