

Holy Matrimony

By **Fr. Lawrence Farley** in **Sacraments and Rituals**

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That our current sacramental rite of matrimony is the product of long development can be seen by reflecting on the simple fact that in the days of the apostles and beyond, there was no church rite of matrimony. When two Christians wanted to marry each other in (say) the second century, they simply agreed to live together as a married couple, registered their marriage, and then came to church and had Holy Communion together like they did every other Sunday. In the Roman world, marriage consisted of the mutual consent of the partners. No third party, or ceremony, or witnesses were legally required. Christians did not invent a marriage ceremony to fill this vacuum—they simply accepted that this was how people, including themselves, got married. There was no special rite used which made their marriage a Christian marriage—Christian marriage existed because marriage existed in society and some of the married persons were Christians, not because the Christians were married in a special ceremony. Indeed, one anonymous early church writer in his Epistle to Diognetus expressly says that Christians marry in the same way as everyone else does.

This does not mean that the Church did not have its own understanding of Christian marriage, or that it did not regard marriage differently than the world did. The Church's understanding of Christian marriage was actually quite different from that of the world, and involved a life-long union in Christ with no possibility of divorce. Since all Christians lived to serve Christ, their marriages also were meant to reveal and express the Kingdom of God. But this different understanding did not express itself in a special ceremony in those early days. The creation of that ceremony came only after the ninth century, when the State gave the Church the difficult responsibility for all marriages in the (by then) Christianized Roman Empire, regardless of whether or not those being married were communicants.

Prior to that, Christians wanting to be married simply agreed to be married, registered their marriage legally, and then received the Eucharist together. Obviously, the assembled church community would want to celebrate the new couple's joy, and so during the Eucharist, the celebrant might offer a special prayer or blessing for the new couple. In the fourth century, one hears of the Church accepting the use of floral crowns for the new couple, though previously it had frowned upon these things as pagan fripperies. Chrysostom, ever the pastoral preacher, suggests that the floral crowns should be regarded as crowns of victory over the passions, to celebrate the couple's intact chastity.

But though these crowns may have been popular with those getting married, they were not required. In the late ninth century, one could become married either through a blessing, or by crowning, or by simple mutual agreement. But in all cases, Christian marriage was sealed by the Eucharist, because the Eucharist was, for Christians, the source of all saving grace. It was only in the beginning of the tenth century that one first hears of a marriage service apart from the Eucharist. Now, those ineligible to receive the Eucharist (such as those entering into a mixed marriage) were still to be married by the Church, which then had to devise a new ceremony. It is this ceremony which the Orthodox Church uses today.

The wedding service as presently constituted consists of two parts: the betrothal (when the couple get engaged), and the crowning (when the couple, having concluded the period of betrothal, are actually married). Given that during the time of betrothal, the couple had all the responsibility of mutual fidelity to each other and none of the joys of shared conjugal life, there was all sorts of incentive to make the time between betrothal and crowning as short as possible. Currently, it is short enough, since

one service follows immediately after the other, so that the liturgical engagement lasts about four minutes, the time needed to walk from the back of the church, where they were betrothed, to the center of the church, where they will be married.

The betrothal consists of the mutual agreement of each party to marry the other (the legal requirement for all marriage), which is expressed in the giving of rings. The man gives his bride a ring, and the woman gives her groom one too, each one placing it on the fourth finger of the right hand as the hand of honour (note: not the left hand, as in the west). There are no vows needed to express this mutual agreement; the exchange of rings expresses their wordless and beautiful consent. After the betrothal comes the crowning. The bridal pair stands together in the center of the nave, since their union expresses the eternal union between Christ and His bride, the Church. The priest places crowns on the heads of both bride and groom, and prays that God Himself will crown them—not with flowers, but with glory and honour. After this, the couple shares a single cup of wine as an image of their shared joy and intimacy, an intimacy (and cup) which they will share with no one else. Next, they take their first steps together as a married couple, as the priest leads them three times around a table with the Gospel upon it and the choir sings hymns of praise to God. This circular procession around the Gospel shows how they must keep Christ at the center of their married life. Throughout all the service, the priest prays for the couple, asking God's blessing upon them.

All this is very different than the weddings one sees in Hollywood movies, with the walk down the center aisle, the father giving away the bride, and the exchange of vows (often written by the couple themselves). In Hollywood weddings, everything is about the couple, and about romantic love. In Church weddings, everything is about Christ. It is, after all, a sacrament, and one shouldn't expect a personalized designer version of the matrimonial service any more than one should expect it of a baptismal service. The couple does not come to make a personal statement of their unique love for each other; they come to receive grace from the Lord.

Thus, a Christian marriage is quite different from a secular marriage. Couples not married in Church but by a civil functionary such as a justice of the peace are, of course, still married, both in the eyes of the Church and in the eyes of God. But these secular marriages will be different than the marriages of devout Christians. "For me to live is Christ," said St. Paul (Phil. 1:21), and for a Christian, life has no other purpose than to glorify the Lord. Because of this, the marriages of Christians have no other purpose than to glorify Christ also. All the joys in marriage—shared sexuality, the blessing of children, long life—are received as gifts from Him, and call forth thanksgiving. Husband and wife regard each other as Christ's gifts. This means that they must treat each other with respect and kindness, serving each other in love, with life-long fidelity to the other and commitment.

There are two main ways in which Christian marriage differs today from many secular marriages. One way concerns the commitment to chastity. In the World, it is often taken for granted that the couple will be sexually active prior to the actual wedding, and may even live together beforehand. "Try before you buy" is the popular advice. This advice does not come from the Lord. The Christian's commitment to sexual purity involves a commitment to come to the marriage bed in a virginal state, free from stain of fornication. That is why St. John Chrysostom compared the marriage crowns to the crowns of victory over the passions. But why should one wait? Because that is how one receives married sexuality as a gift—by waiting until the gift is given. Who opens the Christmas presents under the tree a week before Christmas? Sensitivity to the giver of the gift and gratitude for it demands that one wait until the gift is given at the proper time. It is the same with this gift: Christ places the bride and groom in the hands of the other at the crowning. We wait until the gift is given.

The other main way in which Christian marriage differs from its secular counterpart is in its permanence. Divorce is not an option for devout Christians. There are no irreconcilable differences which cannot be overcome through repentance and forgiveness. The World may regard divorce as normal and perhaps even as inevitable. Not so the disciples of Jesus. For us, divorce is forbidden.

Marriage is not a contract which may be amicably dissolved by mutual agreement. The marital union is not a contract, but a new creation. Out of two separate persons, God makes one new creation, one flesh, an entirely new organism. The bridal couple have been remade into one by God Himself, and divorce therefore undoes the work of God. "What God has joined together, let not man put asunder." Sometimes one partner insists on divorce, and there is little the other can do. St. Paul insists that the one being divorced in this way must accept it, and not be under bondage. But divorce is always a sin and a tragedy, and if both partners are intent on serving the Lord, divorce is never the right path. Repentance is.

The Christian understanding of marriage is under concerted attack in our culture, which seeks to redefine not only marriage but even such basic realities as gender. In this as in so many other things, Orthodox Christians are called by God to be counter-cultural, and to swim against the tide.