

And the Two Shall Become One Flesh

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony

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“Have you not read,” Jesus said, “that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6)

Marriage is a mystery, a sacrament, a uniting of one man and one woman into a living icon of the Holy Trinity, a manifestation of the love of Christ for His Church and the Church for her Lord, the foundation for the family and the generative force for bearing children, and it is the context for working out the salvation of both husband and wife through self-sacrificing love.

In the secular society in which we live, however, marriage has become a contract between two consenting adults based on the fulfillment of each other’s needs. The desire “to live happily ever after” has become the fanciful basis for marriage, and also the great downfall of so many romantic beginnings. This self-orientation, of meeting my needs, is evident even in how many go about planning their wedding ceremonies. Many little girls dream of having a fairytale wedding – whatever that may look like in their mind. Some dream of getting married in a cathedral, dressed like a princess, others perhaps on a beach surrounded by only a few of their family and friends, and some opt to want no one there, but to simply elope with the man of their dreams. No matter what their version of the fairytale looks like, the wedding is “their special day.”

Over the years, we have either heard of requests from other clergy, or else received many requests ourselves to alter the wedding service by adding to, subtracting from, or substituting something for traditional Orthodox wedding practices. Everything from walking down the aisle to pop music, to changing the Epistle reading, to adding a unity candle or vows to the service, to having girls stand with the groomsmen because she is the groom’s best friend, to having the family pet serve as the ring-bearer, and the list goes on and on.

Marriage is a Sacrament

In order to understand why the Church has the traditions that it does, we should understand what a wedding is. A wedding is a mystery (sacrament), where God takes a man and woman, who have already promised themselves to each other, and blesses their union, making them one flesh. “In marriage man does not only satisfy the needs of his earthly, secular existence, but also realizes something very important of the purpose for which he was created; i.e., he enters the realm of eternal life.”¹

The marriage service gives the couple grace to endure the hardships of life. It blesses the man and woman to consummate their relationship and to bring children into the world. It changes the role

¹ John Meyendorff, Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975), p. 19

of the bridal pair with their parents, still teaching them to honor and love them, but also instructing the “*man [to] leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife*” (the same is implied for the wife), and to no longer be under obedience to or directed by their parents, but that they become an independent unit, walking together with the Lord.

Because marriage is a sacrament of the Church given to us by God, it is important that we come to the marriage service with an attitude of submission and reception rather than with our list of needs and wants. St. Ignatius (c. 105) writes, “It is becoming, therefore, to men and women who marry, that they marry with the counsel of the bishop, that the marriage may be in our Lord, and not in lust. Let everything, therefore, be [done] for the honour of God.”²

Marriage as an icon of the Holy Trinity

Marriage is also a living icon of the Holy Trinity in which the “mystery of unity in diversity applies not only to the doctrine of the Church but to the doctrine of marriage.”³ In the creation narrative in Genesis, God says, “Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” From the beginning, the uniting of the differences of man and woman was intended to be an image or icon of the life of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Together, as husband and wife, they were given ‘dominion’ to rule as representatives of God with the goodness of the differences united in love.

We know from our Lord and from the Church Fathers that ego (self-love) is the opposite of true love. Ego is the rejecting of love, and when it interferes with the sacrament of Marriage offered by the Church, it prevents the love that Christ has for us from reaching us on that day when we are supposed to be receiving His blessing to live together as one for the rest of our lives – reflecting the life of the Holy Trinity. Bishop JOHN (Abdalah) writes, “We are not self-sufficient; rather, we are made to be in relationships. These relationships need God’s love to envelop us communally, which is accomplished through Christ by the Holy Spirit.”⁴

It is true that we are all individuals and different and that there are times to celebrate our individuality, but the marriage service is a time to embrace the solidarity of our humanity. Laws are created and enforced equally on all people because no one is better than anyone else. To individualize our wedding service is to say that we are different from all other people; this is heresy and reflects our own ego rather than reflecting the selfless love of the Holy Trinity.

