The Mystery of Marriage: Mystery of Human Love Crowned in Glory and Honour. An Orthodox Perspective

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The Mystery of Marriage has always been understood by the Eastern Orthodox as a divinely mandated holy act, in which the grace of the Holy Spirit is communicated to the affianced man and woman, whose natural bond of love becomes thus elevated to the state of representation of the all-encompassing spiritual union between Christ and His Church. According to the patristic tradition, the service of the Mystery of Marriage invariably took place during the Liturgy and within the Eucharistic context. It was through the blessing of the bishop that the espousal love merged with the love of Christ—the true source and power of all human affection, and only then could the two become one single being, one single “flesh”, the body of Christ. The intent of the present article is by no means to cover all aspects of the marriage ritual in the Orthodox Church, as this is a vast topic that begs for further theological research and ample multi-angled analysis, but rather to examine the patristic view on the Mystery of Marriage and on its evolution, and to revisit the exegesis of its liturgical expression.

Keywords: *Sacraments, christian love, christian marriage, ancient church history, Church Fathers, eucharist, rite of betrothal, the rite of crowning, sacrament of matrimony, mixed marriages*

The Orthodox Church believes that redemption is fulfilled in the union of the crucified and risen Christ with those who believe in Him, wherein men die to sin and are raised to new life. Consistent with this, the Orthodox Church invests its Mysteries with a great importance in the *oikonomia* of redemption, as they are the very means through which this union of human beings with Christ is brought about. Human life needs the encounter with God's life, and that happens through the Mysteries. Those who receive a Sacrament open themselves through faith to the full action of the power of God, which is transmitted through the visible and material things, by the one who celebrates it in the middle of the Church, where the Spirit of Christ is fully present and active.¹

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¹ Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God, Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, volume 5: The Sanctifying Mysteries*, trans. and ed. Ioan Ionita, Robert Barringer, Brookline, Holy Cross Orthodox Press 2012, p. 2.

The Patristic Tradition of the Orthodox Church is an abundant repository of information on the evolution and exegesis of the Holy Mysteries' rites across the ages. The analysis proposed by the present article shares this patristic perspective. All the liturgical manuscripts and texts are fruits of the living tradition of the Church, and as such, they must be interpreted in keeping with this dynamic and live reality of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

The ancient Church saw in the Sacraments Christ's continuous involvement in men's lives, who are thus granted an invisible partaking through gestures and material elements of His divine-human life. It is neither the material elements, nor the words spoken, nor the gestures employed taken by themselves or together, that constitute the mystery. Rather, the mystery has its being in the faith-filled encounter with Christ within the midst of the Church, through the Holy Spirit. His new life becomes through the Sacraments the life of each Christian. It is through the mystery of baptism that each human being enters a personal relationship with Christ and becomes a member of the Church, whereas through the remaining mysteries, this union of the baptized with Christ, the head of the Church, is either increased or restored for the strengthening of ecclesial unity. For that same reason, certain persons are endowed with particular graces: the grace of celebrating the Sacraments, of preaching the word and maintaining its integrity, the grace needed for other responsibilities, such as marriage, or for the restoration of health and the state of well-being.²

God wants to fill with His love all the aspects of the human life and after His Ascension into heaven He is present in the Church through the Holy Spirit in the Sacraments. The activity of Christ Himself, Who is at work in the Mysteries, has to be considered in strict connection with the fact that it was He Himself who instituted them. The Church celebrates all the Sacraments because Christ celebrated them visibly during His time on earth and, after His entry with the body within that plane of being where all is filled completely with the Spirit – He continues to be their invisible celebrant within His Church.³

As Christ blessed the Marriage in Cana so does He now in the life of the Church through the Sacrament of Marriage. He wants to sanctify with His altruistic love, to strengthen and to elevate the natural bond between a man and a woman to the dignity of representing the spiritual union between Christ and the Church. That is why St. Paul calls marriage a "mystery" (or "sacrament": the Greek word is the same) Eph. 5.32: τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν· ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν meaning that

² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

in marriage, Man enters the realm of eternal life, he meets Christ within His self-giving love, he lives a new life, the life of His resurrected humanity.

The human love between the spouses meets in the sacrament of marriage the love of Christ as the real source and power of all their affection. In Christ's love the husband becomes one being with his wife, one single "flesh", Christ's body, through the Sacraments of the Church. That is why a truly Christian marriage can only be unique, not in virtue of some abstract law or ethical precept, but precisely because it is linked directly to the Holy Body of Christ, and to His eternal love.

That's why Marriage was always celebrated in the context of the Eucharist, as was the case also for all other rites that we today call "Sacraments."⁴ However, it is impossible to understand either the New Testament doctrine on marriage, or the very consistent practice of the Orthodox Church, without examining Christian marriage in the context of the Eucharist. The Eucharist, and the discipline that the partaking in the Eucharist presupposes, is the key which explains the Orthodox Christian attitude toward "church marriage" as well as toward mixed marriages. Many practical contemporary difficulties in pastoral life come from a misunderstanding of this basic connection between marriage and the Eucharist.⁵

1. Marriage as a Natural, Lifelong Bond between a Man and a Woman

The Church Fathers consider the state of well-being experienced by Adam and Eve in Paradise as the first Marriage fulfilled directly by God in the act of creation. This natural, lifelong bond between a man and a woman is based on the fact that both man and woman were created as different but complementary human beings with the purpose to grow together in God's love, experienced in a dialogical reciprocity.⁶

⁴ For the connection of all sacraments with the Eucharist, see: Nenad Milosevic, *To Christ and the Church: The Divine Eucharist as the All-Encompassing Mystery of the Church*, Los Angeles, Sebastian Press 2012; for a historical review of the connection of marriage specifically with the Eucharist see: Παναγιώτης Σκαλτσής, Γάμος και θεία Λειτουργία. Συμβολή στην Ιστορία και τη Θεολογία της Λατρείας, Θεσσαλονίκη, Πουρναράς 1998.

⁵ There are well documented liturgical studies, such as Gabriel Radle's doctoral dissertation, *The History of Nuptial Rites in the Byzantine Periphery*, Rome 2012, in which the connection between the Mystery of Marriage and the Liturgy is called into question, due to the lack of liturgical manuscripts to prove it. Although this entire scientific and philological effort is, undoubtedly, extremely valuable, the author neglects to take into account the important fact that, when it comes to Liturgical research, in the Eastern Orthodox realm the living Tradition of the Church takes precedence, as it is the only one that can compensate for the lack of information in the manuscript tradition and the only one that can supply the guidelines for the interpretation of liturgical texts.

⁶ Stephen Muse, "Transfiguring Voluptuous Choice: An Eastern Approach to Marriage as Spiritual Path", in: *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 54 (1-2/2013), p. 85-96.

The Book of Genesis reads that God made Eve because He saw that “it is not good that man should be alone” (Gen. 2.18). God created Eve not only so that she might help Adam but also so that she could protect him against loneliness. “He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind [Adam] in the day they were created” (Gen. 5.2). The man is a complete unity, hence the image of God, because his unity as man is realized in this duality, which is personal. Nothing in a couple’s dynamics is uniform; rather, the man and the woman complement each other.

