

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 102

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 9: Holy Matrimony

(The Faith, Chapter 16)

Marriage in the Bible:

Genesis 2:18 “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.”

Genesis 2:22-25 Adam and Eve “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”

Genesis 11:29-23:20 Abraham and Sara

Genesis 24 Isaac and Rebecca

Luke 1:5-58 Zacharias and Elizabeth

Holy Tradition Joachim and Anna

Rev. 19:7-9 Christ (Groom) and the Church (Bride)

John 2:1-11 **Christ at Wedding at Cana:** the Lord was present and giving His blessing:

Marriage in the Orthodox Church is **not** a human contract (said by two people facing each other, saying, “I do”, “I do”).

Rather, Marriage is a “Mystery”: in which Christ is invisibly present (iconically represented by the priest) and blessing, uniting the two by His power.

Changing water into Wine: Christ’s presence and blessing can **change** the ordinary relationships of husband and wife **into something sweeter, eternal**—taking that relationship **into the eternal Kingdom of God**.

OT days—deep in history, in the days of the Old Testament, among many in Israel there was not a very clear idea of eternal life. Therefore, marriage was largely seen as primarily for the purpose of having many children—leaving behind descendants who would continue the family.

Barrenness was therefore considered terrible—a curse.

Relationships, especially those of husband and wife, were seen to end at death.

Transformation of Marriage by Christ’s Resurrection:

The Lord radically changed this old view of marriage by His Resurrection. He entered the realm of death—into hades/sheol—and destroyed its might by His glorious Presence.

(The Faith, p.228): “No longer held captive [to sin and death], mankind arose with Christ to participate in the unending life of the Holy Trinity.”

Eternal life for humans became **possible**. And, as a consequence, **eternal personal relationships of love** in that eternal life also became **possible** for humans.

(*The Faith*, p.228): “With the **Resurrection** of Christ came a renewed understanding of the nature of marriage. Personal immortality through the resurrection eliminated the necessity of procreation as a means of survival. This is why our Lord told the Sadducees, ‘For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels in God in heaven’ (Matthew 22:30).”

In the Resurrection, men and women will not have to marry for the purpose of having children who will continue living after they, the parents, die. Death is over. Rather, like the angels who exist forever in personal relationships of love with God and each other, so too saved mankind will live eternally without having to have more kids in order to keep the family name alive. The **relationships of love**, forged on earth, will **continue** throughout **eternity**, because the **saved** will live **forever in heaven together**.

Marriage has been transformed by **Christ**—it has **been taken into the eternal Kingdom of God**—the love of the couple can **literally last forever**.

Marriage is no longer simply the continuing of the earthly family through procreation and descendants. Marriage is, in Christ, a Mystery in and of itself.

Marriage is for our salvation. “It is a relationship in which the partners work out their salvation together.” (*The Faith*, p.227).

Living together, helping each other, the couple participate in the ongoing work of synergy, cooperating with God and each other for their own salvation (their own union with God).

In the Mystery of Christian marriage, even eros (desire) finds its helpful, proper place.

According to the Church Fathers, the physical desire (eros) of a couple is not evil, but is an icon, “a manifestation of the deeper desire of the soul for union with God.” (*The Faith*, p.229).

Song of Songs 2:16 “My Beloved is mine, and I am His.” The writer uses this love poetry to image the deep love and desire of the soul for intimate union with God: “**theosis**”, which for the Orthodox is **salvation**.

Fidelity to one’s spouse is an image of fidelity of the soul to God.
(Conversely, infidelity to one’s spouse is an image of infidelity to God.)

In the Old Testament, many of the children of Israel abandoned the True God and ran after the multitude of pagan gods. The prophets of the OT often pictured Israel as an

unfaithful wife, even as a harlot, for she abandoned the true lover of her soul, the Lord, and shamefully ran after her spiritual boyfriends, the idols.

The **mutual faithfulness** of the couple is God's **original** design (Matt.19:7-9). We were made in God's image. He too is known for His faithful, committed love.

