

The Two Shall Become One Flesh

Understanding an Orthodox Wedding

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For the Orthodox, marriage is a sacrament, a holy mystery in which God unites a man and a woman so that they mystically become “one flesh.” They are not simply agreeing to live together or to work together for a common cause. Their relationship is not a contract between two individuals. It is a true union in which two lives become one life—a new mode of existing in the world. Each spouse will find the truth of his or her life in the life of the other.



The Betrothal

The wedding begins with the exchange of rings. (In some Orthodox jurisdictions, this part of the ceremony is done at the back of the church.) The priest greets the couple and offers prayers for the Church, the world, and the couple themselves. The rings belong to the “betrothal” portion of the service. This is the sacramental “engagement” of the man and woman. In certain unusual cases, the betrothal can even be performed some months ahead of the rest

of the service. But it commonly takes place at the beginning of the wedding.

WEDDINGS ARE AMONG THE MOST TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES in American religious culture. Images of bridal processions, music, and vows exchanged all form part of the popular imagination. An Orthodox wedding will therefore seem very different for the non-Orthodox. The couple does not design their own service. No vows are exchanged. Crowns are placed on the heads of the bride and groom. A cup of wine is shared. The imagery is greatly different.

The priest announces, “The servant of God, N., is betrothed to the handmaid of God, N., in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This is declared three times (signifying the perfection of the Holy Trinity) over both the man and the woman. The rings are placed on their right hands and are then exchanged three times. A solemn prayer follows.

The Crowning

If the betrothal was performed at the back of the church, the priest now leads the couple to a central table where the “crowning” will take place. The crowning is the very heart of the marriage sacrament. It represents the union of the husband and wife in the presence of God. They become witnesses of the love between Christ and His Church and living examples to the world.

As the priest and the couple walk up the aisle, verses from Psalm 128, the traditional hymn of blessing for a marriage, are recited. At the table, the priest gives lit candles, representing the Light of Christ, to the bride and groom. Prayers are again offered for the Church, the world, and the couple.

In an extensive series of prayers, the priest recalls the many married couples in Scripture and prays

that this couple may be blessed in a manner similar to them. God’s actions in establishing marriage and His many acts of salvation on our behalf are also recalled. Through these prayers, this particular marriage is placed into the context of the people of God throughout the history of the world. Marriage is not a private matter but the work of God for the salvation of the world.

Then comes the crowning. The style of crowns varies greatly throughout the Orthodox world—they may be of gold, of pearls, or of flowers, from simple to ornate. In every case, the crowns recall the crowns of the martyrs in heaven. The husband and wife are crowned, showing that in their union they will lay down their lives for each other—the very heart of love as taught by Christ (John 15:13).

The Common Cup

Scripture passages are read—one from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, and the other from St. John’s Gospel, recalling Christ’s first miracle at the wedding in Cana. After the readings, a common cup of wine is blessed and given to the couple.

The origins of the cup are hidden in history, but they seem to be linked to ancient customs in which the couple symbolically share a meal (a common cup is also used in Jewish weddings). A prominent theme throughout an Orthodox wedding is the simple joy of marriage—children, family, hospitality, generosity.



No solemn warnings or lectures are given. Rather, prayers are offered for God's blessings of prosperity (that the couple might have enough to share) and for health, children, and all things "necessary to salvation."

After the cup, the priest leads the couple around the table three times, in token of their journey together through life. Following a final prayer, the crowns are removed, and the priest offers a blessing and dismissal. A brief sermon or homily may be offered here or at an earlier point in the service. The couple are then blessed to kiss and are presented to the congregation as man and wife.

A Public Witness

Certain general aspects of an Orthodox wedding are worth noting. The service is generally sung (chanted) throughout. This is common in all Orthodox services. Prayers are seen not only as words spoken to God, but as acts of communion, of worship, that are better expressed and embodied in singing than in speech.

Weddings always take place within a church (unless this is not possible). Marriage is a sacrament of the Church, a Holy Mystery. Its placement within the church building itself signifies that what is happening is from God and not from our human efforts. It is there, in the place hallowed by the daily worship offered by the people of

God, that the marriage is created and blessed. Surrounded by the icons of Christ and the saints, we are also reminded that the new life begun by the couple is an extension of the life of the whole Church, both in heaven and on earth.

Those in attendance form an equally important part of the sacrament. For marriage is not a secret matter but a public witness of God's love for humanity. It is prayed and hoped that all who attend the wedding will support the couple in their marriage and will themselves be blessed by God and strengthened in their lives. May it be so!

THE SACRAMENT OF *Marriage* IN THE Orthodox Church



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