Marriage as a picture of Christ and the Church

In the service of marriage or crowning, the epistle reading is always from Ephesians 5:20-33. St. Paul describes the way that a husband and wife should live together, “submitting to one another in the fear of God.” Their relationship is counter-cultural to the self-oriented way many couples

² St. Ignatius, *Epistle to Polycarp*, V (ANF, 1.100)

³ Met. Kallistos (Ware), *The Orthodox Church*, (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 294

⁴ Bp. John Abdallah and Nicholas G. Mamey, *Building An Orthodox Marriage*, (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017), p.13

live out their marriages today. St. Paul calls for wives to “submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord,” and husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.” Submission, giving up one’s own right or will, is not a popular concept, but it is necessary if we are to live in Christ - wives giving up their own “rights” to their husbands, and husbands laying down their own lives for their wives. Fr. Thomas Hopko writes, “The husband must love his wife to the point of death, as Christ loves the Church. And the wife must be totally given to her husband in everything as the Church is given to Christ. The union in love must be perfect, total, complete, enduring and lasting forever.”⁵ Can you imagine a more beautiful way of life – a life that is a picture of Christ’s love for his Church and the Church’s self-giving submission to her Groom?

Consequently, a couple needs to engage in the preparation process for marriage with all seriousness and self-examination. The joy that flows from the union of husband and wife should be a godly joy rather than a carnal celebration. Rather than spending excessive amounts of time tasting cakes, taking engagement photos, and selecting a playlist for the DJ to play at the reception, a couple will be better prepared for a godly marriage by seriously engaging in pre-marriage counseling, contemplation of the prayers and readings from Holy Scripture, examining their own motivations in their coming marriage. Is it the bride’s desire to give herself over fully to her husband? Is it the groom’s purpose to lay his life down fully for his wife?

St. John Chrysostom writes, “When harmony prevails, the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbors, friends and relatives praise the result.... When it is otherwise, however, everything is thrown into confusion and turned upside-down.... If we order our lives in this way and diligently study the Scriptures, we will find lessons to guide us in everything we need!”⁶ To the extent that this is lived out in the Church, their marriage will be a picture of Christ and the Church.

Marriage as the foundation of the family

Marriage is also the foundational relationship for the building of a family, as a little church, and the procreation of children. Not only were Adam and Eve given the responsibility to have dominion over creation as icons of the Holy Trinity, but they were also given the charge to “Be fruitful and multiply.” (Genesis 1:28)

In the Service of Marriage or Crowning, the priest prays, “Grant them of the fruit of their bodies, fair children, concord of soul and body.... Give them seed in number like unto the full ears of grain.... And let them behold their children’s children, like a newly-planted olive orchard, round about their table.”⁷ The grace of God poured out in the sacrament of marriage in the Church provides the foundation for a new family to be formed between the man and woman – leaving father and mother cleaving to one another in this new one-flesh union. Typically, the fruit of their union is the blessing of children and the growth of the family. The Church fathers condemned the

⁵ Fr. Thomas Hopko, *Sexuality, Marriage and Family* (The Orthodox Faith, Vol 4), p. 152

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 20: On Ephesians 5:22-33*, *St. John Chrysostom – On Marriage and Family Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1991)

⁷ Isabel Florence Hapgood, ed., *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, (Englewood: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 1996), p. 296

use of contraception in all forms, although there was a difference in approach, as a rejection of God's command to be fruitful and multiply. The sexual union between husband and wife is to be approached with an openness to the blessing of children, even as it is also an aid to "quench the fiery passions of our nature."⁸

As in all aspects of the married life, self-sacrificing love is to be the guiding rule of the family – between husband and wife, and parents with their children. St. Paul writes "Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." And children also are instructed to "obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."⁹ This mutual life together in Christ constitutes a "little Church." St. John Chrysostom writes, "indeed the household is a little Church. Therefore, it is possible for us to surpass all others in virtue by becoming good husbands and wives."¹⁰