Humankind has a double polarity in its very essence, and in this way the man and the woman are dialogical beings. Partners in a dialogue must have something in common, but also something that is different. The complementary bodily distinction between male and female reinforces and conditions a complementary spiritual difference in the same. This does not make each human being less human, but it does mean that each one experiences humanity in a different way and in a reciprocal complementarity. The human couple in paradise was a conjugal couple. This was the grace of marriage in paradise, τῆς τοῦ γάμου χάριτος, as St. Clement of Alexandria states, which had its foundation in the dual nature of man.⁷

The two love each other because they complete one another, they are not identical. Love is a change of being, a reciprocal activity for completeness. Love enriches each because it receives and gives without ceasing, while hatred impoverishes, because it gives and receives nothing.⁸

Marriage as a natural bond has been weakened and disfigured in many ways after the Fall, because of the selfishness that the Fall set loose and helped to develop. Thus, it has lost the grace connected with the primordial state. Nevertheless, in its essence it was not completely destroyed, just as human nature itself was not completely destroyed by sin.

2. The Strengthening and Ennobling of Marriage by Christ

Christ strengthens anew the bond of marriage between man and woman and raises it up from the order of nature to the order of grace, and through His participation in the wedding at Cana, He enshrouds marriage in that atmosphere of grace that pours forth from His Person. By performing this first miracle at Cana and by giving the newly married couple the wine of His

⁷ Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata*, III, 14, 94: ἀλλ’ εἰς τοὺς πεπλανημένους τὰ νοήματα, εἰς ἡμᾶς ὁ σωτὴρ ἀφίκετο, ἃ δὲ ἐκ τῆς κατὰ τὰς ἐντολὰς παρακοῆς ἐφθάρη φιληδονούντων ἡμῶν, τάχα που προλαβόντος ἡμῶν τὸν καιρὸν τοῦ πρωτοπλάστου καὶ πρὸ ὥρας τῆς τοῦ γάμου χάριτος ὀρεχθέντος, in: Ludwig Früchtel et al. (eds.), *Clemens Alexandrinus: Stromata*. Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 52 (15), 17, Berlin, Akademie Verlag 1960, p. 128.

⁸ D. Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, p. 171-172.

love that He offers through His grace, Jesus wishes to show that, with the strengthening and ennobling of marriage, He has begun to raise human life into the order of grace, and He will give to mankind the power of His love.⁹

Later, He would affirm directly that marriage must be returned to that unity and indissolubility that it had at the beginning. To the Pharisees' question as to why Moses permitted a man to forsake his wife, Christ responds, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 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" (Mt. 19.8-9).

Jesus considers that the man who leaves his wife and takes another, or the man who marries the abandoned woman, is an adulterer, because He believes that the bond of marriage was not abolished between the man who left his wife by the simple fact that he has left her. Earlier He had said this directly when He replied to the question as to whether it was permitted for someone to divorce his wife for any reason at all, except for that of adultery (Mt. 5.32). In the latter response, He affirms the unity of the married couple based on the fact that God made man male and female, and therefore whoever unites himself to his wife completes his own reality so totally with her that they form a single and unique unity.

Based on the word of the Saviour, the Orthodox Church does not divorce those who are married except in the case where one of them has broken the unity between them by adultery. The Orthodox Church believes that if the two perceive their marriage only as a means to satisfying the desires of the flesh, the two will rapidly grow bored with one another and so divorce will occur. Marriage begins with a love that synthesizes bodily and spiritual attraction, and in Christ's love each partner values the mystery of the other and affirms in his or her love a limitless readiness to respect the other as person and to accept any sacrifice and weariness for the sake of the other.¹⁰

Thus, the Orthodox understand marriage as a genuine act of living the mystery of human duality through God's love. The Mystery of Marriage is a gradual securing of the couple's bond, which happens by the exercise and growth of the responsibility that the one bears for the other. In the Church, the love between the spouses grows through the exercise of this mutual responsibility, and conversely, this responsibility grows through love. This very responsibility becomes visible in acts performed outside the family unit, within society, for the family cannot properly function well without also fulfilling certain obligations in society.

⁹ Vasile Gavrilă, *Cununia – Viață întru Împărăție*, Bucharest, Fundația Tradiția Românească 2004, p. 55.

¹⁰ D. Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, p. 175.

It is in the exercise of this responsibility and reciprocity that the human being begins to grasp the fullness of its seriousness and solemnity. He becomes a true man, by living the altruistic love of God and sharing it with his family and then with all the other Christians. Through a reciprocally sacrificial attitude, each of the two spouses accentuates both his or her own character and that of the other; their union is accentuated all the more as a personal communion in which each person grows spiritually according to the degree of the union between them.¹¹

Within this responsibility, the personal presence of God becomes ever more transparent for each through the other, as an element that gives immeasurable value to the spouse. In the degree that the other discovers his or her own depth, he or she becomes more transparent to Christ, who guarantees both persons eternal value as human beings, because He Himself became a human being. And that, in turn, causes the responsibility of each to grow toward the other. Therefore, each one is placed by the other within a direct relationship with Christ, without any diminishment in either's own worth and consistency. Each experiences Christ in a specific way through the other, as a unique transparent medium. Both experience Christ as Him who gave the one to the other and as the One who gives His love to unite them. This is the way in which the mystery of indissoluble love between a man and a woman – as a union that, in ever-deeper communion, is rendered spiritual – is a mystery in Christ. Their union in Christ is a small church, as St. John Chrysostom explains, because God and mankind meet in this mystery of the self-giving love in every family. “This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5.32), says the Holy Apostle Paul. Marriage “is a mystery and a type of a mighty thing. It is a type of the Church.”¹²

Marriage is thus a path for the two spouses to grow spiritually in the relationship of the one with the other, but also in all their relationships with all other human persons.¹³ Only marriage raises the relationship between man and woman to the level of friendship and deepens the level of their practical and reciprocal responsibility, in which each one must pledge total commit-

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

¹² Joannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia 12 in epistulam ad Colossenses*, PG 62, 387 D: Μυστήριόν ἐστι, καὶ τύπος μεγάλου πράγματος· κἂν αὐτὸ μὴ αἰδῇ, αἰδέσθητι οὗ τύπος ἐστί. Τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο, φησί, μέγα ἐστίν· ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν, καὶ εἰς τὴν Ἐκκλησίαν. Τῆς Ἐκκλησίας τύπος ἐστὶ καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ πόρνας εἰσάγει; Ἄν τοίνυν, φησί, μήτε παρθένοι ὀρχῶνται, μήτε γεγαμημένοι, τίς ὀρχήσεται; Μηδεὶς· ποία γὰρ ὀρχήσεως ἀνάγκη; Ἐν τοῖς τῶν Ἑλλήνων μυστηρίοις αἱ ὀρχήσεις, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἡμετέροις σιγὴ καὶ εὐκοσμία, αἰδῶς καὶ καταστολή. Μυστήριον τελεῖται μέγα.

¹³ S. Muse, “Transfiguring Voluptuous Choice”, p. 88.

ment to the other. Therefore, marriage is not a simple remedy against sin, but it is the medium that causes the bond between a man and a woman to truly become a complete bonding based on altruistic love, one that leads toward a total personal communion, in which each person achieves a complete personal or truly human realization and helps the other to the same end, just as God willed when He created man and woman with a view to their reciprocal dialogical complementarity.

