

Practical and Liturgical Notes for the Sacrament of Matrimony (Service of Crowning)

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Introductory note

Drawing pious Orthodox Christians into the mystical union of Holy Matrimony is one of the principal sacramental responsibilities of a Priest, and one which brings great joy both to the couple and to the Priest himself. However, since practical instruction in serving the Betrothal and Crowning rites cannot be provided, during normal Seminary instruction, in the same way as instruction in serving the Liturgy or Vigil or other services that are performed weekly or daily, many Priests find themselves uncomfortable when performing a wedding, since their ‘hands on’ instruction in its service may be minimal, however much the rite may have been studied.

For this reason we provide, below, a concise summary of practical guidance on the correct and pious performance of this Sacrament, including preparation for the wedding itself. This text is based upon the guidance authored by the Very Reverend Protopresbyter Alexander Lebedeff in 1997, which has been modified by Bishop Irenei of London and Western Europe (in 2023) to account for standard practices in Europe. Priests should scrupulously follow the practices laid out herein; the counsel of the Ruling Bishop should be sought if there are any questions, or if there are requests for any pastoral alteration to the practices outlined here.

Prior to the service of a Church wedding

When someone in the parish wishes to be married, they should approach the Priest as early as possible and let him know of their intentions. All Orthodox Christians should seek to have a Church marriage, in addition to the legal requirement of a civil marriage. According to the Holy Canons a Christian married by a civil marriage alone, without a Church crowning, is not permitted to partake of the Holy Mysteries; this rule is lessened only in case of special circumstances, which must be blessed by the Bishop.¹ This does not, however, remove the legal requirement of a civil registration, which in most cases must be completed *before* the rite of Crowning is performed: the particularities

¹ This is oftentimes the case as a pastoral response to those, for example, married in countries of the former Soviet Union during the period when Church marriages were almost impossible; or those who might have been married in other places where the importance of the Orthodox Church marriage Sacrament was not rightly emphasised and the civil marriage simply taken as standing for all. When such is discovered, the Bishop may exercise *economia* and permit a normal sacramental life until such time as the couple can have their Church marriage performed — which should be done at the earliest available opportunity.

of this differ from region to region in the Diocese, and must be determined with the Priest individually as part of the preparations.²

The Priest is responsible for determining whether there are impediments to a lawful marriage — ‘mixed marriages’ (where one of the spouses is not an Orthodox Christian, but is yet a Trinitarian Christian) may or may not be permitted, depending on the circumstance, and the Bishop’s counsel should be sought in advance. Totally forbidden are marriages of an Orthodox Christian with non-Christians (Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, etc.) or non-Trinitarian Christians (Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, etc.). The Priest must also ascertain that the couple is marrying of their free volition; that they are of sound mind; that they are of legal age (the practice of our Church is to defer to local legal requirements for minimum ages; however, unlike legal frameworks, the Church also holds an upper age limit for entering into a new marriage of 80 years for both men and women — at this age they should be focussed on other things, namely the preparation for entering the Kingdom of Heaven). It is also the Priest’s responsibility to ascertain that there is no prohibited physical or spiritual kinship between the intended spouses (e.g. blood relations or those of God-parenthood³); and the previous marital status of the couple must be ascertained as well (a second or third marriage is permitted, though the form will differ from a first; a fourth marriage is not permitted⁴).

For all of this, the Priest must schedule a meeting with the intended couple, who should bring with them all appropriate documents (baptismal certificates,⁵ civil marriage license, civil

² In most countries and regions of the Diocese, civil marriage registration cannot be undertaken by an Orthodox Priest, and therefore the couple must go to the relevant civil authorities to have this done. This is a requirement of Law and the Priest is forbidden to serve the Orthodox rite until it has been completed and he has been given a copy of the relevant certificate. He should normally counsel that this be done in a period just before the intended Orthodox wedding (i.e. the week, or a few days, before; no longer unless required). In some places, however, local statute permits legally-registered Orthodox Priests to themselves effect this civil registration. It is essential that the local circumstance be clearly conveyed to the couple early on in the period of preparation for marriage. Under no circumstances is a blessing given for the performance of an Orthodox marriage without the rites of civil registration already being properly completed.

³ In accordance with the canonical practices of the Russian Orthodox Church, marriages may not be entered into by a God-parent and his/her God-child, nor by a God-parent with the immediate relatives (parents or children) of his/her God-child; nor may a God-child enter into marriage with the spouse of his/her God-parent, or the their immediate relatives; nor may a God-child enter into a marriage with another God-child of the same God-parent — since in all these cases the Church considers these relationships to be spiritually equivalent to (or even, in fact, closer than) the bonds of family according to blood. If there is any confusion or concern over this question in a particular case, the counsel of the Bishop must be sought.

⁴ If the marriage to be performed is the second or third for either spouse, then the special rite for a second/third marriage must be performed, which differs from what is described in these pages (please contact the Diocesan Bishop for direction in this matter). Men should also be informed that, in accordance with the Holy Canons, a remarriage or marriage to a previously-divorced spouse precludes future consideration of ordination.

⁵ It is essential that the baptismal status of both the man and woman be confirmed prior to any marriage rite. The Priest must take a copy of the baptismal / chrismation certificate of each, and these copies must be kept in the Parish records together with the other documentation of the marriage. If a baptismal record is not possessed by either individual, it must be sought out by contacting the clergy of the Parish of his/her baptism. If for any reason this proves impossible, the Bishop must be contacted and his counsel sought before any further plans are made regarding the marriage.

divorce and ecclesiastical dissolution of a previous marriage, if applicable,⁶ etc.). When all is in order, the date for the wedding is established, as well as the dates of the public announcements of the coming wedding, if this is required by local regulation.⁷ It is the responsibility of the Priest to verify that the intended date for the marriage is permissible according to the Church Canons: weddings may not be performed on Saturdays, Tuesdays, or Thursdays, during the four major fast periods (the lents of the Apostles, Dormition, Nativity and Great Lent), on the eves of Feast Days, between Nativity and Theophany, or during Cheesefare Week or Bright Week. The Priest may, if so desired, serve a moleben for the intended couple at the time their betrothal is announced; however, in current practice the rite of Betrothal itself is combined with the ceremony of Crowning and is not served separately.

The Priest should schedule normal pre-marriage counselling with the couple, prior to the wedding, in order to discuss the spiritual aspects of marriage and to prepare them for their forthcoming new life together. Every Priest must consider this pre-marriage counselling / education as an essential part of his role, and undertake it systematically and carefully, since in our fallen days too many people enter into marriage without adequate preparation and guidance, and thus we see sorrowfully-high rates of divorce. Additionally, the couple should be reminded that they need to obtain rings and two holy icons prior to the wedding date (one of the Saviour and one of the Mother of God). Usually, the Sunday before the wedding, the intended couple will each go to confession and partake of Holy Communion.

Preparation of the Temple

On the day of the wedding, the Priest places an empty anoly in the middle of the temple, with a candle stand behind it. Right up against the anoly is placed a small, low table, usually on its right side. On the table, the Priest places the two crowns, a small plate with a metal cup containing a little altar wine (about two ounces), the Service Book and two wedding candles (which are often provided by the family and are usually white and decorated). It is customary to place a specially-prepared white cloth, about two metres wide by one, some four feet back from the anoly, on which the couple will stand (leaving ample room between it and the anoly for the Priest to stand and move; if there is concern that this might be trampled upon in the interim, it can be prepared and lain upon the table, and spread out on the floor just before the couple move into the centre of the temple for the Crowning). In the Altar, the seven-branched candelabra is lit, as are the lights in the Altar and Nave. Two more empty anolys are placed on the solea, right and left, at 45-degree angles to the midline of the church, for the wedding icons. The Priest vests himself in light-coloured

⁶ If either individual was married previously, proof of both civil divorce and ecclesiastical divorce must be provided via copies of appropriate certificates/documents. If a civil divorce has been obtained but a Church divorce has not, further plans for the wedding cannot take place until the latter has also been completed: for this the Priest should direct the individual to make their petition to the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Court in the normal way.

⁷ In places where a formal announcement of an intended marriage is required by law or regulation, the public announcement usually takes place on the last three Sundays before the wedding. These announcements, made by the Priest on the amvon before the veneration of the Cross at the end of Liturgy, customarily take the following form: 'There wish to enter into lawful marriage *FULL NAME* and *FULL NAME*. The marriage is scheduled for *DATE*. If anyone knows of any lawful reason why this marriage should not take place, they must let me know' (these announcements should be made in both the Parish of the groom and of the bride, if not the same). Some regions also require printed announcements (e.g. in a newspaper); local requirements should be observed, as this can effect the legal status of the marriage.

vestments (white or gold), wearing epitachelion, cuffs, and phelon. If he has been awarded a head covering (kamilavka or mitre), this is also worn.

The groom and the groomsmen are instructed to arrive at the church at least ten minutes before the wedding is to begin (the choir often sings ‘Blessed is the man...’ for the arrival of the groom, but this is a custom, not a requirement). They give the rings to the Priest, who takes them into the Holy Altar, places them on a small plate and blesses them thrice with holy water, saying each time: ‘These rings are blessed and sanctified by the grace of the Holy Spirit, through the sprinkling of this holy water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.’ The rings are then returned to the chief groomsman (best man), who shall hold them until they are needed in the Betrothal service. The groom and groomsmen then stand near the door to the temple (the groom himself nearest the door) and await the arrival of the bride.

The Priest (who is in the Altar) then opens the curtain and Royal Doors, venerates the Holy Table, then exits the Altar carrying the Gospel and Cross, which he places upon the central anoly (the Cross is always placed on the right side of the Gospel, as seen when facing east). He picks up the Service Book then proceeds to the door of the church in time for the bride to arrive.

The bride’s ‘procession’ generally looks something like this (this being entirely custom, not a required rubric): Leading are two children carrying the wedding icons; then the bridesmaids, followed by the bride on the arm of her father, with her mother as well. Entering the temple, the father ‘hands away’ the bride to the groom inside the door, and then goes to stand with the mother on the left (north) side of the porch. When the bride enters the temple, the choir by custom, sings ‘Come, come from Lebanon, O bride...’ The children with the icons are led to the foot of the solea, where servers take them and place them on the two analoys prepared beside the Royal Doors — the icon of the Saviour on the right side, the icon of the Mother of God on the left. The groom and bride remain together at the back of the narthex, just inside the doors, the groom on the bride’s right, both facing east. The best man and all the other groomsmen are lined up in a row to their right, facing north, with the best man nearest the groom; the bridesmaids are in a line opposite, facing them, with the maid of honour closest to the bride.

Liturgical notes (customary departures from the rubrics):

1) **The rings:** According to the rubrics, the groom’s ring is gold and the bride’s is silver; but it is important to remember that each spouse is betrothed with, and always wears, the other’s ring — so the bride ends up wearing the golden ring, and the groom the silver. However, it is now customary that both rings are made of gold. The simpler, the better.

2) **The censer:** According to the rubrics, the couple is censured by the Priest when they enter the temple. This is not now done in the Russian Orthodox tradition — most probably because the people have long associated the use of the censer with funeral and memorial services. If a Priest were to bring out a censer at a wedding, one of the babushkas would likely ask, ‘Is this a panikhida, or a wedding?’

3) **The candles:** The rubrics indicate that the specially-prepared wedding candles are given to the couple immediately after they enter the church. Most Priests do not do this, but wait until the conclusion of the rite of Betrothal, when the couple moves to the center of the church for the ceremony of Crowning. It is awkward to manipulate the rings during the Betrothal when there are burning candles in the hands of the couple.

4) **A practical note on dress:** While obviously not indicated in the rubrics, the Priest should counsel the bride ahead of time that the bridal dress should be appropriate to normal Orthodox custom in the temple: that is, not one that is open to the waist either in the front or back, and which adequately covers the shoulders. Gloves are not worn, and if a veil is used it should be the kind that easily lifts up over the head. Bridesmaids' dresses should be similarly appropriate. The bride usually carries a bridal bouquet; this is handed to her maid of honour when she is given her candle to hold, as she cannot hold both. The groom and groomsmen normally wear a traditional wedding suit; if hats are worn, they must be removed before entering the temple. A groom of military background may wear his uniform and medals; in this case his official head-covering (e.g. officer's cap) is held by one of the groomsmen, and any sword or other armament that forms part of the uniform are removed before entering the temple — these are ceremonially restored to him, with due honour, outside the doors when the couple departs after the conclusion of the wedding.

The rite of the Betrothal

When the choir is done singing the hymn for the bride's entrance and everyone has settled into place, the Priest faces the couple and blesses them with his hand thrice, saying each time, 'In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.' He then turns to the east and exclaims, 'Blessed is our God...', then intones the Great Litany, with its additional petitions for the rite (as in the Service Book). He then says 'Let us pray to the Lord' and the choir answers 'Lord, have mercy' (usually on a simple major chord). The Priest then reads all the prayers appointed in the Service Book.

Upon their conclusion he turns to the groomsman, who holds the rings on his upturned right palm. The Priest picks up the the ring intended for the bride and says to the groom: 'The servant of God, *N.*, is betrothed to the handmaiden of God, *NN.*, in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.' The Priest makes the sign of the Cross with the ring over the groom while he says these words (and the groom should also make the sign of the Cross at this time), which he repeats thrice; the Priest then puts the ring on the fourth (ring) finger of the *groom's* right hand (as this is the ring ultimately intended for the bride, it will likely be too small to be placed more than just at the end of the groom's finger; this is fine, as it will only be here for a few moments). The Priest then does the same with the larger ring intended for the groom, addressing his word to the bride. At the conclusion of this, the bride's ring is thus on the groom's finger, and the groom's on the bride's; the groomsman then steps forward at the Priest's invitation and exchanges the rings three times: he does this by standing facing the couple and — with both his hands, at the same time — slipping off the rings from the hands of the couple, crossing his own hands one over the other, putting them on the hands of the couple again, then repeating this process twice more. When he is done, the rings will be on the correct hands: the larger ring on the groom's finger and the smaller one on the bride's. This exchange can be done while the Priest is reading the next prayer, if the groomsman can be trusted to do it correctly; if not, the Priest must supervise.

After the final prayer of the Betrothal, the entire group proceeds into the center of the temple while the Priest is intoning the verses (Psalm 127) and the choir is singing 'Glory to Thee, O our God, glory to Thee.'⁸ The litany at the end of the Betrothal service, found in the Service Book is

⁸ The Priest usually starts the choir off by proclaiming 'Glory to Thee, O our God, glory to Thee' himself; then, when the choir responds, he continues with the verses. The rubrics indicate that the Priest and choir alternate, but in practice the Priest usually chants the next verse before the choir finishes the refrain. Often, the Priest will read the verses two at a time.

universally omitted, by custom. It would make sense only if the betrothal service were to be held separately, but is not done in Russian Orthodox practice.

The rite of Crowning

When the choir finishes, everyone should be in the middle of the church, in front of the analog. The couple are led to stand together, side by side, upon the white cloth that has been placed on the floor for them.

The exhortation to the couple (sermon) that the rubrics indicate is offered here is typically moved to the end of the service, and is not given at this time. The Priest takes up the two wedding candles from the table, lights them, then blesses the groom with one in the sign of the Cross and hands it to him, then the bride likewise with the other. The couple holds the candles in their left hands, so that they can make the sign of the Cross with their right hands.

Remaining facing the couple, the Priest asks the two questions in the Service Book, first of the groom, then the bride. The couple should have been prepared beforehand (during the normal counselling / preparation for marriage) to answer, ‘Yes, Reverend Father’ and ