

The Sacraments of Love: Marriage and the Priesthood
Re-Catechism 3
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Introduction to the Sacrament of Marriage

The sacraments of the Church are essential for our growth in Christ because through them God saves us. A life without the sacraments is like a life without God. This evening I will be speaking to you about two sacraments, Marriage and Ordination and how participating in these sacraments helps not only us but also others as well.

I am sure that all of you are familiar with the creation account in the book of Genesis, where God created Adam, and Adam was lonely. So God put Adam into a deep sleep, and proceeded to create woman from his side. And this woman, Adam named Eve and said that she was like him because she was flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. The fact that God created woman from Adam's side symbolizes their intended equality.

But with the introduction of sin, the relationship between husband and wife changed. Marriage as God first intended it to be became distorted. Thus, in the Old Testament we see how marriage was viewed as fulfilling various functions, first that of populating the earth, second, of ensuring that one lives on through their children, and for the Jews children became even more important as there was the possibility that one might even be a forefather of the promised Messiah. Marriage soon evolved as a means of uniting families, even kingdoms and gaining wealth, property and power. The wife continued to slip from partner to chattel; she was now simply part of a business deal whose primary function was to provide offspring. Marriage was

predominately seen as a social obligation that fulfilled social responsibilities to society or the state.

In our modern “post-Christian” secular world, marriage is still seen as fulfilling a social need. Today, marriage has become a private, personal decision that supposedly serves “to enhance emotional, social, economic, and psychological well-being.”¹ And for this reason many people consider marriage disposable when it ceases meeting their secular needs. So like the past, the secular world today views marriage as fulfilling a social function.

However, for Christians, and especially Orthodox Christians, marriage has been recreated, with the coming of Christ. Christ revealed that marriage was not intended to fulfill a social or secular function but that its primary purpose is that of salvation. Marriage changed from a secular contract between two separate bodies into a Sacrament, a profound mystery where two individuals become one flesh, one body. And as one, the two through marriage journey together towards the kingdom of heaven. Children now become a fruit or a blessing on this journey, and are an expression of the love and physical union between husband and wife. They are no longer the primary purpose. So, marriage from an Orthodox perspective seeks primarily to meet one’s spiritual needs, in addition to their physical, emotional, economic, and social need.

The Model Marriage

St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians chapter 20 verses 21-22 presents before us a perfect model of marriage, that of Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride. Marriage is presented as it was meant to be, namely as a union of selfless love for the other. St. Chrysostom understood Paul, as teaching that if husbands strived to live a Christ-like life of sacrificial love, and wives a Christ-like life of

obedience, then they would be on the right path to emulate the marriage of Christ to the church. Paul refers to the marriage between Christ and his church as a mystery, because as St. Chrysostom explained, it presents a relationship that is really inconceivable. Christ as head is set before Christian husbands as the model to be exemplified. He is the perfect lover. St. Chrysostom calls him the “manic lover” the bridegroom who so loved his bride that he *left* his divine Father in heaven in order to save his bride, which are the people of the church. (Notice how even in the divine model one has *to leave* the “parent” in order *to cleave* “to the spouse”). Jesus is the unrestrained lover who accepted the Church with all her faults and gave his life up for her in order to make her perfect. Christ is the head of his church, and as her head he realized that headship meant more than authority, but also responsibility, duty, servitude, sacrifice and love. This is the model of a perfect husband.

The Church is set before the Christian woman as the model to be exemplified. She is the ever-obedient bride who is united to the perfect lover. She is the body of Christ who is made holy by his sacrifice. She is the bride who knows that she is one with her bridegroom, who then unites her to His Father in Heaven. This is the model of a perfect wife. So a good marriage is one that attempts to imitate this example.

The husband and wife so united no longer sees themselves as two, but as one. Yet this oneness does not negate their individuality. Rather their oneness is to be understood as a harmonizing of the two. And the two recognize that their harmonized unity is a precious eternal gift from God that is to be forever cherished. Whom God has united, let no one (neither parent, in-law, sibling, but no one) put asunder. There is no “till death do us part” in the Orthodox Sacrament of marriage, because when the Holy Spirit is invoked to bring about change, the change is always intended to be eternal. And as the

persons of the heavenly Trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are unique in their personhood and yet inseparable, the earthly trinity of husband and wife united in God also celebrates the uniqueness of its members who are inseparable.