The children who are born and raised within a marriage are the real test of the self-giving love of the spouses and they do not have their place outside the bond that binds the man and wife together; rather, they cause the communion between the spouses to grow in an essential way through the common responsibility for the children, a responsibility in which the two are united.¹⁴

Through their children, the spouses transcend this selfishness and open themselves up toward others and toward society in general, which they need in order to raise their children and to fit them into the framework of society. The birth and rearing of children implies a cross, as it brings about a curbing of personal selfishness of the two. That is why a hymn dedicated to the martyrs is sung during the Crowning ceremony at the marital Liturgy. A marriage which does not constantly crucify its own selfishness and self-sufficiency, which does not “die to itself” that it may point beyond itself, is not a Christian marriage. The real sin of marriage today is not adultery or lack of “adjustment” or “mental cruelty”, it is the idolization of the family itself, the refusal to understand marriage as linked with the Liturgy and directed toward the Kingdom of God through love and sacrifice. It is not the lack of respect for the family, it is the idolization of the family that breaks the modern family so easily, making divorce its almost natural shadow. It is the identification of marriage with happiness and the refusal to accept the cross in it.¹⁵

3. The Evolution of the Rite of the Marriage Sacrament

The Rite of Marriage has always been connected to the Holy Liturgy, as well as to the other Holy Mysteries. From a blessing prayer recited by the priest or bishop, in time it has come to be a firmly well-rounded service made up of two parts, the service of betrothal and that of the marriage per se.¹⁶ Yet this ritual, so closely connected to the Eucharist, was perceived like

¹⁴ D. Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, p. 182.

¹⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, Crestwood, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1973, p. 90.

¹⁶ On the early history of the Mystery of Marriage in the Eastern Christianity see: Korbinian Ritzer, *Le mariage dans les Églises chrétiennes du Ier au XIe siècle*, Paris, Cerf 1970; Alphonse Raes, SJ, *Le mariage, sa célébration et sa spiritualité dans les Églises d'Orient*. Collection Iré-

a crowning, like the blossoming of the baptismal grace, and like an expression of the Christian Sacramental and ethical-ascetical identity. In the early Christianity, there was this conscience that the shared life of the two spouses was, indeed, a reflection of the life in Christ, and that this new godly life they were called to partake of through the Holy Mysteries and through their disinterested love and their comfort and assistance of one another, was what made the Mystery of Marriage the icon of the spiritual union between Christ and His Church.¹⁷

Early Christian writers affirm that it is the Eucharist which gives to marriage its specifically Christian meaning. In this respect, Tertullian (2nd century) writes that marriage “is arranged by the church, confirmed by the oblation (the Eucharist), sealed by the blessing, and inscribed in heaven by the angels”¹⁸. Every Christian couple desirous of marriage went through the formalities of civil registration, which gave it validity in the secular society; and then through their joint participation in the regular Sunday liturgy, in the presence of the entire local Christian community, they received the Bishop’s blessing through prayers and they took the Holy Communion. It was then that their civil agreement became a “sacrament” as well, one endowed with eternal value, which transcended their earthly lives because it was also “inscribed in heaven,” and not only in a secular “registry.” It became thus the visible expression of their eternal union in Christ.¹⁹

In the writings of the 1st century Apostolic Father Ignatius of Antioch, the necessity of the presence of Christ in the Christian marriage is stressed through the presence of the icon of Christ, the bishop: “those who marry and are given in marriage must be united through the opinion of the bishop (with the assent of the bishop), so that their marriage may be in conformity with the Lord and not with concupiscence.”²⁰ Marrying “in the Lord” or having the “opinion” of the bishop indicates the necessity of the blessing ritual for the couple but also the requirement of the acknowledge-

nikon, Chevetogne, Éditions de Chevetogne 1959; Mark Searle, Kenneth W. Stevenson, *Documents of the Marriage Liturgy*, Collegeville MS, Liturgical Press 1992.

¹⁷ Ilie Moldovan, “Taina nunții”, in: *Ortodoxia* 31 (3-4/1979), p. 511.

¹⁸ Tertulian, *Ad uxorem*, II, 8, 6, *PL* 1, 1302: “Unde sufficiamus ad enarrandam felicitatem eius matrimonii, quod ecclesia conciliat et confirmat oblatio et obsignat benedictio, angeli renuntiant, pater rato habet?”

¹⁹ K. Ritzer, *Le mariage*, p. 114.

²⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to Polycarp*, 5, 2, critical edition at: Pierre Thomas Camelot, *Ignace d'Antioche. Polycarpe de Smyrne. Lettres. Martyre de Polycarpe*, Sources Chrétiennes 10, Paris, Cerf 1969, p. 150: Πρέπει δὲ τοῖς γαμοῦσι καὶ ταῖς γαμουμέναις μετὰ γνώμης τοῦ ἐπισκόπου τὴν ἑνωσιν ποιεῖσθαι, ἵνα ὁ γάμος ᾗ κατὰ κύριον καὶ μὴ κατ' ἐπιθυμίαν. Πάντα εἰς τιμὴν θεοῦ γινέσθω.

ment of the local assembly, of the parish, represented by the bishop.²¹ Unfortunately for liturgists, Ignatius says nothing about the liturgical or other forms of this assent. Even though it is not mentioned in the manuscripts, it is certain that the Mystery of Marriage, just like all the other Mysteries, was celebrated through prayers and blessings spoken by the priests and bishops in a Eucharistic context.²²

By the 4th century, an originally threadbare “marriage service,” which was tantamount to the mere participation in the Eucharist of the couple in the presence of the bishop and the community, began to develop gradually into a fully-fledged marital liturgy. This process of evolution begins with the gradual appearance of blessing prayers referring specifically to the couple, and then morphs into certain marriage “customs” that can be found today as belonging to a “rite” of marriage.²³ It is during this era that staples of our modern marriage rite, the rings, joining of hands and crowns, begin to be introduced, and a specific solemnization of the sacrament is mentioned by Eastern Christian writers who speak about the rite of “crowning,” performed during the Eucharistic Liturgy as the Sacrament of Marriage. According to St. John Chrysostom, the crowns symbolized victory over “passions,” for Christian marriage – a sacrament of eternity – was not concluded “according to the flesh.”²⁴

Until the 9th century, the Church did not know any rite of marriage separate from the Eucharistic Liturgy. Normally, after entering a civil marriage, the Christian couple partook of the Eucharist, and in this ambience the marriage took place.²⁵

Letter 22 of St. Theodore Studite (d. 826) writes about a rite of crowning that was accompanied by “a brief prayer” read “before the whole people” at the Sunday Liturgy, by the bishop or the priest. The text of the prayer, recorded by St. Theodore, is the prayer used today in the ritual of marriage before the crowning of the spouses: “Thyself, O Master, send down Thy hand from Thy holy dwelling place and unite these Thy servant and Thy handmaid. And give to those whom Thou unites harmony of minds; crown

²¹ Philip Zymaris, “Marriage and The Eucharist: From Unity To Schizophrenia – The Positive Theology Of Marriage And Its Distortion From An Eastern Orthodox Point of View”, in: Theodore Dedon, Sergey Trostyanskiy (eds.), *Love, marriage, and family in Eastern Orthodox perspective*, Piscataway, Gorgias Press 2016, p. 107.

²² Dumitru Moca, “Originea, evoluția și semnificația slujbei Sfintei Cununii”, in: *Mitropolia Banatului* 40 (1-2/1990), p.36-54.

²³ Π. Σκαλτσής, Γάμος και θεία, p. 136.

