

CROWN THEM WITH GLORY & HONOR

By David Anderson



Breathtakingly beautiful to behold, the Orthodox marriage liturgy is filled from start to finish with Scriptural symbolism and mystery. As an Orthodox priest, I have had the privilege of officiating at dozens of these services over the past years. Often I have found myself compelled to explain what was going to take place, or what did take place during the course of the wedding service, for most Americans are unaccustomed to the Orthodox marriage tradition. I find that a degree of confusion also exists among Orthodox Christians concerning various aspects of this beautiful liturgy.

Of course there are many similarities between Orthodox weddings and the weddings traditional to our western culture. Familiar elements exist: A beautiful Church resplendent with flowers. Elegantly dressed men and women. A beautifully adorned bride and a nervous bridegroom. An officiant or officiants. The list goes on.

But there are also some important differences. To clarify some of the confusion which exists on both sides, I want to walk through the Orthodox wedding liturgy step by step with you, to give a basic understanding of what is happening and why.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEDDING LITURGY

It is not possible to understand an Orthodox wedding service

without a brief historical frame of reference. All of the Church's services have undergone a long historical development. This is especially true of the marriage service.

In the early centuries, there was no special liturgy of marriage, as we have now. Both in the Roman Empire, and for a long time in the Byzantine Empire, marriage was understood as a civil or legal contract. All of the modern Western marriage services, which focus on the exchange of vows, reflect this legal inheritance. During the Roman and Byzantine periods, a Christian man and woman would go to the appropriate imperial agency for the marriage contract to be signed. Their marriage in Christ, as members of the Church, was sealed later, when they received Communion together at the liturgy, and were blessed by the bishop.

In time, the Church "took over" from the state the entire process of the marriage, and thus the present liturgy of marriage consists of two parts: the betrothal and the crowning. The service of the betrothal, which according to historical practice takes place in the vestibule or narthex of the Church, is the equivalent of the "natural" or "civil" marriage.

But a "civil" marriage alone is not enough for those who have died to this world and whose lives are hidden with Christ in God. Once the betrothal, the earthly marriage, has been completed in the narthex, the priest leads the bridal pair into the Church, into the



Kingdom of God, where the water of their earthly union will be transformed into the wine of that union which is the same as the mystery of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32).

HEAVENLY PROCESSIONS

The two parts of the marriage service are joined by a procession into the Church. This procession follows the same pattern established by the Church for baptisms and the Eucharist. At baptism, it is the entrance of the newly-baptized and chrismated, clothed in their white garments, having died in the font to this world of death and sin, which provides the visual liturgical focus of the Christian life as a procession, a passover, from death to life, from earth to heaven.

Likewise, at the Divine Liturgy, a series of processional movements reveals the essential experience of the Christian life. Our earthly life is a passage out of this world to God's Table in His Kingdom. The members of the Church assemble to become one body, just as the many grains of wheat together form one bread. The Word of God in the Gospels leads the clergy to the altar. The bread and wine, symbol of our lives, are carried to the altar, and then are lifted on high. The Church advances to receive Communion.

In the same way, the tradition of the Church gave birth to the

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liturgy of marriage within this paschal, baptismal, and Eucharistic framework. Just as the earthly bread and wine move forward to become the Body and Blood of the Lord, so the man and woman, betrothed in this world, move forward to become the icon of Christ and the Church.

THE BETROTHAL

As we have said, the first part of the marriage, the betrothal, appropriately takes place at the entrance of the Church. The groom and bride arrive with their attendants to freely offer themselves to each other. According to Western practice, the bride enters the Church, accompanied by her father or another male figure, to be "given away" before the altar. This custom runs counter to the traditional Orthodox understanding. In Orthodox marriages, the bride and groom are united at the entrance of the Church. Their entry together into the Church is a movement from the natural union to the ultimate mystery of union in Christ.

The betrothal consists of an opening blessing by the priest, followed by a special litany in which the Church asks God to bless the marriage with those things most needed: salvation (always the first and greatest need), perfect and peaceful love, oneness of mind, steadfastness of faith, the procreation of children, blamelessness and fidelity. The priest concludes this litany with a prayer addressed to God "Who has brought together into unity the things which before had been separate, and has ordained for them an indissoluble bond of love."

Thus at the very beginning of the marriage union we see reflections of a much larger reality—that of the salvation of the human race. Just as God and man, who had become separated, are united in Christ, so also in Christ human beings, separated by sin and selfishness, can be reconciled in an indissoluble bond of love.

The priest then prays another prayer: "O Lord our God, Who espoused the Church as a pure virgin from the Gentiles, bless this betrothal, and unite these Your servants, keeping them in peace and oneness of mind." The same love which made God the Bridegroom of Israel in the Old Covenant, and which unites Christ to His Bride the Church, is called upon to unite the man and woman.

The sign of the betrothal, the rings, are then blessed and exchanged three times, in the Name of the Holy Trinity. The priest then says a long prayer, in which the creation of the human race as men and women is praised as an act of divine providence, and the biblical history of the ring as a symbol of fidelity is reviewed. The betrothed couple are then ready for their entrance into the Church.

THE CROWNING

The second part of the wedding, the marriage proper, most often called the crowning, begins with a glorious procession in which the priest, as Christ, leads the man and woman to the front of the Church, while he chants the marriage psalm, Psalm 128: "Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways!

You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be as a fruitful vine within your house; your children like olive branches around your table. . . The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the good things of Jerusalem all the days of your life. . ." The people respond, singing in a triumphant melody, "Glory to You, Our God, glory to You!" after each verse.

The couple are then presented with lighted candles, reminiscent of baptism and Pascha, and the priest declares the "destination" of the liturgy with the Eucharistic blessing: "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. . ." A litany follows, asking for the Lord to be present as He was in Cana, to grant salvation, children, blamelessness, and gladness.

