

The Sacrament of Marriage in the Orthodox Church

Marriage is one of the seven Sacraments of the Orthodox Christian Church. The Bride and Groom present themselves before Christ, the Priest, and the congregation, promising to be true to each other for life, seeking God's grace, promising to live together in His love, and mutually fulfilling and perfecting each other. The Marriage ceremony of the Orthodox Church is steeped in ritual and symbolism.

The Koumbaro (sponsor)

A close interwoven relationship exists among the Bride, Groom, and Koumbaro (male) or Koumbara (female). For an Orthodox Christian, it is considered a great honor to be invited to sponsor a couple in a marriage. The sponsor must be an Orthodox Christian and give witness before God and the people that the Bride and Groom are committed to each other and to Christ.

The Candles

At the beginning of the Service, the Bride and Groom are given white, lighted candles to hold. These symbolize the purity of their lives, which should shine with the light of virtue and spiritual willingness of the couple to receive Christ, Who will bless them through this Sacrament.

Betrothal Service

The first part of the Sacrament is the Betrothal Service which originally took place at the time of engagement. Over the course of centuries, the Betrothal Service was included with the Sacrament of Marriage.

Exchange of Rings

The rings are blessed by the Priest over the couple's heads three times.* The Koumbaro(a) exchanges the rings three times, taking the Bride's ring and placing it on the Groom's right ring finger and vice-versa. The exchange signifies that, in married life, the weakness of one partner will be compensated by the strength of the other, and the imperfections of one by the perfections of the other. Thus, this exchange of the rings represents that the couple will constantly complement each other.

Joining of the Right Hands

In the Service of the Crowning and during the third prayer, the right hands of the couple are joined together by the Priest who calls upon God to unite them into one mind and one flesh. The hands are kept joined throughout the Service to symbolize the “oneness” of the couple.

The Crowning

The crowns are signs of glory and honor with which God crowns the couple during the Sacrament. The Groom and the Bride are crowned king and queen of their own kingdom, their home, which they will rule with love, wisdom, justice, and integrity. With the crowns, the Priest makes the sign of the Cross over the heads of the Bride and Groom and then places the crowns on their heads. The Koumbaro(a) then exchanges the crowns over their heads as witness to their union. Some interpret the crowns used as the crowns of martyrdom, since every true marriage involves immeasurable self-sacrifice by both husband and wife.

The Common Cup

After the reading of the Epistle (Ephesians 5:20-33), the Gospel (St. John 2:1-11) describes the first miracle of Christ at the wedding of Cana in Galilee, where He converted the water into wine and gave it to the newlyweds. In remembrance of this miracle, wine is given to the couple. The husband and wife drink from this Common Cup, denoting the mutual sharing of joy and sorrow in their life as husband and wife. This is not Holy Communion, but it symbolizes that they will share in all of life’s experiences together.

The Ceremonial Walk

The Priest then leads the Bride and Groom in a circle around the table on which are placed the Gospel and the Cross. The husband and wife take their first steps as a married couple and the Church, which is represented by the Priest, leads them in this walk. This walk represents their life together as a perfect orbit around the center of life, Christ our Lord.

The Blessing

Finally, the Priest lifts the crowns from their heads with special words of blessings to the newlyweds. He then places the crowns on the Altar Table as an offering of the newly-formed Christian couple.

Boubounieres (wedding favors)

A custom in the Greek Orthodox Church provides a wedding favor for everyone in attendance, as a remembrance of their presence at this wedding. These wedding favors contain candy-coated almonds (called koufeta), which symbolize the sweetness and bitterness of marriage. As they are eaten, the sweetness of the candy coating and the bitterness of the almond mingle and become inseparable.

*Performing actions three times symbolizes the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.