

An Explanation of the Orthodox Wedding Service

Marriage is a sacrament of the Orthodox Church in which a man and a woman offer themselves to each other and to Christ in the Church to be faithfully united together for life. Christ blesses the marriage and creates their sacramental union in His Holy Church. God's grace is imparted through this ceremony to help the couple live together in His love, mutually fulfilling and perfecting each other. A sacrament is also called a holy mystery, in which the heavenly and earthly realms are brought together by the Holy Spirit.

Historical Foundations of the Services

For centuries, the Orthodox Church has celebrated weddings much like we witness it today. The services have blossomed from the common Judeo-Christian teachings found in both the Old and New Testaments and properly infer that marriage existed even from the creation of the first man and woman, whom God blessed and told to be fruitful and multiply.

In the Orthodox tradition, the wedding ceremony is actually two services in one. The first, which is the briefer of the two, is the Service of Betrothal, during which the rings are exchanged. The second is the Service of Crowning, during which lengthy prayers are offered for the couple, the crowns of marriage are placed on their heads, the common cup is shared and the celebrational procession takes place around the table.

The Service of Betrothal

The Blessing and Exchange of Rings

In this service, the priest begins by offering petitions of prayer on behalf of the man and woman who are being betrothed. He then asks God's blessings upon the rings and proceeds to bless the bride and groom with the rings. He does this three times in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, first from the groom to the bride, and then from the bride to the groom. The back and forth movement can be interpreted to mean that the lives of the two are being entwined into one. Two wedding bands are used, since according to Old Testament references, the placing of rings was an official act indicating that an agreement had been sealed between two parties. In this case, the agreement is that a man and a woman agree to live together in the fellowship of marriage as husband and wife.

The priest then places the rings on the ring fingers of the right hands of the two. It is noteworthy that the right hands are used in the putting on of the rings, since according to all Biblical knowledge we have, it is the right hand of God that blesses; it was to the right hand of the Father that Christ ascended; it is to the right that those who will inherit eternal life will go. Thus, the Church preserves the superiority of the right also in marriage. The rings are then exchanged three times on the fingers of the bride and the groom by the Sponsor as a further expression and witness that the lives of the two are being brought together. A final prayer is read, sealing the putting on of the rings, which then take on the added meaning that the agreement was sealed and that the marriage was enacted by God Himself.

Chanting of Psalm 128

After the exchange of the rings, the priest chants Psalm 128, "Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways..." This psalm is one of the "Psalms of Ascent" sung by Jewish pilgrims on the way to the Jerusalem Temple. This point in the service most clearly reveals the "action" of the sacrament.

The couple brings themselves, each other, their lives, and all that fills their lives, to the altar as an offering to God. As the couple enters into the midst of the Church, their relationship enters into the new reality of God's Kingdom.

The Service of Crowning

The Service of Crowning begins with the invocation of the Holy Trinity. After petitions are offered on behalf of the bride, groom and wedding company, three prayers are read which ascribe to God the institution of marriage and the preservation of His people through the ages. These prayers portray humanity as one continuous fabric, in which is interwoven everyone from the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, to the present generation of believers. The bride and groom enter into this fabric with the reading of the third prayer.

The Joining of the Hands

During this prayer the celebrant joins the right hands of the two to symbolize the union coming from God. Since God is the true Celebrant of every sacrament, the priest always expresses himself in the third person. He is simply God's instrument in the service. While offering prayers to join the bride and groom, the priest invokes the very hand of God in asking the Lord, "stretch forth Your hand from Your holy dwelling place" to join the bride and groom "together in oneness of mind" and to "crown them into one flesh." The couples hands are joined and remain together for the rest of the service.

The Placing and Exchange of Crowns

The union is then completed with the Crowning. The celebrant takes the crowns from the table and blesses the bride and groom in the same manner as he blessed them with the rings. He then places the crowns upon their heads, chanting, "O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor." The crowns have several meanings, three of which are most important. First, they conform to Biblical teachings in that God bestows His blessing upon His children in the form of crowns. Second, they identify the bride and groom as the beginning of a new kingdom, and as such they reign supreme under the Divine Authority of God, Who reigns over all. The sponsor exchanges the crowns over the heads of the bride and groom as a witness to the sealing of the union. Third, crowns represent martyrdom. The word "martyr" means "witness." The couple bears witness to Christ's presence in their lives, which requires both to die to themselves their own desires and to give of their lives for the other. The ribbon joining the crowns represents the unity of the couple. The crowns are exchanged three times to signify the complete sealing of their union.

The Scripture Readings

The Epistle reading, Ephesians 5:20–33, explains the mystery and holiness of marriage, as well as the duties and responsibilities of a husband and wife. The love of the couple parallels the love of Christ and His Church. The couple becomes one in their submission to each other and to Christ. The Gospel reading, St. John 2:1–11, retells the story of the wedding at Cana, where Christ performed His first public miracle and blessed marriage by turning the water into wine.

The Common Cup

The common cup is offered to the bride and groom as a mutually-shared blessing. The cup contains a small portion of wine (not Holy Communion) that is blessed and offered to the now wedded husband

and wife as a witness that from that moment on they will share the same cup of life, and whatever life has in store for them, they will share equally.

The Dance of Isaiah

The celebrant then takes the arm of the groom and leads him and his bride around the table as an expression of joy. The three-fold walk around the anti-altar is seen as a religious dance. In this respect it is an expression of gratitude to God for His blessings, and joyfulness at the receiving of those blessings. As the bride and groom are led around the table three times, three significant hymns are sung. The first speaks of the indescribable joy that Isaiah the Prophet experienced when he envisioned the coming of the Messiah upon the earth. The second reminds us of the martyrs of the Faith, who received their crowns of glory from God through the sacrifice of their lives. The third is an exaltation to the Holy Trinity.

The Removal of the Crowns and the Benediction

When the bride and groom have returned to their original places, the Priest faces the groom, offers a special blessing and exhortation to him, then does likewise to the bride. Removing their crowns, the Priest says, "Accept their crowns in Your Kingdom unsoiled and undefiled; and preserve them without offense to the ages of ages." After this, the prayer of benediction is offered in the name of the Holy Trinity.

The Greeting of the Couple

At the end of the service, the couple stands as husband and wife before the Holy Altar of Christ, which represents their goal: progress together toward the eternal Kingdom of God. Through this Holy Mystery, they have become an icon (image) of the Church and Christ, and their family and the gathered assembly of the people of God congratulate them and shares in their joy as they depart the service for married life together forever.

Patristic Commentary: On the Benefits of Marriage

Look at the benefits good marriages bring to humanity. Who are the teachers of wisdom, the discoverers of the deepest knowledge, the explorers of everything on the earth, in the sea, or in the sky? Who are the lawgivers in the cities, and before them, the founders of the cities themselves? Who founded the arts? Who populated the squares, and the houses, the tables of banqueters? Who brought together the choirs that sing in the churches? Who tamed the ferocity of primitive life, first tilled the soil, and crossed the seas? What, if not marriage, could unite what was divided? Here is a better point still. We are each other's hand and ear and foot, because marriage doubles our energy, cheers our friends, and depresses our enemies. Sharing our troubles lessens the pain; joys put in common are sweeter; harmony makes riches more precious. And marriage is more precious than the riches themselves. Marriage is the key to the control of the desires; it is the seal of an unshakeable friendship; it is drink from a hidden spring; strangers cannot taste it; it bubbles up yet cannot be drawn from outside. Those who are united in the flesh form one soul and purify their religion by their reciprocal love.

Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Fourth Century A.D.