

Crowned With Glory & Honor



**Guidelines for
Orthodox Marriage Preparation**



ABOUT THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

Holy Matrimony is a sacrament of the Orthodox Church in which a man and a woman agree before Christ, the priest, and the Church to be loyally united together for life. Christ blesses their marriage through their sacramental union in the Church. God's grace is imparted through this ceremony to help the couple live together in His love, mutually fulfilling and perfecting each other. A sacrament is a mystery in which the heavenly and earthly realms are brought together by the Holy Spirit. We are joined in Holy Matrimony with Christ, as He is the Bridegroom and the Church is His Bride.

A Description of an Orthodox Christian Wedding

In preparing for an Orthodox wedding, it will be helpful to understand the unique aspects of an Orthodox Christian wedding. The ceremony is rich in tradition and symbolism. Orthodox Christians believe that it is God who unites the couple; in the sacrament of marriage, the church recognizes and blesses the union God has begun in their lives. Without this sacrament, the marriage will suffer pain, sin, and death. Through their union with Christ, the couple has the hope of a new life together as one flesh in God's Kingdom.

The Sacrament of Marriage is actually two services in one: first, the Betrothal service and then the Wedding or Crowning service.

The Betrothal Service

The couple's entrance into the church from the narthex, the area closest to the outside world, represents that the relationship which began "in this world" will now move into the church for blessing to enter "the world to come." At this time the bride and groom each declare their willingness to be married to the other. This part of the service recognizes the civil union through which a man and a woman come with free will to join each other. And yet, it is much more than a legal contract. In fact, in the Orthodox service the couple do not exchange vows. They have come to the Church to recognize *God's* union in their relationship, not merely to make promises to each other.

The priest then gives the bride and groom candles that they will carry throughout the rest of the service as a sign of their willingness to follow Christ and His light. They are acknowledging their desire to have their lives lighted by the teachings of Christ and His Church.

During the Betrothal, the priest prays for the couple to have a life of perfect love together, for salvation, and for the blessing of children from their union. The priest first blesses the rings and then lifts them above the heads of the bride and groom as he blesses their betrothal three times, in the name of the "Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit," invoking the mystical presence of the Holy Trinity. The rings are then exchanged and placed on the ring finger of the right hand of the man and the woman. (Promises are made and oaths are taken with the right hand, symbolizing the right hand of God that blesses. Christ ascended to sit at the right hand of the Father. Finally, those who inherit eternal life will go to the right hand of God.) In some Orthodox traditions, the bride and groom exchange the rings to symbolize that they will compensate for each other's strengths and weaknesses. Only by the union of the two are they made perfect.

The Beginning of the Wedding Service

At the beginning of the Wedding Service, the priest censes around the table before the altar as he chants Psalm 128,

“Blessed are they that fear the Lord, and walk in His ways . . .”
By coming to the altar, the couple offer their lives together to God for His blessing.

The Joining of the Right Hands

While offering prayers to “join” the bride and groom to “unite them in one mind and one flesh,” the priest joins their right hands to symbolize their union. The couple holds hands for the rest of the service.

The Crowning

The priest offers prayers for the couple and then blesses the crowns, which are placed on their heads. The crowns symbolize the glory and honor with which God crowns the bride and groom. The crowns have two meanings: First, the couple have come into the Kingdom of God and taken their place as a king and queen in their marital kingdom. Secondly, the crowns represent martyrdom. The word “martyr” means “witness.” The couple bears witness to Christ’s presence in their lives, which requires both to die to themselves and to give of their lives for the other. The ribbon joining the crowns represents the unity of the couple. The crowns are exchanged three times to signify the sealing of the complete union. Many Orthodox couples keep the crowns to remind them of the crowns of glory that will be awarded to them in eternal life if they guard their virtue in their marriage.

Scripture Readings

The Epistle reading, Ephesians 5:20–33, explains the mystery and holiness of marriage, as well as the duties and responsibilities of a husband and wife. The love of the couple parallels the love of Christ and His Church. The couple becomes one in their submission to each other and to Christ.

The Gospel reading, St. John 2:1–11, retells the story of the wedding at Cana, where Christ blessed marriage by turning the water into wine, symbolizing the turning of our passions into virtues.

The Common Cup

Although this is not the Holy Eucharist, the bride and groom drink from a common cup to signify the sharing of their lives together—their joys *and* their sorrows.