The priest then says the three great prayers of marriage. These are prayers of thanksgiving. Through these prayers, what marriage IS is revealed. God is praised for revealing the union of man and woman as the source of blessing: the great promise of the Old Covenant, that through the offspring of Abraham all peoples would be blessed, has been fulfilled through that human love which united Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and Asenath, Moses and Zipporah, and reached its climax in the unions of Zechariah and Elizabeth, from whom John the Baptist, the ultimate prophet, was born, and of Joachim and Anna; from whom came forth the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, whose virgin birth of God in the flesh ushers in the new creation.

It is God Himself Who is the "holy Celebrant of mystical and pure marriage." In these prayers, His Church asks Him to pour the riches of all the blessing He has shown from the beginning of time upon the marriage now taking place.

Next, as the sign of this union of man and woman being transformed into a divine union in Christ, the bride and groom are crowned in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As jeweled or floral crowns are placed upon the heads of the bride and groom, the priest exclaims, "O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor!"

The wedding crowns have a double meaning rooted in Scripture: they are the signs both of royalty and of martyrdom. In Christ, fallen human beings who have lost their royal dignity, trapped in a web of death and sin, are restored and re-created as kings and queens of the new creation. But this restoration depends on the cross, and the cross means far more than accepting that "Jesus did it for me." The cross means being crucified with Christ in this world, and the death of the self-centered pride so deeply rooted within our fallen hearts.

The Church is saying to the newly married couple: "You have been united as fallen human beings, but Christ has made you a king and a queen. For the rest of your life you must become what He has begun to make you. Your love must be His sacrificial love, and your life together must be a martyrdom, a crucifixion. Christ was glorified in His crucifixion, and His martyrs were exalted through

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suffering and death. This is the royal way of love."

**THE READINGS FROM
SCRIPTURE**

At this point in the marriage liturgy, two passages of Scripture are read before the couple and in the presence of the entire Church.

The reading from the Epistle to the Ephesians describes the marriage union as the image of the union between Christ and the Church. "Submit to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. . . just as the Church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:21ff.).

Submission means mutual sacrifice. Christ revealed His headship not through any demonstration of what the world understands as masculine power, but by washing the feet of His Apostles (who were being very "masculine"—quarrelling about who was the greatest), and then going to His voluntary death. It is to this revelation of true masculinity that the Church submits herself as a bride, and Saint Paul's words must be understood in this context.

The Gospel reading of Christ's first miracle at the wedding in Cana (John chapter 2) tells of the transformation of water into wine. This is the image of the Christian life, and of Christian marriage. By His grace, through His mercy and love, the water of our lives can be transformed into unspeakable glory. "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him" (I John 3:2).

THE CUP OF BLESSING AND THE DANCE OF JOY

At this point in the present marriage service, a cup of wine is blessed and shared by the newly married couple. Originally, the wedding continued and reached its climax in the celebration of the Eucharist. For it is at the Lord's table that His people eat and become His Body in this world, and the reception of Holy Communion should be the first act of marriage. Hopefully the desire for the renewal of the liturgy shared by many Orthodox will result in our time with the restoration of the Eucharist to the sacrament of marriage.

The final act of the service consists of another procession: the priest, holding the Cross, leads the couple three times around a table placed at the front of the Church, while hymns to the Virgin Mary and the martyrs are sung: "Rejoice, O Isaiah! A Virgin is with child; and shall bear a Son, Emmanuel. He is both God and man; and Orient is His name. Magnifying Him, we call the Virgin Blessed." This circular procession, a solemn "dance of joy," is an image of life in Christ: the Cross leads us, the Gospel on the table

is our sun, and we revolve around it. The obedience of the Mother of God and the martyrs' faithfulness unto death are our models.

Following this procession, the bridal crowns are removed, and the priest prays that the Lord will "receive their crowns into Your Kingdom." What has been made visible through the liturgy will now

continue invisible as we pass through life in this world, with our true life hidden with Christ in God, as we strive in faith for the good work He has begun in us to be brought to perfection.

A QUIET MIRACLE

This, in very rudimentary form, is what takes place at every Orthodox wedding. The liturgy has developed over the course of centuries, yet hearkens back to the early days of the Church, when the entire service was celebrated in the context of the Eucharist on Sunday morning.

I would be remiss in not mentioning one last element which exists at Orthodox weddings. One might call this final element the "miraculous" element.

In the fullest meaning of the word, a miracle occurs whenever the members of the Body of Christ assemble to visibly become the Church—to become together what they cannot become as isolated individuals. This miracle is nearly always (there are exceptions!) a quiet, invisible miracle: a miracle that goes unnoticed by this world, a miracle that cannot be seen without the "eyesight of the Kingdom." In this miracle, the merely chronological time of this world is transcended and the time of God's eternal "present tense" is revealed. The Kingdom of God is made manifest, not as something to be revealed in a future setting, but as a present reality.

This miraculous element is uniquely evident in the Orthodox liturgy of marriage. The liturgy of marriage is not simply a beautiful and meaningful service. It cannot be reduced to words or concepts—it is not just a declaration of everything the Church believes about marriage. Rather, the liturgy of marriage IS marriage, just as the liturgy of baptism IS baptism, or the liturgy of the Eucharist IS offering and communion.

When the Church assembles to be the Church, God becomes present. The liturgy of marriage condenses everything that has been experienced by God's people about married life in Christ into a wine as new and strong as that made by Christ in Cana of Galilee. As Christ was present at that wedding to perform His first miracle, so He is present at each new wedding. Miraculously, the temporal is transformed into the eternal as a man and woman are joined in the sacrament of Holy Marriage.

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