The husband and wife get married to work together with God. And their ultimate goal is to unite with God for eternity. Once the spiritual bond between a couple united in Christ has occurred it is then later expressed in the couple's physical union. Society's tragedy is that it has removed the necessary spiritual prerequisite from physical unions, making them meaningless expressions of selfish gratification between two separate bodies, rather than expressions of oneness in God.

Since the primary function of marriage is to have the one partner assist the other partner along their journey to God's Kingdom, both husband and wife must be baptized Christians, and ideally should both be Orthodox.

Needless to say, choosing a life companion must be made carefully. Think of it as embarking on a journey in a small rowboat across the Atlantic. Who would you choose to row with you? You would first choose someone who first knows where they are going and how to get there. You will choose someone who will be willing to work at the oars with you; who will row in harmony with you (otherwise you'll just go round and round in circles); someone who will take over when you are tired and willing to let you take over when they are tired. And that is the type of spouse you will want in your marriage boat as you sail together to the kingdom.

This picture of marriage that I have presented before you is the ideal. It is the model set before us that married persons strive to obtain. Living in a state of sin (as we all do) there is no marriage that comes anywhere close to imitating the model of Christ and the church. Along the journey, some couples overcome obstacles

successfully and move on to the next obstacle. While others crash on the rocks and the marriage is destroyed. The major cause of such crashes is when God is removed from the marriage resulting in the unity between the two to become severed. Once this happens it is only a matter of time before our selfless love turns into selfish wants. My needs, my life, my family, my children, my career, my money, my possessions, my culture, my church, my body, all things “my” bring division. Our needs, our life, our family, our children, our career, our money, our possessions, our culture, our church, our children, our body, keep us united. We have to train our thought to move away from “my” to “our”: from “me” to “we”.

The Sacrament of Marriage

The Orthodox Marriage sacrament is full of symbolism and the meanings are deeply rooted in the Kingdom of Heaven. There are two parts (traditionally three) to the present day Sacrament of Marriage: the Betrothal Service, the Crowning Service, and the removal of the Crowns service. These were separate services, with the Crowning actually being blessed during the Divine Liturgy until the 9th C, but for practical reasons they have been united into one service. The marriage service that we have today has been the same since the late 16th century. The first part is the Betrothal Service. The climax of this service is the Exchanging of the Rings. The rings signify eternity, everlasting love and commitment. The wearer of the ring belongs to the one who gives the ring. So the husband belongs to his wife and the wife belongs to her husband in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. The rings are placed on the right hand, as this has always been the biblical practice, and the celebrating priest in the final prayer lists all the mentions of when a ring was used to bind agreements and commitments in the bible.

The Crowning Service is the climax of the wedding. It is here where the two become one. The couple's candles are lit symbolizing that Christ the divine light is to unite them and always guide them. Their right hands are joined together symbolizing their unity into one flesh, and then the couple is crowned. One of the many interpretations of the meaning of the wedding crowns is that the couple is crowned king and queen over their new family, and is to exercise absolute rule together over their new kingdom, however, with a difference. They are to rule as Christians, with patience, humility and as always, with selfless and sacrificial love.

As an extension of this understanding, the crowns also symbolize that they are adopted children of their heavenly Father, princes and princesses of Heaven living together to do the will of the Father on earth. And this leads to the final understanding, that the crowns symbolize the victory crowns the couple is to receive at the time of their deaths, that with honour and glory they will have run the good race and arrive at their final destination ... the Kingdom of heaven.

The Koumbari are the "godparents of the couple" and have the responsibility to do everything in their power to keep the marriage on track, similar to a godparent at baptism who is responsible for the spiritual upbringing of the new member of the church. Often times the person who baptized you also exchanges the crowns as they should be actively involved in your spiritual growth. This is what the exchanging of the crowns means when performed by the koumbaro/a. Their participation in the service symbolized that they will advocate for the couple. How they exchange the crowns is irrelevant, so long as they are involved, and yes, for obvious reasons they must be Orthodox Christians. Once the crowning is finished, the couple is married.

The service continues with the Common Cup that the couple and only the couple share. The wine, in memory of the first miracle Christ performed at wedding at Canaan, is not Holy Communion. It is shared by the couple and symbolizes first, the unity of the couple both spiritually and physically. Second, the bitter and sweet moments of married life that they will share together, and finally, that just as Jesus blessed the wedding in Canaan, so too he will bless this couple throughout the marital and family cycle of life.

The newlyweds then take their first steps together, their first steps toward the kingdom of God with the priest in the lead holding the Gospel, and in the presence of members of the Church, their guests. These steps are a reminder that they have chosen to walk through life with the Holy Trinity as their guide, with in the body of the Church as their support.

In the final prayer the crowns are removed. In the past, a ribbon did not join the crowns, and the couple wore them until the 8th day of marriage when they would come to church and have them removed. The 8th day is very symbolic for we orthodox. It is eschatological, which means it represents the second coming. It is the day of recreation, when we enter into God's Kingdom. This final act of removing the crowns serves as a reminder that the true goal of marriage is to prepare us for the final judgment when we are to come before God and be crowned victorious, for having together run the good race.

As you can see, marriage *is* a great mystery and is a sacrament that not only involves the salvation of our own soul, but also the salvation of our life partner's soul, and also of any children who have been entrusted to us by God.

The Sacrament of Ordination

I would like to take the last five minutes to talk about the next sacrament that I will mention tonight which like marriage is also not obligatory, and like marriage helps lead to salvation others as well as the self. It is the sacrament of the Holy Priesthood.

All are called but few are chosen. And this means that out of the Royal Priesthood, which all baptized Orthodox Christians belong to, few are chosen by God to be extensions of His Holy hands and become members of the Holy Priesthood. The purpose of these few chosen individuals is to invoke the Holy Spirit to come to all of us, to provide us with the sacraments of the Church, which enables us all to participate in the Liturgical life. Theirs is a calling of servitude. In marriage, the one partner puts the needs of their spouse and children above their own. In Ordination, the clergy put everyone else's needs above their own.

There are three basic levels of Ordination. The top level is the Bishop, and whether one is a simple bishop, metropolitan, an Archbishop, or a Patriarch, in God's eyes, a bishop is a bishop. The Holy Apostles established the Order of Bishop, and through the laying on of hands they ordained bishops who were responsible for presiding over the Holy Gifts (the Liturgy), for teaching the true faith and upholding the teachings of Christ in each city where Christians were found. All bishops can trace their ordination back to the Apostles and Christ. This is called Apostolic Succession. When the churches in the cities grew so that the Bishop could not manage to serve all the faithful alone, He would ordain presbyters (priests) who are an extension of the Bishop. The priest can do nothing without the blessing and permission of the Bishop who has total authority over his church. The priest has permission to perform the sacraments, and proclaim the gospel from the pulpit.

When the bishop and presbyters are vested, they become mediators representing the people of God before Christ, and Christ

to the people of God. When vested, they have the power to expel demons, heal the sick, and uplift the downcast. When vested, they have the power to invoke the Holy Spirit to descend. They take upon themselves a heavy yolk, the responsibility of Jesus' flock, and the tassels on the "stole" or petrichili represent the souls that they are responsible for, and will give an account for before the awesome judgment seat of God. But clergy, like us, are also in need of the sacraments for their salvation, and in greater need of prayers, because the devil attacks them more.

We also have the order of deacons, whose role is to help the priest with the sacraments and to visit the sick and the needy. It is a role that has presently become a mere stepping-stone for ordination to the priesthood, but its function is so desperately needed in our day that the church needs to seriously look into reinstating the diaconate to its past level.

Yet, regardless to which level of holy orders one belongs, the purpose of ordination is one and one alone, to assist the members of God's flock along their journey to His kingdom, and to bring others not of the flock into the fold. Then again as baptized Christians and members of Christ's Royal Priesthood, do we not also share the same calling?

¹ Marriage: Some Observations from an Orthodox Perspective

Rev. Fr. Charles Joanides, Ph.D., LMFT

Ministering Cover (An excerpt from the following resource: Joanides, C. (in print). Ministering to intermarried couples: A Resource for Clergy and Lay Leaders. New York, NY: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.)