

Greek Orthodox Wedding Service

The Sacrament of Marriage in the Eastern Orthodox Church derives from the belief that marriage exists from God's creation of the first man and the first woman. As such, the couple does not exchange vows, but is united in "one flesh" by the grace of God. The ceremony is celebrated as two services: the Betrothal (the exchange of rings), and the Crowning (the exchange of crowns). Both the betrothal and wedding service are rich with prayers, rituals, symbolisms, and readings that reference God's blessings on well-known couples of the Old Testament. There is not act in these services that do not have special meaning and significance.

Koumbaro(a)

The koumbaro(a) is the "sponsor" who stands and bears witness to the mystery of marriage for the couple. This person is carefully chosen by the couple, a faithful Orthodox Christian who will pray for the couple throughout his/her life, offer support, encouragement, and guidance.

I. The Betrothal

The Betrothal consists of a number of petitions, the blessing of the rings, and a concluding prayer. The rings are the symbol of betrothal from the most ancient times. During the service the priest blesses the rings in a form of a cross over the heads of the bride and groom three times, then places them on their right hands. The sponsor (koumbaro/a) stands before the couple and interchanges the rings three times. The exchange signifies that in married life the weakness of one partner will be compensated for the strength of the other interchangeably; by themselves the newly betrothed are incomplete, but together they are made perfect; thus, the exchange of the rings gives expression to the fact that the spouses in marriage will continually be complimenting each other. Each will be enriched by the union.

The Candles

The wedding service begins immediately following the betrothal service. The couple are handed candles which they hold throughout the service. The candles symbolize the spiritual willingness of the couple to receive Christ, the Light of the world, and to follow Him throughout their life together.

The Joining of the Hands

The priest joins the right hands of the couple and calls upon God to join these “Join these, Your servants, unite them in one mind and one flesh”. The hands are kept joined throughout the service symbolizing the “oneness” of the couple.

II. The Crowning

The crowning is the pinnacle of the wedding service. The Crowns are symbolic of the great honor and responsibility that attend the establishment of a new Christian family. The new bride and groom are crowned as king and queen of their own domestic kingdom. The kingdom established today is not to be a separate kingdom, but fully integrated in the Kingdom of God. The purpose of living together in it is that that they and their children will achieve salvation by living a true Christian life. The white ribbon joining the crowns indicates that God blesses the couple in relationship to one another, not as separate individuals.

The priest takes up the crowns and makes the sign of the cross first over the groom saying: “The Servant of God (Name) is crowned in marriage to the handmaiden of God (Name) in the Name of the father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This rubric is done three times beginning the with groom and then repeated three times beginning with the bride. The koumbaro(a) then exchanges the crowns three times as a witness to their union. The couple will wear the crowns for the remainder of the ceremony. The crowns also have another deep spiritual meaning as they represent the crowns of martyrdom since every true marriage involves immeasurable self-sacrifice from both the husband and the wife. This will be revealed in one of the hymns chanted during the ceremonial walk.

The Common Cup

The crowning is followed by an Epistle reading (Eph. 5:20-33) which speaks of a godly ordered relationship between a husband and wife, and the Gospel (Jn. 2:1-11) describing the marriage at Cana of Galilee. At this wedding Christ performed His first miracle, changing water into wine. In remembrance of this blessing, wine is given to the couple in what is known as the “common cup” which at one time was the holy Eucharist when wedding services were conducted within the context of the Divine Liturgy. Drinking from the common cup serves to impress upon the couple that from that moment on they will share all things in life, joys as well as sorrows, a token of a life of harmony.

The Ceremonial Walk

The priest and couple encircle the ceremonial table located in the middle of the Solea. Lead by the priest, they walk around the table three times in honor of the Holy Trinity. This walk not only represents their first steps together as a married couple but symbolizes their journey through life. The priest leads the couple in the manner they must travel on their journey. Holding the Gospel in his hands, the priest leads the procession, reminding the couple that the Word of God is to always go before them as a guiding Light. On the table stands a cross, which reminds the couple that at the center of their life is the example of the life-giving sacrifice of Jesus Christ who gave His life for our salvation. The koumbaro(a) follows behind the couple holding the ribbon that joins their two crowns signifying his/her lifelong support for the couple. During the ceremonial walk, the choir sings three hymns, one of which refers to the Holy Martyrs, reminding the newly married couple of the sacrificial love that does not seek its own, but is willing to sacrifice for the one loved.

The Final Blessing

At the conclusion of the service, the priest removes the crowns from the head of the groom and bride as he says, "Accept their crowns in Your Kingdom unsoiled and undefiled; and preserve them without offense to the ages of ages." The priest then gives the groom and bride a final blessing, praying that God will "fill their lives with all that is good" and to bless them all the days of their life."