

## **A Short Summary of the Sacrament of Marriage**

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Before discussing the Sacrament of Marriage, I think it's important that I provide you with a working definition of a sacrament from an Orthodox and Christian perspective. If you desire more information, there are a number of other helpful resources that can be of further assistance. Should you be uncertain how to find them, I am sure your priest can be helpful.

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

From an Orthodox perspective, sacraments are God-given gifts that have emerged from Holy Tradition, and have either been instituted by Christ or the Apostles. Orthodox Tradition also refers to them as mysteries. That is because a dimension these experiences is tangible and can be explicated, and another part must be accepted by faith.

The sacraments are best understood as God-given points of contact, where God makes Himself available to us on a very personal level. Moreover, as we choose to faithfully participate in these mysteries, God's life giving, life changing grace touches our lives and, by extension, makes us holy.

### **Historical and Theological Information**

The Sacrament of Marriage is comprised of two interrelated parts – the Betrothal Service, and the Crowning Service. It evolved over a over a number of centuries. By the end of the 16th century, the sacrament as we know it was being celebrated. Prior to this, shorted variations of the sacrament were conducted. In addition, up until the 9th century, marriages were blessed during the Divine Liturgy. Thereafter, marriages were blessed outside of the Eucharist.

Despite these historical variations, the Church has always sought to contextualize marriage into its married members' religious and spiritual journey. Above and beyond the legal, psychological and sociological dimensions of marriage that society typically identifies, the Church expands the definition of marriage and describes it as a holy union whereby a man and woman struggle together toward sanctification and eternal life within a community of faithful. Moreover, as we will see, the symbolism, prayers and rituals that unfold during the Betrothal Service, as well as the Sacrament of Marriage, serve to reinforce, communicate and celebrate this central meaning of marriage.

## **The Betrothal Service**

The first part of the service is referred to as the Betrothal Service. It is comprised of a series of petitions, a few small prayers, the exchange of the rings, and a lengthy prayer. Here are the main components:

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

Let's briefly examine the components of this service, while keeping in mind that these various pieces are interrelated and should not be understood apart from one another. Together, they lead the couple to an experience that is greater than the sum of its parts.

### **Doxology**

"Blessed be our God both now and ever and unto the ages of ages." Many Orthodox prayer services begin with this doxology. This is a form of prayer. As you may have already noticed, this prayer does not request anything from God. It simply calls both partners – together with all who are in attendance - to acknowledge and glorify God. It is a natural response that faithful people have when they stand before God.

### **Opening Petitions**

A petition is another form of prayer. Since many of our prayers tend to be offered to God in the form of requests or petitions, this type of prayer is perhaps the most familiar to most people, "Dear God, please help me today," is a simple example of this type of prayer.

This set of petitions begins with some general requests asking God to bless those in attendance with peace and salvation. The priest then asks God to be mindful of our world, the Church and our leaders. After these opening petitions, the list quickly narrows its focus and concerns itself with the couple who are pledging themselves to one another. The prayers will ask God to bless the couple with divine peace, love, harmony and oneness of mind. God is also asked to bless the couple with children, while promoting fidelity and mutual trust within their lives across the life cycle. These are all indispensable couple needs and Christian values and virtues that promote marital well-being and satisfaction.

### **Two Short Prayers**

The priest will subsequently read two short prayers. Irrespective of their length, these prayers communicate significant theological truths about marriage. They remind the

couple that God's love has brought them together, and will sustain them in "peace and oneness of mind" across the marital life cycle. They also remind the couple that they are standing before God, family and the Church pledging to enter into an "indissoluble bond of love."

### **The Exchange of Rings**

The priest will stand before the couple and bless them in the sign of the cross with their wedding rings. Beginning with the groom and then the bride, he will prayerfully intone the following statement: "The servant of God \_\_\_\_\_, is betrothed to the servant of God \_\_\_\_\_, in the name of the Father, Son and holy Spirit." This will be done three times. Once this step is complete, the priest will begin with the bride, prayerfully repeating the same pattern.

From an Orthodox 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 from an Orthodox perspective is a more than sufficient witness of their dedication to one another. Moreover, the rings they will wear on their fingers henceforth will serve as a silent reminder of this commitment.

### **The Closing Prayer**

The final prayer is also the longest prayer. It serves to provide closure by recapping some of the significant underlying meaning of the rings which have served to seal their commitment to one another. Moreover, numerous Old Testament references remind the couple that God will protect their commitment, and guide their future footsteps, as He protected and guided other faithful before them. This prayer also functions to provide a convenient transition into the second half of the service. One of the final phrases alludes to the couple's life together as husband and wife: "and may your angel go before them all the days of their life, for you are he that blesses and sanctifies all things."

### **The Crowning Service**

This service is comprised of the following parts: (1) Psalm 127, (2) Doxology, (3) Wedding Candles, (4) Petitions, (5) Prayers, (6) Crowning, (7) Scripture Readings, (8) Lord's Prayer, (9) Common Cup, (10) Procession, and (11) Final Exhortation and Dismissal. While it is important to understand each of these components, you should remember that a fuller understanding of the service emerges when these various parts are integrated and experienced as a whole.

### **Psalm 127/128**

From an early age, our society teaches us that we, and only we, are responsible for our own happiness and prosperity. We are also taught that so long as there are no medical reasons to preclude us from having children, it is our choice if we have children, and

what size our family will be. This psalm disagrees with these assertions, and reminds couples that our happiness, prosperity and the children that come into our lives are ultimately blessings from God, and not exclusively the result of our choices and decisions.

