

new couple is added to the story - with the Church's prayer for a blessed future.

### **Crowning**

After the joining of hands, the wedding crowns are blessed, and the bride and groom are crowned unto one another with the statement, "The servant of God \_\_\_\_\_ is crowned for the servant of God \_\_\_\_\_, in the name of the Father, and the Son and the holy Spirit." The crowns are placed on the heads of the bride and groom, as the priest chants the verse from Psalm 8, "O, Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor." The sponsor then exchange the crowns three times, placing them back on each partner's head. This ancient ritual, is believed to date back to the 2nd or 3rd century.

The symbolism of the wedding crowns has been interpreted in various ways. This liturgical ritual may be seen to install the couple as king and queen of their household. But unlike the autocratic rule of a monarch, this crowing calls both spouses to rule over their household with Christian humility, patience and self-sacrificial love.

### **Scripture Readings**

Most Orthodox Christian sacraments and services contain readings from Holy Scripture. The Church teaches that Holy Scripture is the Word of God, and contains His revealed truth and wisdom. Each reading relates specifically to the given service. In the Sacrament of Marriage, the readings form the basis of the Orthodox Church's understanding of marriage, communicating much of what the Orthodox Church believes about marriage. Two readings from the New Testament are included in this service. The first is from the St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (5:20-33), and is usually read by the chanter. The second reading is from the Gospel of Saint John (2:1-11), and is read by the priest.

**The Lord's Prayer** follows shortly after the scripture readings. Jesus Christ offered this prayer to the disciples when they asked him to "Teach us to pray" (LK 11:1). This is a familiar prayer that most Christians have committed to memory. At any given place and time the words in this prayer serve

to comfort the faithful, and remind them of God's presence.

**The Common Cup** of wine is blessed by the priest, and offered to each partner, each drink three sips from the cup. The wine in this cup symbolizes the bitter and sweet moments of married life that will be shared by the couple. The common cup also reminds them that God will bless them throughout their life together.

### **Procession: The Dance of Isaiah**

After sharing the Common Cup, the priest, couple and sponsor will process around the table. In earlier times, this procession took place from the church to the couple's home. Today it takes place round the sacrament table in the center of the Solea, the raised area in front of the Icon Screen. Cradling the golden book the Gospels in his right arm, the priest will guide the procession around the table three times while wedding hymns are chanted. As the couple follows, their journey together begins, but it is not a journey that they will take alone. The Gospel held by the priest, and the presence of other Orthodox faithful serve to remind them that they have chosen to walk through life accompanied by the Holy Trinity and other faithful like themselves.

As a **Final Exhortation**, two short congratulatory prayers are read immediately following the procession. The first is for the groom, and the second for the bride. Both are asked to emulate the faith of Old Testament figures who found happiness and marital fulfillment through faith in God. The crowns are also removed and the dismissal follows.

### **SUGGESTED READING**

Ware, T. (1997). *The Orthodox Church*. London: Penguin Books  
Coniaris, A. (1981). *These are the Sacraments*. Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing Company.



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# The Orthodox Christian Sacrament of **MARRIAGE** A Summary

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Sacraments in the Orthodox Church are God-given gifts that have emerged from Holy Tradition, and have been instituted by Christ or the Apostles. Our Tradition refers to sacraments as *mysteria* because some aspects are tangible, and other aspects must be accepted by faith.

The sacraments are best understood as God-given points of contact, in which God makes Himself available to us personally. As we make the choice to faithfully participate in these mysteries, God's life-giving and life-changing grace touches us and makes us holy.

### **Historical and Theological Information**

The Sacrament of Marriage evolved over several centuries and is comprised of two interrelated parts – the Betrothal Service and the Crowning Service. By the end of the 16th century, the sacrament was being celebrated as we now know it. Prior to this, various shorter versions of the sacrament were conducted. It is interesting to note that up until the 9th century, marriages were blessed within the Divine Liturgy. Since that time marriages have been performed as a distinct liturgical event.

Despite these variations, the Church has always sought to place marriage in the context of one's religious and spiritual journey. Beyond the legal, psychological and sociological aspects of marriage identified by society, the Church defines marriage as a holy union in which a man and woman struggle together toward sanctification and eternal life within the community of faithful. As the symbolism, prayers and rituals unfold during the Betrothal Service and the Sacrament of Marriage, they reinforce and celebrate the sacred meaning of marriage.