²⁴ For example, Chrysostom on the crowns as a symbol of victory, *PG* 62, 546; see also *PG* 62, 64.

²⁵ I. Moldovan, “Taina nunții”, p. 511-531.

them into one flesh; make their marriage honorable; keep their bed undefiled; deign to make their common life blameless”²⁶. The liturgical books of the same period (such as the famous Codex Barberini) contain several short prayers similar to that quoted by St. Theodore. These prayers were all meant to be read during the Liturgy and are in our day incorporated in the marriage service.

The one element that remained constant during this long period of gradual development of a distinctively nuptial rite however, was its celebration in the context of a Eucharistic service at least up to the 9th century. The earliest description of marriage as a rite can be found in the Codex Barberini 336 (Barberini Gr. 336) of the late 8th century, which makes clear reference to the couple’s reception of communion not as an option but as a necessary part of the service: “giving them the life-giving communion” [μεταδιδούς αὐτοῖς τῆς ζωοποιοῦ κοινωνίας]²⁷. The same rubric is to be found also in the 8th/9th century manuscript Sinai NF/MG53.²⁸ Other manuscripts as Codex Coislinius 213,²⁹ Codex Bessarion³⁰, Codex Sinaiticus gr 957³¹ and all those of later date, already contain the ritual found in today’s Orthodox liturgical books.

²⁶ Letters I, 22, PG 99, 973: „αὐτὸς, δέσποτα, ἐξαπόστειλον τὴν χεῖρά σου ἐξ ἁγίου κατοικητηρίου σου καὶ ἄρμωσον τῷ δούλῳ σου τὴν δούλην σου. σύζευξον αὐτοὺς ἐν ὁμοφροσύνῃ, ἔνωσον αὐτοὺς εἰς σάρκα μίαν, οἷς εὐδόκησας συναρθῆναι ἀλλήλοις· τίμιον τὸν γάμον ἀνάδειξον, ἀμίαντον αὐτῶν τὴν κοίτην διατήρησον, ἀκηλίδωτον αὐτῶν τὴν συμβίωσιν διαμεῖναι εὐδόκησον.” See also: Theodorus Studites, “Epistulae”, in: Georgios Fatouros, *Theodori Studitae Epistulae*, vol. 1-2, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Berolinensis 31, Berlin, De Gruyter 1992, vol. 1, p. 5-187; vol. 2, p. 189-861.

²⁷ Stefano Parenti, Elena Velkovska (eds.), *L’eucologio Barberini Gr. 336*, BELS 80, Roma, Edizioni Liturgiche 1995, p. 187. See also: Giuseppe Baldanza, “Il rito del matrimonio nell’eucologio Barberini 336. Analisi della sua visione teologica”, in: *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 93 (1979), p. 316-351.

²⁸ Π. Σκαλτσής, Γάμος και θεία, p. 164f.

²⁹ Alekse Dmitrievskij, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei, khraniash-chikhsia v bibiotekakh Pravoslavnogo Vostoka*, Description of the Liturgical Manuscripts in the Libraries of the Orthodox Orient, vol. 2, Kiev, 1901, p. 993-1052; critical edition by James Duncan, *Coislin 213. Euchologe de la Grande Eglise*, Rome, Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae 1983; see also: Józef M. Maj, SJ, *Coislin 213. Eucologio della Grande Chiesa. Manoscritto della Biblioteca Nazionale di Parigi. Testo critico annotato dei ff. 101-211*, Rome, Pontificium Institutum Orientale 1990.

³⁰ Miguel Arranz, *L’Eucologio Constantinopolitane agli inizi del secolo XI secondo l’Eucologio Bessarion (ms Grottaferrata GBI) comparato con l’Eucologio Strategios (ms BN Paris Coislin 213)*, Roma, Editrice Pontificia Univ. Gregoriana 1992.

³¹ A. Dmitrievskij, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh*, vol 1, p. 653-787. G. Radle, “The Development of Byzantine Marriage Rites as Evidenced by Sinai Gr. 957”, in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 78 (2012), p. 133-148.

The manuscript evidence³² shows that, in time, a gradual separation of the marriage service from its original Eucharistic context took place and eventually led to today's non-Eucharistic marriage rite. Despite this original connection of marriage with the Eucharist, from the 9th to the 18th centuries the MS tradition witnesses to the development of four different versions of the marriage service which trace a gradual divorce of this sacrament from its original Eucharistic context. Therefore, we can find: 1) the marriage rite in the context of the Divine Liturgy; 2) a special pre-sanctified liturgy marriage rite; 3) a service offering a choice of either the pre-sanctified gifts or the "common cup;" and 4) a service like today's which offers only the common cup.³³

It is interesting to see how the Byzantine harmony between Church and state affected the ritual of the Christian Marriage. In the early Christian era, the Byzantine law allowed three choices for legal marriage: 1) a verbal agreement in the presence of witnesses; 2) a written contract; and 3) a Church marriage.³⁴ It is interesting to note the fact that the gradual abandonment of the first two choices in favour of the ecclesial marriage for all citizens is one of the main factors that finally sealed the permanent separation of marriage from the Eucharist. This occurred in three basic stages: 1) in 537 Emperor Justinian ordered that all government figures be married in the Church; 2) in 893 Emperor Leo the Wise legislated that the Church marriage was mandatory for all free citizens (there still were slaves in Byzantium); and, finally 3) in the 11th c, Emperor Alexios Comnenos determined that the only valid marriage is ecclesiastical.³⁵

From the 6th to the 9th centuries, imperial state legislation tended to grant the Church an ever-increasing control over marriages and the decisive step in this direction was taken at the beginning of the 10th century, when the Church took over the role of the state and became the only legal authority to fulfil the marriage ceremony. This meant that all people, even

³² See: G. Radle, "The Nuptial Rites in Two Rediscovered Sinai First-Millennium Euchologies", in: Bert Groen et al. (eds.), *Rituals and Rites of the Christian East: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Lebanon, July 10-15, 2012*, Leuven, Peeters 2014, p. 303-315; idem, "The Rite of Marriage in the Archimedes Euchology & Sinai Gr. 973 (a. 1152/3)", in: *Scripta & e-Scripta* 12 (2013), p. 187-199; idem, "The Byzantine Tradition of Marriage in Calabria: Vatican reginae svecorum gr. 75 (a. 982/3)", in: *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* s. III 9 (2012), p. 221-245; idem, "The Development of Byzantine Marriage Rites as Evidenced by Sinai Gr. 957", in: *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 78 (2012), p. 133-148; idem, "Uncovering the Alexandrian Greek Rite of Marriage: The Liturgical Evidence of Sinai NF/ MG 67", in: *Ecclesia Orans* 28 (2011), p. 49-73.

³³ Ph. Zymaris, *Marriage and The Eucharist*, p. 109;

³⁴ Π. Σκαλτσής, Γάμος και θεία, p. 55-56.

