

MARRIAGE SERVICE

The Eastern Orthodox Marriage Service

The marriage ceremony, like all services in the Orthodox Christian Church, is steeped in spiritual symbolism, often on several levels, expressed by words, images, signs and physical actions during celebration of the rite. Its purpose is to remind the couple of certain deep spiritual realities and events, and enable them to identify with them.

The most fundamental of these mysteries which underlies all services in the Orthodox Church including the sacrament of matrimony is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that the human race may be reunited with God and have eternal life. Throughout the wedding ceremony specific wedding imagery reminds the couple and those present that salvation comes through Christ the Saviour. They are to make Him the center of their life together as a married entity and, like the martyrs, to be loyal to Him and His commands to death. This loyalty will be rewarded with crowns of glory and eternity with God in Heaven.

The rite of marriage consists of two parts: the Betrothal during which the couple is formally engaged to be married and the Crowning when the couple is actually married. It is important to emphasize that in the Orthodox Church the couple enters matrimony of their own free will as individuals equal before God. No one "gives away" the bride during the ceremony.

The Rings

The Betrothal concludes with the exchange of rings blessed by the priest. Since ancient times rings were exchanged as tokens of a most solemn promise and especially of a union. The couple exchanges rings as a symbol of their firm intention to enter into a permanent marriage with each other and of their readiness to share all the joys, sorrows and responsibilities of life together. On another level a ring is seen as a symbol of God since it has no beginning or end. In

the Orthodox Church the rings are placed and worn on the right hand because historically the right hand has been viewed as a symbol of strength and honour.

The Candles

During the Crowning part of the marriage rite the couple is given lit candles to hold. The candles have several meanings. Generally, they are an image of the triumph of light and life over darkness and death. Traditionally, they also symbolize spiritual awakening, hope and vigilance and in this sense particularly represent Christ, the Light of the World. By accepting and holding the lit candles, the couple demonstrates their constant readiness to make Christ the center of their marriage and home.

The Embroidered Runner (Rushnyk)

Throughout the Crowning the couple stands on an embroidered runner. This recalls the ancient custom of important dignitaries standing in honour on a special decorated rug, particularly during formal occasions. In Ukrainian tradition this cloth has the added symbolism of the road of life with all its ups and downs which the couple will now walk as one.

The Marriage Vows

Kneeling on the rushnyk, with their hands on the Holy Gospel, the groom and bride separately take the marriage vow in which each takes the other as spouse, and pledges love, loyalty and faithfulness. Each swears not to abandon the other to life's end and call upon God in Trinity and the Saints to help keep the oath. This followed by the formal proclamation of the marriage by the officiating priest with the words from Holy Scripture: "Whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder".

The Crowning

The crowning of the couple is the central act of the Orthodox wedding ceremony. On a deeper spiritual level, it reminds the bride and groom that they have been united and blessed by God,

and must always remain loyal to Jesus Christ, His teachings and commands in order to merit the crowns of glory in Heaven for eternity as His faithful servants. The bride and groom are also crowned queen and king of their family which in the Orthodox Church is viewed as a small Kingdom of God over which they are expected to rule in accordance with Christ's teachings and especially with love. Further, the couple are crowned as king and queen to each other, the most important person in their lives. On a spiritual level, the crowns will also remind the couple of the mutual suffering for each other.

The Scripture Readings

The crowning is followed by the following readings from Holy Scripture:

Ephesians 5:20-33: in his letter to the Church in Ephesus, St. Paul explains marriage as being symbolic of the relationship of Christ and His Church which is described as His Bride. As Christ loves His Church and has died for it, so the husband must love his wife in imitation of Christ's example and be prepared to die for her. Also, a husband must constantly look after his wife as Christ does His Church. Marriage is described as two persons becoming one. And just as the Church commits herself to the loving care of Christ, so wives should entrust themselves to the love of their husbands.

John 2:1-11: The reading from the Gospel of St. John describes Jesus' first miracle at a marriage feast in Cana in Galilee when He turned water into wine. This act symbolizes God's enduring blessing of the estate of marriage.

The Common Cup

Following the Lord's Prayer, the priest gives the bride and groom wine to drink from a common cup. Each drinks three times in honour of the Trinity. This also is an ancient custom, enacted since time immemorial to emphasize and strengthen a solemn act of union or alliance, especially a spiritual one. From this day on the couple as one entity will share all life has to

offer, both the positive and the negative. Again, this act has a more specific spiritual meaning: it recalls Communion in which the couple accepts the Blood of Christ for the remission of sins and in doing so unites with Christ for salvation.

The Binding of the Right Hands

After the Common Cup, the priest binds the bride's and groom's right hands with a cloth. This is an ancient symbol of union and emphasized that the couple are joined together for life as one entity. This act also reminds the couple that God has bound them together and that they are bound by Christ's teachings, commands and example.

The Triumphant Procession

After the binding of the right hands, the priest leads them three times around the icon table (tetrapod) in front of which the marriage ceremony has taken place. On the table are the Gospel containing Christ's teachings and the Cross as the symbol of redemption by Christ. These form the center around which the couple takes their first steps as husband and wife. The priest represents the church which will continue to lead and guide the couple throughout their life together, while the objects on the table represent Jesus Christ around whom the couple will build their life together. The processional hymns sung to the Holy Martyrs and apostles remind the newly married couple of their sacrificial love they are to have for each other in their marriage. Other texts glorify Christ the Saviour and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the ancient world it was common to have triumphal processions to advertise important events and share the joy of these events with everyone.

The Closing Prayers

After the triumphal procession the priest unties the couple's hands, removes their crowns and blesses the couple that they may, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives, Sarah,

Rebecca and Rachel, prosper in their marriage and keep God's commandments. He then prays to Christ to bless the couple and grant them peace, prosperity and eternal life.

The Wedding Icons

Icons are an ancient Christian tradition and a very important part of Orthodox spiritual life. The husband and wife are presented with two icons, one of Christ and the other of the Mother of God. These icons serve to remind them of the commitment they have made before God, and become a physical center for their prayer life. These icons are the very first item the couple carries into their new home and places them in a place of honour as a symbol of God's blessing and His constant presence.

The Singing and Church Decoration

Except for certain prayers which are recited, services in the Orthodox Church are normally sung. This is in keeping with an ancient tradition instituted by King David who introduced singing into the Old Testament temple in order to beautify the services. To sing the service is considered to worship God twofold. The human voice being considered the most beautiful of all instruments. Singing also reminds worshippers of Heaven where the choirs of angels ceaselessly worship God.

Most Eastern Byzantine churches are elaborately decorated with icons and ornamentations. This reflects the Orthodox understanding that God Himself is the source of all beauty and that the church building on earth should reflect the beauty of Heaven, which is God's abode.