

*The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony  
in the Orthodox Church*



*Meaning of the Marriage Ceremony*

## **The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony in the Orthodox Church**

Holy Matrimony is a sacrament of the Orthodox Church in which a man and a woman are joined together by God. St. Paul, in his epistle to the Ephesians, calls marriage *"a great mystery."* The *"mystery"* is that two persons become truly one, both in flesh and in spirit. They remain two persons but become one living being in the community of marriage. *"And Adam said: This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called "woman" (Gen 2:23 NKJ).* It is man and woman together, in unity, who form a complete and perfect human nature. This intimate union of man and woman in marriage points to an even greater reality - the union of our Lord Jesus Christ with His Church. It is love that unites man to woman, and it is love that unites Christ to the Church. Through this very love, the sacrament of marriage brings us into the Kingdom of God. *"When husband and wife are united in marriage, they are no longer seen as something earthly, but as the image of God Himself"* (St. John Chrysostom, 4th century). This mystery is accomplished through the grace of God in the Church as follows:

### **The Betrothal**

The Betrothal occurs with the exchange of rings and immediately precedes the wedding service. The priest receives from the betrothed the assurance that they present themselves in complete freedom before the eyes of God. The priest asks the groom: *"Have you a good, free, and unconstrained will and firm intention to take unto yourself to wife this woman whom you see here before you?"* He then asks the bride the same question. True love can only exist in complete freedom.

### **The Candles**

The bride and groom are then each given a lit candle, just as they fervently desire to receive our Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

### **The Rings**

The rings are blessed by the priest who takes them in his hand, and, making the sign of the cross over their heads, says: *"The servant of God is betrothed to the handmaid of God in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* These rings are a symbol of betrothal from the most ancient times. The priest places the bride's ring on the right hand of the groom and the groom's ring on the right hand of the bride. The couple then exchanges the rings, putting them on each other. This exchange signifies that in

married life the weaknesses of the one partner will be compensated by the perfections of the other. By themselves, the newly betrothed are incomplete; together they are made perfect.

### **The Crowning or Marriage Service**

The Crowning or Marriage Service begins with this hymn: *"Blessed are all that fear the Lord and walk in His ways. You shall eat of the fruit of your labors. Blessed are you and you shall be happy. Your wife shall be as a fruitful vine upon the walls of your house. Your children like a newly-planted olive-orchard around your table. Thus shall the man be blessed that fears the Lord: The Lord in Zion shall so bless you that you will see the good things of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Yes, you will see your children's children and peace upon Israel."*

### **Blessed is the Kingdom**

*"Blessed is the Kingdom"* is the exclamation which announces the destination of our sacramental journey. During the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, as with the Divine Liturgy and Holy Baptism, the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven is truly present among us. It is Christ Himself, through the priest, who joins together the bride and the groom.

### **The First Prayer**

The First Prayer...*"Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, The Priest of mystical and pure marriage..."* recalls the community of faith of which we are a part. We are not Christians in isolation, but rather as a part of the spotless Bride of Christ, which is the Apostolic Church (both Old and New Covenants). It is not the promise of the couple that is stressed in this prayer, but God's faithfulness. First God is asked to confirm their promise. Next four Biblical references are made with each story calling attention to God's pledge and faithfulness to men and women. We begin with the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and end with Joachim and Anna (the parents of the Virgin Mary) and Zacharias and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist).

### **The Joining of Hands**

The Joining of the Hands occurs during the second prayer, *"O Holy God, who has created man out of the dust ... Do thou, the same Lord, extend Thy hand from Thy holy dwelling-place, and join this Thy servant, and this thy handmaid, for by Thee is the husband united unto the wife. Unite them in one mind and one flesh, and grant unto them fair children ... "* The hands are kept joined throughout the service to symbolize the oneness of the couple.

## **The Crowning**

The Crowning "*The servant of God is crowned to the handmaid of God ... O Lord our God, crown them with glory and with honor*" is the apex of the marriage ceremony. As the priest puts the crown on the heads of the bridal pair, he blesses them with the words that King David used in Psalm 8 to describe God's blessing of mankind. "*O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor.*"

After the crowning, the couple is considered to be married. The couple is crowned King and Queen over their own kingdom, which is their home and family. Each Christian household becomes a "*little church*" (St. John Chrysostom). All of this is accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives the ability to live a truly Christian Marriage. It is the Holy Spirit who makes marriage something heavenly and not earthly. It is the couple's task to preserve the Holy Spirit in their marriage through keeping the commandments of our Lord.

The first and greatest of these commandments is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind; and our neighbor as ourselves. The bridal pair will witness (martyr) this love by sacrificing their lives for each other and for their neighbor. It is in service to others, through love, that Christian marriage is truly crowned with glory and with honor.

## **The Epistle Reading**

St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians 5:20-33

Reader: *Brethren: Give thanks always for all things to God and the Father, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ; submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and he is the Savior of the body. Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be Holy and without blemish. So should men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourishes and cherishes it, even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.*

*This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church. Nevertheless let everyone of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.*

### **The Gospel Reading**

Gospel according to St. John 2:1-11

Priest: *And on the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: and both Jesus was called and His disciples to the marriage. And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." Jesus said to her, "Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour is not yet come." His mother said to the servants, " whatsoever he says to you, do it." And there were set there six water pots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece. Jesus said to them, "Fill the water pots with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast." And they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants which had drawn the water knew) the master of the feast called the bridegroom, and said to him, "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but you have kept the good wine until now."*

*This was the beginning of miracles that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and He manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.*

### **The Common Cup**

The Common Cup follows the Epistle and Gospel Readings. The Gospel reading tells us of the changing of the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. The common cup of which the couple partakes recalls this new and best wine which the Lord Himself gave us. It is symbolic of the common cup of life in which they will equally share both joy and sorrow. Their joys will be doubled and their sorrows halved, because they are shared.

### **The Ceremonial Dance of Isaiah**

The Ceremonial Dance of Isaiah takes place after the common cup as the priest leads and censes the bride and groom in a circle (symbolizing eternal life) around the table on which are placed the Gospel and the Cross. The husband and wife take their first steps as a married couple centered on the Word of God and the salvation He has given us through His cross. This experience is the same unutterable joy of Isaiah and the Holy Martyrs who foresaw and sacrificed everything to experience the presence of the Son of God dwelling among us. It is the joy of loving and being loved. It is the joy of Christian marriage.

### **The Final Blessing and Benediction**

The Final Blessing and Benediction takes place as the couple returns to their place and the priest removes the crowns. *"May the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the all-holy, consubstantial and life-giving Trinity, one Godhead, and one Kingdom, bless you; and grant to you length of days, fair children, prosperity of life, and faith; and fill you with abundance of all earthly good things, and make you worthy to obtain the blessings of the promise: through the prayers of the holy Theotokos and of all the Saints. Amen."* Thus the marriage ceremony ends and an eternal life together, in Christ, begins for the newly married couple.

**MAY GOD GRANT THEM MANY YEARS!**



**Matt. 19:6**

*So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."*