The Dance of Isaiah

The Dance of Isaiah is a procession led by the priest as he places his hands on the joined hands of the bride and groom. They process three times around a table on which the cross and the Gospel book are placed, as a reminder that they must keep Christ at the center of the marriage. The hymns sung during the Dance of Isaiah recall the themes of blessing, martyrdom, and the setting apart of the couple from this world to a union with Christ. The best man and maid of honor follow the bride and groom as witnesses, and pledge lifelong moral and spiritual support.

The Removal of the Crowns and the Blessing of the Couple

The priest removes the crowns and places them on the Gospel book as an offering of the marriage to the Lord. The priest prays that God will receive these crowns into His Kingdom. The couple now begin their journey together in Christ at the foot of His altar. They are an icon of Christ and His Church to the witnesses attending this sacrament of their threefold union.

You will notice that nowhere in the wedding service is the phrase “until death do us part.” Marriage is an eternal relationship that begins in this world and is perfected in God’s Kingdom. In Christ, marriage is restored to its original perfection through the sacrament and becomes an eternal life of joy in union with Him. Christ destroyed death by His Cross and Resurrection; therefore, death has no power to separate the marriage.

The Wedding Favors

The sugar-coated almonds offered to guests symbolize the honey-dipped almonds given by priests in the ancient Church.

The white coating symbolizes purity; the egg shape represents fertility and new life that begins in marriage. The hardness of the almond represents the endurance of marriage, and the sweetness of the sugar encourages the hope of the sweetness of future life together. Giving of three almonds signifies the union is indivisible, just as the bride and groom will remain undivided in their union with each other and with Christ.

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GUIDELINES FOR AN ORTHODOX WEDDING

Before making preparations for an Orthodox wedding, there are many considerations to keep in mind. Because marriage in the Orthodox Church is a sacrament, it is held in high regard. Therefore several conditions must be fulfilled. First and foremost, the wedding is celebrated with seriousness, holiness, and profound joy.

St. John Chrysostom, a champion of marriage in the ancient Church, advises:

There is nothing more pleasurable than virtue, nothing sweeter than orderliness, nothing more honorable than dignity. Those who celebrate weddings such as this will find true pleasure. . . . If you drive away the other things, Christ Himself will come to your wedding, and where Christ goes the angels' choir follows. If you ask Him, He will work for you an even greater miracle than He worked in Cana: that is, He will transform the waters of your unstable passions into the wine of spiritual unity, but remember: if He should come and find the musicians and the crowd making a tumult, He will expel them all before working His wonders. (Homily 12, *On Marriage and Family Life*)

The Sacrament of Marriage in the Orthodox Church is celebrated in holiness and is not to be entered into lightly without understanding the necessary conditions in which it is performed. The Marriage Ceremony in all its fullness is very different from a secular ceremony or one in another Christian assembly. In order to have the best possible experience, the following conditions need to be kept.

First, the Holy Orthodox Church maintains guidelines as to the dates when marriages may be performed. These dates may differ slightly in the various Orthodox jurisdictions. The most important beginning in planning your wedding is to **choose an appropriate date with the guidance of the priest** who will be performing the Marriage Sacrament. Other considerations are the priest's schedule and the availability of the church facilities. Many couples begin wedding plans a year in advance in order to accommodate all of these requirements.

Unavailable Wedding Dates

Weddings may not be performed during a season of fasting. Occasionally the excluded dates vary somewhat in different Orthodox jurisdictions; however, the following is a general guideline of the days to avoid:

- ☩ All Saturday evenings after Great Vespers;
- ☩ All Wednesdays and Fridays, unless they fall during a fast-free period;
- ☩ All evenings *preceding* one of the twelve Major Feasts:
 - Birth of the Theotokos (September 8);
 - Exaltation of the Cross (September 14);
 - Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (November 21);
 - Nativity of Christ (December 25);
 - Theophany (January 6);
 - Meeting of our Lord in the Temple (February 2);
 - Annunciation of the Theotokos (March 25);
 - Transfiguration of Christ (August 6);
 - Dormition of the Theotokos (August 15);
 - Palm Sunday (one week before Pascha/Easter);

- Ascension of Christ (forty days after Pascha);
- Pentecost (fifty days after Pascha).

The following times are not available for weddings because they fall within one of the extended seasons of fasting of the church year, or are connected to a particular day of fasting.