³⁵ D. Moca, "Originea, evoluția și semnificația", p. 38.

those who in earlier times would freely have chosen not to be married in the Church, were now compelled to do so. This led to two results that contributed to the separation of marriage and liturgy: 1) the increase in the number of people that had to be accommodated led to an overflow of marriages outside the Sunday liturgy, which contributed to the gradual privatization of the service; and 2) the marriage service had to be adapted to accommodate all types of people which led to a general “watering down” of the service.³⁶ This is reflected in the aforementioned marriage service which offered a choice between pre-sanctified gifts for the worthy, or the “common cup” as a sort of antidoron, i.e. substitute Communion, for cases when the couple was ‘unworthy’ of Communion.³⁷

The Church had to pay a high price for the new social responsibility which it had received; it had to “secularize” its pastoral attitude towards marriage and practically abandon its penitential discipline. That was when all the Mysteries started to drift away from the Liturgy and began to develop a “parallel” ritual with that of the Liturgy. The Church did not agree, however, to mitigate the holiness of the Eucharist: it could not, for example, give Communion to a non-Orthodox, or to a couple entering a second marriage. Thus, it had to develop a rite of marriage separate from the Eucharist. The change was made more acceptable by the fact that the obvious connection between Church marriage and Eucharist was lost anyway as soon as Church marriage became a legal requirement.³⁸

The slaves, i.e. more than half of the Empire’s population, were not touched by the new law. This discrepancy between marriage law for slaves and for free citizens was suppressed by Emperor Alexis I Comnenos (1081-1118) who issued another novella making “crowning” a legal obligation for slaves as well.

By establishing a rite of “crowning” separate from the Eucharist, the Church did not forget, however, the original and normal link between marriage and Eucharist. Ancient forms of the rite include the Communion of the bridal pair, the rubric says: “if they are worthy” – with the reserved Sacrament. Communion was then preceded with the priest’s exclamation: “The pre-sanctified Holy Things for the holy!” and accompanied by the Communion hymn: “I will receive the cup of the Lord.” A marriage rite including communion with reserved Sacrament was used in the Church

³⁶ Ph. Zymaris, *Marriage and The Eucharist*, p. 110.

³⁷ N. Milosevic, *To Christ and the Church*, p. 193.

³⁸ John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1975, p. 27ff; John Chrysavgis, *Love, Sexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage*, Brookline, Holy Cross Press 1996, p. 35; Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of love*, New York, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1985.

as late as the 15th century: it is found in Greek manuscript service books of the 13th century and in the Slavic books until the 15th.” In cases where the married couple was not “worthy” – i.e., when the marriage was not in conformity with Church norms – they partook not of the Sacrament, but only of a common cup of wine blessed by the priest. This practice – similar to the distribution of blessed bread, or antidoron at the end of the Liturgy to those who are not “worthy” of Communion – became universal and is still adopted today. But even our contemporary rite preserves several features witnessing to its original connection with the Eucharist. It starts, as the Liturgy does, with the exclamation: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, and partaking of the common cup is preceded by the singing of the Lord’s Prayer, as is Communion during the Eucharistic liturgy.³⁹

4. The Celebration of the Mystery of Marriage: The Ritual and its Significance for the Spiritual Power Bestowed by the Mystery

The celebrant of the Mystery in the Orthodox Church is the priest, because through him Jesus Christ Himself comes invisibly before and in the midst of those who are being married. It is Christ who places His seal upon the natural bond that the two bring into being through their mutual consent, and it is Christ who sustains their union in Himself. A further reason would be that it is through the priest that the marriage of the two is integrated as a living cell within the Church, filled with the grace of Christ that flows from the Church. To think that the marriage is contracted only through the consent of the spouses as is the case in Catholicism, where the priest is only a witness, is to understand marriage only at the level of a natural bond. The recipients of the sacrament are two faithful members of the Church, of opposite sex, single, neither of whom has been married in the Church more than twice previously and who are not found within the fifth degree of consanguinity. Mixed marriages between Orthodox Christians and those of other Christian confessions is an issue at the discretion of every bishop in his diocese.

Marriage is not permitted for deacons and priests after they have received ordination, and no one is admitted to ordination as bishop if he has been married before, except in the case of the death of the spouse or her entry into the monastic life.⁴⁰

³⁹ J. Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Ioan Floca, “Impedimente la căsătorie”, in: *Mitropolia Ardealului* 34 (1/1989), p. 30-36.

a. The Contemporary Rite of Betrothal

The new responsibility given to the Church by the laws of Emperors Leo VI and Alexis I – that of giving formal legitimacy to all marriages – required the adoption of new liturgical forms. These new forms, produced in the 10th and 11th centuries are the two present-day Orthodox services of Betrothal and Crowning.

Today, the service of Betrothal generally immediately precedes the Crowning. It is celebrated in the back of the church (technically, in the narthex or vestibule) and is followed by a solemn procession of the bridal pair towards the ambo, where the Crowning service follows. Characteristically, however, the Church keeps the two services, at least in principle, distinct; and they can be celebrated separately. Each corresponds to a distinct aspect of marriage. The Betrothal service is the new form of a marriage contract, with the bridegroom and bride pledging mutual faithfulness. It was originally a civil ceremony. By assuming responsibility for it, the Church did not suppress the legal and moral obligations imposed by the Old Testament law, by Roman law and still maintained by our own contemporary society. She rather provided them with a new Biblical and spiritual meaning.⁴¹

After an initial Great Litany, which includes special petitions for the bridal pair, the service is composed of two short prayers, an exchange of rings, and a longer concluding prayer. The first two short prayers are full of typological images taken from the Old Testament:⁴²

“O eternal God, who hast brought into unity those who were sun-dered, and hast ordained for them an indissoluble bond of love, who didst bless Isaac and Rebecca, and didst make them heirs of Thy promise: Bless also these Thy servants, and guiding them unto every good work.”⁴³

“O Lord our God, who hast espoused the Church as a pure virgin from among the gentiles: Bless this betrothal, and unite and maintain these Thy servants in peace and oneness of mind.”⁴⁴

The account of the betrothal of Isaac and Rebecca (Gen. 24) – one of the most beautiful stories preserved in the book of Genesis – comes out again at the beginning of the last and longer prayer which follows the exchange of rings:

“O Lord our God, who didst accompany the servant of the patriarch Abraham into Mesopotamia, when he was sent to espouse a wife for his lord Isaac, and who, by means of the drawing of water, didst reveal to him that

⁴¹ J. Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, p. 30.

⁴² V. Gavrilă, *Cununia*, p. 159-167.

⁴³ Spencer T. Kezios (ed.), *Sacraments and Services: The Sacraments, Service of Holy Matrimony*, trans. Archimandrite Leonidas Contos, Northridge, Narthex Press 1995, p. 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

he should betroth Rebecca: Do Thou, the same Lord, bless also the betrothal of these Thy servants...”⁴⁵

The Fathers of the Church saw in Isaac’s and Rebecca’s betrothal a “type” of the call of the Gentiles to Christ. The Fathers also saw a prefiguring of the Baptism in the fact that Rebecca was identified by the servant Eliezer when she was drawing water out of the well (Gen. 24.14): in the same manner, the baptism through water reconciles mankind with God. Each Christian soul is betrothed to Christ upon rising from the baptismal font.

This interpretation of the story is adopted by the betrothal prayers, which also mention the “unity” of the “sundered” parts of creation, the “calling” of the Church from among the Gentiles and recall that Rebecca was invited to become Isaac’s bride when she drew water from the well. This invitation delivered to Rebecca was just the beginning of her life with Isaac, just as baptism is only the beginning of Christian life. So, the Betrothal prayer inaugurates for the pair a shared life, one which still lies ahead, just as the apostolic call to the Gentiles begins the long history of Christ’s Church. However, the ultimate goal is always the same, the restoration of man’s lost unity with God, the reintegration of human life into its authentic wholeness. This is also the meaning of a Christian betrothal.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the reintegration of mankind through love cannot withstand the power of division and sin, not without God’s faithfulness to His promise. The theme of faithfulness is thus the main one in the Betrothal service and it is expressed in the symbolism of the rings.

