

14. Weddings and Marriage in the Orthodox Church

Marriage, as it is understood in the Orthodox tradition, is a mysterious icon of the Church. Like every Mystery, or Sacrament, it is a tangible manifestation of the Kingdom of God, establishing a “little church” in the home of the new family, with Christ as the head. Recognizing the bonds of love that already exist between bride and groom, the Sacrament of Marriage provides the necessary grace for a shared life of continual growth in Christ-like love. This life-long process involves dying to self in order to live to Christ and the beloved spouse; thus, Christian marriage is a school for learning the art of self-sacrifice, which Christ makes possible through this great Mystery.

The service itself consists of two main parts: the *Betrothal* and the *Crowning*. The Betrothal involves the exchange of rings between bride and groom, representing the presentation of the human element: the giving away of the bride, the acceptance of the bride by the groom, and the choice of each of them to cleave to the other with God’s help. The accompanying prayers recall the history of God’s perpetual love and faithfulness towards man. The Crowning is the Divine blessing that enables the betrothed couple to enter the mystery of marital union. The Holy Spirit descends upon the couple and unites them. The crowns signify that the couple is accepting the martyrdom of perpetual faithfulness, humility and sacrificial love. God, for His part, bestows “glory and honor” on those married couples who faithfully continue to live out their marital commitments to Christ and to one another.

When considering marriage in the Orthodox Church, couples should keep the following points in mind. It should go without saying, but nevertheless must be said, that the Orthodox Church blesses only marriages between one man and one woman, neither of whom is married to another, and both of whom are freely entering into the marriage. Ideally, both bride and groom should be Orthodox Christians, for unity of life implies unity of faith, and Marriage is a Sacrament of the Church. Any exceptions to this rule must be discussed with the priest. In the event that either the intended bride or groom has been divorced or widowed, there are special procedures to be followed; however, no marriage can be granted for anyone previously married three or more times.

A couple seeking marriage must go through a series of pre-marital counseling sessions, to be arranged with the priest. Because of this requirement, as well to make sure everything is properly prepared, a couple should begin discussing wedding plans with the priest at least 6 months before the intended wedding date. No invitations or other arrangements should be made until that conversation happens. In the meantime, it is expected that the intended bride and groom are living separately and chastely.

The following arrangements should be discussed well in advance: selection of an Orthodox wedding sponsor; crowns, candles, and common cup; intended wedding party participants, plans for photography, and so on. Please keep in mind that weddings are not normally allowed during fast periods. Also, the use of instruments is not allowed. Bridal and bridal-party attire should be tasteful and modest. In general, the atmosphere of the wedding, while joyful, should be in keeping with the dignity of the Church.

For more information, please see additional resources available at the church.