- ✚ From the beginning of the Christmas Fast *through* Theophany (November 15 to January 6);
- ✚ From the week before Great Lent begins *through* Bright Week (the week following Pascha/Easter);
- ✚ During the Fast of the Apostles (the second Monday after Pentecost *through* June 29);
- ✚ During the Fast of the Dormition of the Theotokos (August 1 *through* August 14);
- ✚ The evening before and the day of the Beheading of John the Baptist (August 28/29);
- ✚ The evening before and the day of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 13/14).

A wedding that is performed during one of these times must be an exception due to a grave circumstance, and requires the special permission of the Metropolitan.

Prohibitions on Marriages

There are prohibitions on marriages in the Orthodox Church between couples in the following relationships:

- Parents with their own children and grandchildren;
- Brothers-in-law with sisters-in-law;
- First or second cousins;
- Aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews;
- Godparent with godchild;
- Godfather with mother of godchild;
- Godmother with father of godchild;
- Foster parents with foster child;
- Same gender relations.

Other Important Conditions for an Orthodox Marriage

- ✚ Both bride and groom should be Orthodox Christians in good standing, meaning that each participates in the Sacraments and is an active member of a canonical Orthodox parish. If one of the partners is not Orthodox, but *is* baptized in the name of the Trinity, they may still be permitted to marry.
- ✚ Both bride and groom must have valid birth certificates.
- ✚ Baptismal certificates for non-Orthodox must show that they were baptized “in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” by a recognized Christian communion.
- ✚ If one of the partners is not baptized, the marriage *cannot* take place in an Orthodox Church.
- ✚ Neither the bride nor the groom can be currently married.
- ✚ If either has received a civil divorce, they must first receive a blessing from their bishop recognizing the divorce and allowing remarriage.
- ✚ If either is widowed, they must produce a legal death certificate for the deceased spouse.
- ✚ Neither a man nor a woman may enter into a fourth marriage in the Orthodox Church.
- ✚ The best man and maid of honor must be Orthodox Christians in good standing. The other members of the bridal party need not be Orthodox.

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PRACTICAL ADVANCE PREPARATIONS

- ☞ As soon as the wedding date has been approved by the priest, schedule the wedding rehearsal and reception hall.
- ☞ Discuss the fees and honorariums for the priest, deacon, chanters, choir, church rental, etc. Your priest will provide guidelines.
- ☞ **Schedule premarital preparation counseling with your priest.** *This should begin no later than six to nine months in advance of the wedding, and should be completed four months prior to the wedding.* Many clergy require three to six meetings, some more, in order to adequately cover the areas for marriage preparation. **Research consistently supports the need for adequate premarital preparation to ensure a happily married life!**
- ☞ Note: There is now an Orthodox Premarital Preparation Inventory that will greatly enhance your sessions. It is called *FOCCUS, Orthodox Christian Edition*. Your priest must have received special training before using this inventory to enhance your marriage preparation. It is a well-planned guide to direct you as you begin the journey toward your marital union, and covers all the essential areas of preparation for marriage.
- ☞ Verify that the bridal clothing you are considering is suitable for an Orthodox wedding. An important word

about the bridal gown: it should be modest, preferably with covered shoulders. The bridesmaids must also dress modestly.

- ✚ Obtain copies of your birth and baptismal certificates as soon as possible.
- ✚ The couple must obtain their civil license from the state in which the marriage is to be performed. Some states require a blood test.
- ✚ At least one month before the wedding, the priest must apply for a church license if your Orthodox jurisdiction requires it.
- ✚ After your date has been agreed upon by the priest, *and not before*, begin arranging:
 - Invitations and reservation cards;
 - Wedding crowns;
 - Candles for the bride & groom;
 - Flowers;
 - Photographer and/or videographer (please make sure to instruct photographers that pictures and videos may not be taken behind the priest or in front of the altar);
 - Wedding cake;
 - Caterer;
 - Rehearsal dinner reservations;
 - Reception hall;
 - Appropriate entertainment;
 - Accommodations for out-of-town guests;
 - A schedule of events for the bridal party, including dress and tuxedo fittings, rehearsal dates (time and place), photography times, bridal showers, etc.;
 - Service brochure, if desired. (Note: an example of a service brochure may be downloaded from www.antiochian.org. Please refer to the section for the Department of Marriage and Parish Family Ministry.)

The icon on the cover of this booklet is by the hand of Jan Isham, and is available for purchase as a mounted icon through Conciliar Press. Wedding cards featuring this icon are also available for purchase. Visit www.conciliarpress.com for details.

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