The Betrothal is celebrated through an exchange of rings between the future spouses, after the priest has made the sign of the cross over the couple with the said rings; the priest then says to the man, “The servant of God (N.) is betrothed to the handmaid of God (N.) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷ He does the same in the case of the woman, also using her name as a way of showing the personal equality of the two and the freedom of each in accomplishing this act. To each of the betrothed, however, the priest recalls the name of the other, and with each ring he makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of each to show that through the rings they are united, the one with the other, for the whole of their lives in the name of the Holy Trinity, and that they are to also keep in mind the meaning of the spiritual power that the cross possesses to strengthen their unity.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁶ J. Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, p. 32.

⁴⁷ S. T. Kezios (ed.), *Sacraments and Services*, p. 46.

⁴⁸ D. Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, p. 185.

The exchange of rings is a pledge of mutual faithfulness. Secular society itself has widely accepted the custom. It is noteworthy, however, that none of the four Biblical references used in the “prayer of the rings” interprets the rite in this limited and merely human sense. In all the references, the ring is a sign of God’s pledge to man (not necessarily in connection with marriage). Joseph received a ring from the Pharaoh of Egypt as a sign of his newly granted power (Gen. 41.42); the king of Babylon, with his ring, sealed the lions’ den where Daniel was being thrown, as a pledge of his faithfulness to the suffering prophet, a faithfulness which God endorsed by saving Daniel from the lions (Dan. 6.17); Tamar, before giving herself to Judah, asked for his ring as a pledge of safety so that on the day she would be brought to trial before the same Judah, the ring would save her from the punishment due to harlots (Gen. 38.18); finally, in the parable of the prodigal son, the ring is a sign of the father’s regained favour for his lost son (Lk. 15.22).⁴⁹

To these four examples concerning the rings, the prayer adds the symbolism of the right hand: Moses’ right hand was, in fact, God’s hand, which brought the waters of the Red Sea over the Egyptians (Exod. 15.26) and which is, in fact, nothing other than the power of God, “making firm” the foundations of the earth.

Already, from the beginning of the rite of Betrothal, each member of the couple, the man and woman (or their godparents on their behalf), holds a lighted candle, showing that they will walk in the light of Christ and of His will, thus making their marriage one filled with a higher meaning.

*b. The Rite of Crowning*⁵⁰

Originally celebrated in the framework of the Eucharistic liturgy, the Crowning service is composed of the following major elements:

1. The Chanting of Psalm 127
2. The Great Blessing
3. The Great Litany with additional petitions for the Crowning service.
4. The prayers. (3)
5. The imposition of the crowns.
6. The Scripture readings (Eph. 5.20-33 and Jn. 2.1-11) and Litany of fervent supplication
7. The Lord’s Prayer and the common cup.
8. The circular procession, sometimes designated as the “dance of Isaiah.”
9. The taking off of the crowns
10. The Final Prayer

⁴⁹ V. Gavrilă, *Cununia*, p. 160.

⁵⁰ See: Gaetano Passarelli, “La Cerimonia dello Stefanoma nei Riti Matrimoniali Bizantini secondo il codice Cryptense Gb VII (X sec)”, in: *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 93 (1979), p. 381-391.

In solemn procession led by the priest, the bridegroom and bride enter the middle of the church, welcomed by the chanting of Psalm 128 (127). Each verse of the psalm is accompanied by a refrain:

“Glory to Thee, our God, glory to Thee.
Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!
You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
Your children will be like olive shoots around your table.
Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The
Lord bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life!
May you see your children’s children! Peace be upon Israel!”

This psalm was already a part of the liturgy in the Old Testament temple in Jerusalem. It was one of the “hymns of degrees”, sung on the steps of the temple, when the Levites were entering the sanctuary on solemn feast days. It exalts the joy of family life, the prosperity and peace which it brings to man as the highest forms of God’s blessing.

However, when psalms are used in the Church of the New Testament, they also acquire a new meaning: “Zion” is the “Temple of the body of Christ” (Jn. 2.2); “Jerusalem” is the eternal city “descending out of heaven from God” (Rev. 20.10); “Israel” is the new people of God, united in His Church. The procession before the Crowning signifies therefore, an entrance into the Kingdom of Christ: the marriage contract concluded through the Betrothal service will now be transformed into an eternal relationship; human love will acquire a totally new dimension by being identified with the love of Christ for His Church.⁵¹ The Crowning service will now begin with a solemn proclamation by the priest: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

While the Betrothal rite was initiated with the priest exclaiming “Blessed is our God,” the small blessing used to begin the rite of any liturgical service, at the Crowning service, he begins with the words “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” the great blessing that is exclaimed at the beginning of all of the Mysteries through which grace is bestowed. For it is from this point onward that the obligations of a life lived together begin, obligations that stand in need of the assistance of grace; and it is from this point onward that the couple, destined to grow as a union of love and of fruitfulness in their children, takes its place within the framework of the Kingdom of God and in the Church.

⁵¹ Vasile Răducă, “Căsătoria – Taină a dăruirii și desăvârșirii persoanei”, in: *Studii Teologice* 44 (3-4/1992), p. 130-138.

In the first prayer the priest asks Christ to be present Himself as He was at the wedding in Cana and to grant to those being married “a peaceful life, length of days, discretion, mutual love in the bond of peace, healthy issue, the joy of grateful offspring, and that crown of glory that never fades ... Give them both of the dew from heaven and of the earth’s bounty ... so that in turn they may share with those who are in want.”⁵²

In this prayer, the priest asks God to place the bridegroom and the bride in the company of the holy couples Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and Aseneth, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joachim and Anna, the ancestors of Christ and to bestow upon them the same blessing.

Thus, the prayer is for all those positive things that their union as a couple will need, and most especially for their mutual love and for protection against the temptation of infidelity, the thought of which might steal into the mind of the one or the other; yet the duty of generosity to those in need is not forgotten either, for marriage is not a monad selfishly taken up with its own interests alone.⁵³

In the second prayer, after recalling that God created man and appointed him “king of creation”, and thinking that it was not good that he remain alone, gave him a woman to be one indivisible body with her, the priest asks God’s special grace that would have the two being married protected from all manner of dangers. In this regard, he asks God to give the couple the same joy that the Empress Helen experienced when she found the cross and to remember them as God remembered the Forty Martyrs when He sent them crowns from heaven. Thus, allusions are made to the difficulties that can arise in the family and the cross that these difficulties represent, a cross that the spouses will need to bear with patience in order to lay hold of the heavenly crown. Along the same lines, the prayer also reveals what the crowns with which the couple will soon be crowned mean in the context of the marriage service, they represent the necessity of an effort full of firm resolve in the life of the family. From there, the priest goes on to pray to God on the pair’s behalf for “fair children”, “harmony of soul and body”⁵⁴, and growth into every good thing. A happy marriage implies the harmony of souls and bodies, and both of these depend upon the couple being “of one mind.”⁵⁵

In the third prayer the priest prays, “Now, too, Master, reach out Your hand from Your holy dwelling place and conjoin these Your servants (N.)