Matthew 19:7 They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” 8 He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, **but from the beginning it was not so.** 9 And I say to you, whoever **divorces** his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, **commits adultery**; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

With the **Fall** into sin, mankind easily lost sight of this absolute faithful love. Polygamous relationships, same-sex relationships, adulterous relationships, non-committed casual multiple relationships, and divorce all came into existence. All are sin.

However, in Christian marriage, the spouses are absolutely committed to one another. Here their sexual faithfulness--their physical desire (eros)--**finds its only proper place**—to help unite, underscore, and solidify the unique special love of the two so that their marriage **can become** in reality **a permanent, eternal union of love.**

Conversely, roving, unfaithful, unbridled lust (similar to Israel's idolatry) will quickly work to break and destroy any marriage union.

Christian marriage, where Christ is present and giving His blessing, is the context (the place/the arena) where the couple struggle together to work out their salvation.

It is in this arena where they each learn to subject their egos, and learn to really love, to really serve one another.

In Christian marriage there is both an **equality** and also an **order**.

The Equality:

The Crowning ceremony in the Orthodox wedding service shows the groom and bride as **equal sons and daughters** of the Kingdom of God, equal children of God, both wearing heavenly crowns. They both equally share God's Image and Likeness.

They are united in a love that is to be like God's love: eternal and equally given out to both men and women without discrimination. **Galatians 3:28** “There is neither male nor female” in the Kingdom of God, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

These crowns are also equal **crowns of martyrdom**. Both husband and wife are to mutually **die for** and **serve the other**. It is through this **daily “dying” to self will**, that their real eternal crowns are forged here on earth.

The Order in the Family:

Men and women may be **equal**, in that they are both made in God’s Image, and in the fact that they can equally achieve salvation (union with God); however, this equality does not erase their differences. There is an order in the family, just as there is an order within the Holy Trinity. The Three Divine Persons are fully equal in power, glory, divinity, etc., yet there is an “order”: The Father begets, the Son is begotten. Not the other way around. The Son shares the Father’s one divine will, and obeys it. Marriage—made by God—reflects this divine order.

As **Christ** is the **Head of the Church**, which is His Body, so too the **husband**, reflecting this divine order, is to be the **head of his wife**. The wife, though equally carrying God’s Image, stays within the order of the family and **obeys the leader**, her husband, just as the **Church obeys Christ**. After speaking in general to all Christians to “**submit**” to each other in love, (Ephesians 5:21 “**submitting to one another** in the fear of God”), St. Paul then in the very next verse specifically tells to the woman to follow her husband, her leader.

Ephesians 5:22-24

22 Wives, **submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord**. 23 For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just **as the church is subject to Christ**, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

The difference between male and female reflects the difference between the uncreated God and the created world.

God	creation
Uncreated	created
Christ	Church
Head	Body
male	female
leader	helper
head and protector of family	nurturer of family

Ephesians 5:20-33 - The Orthodox Wedding Epistle Reading.

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the **husband is head** of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the **wives be to their own husbands in everything**.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. 28 **So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies**; he who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. 30 For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. 31 “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and **the two shall become one flesh.**” 32 This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that **she respects her husband**.

The husband is the **head** of the house, but **he must die** for its good, as Christ did. The godly husband denies himself, crucifies his ego, and dies for his wife (and children). A good husband is not a tyrant. He will ask his wife for her advice, for he LOVES her.

Eph. 5:25 “Husbands, **love your wives**, just as Christ also loved the church and **gave** Himself for her.”

The godly wife is to be **obedient**, and follow, and help, her leader/husband. By subjecting her will to her husband, she overcomes her own ego and self-will. It is easy for her to respect and obey her husband, her leader, when she sees how much he loves her, that he is dying for her spiritual and physical improvement.

The husband, by subjecting his will to the good of the family, and by being obedient to his bishop/spiritual father, overcomes his own ego and self will.

Thus, Christian marriage, by God’s design, becomes **the arena** where the husband and wife, with God’s Presence and blessing, **together work out their salvation**, conquering their own egos, and using their **eros-love** to solidify their faithfulness. Upon their **eros**, they build “**philia**” (friendship type of love) and “**agape**” love (sacrificial unconditional

love). They even add in “**storge**” (the familial love and affection that puts up with each other.) The **Divine Love of the Holy Trinity mixes** into this compound of earthly loves, making it a strong emotional and spiritual cement that can be **eternal**. With God as the Source of their own love, the bride and groom’s earthly love can last forever and be taken into the eternity of the Kingdom of God, where relationships of love literally last forever, by God’s Grace. If God so wills, children are born as a natural consequence of this marital love.