## **The Betrothal Service**

The Marriage Ceremony is immediately preceded by the Betrothal, a series of petitions, short prayers, the exchanging of rings, and a lengthy prayer. The order of the Betrothal Service is:

- Doxology
- Opening Petitions
- Two Short Prayers
- The Exchange of Rings
- The Closing Prayer

**The Doxology** is simply “Blessed is our God, now and ever and unto the ages of ages.” This opening prayer calls upon both partners, and all those present, to acknowledge and glorify God. It is the natural response of faithful people standing before God.

The **Opening Petitions** (a form of prayer) begin with general requests that God will bless those present, be mindful of our world, the Church and our leaders. The petitions then focus on the bride and groom who are pledging themselves to one another, asking God to bless the couple with divine peace, love, harmony and oneness of mind. We further ask that God bless the couple with children, fidelity and mutual trust throughout their lifetime together. Each of these is indispensable for the couple and represents Christian values and virtues that promote marital well-being and satisfaction.

**Two Short Prayers** follow the doxology and communicate significant theological truths about marriage, reminding the couple that God’s love has brought them together, and will sustain them in “peace and oneness of mind” throughout their lifetime together. They also remind the couple that they are standing before God, their family and their Church, pledging to enter into an “indissoluble bond of love.”

In the **Exchange of Rings**, the priest stands before the couple, blessing them in the sign of the cross with their wedding rings. Beginning with the groom and then the bride, he prayerfully intones, “The servant of God *name*, is betrothed to the

servant of God *name*, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

From an Orthodox Christian perspective, this liturgical action serves to seal the couple’s commitment. *No vows* are requested or required. The couple’s silent participation in this rite presupposes their commitment, and is a more than sufficient witness of their dedication to one another. The rings they will wear from this time forward serve as a silent reminder of their commitment.

**The Closing Prayer** is also the longest prayer and provides closure by reiterating the underlying meaning of the rings which serve to seal their commitment to one another. Numerous Old Testament references remind the couple that God will protect their commitment and guide their footsteps as He did for other faithful throughout history. This prayer also provides a transition to the second half of the service, looking forward to their life together, asking God that His: “angel go before them all the days of their life....”

**The Crowning Service** is comprised of Psalm 127, the Doxology, Weddings Candles, Petitions, Prayers, Crowning, Scripture Readings, Lord’s Prayer, Common Cup, Procession (Dance of Isaiah), and the Final Exhortation and Dismissal. Though it is important to understand each of these components, one must remember that a fuller understanding will emerge when they are experienced as a whole.

**Psalm 127/128** From an early age, society teaches us that we are responsible for our own happiness and prosperity, and that it is our choice whether to have children, and how many we will have. Psalm 127/128 challenges these assertions, and reminds couples that the happiness, prosperity and children that come into our lives are blessings from God, and not simply the result of our choices and decisions.

**The Doxology**, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto

the ages of ages,” invokes the Holy Trinity, marking the beginning of the Crowning Service. This simple prayer reminds us that God rules eternally over all creation with Divine Wisdom. As part of his creation, our response is to praise His holy name and adore Him as ruler of all creation.

**The Wedding Candles** are lit and presented to both partners, to be held in their right hands. In receiving the lighted candles, the couple receives the light of Christ, which illuminates their lives as individuals, and shines upon the joining of their lives in Christ.

**Petitions** of a general nature are followed by a series of personal requests made on behalf of both marriage partners. This personal aspect again reminds us that God knows us and loves us personally.

The remaining petitions help the couple to understand that they are entering into a community of marriage that will be both separate and joined to a larger community of faithful individuals, couples and families. These prayers ask Christ to be present in this marriage, as He was present and blessed the marriage in Cana (JN 2:1-11). They reinforce the importance of children, and ask that God bless the couple with “fruit of the womb” according to His Wisdom.

The **Three Prayers** that follow tell a wonderful story with the help of a litany of Old Testament images, metaphors and references, describing a loving, caring God who has instituted marriage to preserve and protect humankind. They recount how marriage affords us the opportunity to become part of something greater than ourselves. From this sacrament, a new relationship is formed, two lives are prayerfully bound together, a family emerges, and life continues.

As the last of these three prayers is read, and the story draws to a close, the priest stands before the couple and prays “O Sovereign Lord, stretch forth your hand from your Holy dwelling place, and join together this your servant \_\_\_\_\_ and your servant \_\_\_\_\_.” He joins their right hands, and a