Pastors understand that many marriages in our churches these days are mixed marriages, meaning an Orthodox is marrying a heterodox. Let us remember that Orthodox means "true believing," and our traditions – regardless of whether or not we fully understand them – must be maintained. Because of the difference between the Orthodox approach to family and the blessing of children and the heterodox Christian traditions, it is especially important for couples to submit themselves to the wisdom of the Church through the bishop and priests as they are preparing for marriage. One way that a humility of heart is demonstrated is in their willingness to accept the traditional Orthodox wedding service. If a bride and groom are not willing to trust the Church to instruct them about how to be married, we should question why the bridal pair desire to get married in the Orthodox Church at all. This is a good indicator of what their faith will look like within the married couple's life, especially in the raising of children.

Marriage as a path of salvation

Finally, marriage is a pathway for salvation for the husband and wife as they receive and bear the crowns of joy and martyrdom given to them in the marriage service. This is not intended to be a morbid prediction of suffering in marriage, but instead a call to lay down one's life in order to participate with Christ in his victorious death and resurrection. This is "the central frame of reference which is making marriage a Christian marriage."¹¹

The Church is in the business (for lack of a better word) of sanctification and salvation. All aspects of our lives, including marriage and the family, are for our salvation. St. John Chrysostom writes, "Let your home be a sort of arena, a stadium of exercise for virtue, that having trained yourself well there, you may with entire skill encounter all abroad."¹² As a couple lives together in this way, with the children that God gives them as the fruit of their loving union, they will be martyrs

⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *On Virginity* 19.2-3

⁹ Ephesians 6:1-4

¹⁰ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 20: On Ephesians 5:22-33*, *St. John Chrysostom – On Marriage and Family Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), p. 57

¹¹ John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), p. 39

¹² St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew II*, (NPNF 1.10, p. 74 as translated by Fr. Josiah Trenham in *Marriage and Virginity According to St. John Chrysostom*, p. 202

(witnesses) to the presence of Christ in their home even as they encounter the society in which they live.

This approach to marriage and the family is formed even in the process of planning for the wedding. As a couple lays aside their preferences in order to receive from the Church the sacrament of marriage, they will already be living as witnesses of the submission and self-sacrificing love that is necessary for a family to flourish in Christ. There are certain customs that may creep into our churches, such as having a young girl throw flowers while a young boy walks [usually fake] rings down the aisle, but these changes do not really effect the wedding service, and so they are accepted by many priests; some, however, may not allow anything to distract from the true purpose of the wedding: the sanctification and purification of the bride and groom to live as one with each other in Christ.

I would like to leave you with a beautiful description of an Orthodox Christian marriage by the ancient Christian apologist, Tertullian. He writes,

“What words can describe the happiness of that marriage which the church unites, the offering strengthens, the blessing seals, the angels proclaim, and the Father declares valid? For even on earth children do not rightly and lawfully wed without their fathers’ consent. What a bond is this: two believers who share one hope, one desire, one discipline, the same service! Two are brother and sister, fellow servants. There is no distinction of spirit or flesh, but truly they are two in one flesh (Gen. 2:24; Mark 10:8). Where there is one flesh, there is also one spirit. Together they pray, together they prostrate themselves, together they fast, teaching each other, exhorting each other, supporting each other.

Side by side in the church of God and at the banquet of God, side by side in difficulties, in times of persecution, and in times of consolation. Neither hides anything from the other, neither shuns the other, neither is a burden to the other. They freely visit the sick and sustain the needy. They give alms without anxiety, attend the sacrifice without scruple, perform their daily duties unobstructed. They do not have to hide the sign of the cross, or be afraid of greeting their fellow Christians, or give blessings in silence. They sing psalms and hymns to one another and strive to outdo each other in chanting to the Lord. Seeing and hearing this, Christ rejoices. He gives them his peace. Where there are two, he also is present [cf. Matt. 18:20]; and where he is, there is no evil.”¹³

¹³ Tertullian, *To His Wife* (Marriage in the Early Church, pp. 38-39)