

The Sacrament of Marriage

According to the Rites of the Greek Orthodox Church



Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia

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ORDER OF SERVICE

Marriage is a Sacrament, a Mystery of the Orthodox Church, through which the union of man and woman is sanctified by God.

The Orthodox marriage ceremony, the most ancient of Christian wedding rites, is steeped in ritual and symbolism, reflecting the theology of the Church.

The rite is performed by a Priest who stands before an appropriately covered ceremonial table. It is placed in the middle of the Soleas area of the church, in front of the Holy Altar.

Upon the table are placed the Holy Gospel, a cup of wine, the Betrothal Rings and the Wedding Crowns. Two candles are lit as a reminder that Christ is “the Light of the world” Who offers Himself as illumination for the couple that they “will not walk in darkness but will have the Light of life”.

The couple stands facing the Priest and the Royal Door of the Holy Altar; the Groom on the right; the Bride on the left.

The Ceremony comprises Two Parts:

1. The Betrothal Service with the official Blessing of the Rings, and
2. The Marriage Service with the Crowning of the Bride and Groom

THE BETROTHAL SERVICE

The Priest begins the Service intoning: “Blessed is our God always, now and ever and to the ages of ages. Amen”.

He then recites the Litany in which he beseeches the Lord for the salvation of the Bride and Groom; to send down upon them perfect and peaceful love; to preserve them in steadfastness of faith; to bless them with a blameless life; to grant them an honourable marriage. He concludes the Litany glorifying God: “For to You belong all glory, honour and worship, to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”.

Two more prayers are recited asking God to set a unity upon the Couple which cannot be broken; a blessing of peace; oneness of mind; a spirit of truth and love.

Through tradition. Every Orthodox betrothal is a double ring Ceremony. The Priest takes the Rings and with them makes the sign of the Cross on the forehead of

the Groom saying: “The servant of God ... (groom) is betrothed to the servant of God ... (bride) in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen” (three times).

The same procedure is repeated making the sign of the Cross over the Bride's forehead, signifying the equality of man and woman in the eyes of God. At the conclusion, the Rings are placed on the fourth finger of the right hands of the couple.

The koumbaros or koumbara (the Best Man or Matron of Honour), steps forward and, crossing his hands first, takes the Rings and exchanges them, over and under, on the same fingers, three times.

The Priest then recites a prayer beseeching God ... “to bless this putting on of rings with a heavenly blessing and that an Angel of the Lord will go before these Your servants, all the days of their life”. Here ends the Betrothal Service.

THE MARRIAGE SERVICE

The Marriage Service is called “stepsis” in Greek, meaning crowning.

After the chanting of three verses from Psalm 127, the Priest commences the Service by intoning: “Blessed is

the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages". He then recites a series of petitions and three long prayers beseeching the Lord to "bless this marriage, granting to Your servants long life, purity, mutual love in the bond of peace, enduring prosperity, the blessing of children and the unfading crown of glory".

The Joining of the Hands

The Priest then beseeches God "to unite the bridal couple in concord and crown them in one flesh". At this point the right hands of the Bride and Groom are joined by the Priest. They remain joined throughout the remainder of the Service symbolizing the "oneness" of the couple.

The Crowning

The Crowning Ceremony is the climax of the Marriage Service.

In the Orthodox Church each wedding is a form of Coronation Service. Since the Bride and Groom are regarded as part of the "royal family" of God, they are crowned king and queen of their own dominion - their new fellowship and family. Crowns are a symbol of victory for those who "have fought the good fight" of the Christian life and "have kept the faith". In short,

both they and the actual office of marriage are given great honour.

The Crowns were usually plaited of lemon blossoms or flowers. Today they are often made of silver or gold. They are a sign of the bond between the Bride and Groom and represent the glory and honour which God bestows upon the couple who have observed His Commandments.

The most beautiful and significant symbolism of the crown is expressed in the words of the priest before placing them on couple. Making the sign of the Cross on the Groom's forehead, he exclaims: "The servant of God ... (groom) takes as his crown the servant of God ... (bride) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen" (three times).

Similarly, signifying equality once again and making the sign of the Cross on the Bride's forehead, the Priest exclaims: "the servant of God ... (bride) is takes as her crown the servant of God ... (groom) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen" (three times).

These words indicate that the great crown in marriage, your great glory is the one you have chosen to join to for the rest of your life.

The Best Man then exchanges the Crowns three times while the Priest and the Chanter sing: “Lord our God, crown them in glory and honour”.

The Bible Readings

With the Crowns now placed on their heads of the Bride and Groom uniting them as Husband and Wife, the Epistle is read from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians 5:20-33. The Gospel is then read from John 2:1-11.

The Common Cup

That Jesus chose a wedding to enact his first miracle is the most profound indication of the dignity attributed to the union of man and woman by God. Since the changing of water into wine at Cana, Jesus continues to change the ‘water’ of ordinary relationships into the ‘wine’ of Sacramental marriage. In remembrance of Christ’s first miracle, therefore, a cup of wine is shared by the Bride and Groom as a sign of unity with each other and with Christ.

This is not Holy Communion. Rather, it is a symbol of the “common cup of life”, a sign denoting the mutual sharing of joy and sorrow; a token of harmony. The Priest offers the cup, firstly to the Groom then to the Bride.

The Dance of Isaiah

The procession, a symbolic dance for the joy of God's presence, is conducted in a circular fashion with the Holy Gospel in the hands of the priest who leads the couple holding their united hands. This highlights the Church's prayerful desire that the life of the couple will walk through life led by the infallible and secure Word of God and inspired by the Church

During the Procession, the Priest and the Chanter sing the Hymn "Rejoice, Isaiah, the Virgin has conceived and has brought forth a son, the Emmanuel, both God and Man: Dayspring is His name. As we magnify Him we call the Virgin Blessed". The second and third Hymns remind the newlyweds of the virtuous lives of the Saints and Martyrs whose faith and sacrifice they are called to emulate.

Removal of the Crowns

Following the procession, the Priest places his hand on the Groom's head saying "May you be magnified, O Bridegroom, like Abraham, and be blessed like Isaac and be fruitful like Jacob as you go in peace, fulfilling in righteousness the Commandments of God".

Likewise, placing his hand on the Bride's head, the Priest says: "And you, O Bride, may you be magnified

like Sarah and rejoice like Rebecca and be fruitful like Rachel, rejoicing in your own husband and observing the limits of the law, for so God is well pleased”.

During the ensuing prayer, the priest removes the Crowns from the newlyweds’ heads praying: “O God, our God, Who when You were present in Cana of Galilee blessed the marriage there, bless also these Your servants who have been joined together by Your providence in the fellowship of Marriage; bless their comings in and their goings out; make their lives fruitful for good; take their Crowns unto Your kingdom and preserve them blameless, guileless and unstained unto the ages of ages. Amen”.

Conclusion

The Service closes with the benediction “Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers have mercy upon us, Lord Jesus Christ our God, and save us. Amen”. Before congratulating the Newlyweds, the Priest takes the Holy Gospel and separates their right hands with it, thus signifying that nothing and no one, except the God alone, who forgives and unites and strengthens, should come between the new couple.

Marriages are not permitted:

- From the 13th December until Christmas day.
- On the 5th January (eve of Epiphany).
- From beginning of Great Lent until Easter Sunday.
- From 1st to 14th August (fasting period for the Dormition of Theotokos).
- On the 29th August (Beheading of John the Baptist).
- On the 14th September (Elevation of the Cross).