

THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

In the eyes of the Church, marriage is the sacramental union between a man and a woman that is used in the Bible as the image of God's faithful love for ancient Israel (Isaiah 54; Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 16) and Christ's sacrificial relationship to the Church (Ephesians 5). When we say that marriage is a sacrament, we use that word to convey the depths of the covenantal bond the bride and groom are about to enter into: a *sacramentum* in the ancient Roman empire was the oath of loyalty unto death that a Roman soldier took to the emperor when entering the military. As Christians, the sacrament of marriage is the oath of loyalty unto death the bride and groom make to each other and – as a couple – their oath of loyalty unto death to our Lord Jesus Christ, "the King of kings and Lord of lords." Christian marriage is intended to be a sign of God's presence and love in this fallen and broken world.

The celebration of the sacrament of marriage is made up of the Service of Betrothal and the Service of Crowning. The text of these two services summarizes in words, images and symbols the Orthodox Christian teaching regarding marriage.

The Rings

The rings are an ancient symbol of the couple's commitment to one another and their desire to enter into the covenant relationship of marriage. As the Prayer of Betrothal indicates, in the Scriptures, rings were given as signs of commitment, authority and forgiveness. After being blessed by the priest the rings are exchanged between bride and groom. This exchange signifies that in married life the weaknesses of one partner will be compensated for by the strengths of the other.

The Candles

The bride and groom are given candles to hold during the service. The candles symbolize Christ, "the light of the world," and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that must burn in the hearts of the bride and groom to light and guide their path throughout life.

The Joining of Hands

The priest joins the right hands of the bride and groom while saying a prayer asking God to unite them in oneness of mind and heart. The bride and groom keep their hands joined throughout the rest of the service to symbolize their unity as a couple in God.

The Crowning

The crowns are symbols of the glory and honor that God bestows upon His faithful people. They are attached to each other by a white ribbon symbolizing the marital unity being entered into by the bride and groom. They are the “crowns of righteousness” spoken of by the apostle Paul in his Second Letter to Timothy, given on the Day of Judgment to those who are faithful to Christ. The bride and groom are crowned as king and queen of their own household which they must rule responsibly, with love and wisdom. The crowns also symbolize martyrdom and sacrifice. Throughout marriage, husband and wife must be willing to sacrifice themselves for one another in imitation of Christ sacrificing Himself for us.

The Scripture Readings

As part of the wedding service, there are two specific readings from the New Testament. The first is from the apostle Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians 5:20-33, which describes the relationship between the bride and groom as an image of the relationship of sacrificial love that Christ has for the Church. The second reading is taken from the Gospel of John 2:1-11, which describes the first miracle of the Lord Jesus as taking place at a wedding in Cana of Galilee to which He, His mother Mary and His disciples had been invited. It is here, at the urging of His mother, the Theotokos, that He changes water into wine so that the celebration of the marriage feast may continue, thus beginning His ministry and the revelation of His glory.

The Common Cup

The bride and groom drink from a cup of wine given to them by the priest in remembrance of Christ’s miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and symbolizing their sharing in the cup of life together with all its joys and sorrows.

The Dance of Isaiah

The priest leads the bride and groom around the wedding table as an expression of joy and celebration. The hymns during this procession specifically refer to the prophet Isaiah prophesying the birth of Christ, as well as the apostles and early Christian martyrs bearing witness to Christ and His Gospel by their preaching and teaching, even at the sacrifice of their own lives. Husband and wife take their first steps as a married couple in the Church, following a path marked by the good news of the Gospel.

The Removal of the Crowns

Near the very end of the service, the crowns adorning the couple are removed by the priest, as he remembers in prayer Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca and Jacob and Rachel, charging the bride and groom to “go in peace, doing the commandments of God.”

**From the beginning,
God in His providence planned the union of man and woman.
There is no relationship between human beings
as close as that of husband and wife
if they are united as they ought to be.
- St. John Chrysostom (349-407 AD)**