The Orthodox Christian Mystery of Holy Matrimony

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is a mystery. As such, it can never be fully, rationally explained. Just the same, it can be experienced. In wonder and joy, an Orthodox Christian couple places themselves before the eternal God—the Holy Trinity—to be **united by Him** through the outpouring of His Grace. As you will witness today, the groom and bride do not exchange vows with one another, but rather, are **bound together** by God, Who is Divine Love Itself.

Many physical **signs** and **symbols** are used throughout the Orthodox wedding service, intermingled together with the **prayers**. These help to **heighten our perception** of what is taking place spiritually. The marriage ceremony consists of two parts: The Service of the Betrothal and the Service of the Crowning.

The Service of the Betrothal

In the past, the Betrothal was originally celebrated separately from the Crowning, marking a couple’s pledge to marry at a later date—a type of “liturgical engagement,” so to speak. Traditionally it takes place in the Narthex, the entrance of the church.

The Blessing and Exchange of the Rings

The priest asks for **God’s blessing upon the rings** and proceeds to **bless** the bride and groom with them, making the Sign of the Cross over the couple with the rings. He does this three times in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, first from the groom to the bride, and then from the bride to the groom. The back-and-forth movement can be interpreted as the lives of the two being entwined into one.

The priest then places the **rings on the right hands** of the two. It is noteworthy that the right hands are used in the putting on of the rings, for in Holy Scripture it is the right hand of God that blesses us; it was to the right hand of the Father that Christ ascended; it is to the right that those

who will inherit eternal life will go. As the final prayer is read, the putting on of the rings conveys that the agreement is sealed between the betrothed and that the marriage is being enacted by God Himself.

The Entrance into the Church

After the exchange of the rings, the priest **leads the couple**, in procession, into the middle of the church. The priest chants Psalm 128, “Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.” This psalm is one of the “Psalms of Ascent” that used to be sung by Jewish pilgrims on their way up to the temple in Jerusalem. In the same way, the couple comes forward, bringing themselves, each other, and their lives to the altar **as an offering to God**.

The Service of the Crowning

The Candles

The bride and groom are given **candles** to hold—a reminder that it is Jesus Christ, the “**Light of the World**,” Who will guide them through the years they will share as husband and wife.

The Crowning

The crowning is the focal point of the wedding ceremony. The bride and groom by Grace and descent of the Holy Spirit are crowned as the “**king and queen**” of their own kingdom--the **home**--which they will guide with wisdom and love as an **extension of the Kingdom of God**. The crowns also recall the victorious crowns of **martyrdom**, since every true marriage **involves self-sacrifice** from each spouse.

The Scripture Readings

The Reading of St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians (5:20-33) explains the responsibilities of husband and wife to each other, and ultimately to Christ and His Church. St. John’s Gospel (John 2:1-11) tells us of the Wedding Feast in Cana of Galilee, where Christ performed His first miracle, **blessing the marriage by turning water into wine**. Similarly, Christ is invited to be present in this current marriage, to **transform** the earthly love of the groom and bride into an eternal and holy relationship in His Heavenly Kingdom.

The Common Cup

The priest gives the couple **one cup of wine** to drink together, which shows their mutual sharing of joy and sorrow **as one flesh**, not as two. It is also a reminder of the sharing of the Holy Eucharist.

The Joining of the Hands and Dance of Isaiah

Joining the hands of the bride and groom, the priest leads them in taking **their first steps together as husband and wife**. The circular procession reminds the couple of the **eternity of marriage**, at the **center of which is Christ Himself**, signified by the Cross and Gospel on the central table. The chanters sing hymns to Christ, to the Mother of God, and to the martyrs and apostles. This is to remind the couple to show **sacrificial love to each other** just as these holy men and women did for Christ and the Church. The service concludes with a final blessing.