### **Doxology**

“Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages.”

This prayer introduces the Crowning Service. It is Trinitarian in form, as is the case with the entire Sacrament. In its essence, this doxology reminds us that God rules over all creation with divine wisdom unto the ages of ages. Moreover, as part of his creation, our response is to praise His holy name and adore Him as a sovereign King – a King who is both ruler of all creation and our lives.

### **The Wedding Candles**

The priest will present the Wedding Candles to both partners, and instruct them to hold them in their right hands. The candle flame symbolizes divine light that has come into the world through Christ. Moreover, as the couple receive the candles, through this ritual they are celebrating the light of Christ that has come into the world to illumine their lives as individuals, as well as the mutual joining together of their lives as a couple in Christ.

### **Petitions**

After some introductory petitions of a general nature, a series of requests are made on behalf of both partners. The first of these petitions will include both individuals' names to emphasize the personal characteristic of the sacrament – This petition begins, “For the servants of God \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_....” It also reminds us that God knows us and loves personally, and not simply as part of a vast ocean of humanity.

The remainder of these petitions seek to help the couple understand that they are entering a community of marriage that will, at once, be separate and a part of a larger community of faithful individuals, couples and families. These prayers also ask that Christ be present in the couple's marriage, as He was present and blessed the marriage He attended in Cana (JN 2:1-11). They further underline the importance of children, and ask God to bless each couple with “fruit of the womb” according to His wisdom.

### **Three Prayers**

Along with the other prayers in this service, the next three lengthy prayers tell a wonderful story. With the help of a litany of Old Testament images, metaphors and references, the story they describe involves a loving, caring God who has instituted marriage to preserve and protect humankind across time. They also recount how

marriage affords us the opportunity to become a part of something more than ourselves. From this God-given institution, a new relationship is formed, and from this willful joining together, two lives are prayerfully bond together, families emerge, and life continues.

Additionally, as the last of these three prayers is read, and the telling of the story begins to draw to a close, the priest will stand before the couple and read “O Sovereign Lord, stretch forth your hand from your Holy dwelling place, and join together this your servant \_\_\_\_\_ and your servant \_\_\_\_\_.” He will then join their right hands together, and through this invocation and ritual, another couple is brought into this story - with the Church’s hope and prayer that they will make this story an integral part of the story they will coauthor together into the future.

### **Crowning**

After the couple’s hands are joined together, the priest will bless their wedding crowns, and recite the following statement three separate times in front of the couple: “The servant of God \_\_\_\_\_ is crowned for the servant of God \_\_\_\_\_, in the name of the Father, and the Son and the holy Spirit.” Upon completion, he will reverse the process, beginning with the bride while repeating the same words. The priest will then place the crowns on both partner’s heads, and chants a verse from Psalm 8, “O, Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor.” The sponsor will then exchange the crowns three times, and place them back on each partner’s head. This is an ancient ritual, perhaps reaching back to the 2nd or 3rd century. There are several interpretations of the significance of the wedding crowns. I will briefly offer one of the more recent explanations.

In ancient times, monarch’s crowns symbolized their absolute rule over their kingdom. Similarly, this liturgical ritual installs the couple over their household as king and queen, with one important difference. Unlike the manipulative, controlling style of rule that many kings and queens personified, this service calls both spouses to rule over their household as Christians who are motivated by Christ-like humility, patience and self-sacrificial love.

### **Scripture Readings**

Most services in the Orthodox Church contain Scripture readings. The Orthodox Church believes that Holy Scripture is the Holy Word of God, and contains God’s revealed truth and wisdom. Each reading is carefully selected, because it relates to a given service. In the case of the Sacrament of Marriage, the lessons selected and read are foundational to the Orthodox Church’s understanding of marriage. They encapsulate much of what the Orthodox Church believes about marriage, and reinforce the message behind the prayers and hymns of this service. Two Scripture readings from the New Testament are included in this service. The first comes from the Letter to the Ephesians (5:20-33), and is generally read by the chanter. The second reading is from Saint John’s Gospel (2:1-11), and is read by the officiating priest.

## **The Lord's Prayer**

After a few more petitions and prayers are recited, a recitation of the Lord's Prayer takes place. 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. Christians repeat these words at many different times and places. At any given place and time the words in this prayer serve to comfort them, and remind them of God's presence in their lives.

## **The Common Cup**

The priest will then ask God to bless a cup that contains wine. This cup is generally called the Common Cup. He will then offer the cup to each partner, beginning with the groom. Each partner will drink from the cup three times. Briefly, the wine in this cup symbolizes the bitter and sweet moments of married life that both partners will share in together. This ritual also reminds the couple that God will bless them throughout the marital and family life cycle.

## **Procession**

After the couple drink from 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 table in the center of the Solea that is located in front of the Icon Screen. Holding the Gospels in his right hand, the priest will guide everyone around the table three times while three hymns are chanted. As the couple follows the priest, their journey together begins, but it is not a journey that they will take alone. The Gospel Book that the priest holds, as well as the presence of their guests, serves to remind them that they have chosen to walk through life with the Holy Trinity and other faith like themselves.

## **Final Exhortation**

Two short congratulatory prayers are read immediately following the procession. The first relates to the groom, and the second to the bride. In each case, both partners are asked to emulate the faith of several Old Testament figures who found happiness and marital fulfillment through their faith in God. The crowns are also removed at this point, and the dismissal follows.