**The Sacrament of Marriage in the Orthodox Church**

**Marriage** is a Sacrament of the Eastern Orthodox Church in which a man and woman solemnly vow before Christ, along with the clergy and the congregation present, to love each other for life.

The marriage ceremony of the Orthodox Church is steeped in ritual and symbolism. Each of the acts which you will observe solemnized today has special meaning and significance.

**THE RINGS**

The first service that takes place is that of the **Betrothal Service.** After initial prayers, the apex of the service is **the exchange of the rings**.

The rings are the symbol of betrothal from the most ancient times. The exchange signifies that in married life the weaknesses of the one partner will be compensated for by the strength of the other, the imperfections of the other. By themselves, the newly-betrothed are incomplete; together, they are made perfect. Thus the exchange of the rings gives expression to the fact that the spouses of the marriage will constantly be complementing each other. Each will be enriched by the union.

In the service, 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** (groom’s name) **is to betrothed to the handmaiden of God** (bride’s name) **in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”** The koubaro/koubara (religious sponsor) then exchanges the rings three times.

**THE JOINING OF THE RIGHT HANDS**

**The Sacrament of the Crowning** begins immediately following the Betrothal Service. During this service, initial prayers are said by the priest followed by a long prayer asking God to bless the couple. The groom and bride, together with their family and friends, ask God for His sanctification, just as He blessed many holy couples in both the Old and New Testaments, protecting and preserving them in times of trouble, and remembering them in His Kingdom.

This part of the service is concluded when the right hand of the bride and groom are joined when the priest reads the prayer that beseeches God to “join these Your servants, unite them in one mind and one flesh.” The hands are kept joined throughout the service to symbolize the unity of the couple.

**THE CROWNING**

As a sign of the glory and honor which God crowns them during the sacrament, the groom and the bride are crowned as the king and queen of their own little kingdom - their new home. The Church prays they both will rule their home with wisdom, justice and integrity. Some interpret the crowns used in the Orthodox wedding ceremony to refer to the crowns of martyrdom since every true marriage involves immeasurable self-sacrifice on both sides.

When the crowning takes place, the priest takes the crowns and holds them above the couple says: **“The servant of God** (groom’s name) **is crowned for the handmaiden of God** (bride’s name) **in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”**

**SCRIPTURAL READINGS & THE COMMON CUP**

The rite of the crowning is followed by the reading of the Epistle and the Gospel. The Epistle reading is from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:20-33). In this reading, St. Paul reminds the couple to love each other with all their being, sacrificing themselves for one another. The Gospel reading (John 2:1-11) describes the marriage at Cana of Galilee which was attended and blessed by Christ, and for which He reserved His first miracle. There, He converted the water into wine and gave of it to the newlyweds.

After the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer – in remembrance of this blessing in the Gospel reading – wine is given the couple. This is the “common cup” of life, not Holy Communion. It denotes the mutual sharing of joy and sorrow, the token of a life of harmony. The drinking of wine from the common cup serves to impress upon the couple that from that moment on they will share everything in life, joys as well as sorrows, and that they are to “bear one another’s burdens.” Their joys will be doubled and their sorrows halved because they will be shared.

**THE CEREMONIAL WALK**

The priests then leads the bride and groom in a circle around the table, the husband and wife taking their first steps as a married couple. The Church, in the person of the priest, leads them in the way they must walk – with Christ as the Centre of their common life.

During this ceremonial walk around the table, a hymn is sung to the Holy Martyrs reminding the newly-married couple of the sacrificial love they are and to have for each other in marriage – a love that seeks not its own but willing to sacrifice all for their new spouse. Some interpreters consider this walk a religious dance expressing the joy of matrimony.

**THE BLESSING & Dismissal**

The couple return to their places and the priest, blessing the groom, says, *“Be magnified, O bridegroom, as Abraham, and blessed as Isaac, and increased as Jacob, walking in peace and working in righteousness the commandments of God.”* And blessing the bride, he says, *“And you, O bride, be magnified as Sarah, and glad as Rebecca, and do thou increase like unto Rachael, rejoicing in thine own husband, fulfilling the conditions of the law; for so it is well pleasing unto God.”*

The crowns are taken off the groom and bride, followed by a prayer asking God to grant them a long life, beautiful children, progress in life and growth in faith.

Finally, the priest says the last prayer as he parts their hands with the Book of the Gospels. This is to signify that only God may end this union on earth at their earthly passing away, with no one else impeding the union and joy of the couple.

**YOUR PRESENCE**

In attending this wedding ceremony, we ask you not only to witness the marriage of two people but also to add your prayers to theirs that God may bless their life together.

**WHAT YOU DIDN’T SEE…**

**Vows & “I Do”s:** Both the Groom and Bride have freely come to the Church and consented to the sacrament. Therefore, there is no need to ask the couple if they want to proceed—their mere presence shows they want to be husband and wife. There are no vows, since the couple realizes God has brought them together and, therefore, they ask Him for guidance throughout the service.