⁵² S. T. Kezios (ed.), *Sacraments and Services*, p. 55.

⁵³ D. Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, p. 186.

⁵⁴ S. T. Kezios (ed.), *Sacraments and Services*, p. 58.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

and (N.) for by You is the woman married to the man. Unite them in one mind (ὁμόνῃα). Wed them into one body. Grant them fruitful issue the delight of fair children.”⁵⁶ Their bodily union springs from their oneness of mind within an agreement of their hearts that moves them together toward this unity. It is a “symphony” in which each of the two is preserved in his or her personal reality because each one thinks and wills and feels, but this thinking and willing and feeling happens in accord with the other, for the sake of the other, and in convergence with the other. No thought that goes against the other has a place within their bond, and hence their union is like a crown of glory and honour. Nevertheless, this is only because they accept the possibility of the procreation of children; through this assumption of a common responsibility, they grow in the process of their own spiritualization, pneumatization. In this way, the bodily union between a man and a woman, instead of being an act of sinful concupiscence as it is outside of marriage, becomes an act willed and blessed by God.

After the third prayer, the priest places the crown on the head of the groom, after he has touched the forehead of each of the two with it and has made the sign of the cross over the man with it, and says, “The servant of God (N.) is crowned in marriage to the handmaid of God (N.) in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”⁵⁷ He then places the crown on the head of the bride in the same way. This is the central act of the Mystery, the act through which the sacrament is in fact accomplished.

By touching the forehead of each of the two separately with each crown and by making mention of both of them when each is crowned, the marriage service shows that the crown of each one is also in a certain way the crown of the other. Each one bears his or her own crown inasmuch as each one is united with the other and inasmuch as the crown of each is united with the crown of the other: in the love between the two, the crown and the glory of each are found.

The crown is the sign of glory and honour, as the priest says immediately after the crowning: “O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honour.”⁵⁸ The glory is linked to the honour, and vice versa, and their glory is visible to God and man. It consists in the fidelity and love between the two spouses, in the sacrifices each makes for the good of the other, in the exercise of responsibility that one assumes on behalf of the other, and in the making of all the efforts demanded by the good of their family life. It is in the fulfilment of all these that their happiness as a couple is realized, insofar as this

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 59-60.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

happiness can be realized on this earth. From the harmony of such a couple, the whole of creation draws benefit as it moves along the path toward the harmonization willed for it by God.

St. John Chrysostom sees in the crown the symbol of a nuptial asceticism, taken up in order to reach chastity and the integrity of being: “Garlands are wont to be worn on the heads of bridegrooms, as a symbol of victory, betokening that they approach the marriage bed unconquered by pleasure.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, the crowns manifest the restoration of royal priesthood to the couple (Garden of Eden – Gen. 2), and their bearing witness (martyrs) to the kingdom of God and asking for the intercessions of the martyrs. Crowns are in fact given to the martyrs for their perseverance in their faith. The spouses too have to persevere through the assault of many temptations met with in their conjugal life; they have to suffer patiently through many difficulties in order to win the crown of love in its fullness. The glory that comes with the crown also comes with the bearing of certain ascetical trials, a curbing and enduring of passions, and with the resolute and trying fulfilment of various responsibilities. That is why the sign of the cross is made with the crowns over the faces of those upon whose heads they are placed.

The Scripture readings include the two most revealing sections of the New Testament relative to marriage: Ephesians 5.20-33, on marriage in relation to the Mystery of Christ and the Church, and John 2.1-12, on the presence of Jesus at the marriage in Cana of Galilee.

The important point in the text of St. Paul is that the union of Christ with the Church, His body, is seen as the model – the absolute model – of the relationship between husband and wife, and even of the story of the creation of the man and the woman. It is not marriage which serves as a model for the understanding of the relationship between Christ and Church, on the contrary, this relationship is declared as a part of the Christian experience which marriage is called to reflect. As we have seen above, as a sacrament, marriage is the introduction and the transposition of the man-woman relationships into the already given Kingdom of God, where Christ and the Church are one Body.

In this context, the story of the marriage in Cana in Galilee has a deep symbolic significance. The change of water into wine in Cana points to a transfiguration of the old into the new, a passage from death to life. As for the

⁵⁹ Joannes Chrysostomus, *Homiliae 9 in epistulam I ad Timotheum*, PG 62, 546D: Ταχέως αὐτοῖς γυναῖκας ἄγωμεν, ὥστε καθαρὰ αὐτῶν καὶ ἀνέπαφα τὰ σώματα δέχεσθαι τὴν νύμφην· οὗτοι οἱ ἔρωτες θερμότεροι. Ὁ πρὸ τοῦ γάμου σωφρονῶν, πολλῶ μᾶλλον μετὰ τὸν γάμον· ὁ δὲ μαθὼν πορνεύειν πρὸ τοῦ γάμου, καὶ μετὰ τὸν γάμον τοῦτο ποιήσει. Ἄνδρι γάρ, φησί, πόρνω πᾶς ἄρτος ἡδύς. Διὰ τοῦτο στέφανοι ταῖς κεφαλαῖς ἐπιτίθενται, σύμβολον τῆς νίκης, ὅτι ἀήττητοι γενόμενοι, οὕτω προσέρχονται τῇ εὐνῇ, ὅτι μὴ κατηγωνίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῆς ἡδονῆς.

rest of the Crowning service, it announces the possibility of transforming the natural order of things into a joyful celebration of God's presence among men.

Together with the Scripture readings, the sequence of the service that includes the Litany of fervent supplication, the Lord's Prayer and the partaking of a common cup reminds us vividly of the fact that the wedding service was conceived as a Eucharistic liturgy. The wedding service normally implied the partaking of Holy Communion by the bridal pair;

The common cup, however, which today has unfortunately been accepted as a substitute for Communion, possesses its own history both in liturgical tradition and custom, as signifying community of life, destiny and responsibility.

After the readings from the Epistle and from the Gospel, the priest once again says a prayer in which he asks that God may "keep their marriage honourable" and "their household above reproach,"⁶⁰ clearly with reference to a blind and irresponsible licentiousness and to any thought of infidelity, both of which can cause the couple to fall away from their reciprocal respect for one another as persons and from their personal communion with one another. The deeper and the more complete love is, the more chaste it is at the same time. Hence the priest goes on to pray God for His help that "their life together be blameless."⁶¹

After the common cup moment, the priest joins the hands of the bridegroom and bride and leads them three times in a circular procession around the analogion, as a symbol of the unbreakable character of their love and relationship. Clearly, as in the case of the rings, the circle is a symbol of eternity and emphasizes marriage as a permanent commitment.⁶²

The meaning of this procession is also expressed in the three troparia sung by the choir:

"Rejoice, O Isaiah! A Virgin is with child and shall bear a Son, Emmanuel, He is both God and man: and "Orient" is His name. Magnifying Him, we call the Virgin blessed.

O Holy Martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns: entreat ye the Lord that He will have mercy on our souls. Glory to Thee, O Christ God, the apostles' boast, the martyrs' joy, whose preaching was the consubstantial Trinity."⁶³

⁶⁰ S. T. Kezios (ed.), *Sacraments and Services*, p. 65.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² Alkiviadis G Calivas, "Marriage: The Sacrament of Love and Communion", in: Anton C. Vrame (ed.), *Intermarriage: Orthodox Perspectives*, Brookline, Holy Cross Orthodox Press 1997, p. 36.

⁶³ S. T. Kezios (ed.), *Sacraments and Services*, p. 66

The troparia summarize the entire Biblical content on Christian marriage⁶⁴, which is called to be a “witness” (martyria) to the coming of the Kingdom of God, inaugurated by the birth of the Son of God from a Virgin. The jubilation contained in the troparia is poorly expressed in most translations of the hymns. Thus the first words, “Rejoice (χόρευε), O Isaiah,” would be rendered more correctly if one said “Dance in a circle, O Isaiah.” The hymn begins in fact by a call to execute a ritual khorodia, well known both to the Jews of the Old Testament (David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, II Sam. 6:14) and to the ancient Greeks; and the triple circular procession of the bridal pair led by the priest around the lectern can be seen as a proper and respectful form of “liturgical dancing.”

Now the foundation has been put in place for the building up of the new human beings, images of the incarnate Christ. Those who will be born from this new marriage will themselves also be members of the eternal Kingdom of God. Heaven itself rejoices because of this new extension of the Kingdom of God, and during the time of the circling of the analogion, the holy martyrs are asked once again that through their prayers the souls of those being crowned may be saved by a patient endurance that imitates that of the martyrs themselves. The joy that comes from the birth of children, the joy of the love shared by the spouses, does not lack the element of abstinence, of suffering sorrows, and of struggle. These are the same hymns that are sung at baptism and at ordination and for the same reasons: to celebrate the birth of new members of the Kingdom of God and to rejoice in their future growth, even though this will not come about without the efforts of abstinence, of patient endurance, and of many struggles.⁶⁵

In the earlier times, the bridegroom and bride used to wear the crowns for a period of eight days following the wedding. Today, however, crowns are removed at the end of the service with appropriate short exhortations and prayers: “Receive their crowns into Thy Kingdom,” says the priest, “preserving them spotless, blameless and without reproach unto ages of ages.”⁶⁶ Here lies the ultimate and true meaning of marriage as sacrament: whatever the difficulties, tragedies and divisiveness of human life on earth, crowns placed on the heads of two human beings are preserved in the Kingdom of God.

⁶⁴ It is important to mention that these three troparia are taken from other Church services so, “rejoice, o Isaiah” is taken from the 9th ode *irmos* in 1st plagal tone of the Thursday matins service; “Holy martyrs” – from the *apostichon* from Monday vespers, grave tone; and “Glory to Thee” – from the *apostichon* from Sunday vespers, grave tone. See: Bruce Beck, “The Sacrament of Marriage and Union with God”, in: Th. Dedon, S. Trostyanskiy (eds.), *Love, marriage, and family*, p. 42.

⁶⁵ D. Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, p. 189.

⁶⁶ S. T. Kezios (ed.), *Sacraments and Services*, p. 70.

In the final benediction of the marriage service, a commemoration is made of the Emperors Constantine and Helen and of the Martyr Procopius. They who have been crowned are raised up, like the Emperors Constantine and Helen, to the honour of royalty and to the work of collaborating in the defence of the faith; and, like the martyrs, to the patient endurance of sufferings and difficulties. The enjoyment of the good things in life and their exaltation to the heights of a chaste and perfect love is linked to the struggle for these same benefits and to the burdens of self-denial and patient endurance. These difficulties are mixed together with the sweetness of union in body and soul and play a role in the spiritualization of this union.

Conclusions:

1. God created mankind in a double polarity, as man and woman, different yet complementary, meaning for them to grow together in His love, in dialogical reciprocity. They were created to love God and to love each other, because love is a change of being, a reciprocal activity for completeness. Love enriches each because it receives and gives without ceasing.

2. This natural, lifelong bond between a man and a woman has been weakened and disfigured in many ways after the Fall, but Christ brought it back to the grace of its primordial state by His death and Resurrection. Christ strengthened anew the bond of marriage between man and woman and raised it up from the order of nature to the order of grace and through His participation in the wedding at Cana, He enshrouds marriage in that atmosphere of grace that pours forth from His Person. Thus, by His grace, the Christian Marriage becomes the means for the two spouses to grow spiritually in the relationship of the one with the other and with all other people, and the spiritual context where the relationship between a man and a woman is raised to the level of friendship and reciprocal responsibility, in which each one must make a total commitment.

3. Early Christian writers wrote about the celebration of the Mystery of Marriage during the Liturgy and declared that it was only in the Eucharistic context that, through the blessing of the bishop, the human love between the spouses can meet with the love of Christ, the real source and power of all their affection, and only then can the two become one single being, one single "flesh", Christ's flesh.

4. From the initial prayer and blessing of the Bishop, the rite of Marriage developed gradually into a fully-fledged marital liturgy and prior to the end of the 9th century it was not a separate service, but rather was an integral part of the Eucharistic celebration. The creation of a separate service was

done in order to preserve the sanctity of the Eucharist, at a time when the Byzantine Empire began using the church to sanction all civil marriages, regardless of anyone's standing within the Church. The Church did not agree, however, to mitigate the holiness of the Eucharist. Thus, it had to develop a rite of marriage separate from the Eucharist.

5. The ritual of the Mystery of Marriage used today in the Orthodox Church, with its two parts – the rite of Betrothal and that of the Crowning, is preserving elements from the Eucharistic Liturgy that witness to the fact that Marriage cannot be viewed or understood apart from the whole sacramental life of the Church, and the nuptial union, like the whole of the Christian life, is placed through prayers and blessings into the realm of grace, into that power which flows from God and his Kingdom.

6. The Mystery of Marriage must be understood and interpreted in the genuine context wherein it appeared. It belongs to the life of the Church and cannot be separated from it. Even though, for various reasons, it ceased to be celebrated during the Holy Liturgy, to recover its connection with the Eucharist is an extremely valid and actual missionary imperative. From this point of view, in order to resolve the issue of mixed marriages, which is a highly sensitive and live pressing matter that was lately left to the discretion of the local bishop by the Synod in Crete, the issue of Christian intercommunion must be addressed first; should this challenging issue remain unsolved, then that could cause difficulties in the lives of those families that are administered a mixed marriage service through the *oikonomia* of the local bishop.⁶⁷

7. The Orthodox Church has always known how to keep the balance between *akribeia* and *oikonomia*, and this is also apparent in the way it manages the issue of mixed marriages. As the acts of the Holy Synod in Crete state, according to canonical *akribeia* (Canon 72 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council), the marriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians is forbidden, but “with the salvation of man as the goal, the possibility of the exercise of ecclesiastical *oikonomia* in relation to impediments to marriage must be considered by the Holy Synod of each autocephalous Orthodox Church according to the principles of the holy canons and in a spirit of pastoral discernment.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ On mixed marriages and how *oikonomia* is administered, see: I. Floca, “Căsătoriiile mixte în lumina învățăturii și practicii ortodoxe”, in: *Mitropolia Ardealului* 34 (5/1989), p. 55-63 and Patriciu Vlaicu, “Biserica ortodoxă în fața căsătoriilor mixte, in: *Studii Teologice* 8 (1/2012), p. 167-190. Here one can also find all the agreements between the Orthodox Churches and the other Churches regarding the issue of mixed marriages.

⁶⁸ Acts of the Holy Synod in Crete, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/marriage>, last viewed on November 13, 2018.