

MARRIAGE IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

In the Orthodox Church the ritual of marriage is not just a service but a sacrament. And a sacrament is the channel of the conveyance of the grace of God upon a man and a woman who have freely asked for it, in order to bring about in them a permanent change by making "the two of them one flesh", and to enable them to attain the ends which marriage has in view: The preservation and increase of the human race; the promotion of helpfulness; the restraint of passions and their submission to the moral law; and the Christian upbringing of children. Marriage was regarded in the Church from the very beginning as a sacred union of body and soul for the propagation of civil society and the kingdom of God, for the exercise of virtue and the promotion of happiness.

Marriage is a bond, a "yoke", if you prefer, freely and publicly entered upon. It is a union which, at first, was instituted by God when He created man in his own image, male and female, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1, 28).

Later, this union was elevated and exalted by our Lord Jesus in the fact that he performed his first miracle at a wedding ceremony (John 2, 1-11).

Marriage is a divine act which the Apostle St. Paul calls "a great mystery". (Ephesians 5, 32), by comparing it with the most holy, most perfect and most permanent union between Christ, as the groom, and the Church, as the bride.

In the Orthodox ritual the service is made up of two parts: The Betrothal and the Crowning.

THE BETROTHAL SERVICE

The Candles

When the service is about to begin, the priest, standing in front of the couple with two lighted candles, asks the familiar question of each of them by name: "(name) do you take (name) to be your wedded wife (husband) to love and to cherish until death do you part?" After their affirmative response, he hands them the candles which are symbolic of their Christian illumination in their belief that Jesus is "the light of the world and whoever believes in him shall never walk in darkness but have eternal life."

The Blessing of the Rings

In this service, double betrothal bands are always used which belong only to the betrothal service. The priest first blesses the rings: "O eternal God who brought things divided into unity and established an unbroken bond between them.... bless these rings and unite and preserve these, your servants, in peace and concord." Then he blesses alternately the groom and bride with the rings three times and places them on the third finger of their right hands; the best man then exchanges them three times between the bride and groom. This exchange of rings means the unconditional acceptance of the one by the other and the pledge of mutual support.

THE SERVICE OF CROWNING

From time immemorial, crowns were placed on the heads of people as a recognition for accomplishment. But what have the bride and groom accomplished to merit such recognition by the Church? They have overcome the passions, weaknesses and temptations of the flesh and they have vowed to live with one another, for one another and by one another until the end of their lives. Because of this solemn vow, honor and glory is bestowed upon them as they are crowned as king and queen of their home and future family under the Divine Kingship of God; king and queen of a new kingdom, a new creation of one, where the new family is a reflection of the Church. ;

The Joining of Hands

The priest joins the right hands of the groom and bride as he reads this prayer: "Holy God who created man out of dust, and from his rib fashioned woman whom you joined unto him as a helper fit for him. . .join your servant (name) and your servant (name) for by you is woman joined to man. Yoke them in oneness of mind; crown them in one flesh; grant to them the joy of fair children..."

The Crowning

The priest takes the two crowns (really wreaths of fresh flowers or simulated flowers) which are joined together in the back with a ribbon to show the oneness of the two and blesses alternately the groom and bride with them three times saying for each of them: "The servant of God (name) is crowned to the servant of God (name) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He then places the crowns on their heads chanting out: "O Lord, our God, in honor and glory crown your servants." The best man then exchanges the crowns between them three times to demonstrate that they are being crowned in equality, dignity and mutual love and support.

The Readings

A passage from the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians (5, 20-33) is read here: "...wives be subject to your husbands as to the Lord, just as the Church is subject to Christ. . . Husbands, love your wives as Christ also loved the Church and gave himself up for it.... In loving his wife a man loves himself. . . for this reason shall a man leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and Church. Yet, each one of you individually must love his wife as his very self, and the wife must see to it that she treat her husband with respect."

What is this mystery that St. Paul speaks about? Very briefly this. The bride and groom come into the Church for the ceremony their different ways as free and independent individuals. When the ceremony is over they leave still as free and independent individuals but holding onto each other—yoked together—as one. Now the mystery: How will they be able to preserve their personal freedom and independence without doing any damage to their union, on the one hand, and how will they be able to preserve their union without doing any damage to their personal freedom and independence, on the other! That is, how will they be able to act as one and two at the same time! And what is the answer? Unconditional and sacrificial love; the kind of love that exists between Christ the Groom and the Church, his Bride. When the Church is called the Bride of Christ we mean those relations between bride and groom, taken in their everlasting fullness which consist of a perfect unity of life, a unity which preserves the reality of their

differences. It is a union of two in one, which is not dissolved by duality nor absorbed by unity. And this union, being the ultimate form, reflects the kind of love which—living it dies and dying it lives! Because if love is to be true, it has to be unconditional and sacrificial.

The Gospel passage which follows comes from the Gospel of St. John (2, 1-11) and describes the first public act of Jesus at a wedding in Cana of Galilee where he changed the water into wine. By this act, as the prayer following the Gospel states, Jesus" declared marriage honorable by his presence". Thus, Jesus employed the first public act of his ministry to bless a marriage, as God, the Father, employed his first public act to bless the very first union of Adam and Eve.

The Common Cup

Following the Lord's Prayer, a cup of blessed wine is offered to the newlyweds from which each takes three sips. It is their cup of life symbolic of the fact that from this day on they will share all life's experiences together.

The "Dance" of Isaiah

Right after the taking of the cup the most unique happening of the Orthodox wedding takes place. The priest, holding the Gospel Book in his right hand, takes the joined hands of the bride and groom with the other and leads them around the marital altar, in front of them, three times, in the name of the Holy Trinity and in the form of a circle which means eternity.

Thus, the first steps that the bride and groom take as husband and wife are in following Jesus Christ — symbolically represented by the Holy Gospel — forever.

As the priest does this he chants three hymns of joy: "Dance (rejoice) O Isaiah for the Virgin has indeed conceived . . . ". This refers to the fact that Isaiah's prophecy some 760 years before the coming of Christ came true; as a result he has a right to rejoice in Heaven. It is also an indirect reference to the fact that the first and foremost goal of marriage is the procreation of children.

"O Holy martyrs who have fought well and have been crowned . . . ". This is a reference to the fact that those who remained faithful to their commitment to Christ and died for him received crowns in heaven. Likewise, if the newlyweds remain faithful to each other and their commitment, on that great day when all of us shall face our Maker, the crowns of simulated flowers which they are wearing today will be exchanged with crowns of glory.

The third hymn is an exaltation to Christ, "the boast of the Apostles and the delight of the martyrs," because through him they, and all of us, have come to know, worship and proclaim the indivisible Trinity.

The Concluding Prayers

"Be you magnified, O Bridegroom, like Abraham. . .". "And you, O Bride, be you glorified like Sarah . . . ". "O God . . . bless your servants who by your providence have been joined together in matrimony; bless their goings and comings; grant them a life full of abundant goods; preserve their union spotless, blameless and unthreatened . . .". "May the Holy Trinity bless you and grant you long life, beautiful children, progress in life and growth in faith and make you worthy to enjoy the blessings of the promise . . . Amen."

A Note of Interest

The sugar-coated almonds or "koufeta" which are usually placed in the tray with the wreaths are quite symbolic. In the early Church the priest used to offer to the bride and groom, during the ceremony, almonds dipped in honey to symbolize abundance, sweetness and fertility. Sugar-coated almonds are the natural development, and they are offered to the guests in tulle or other fancy "boubounieres" in odd numbers, three or five, for good luck.

Thank you for becoming witnesses to this "great mystery." Please pray to Almighty God that the newlyweds may have a Godly and happy life together — in true love and commitment to each other.

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[back](#)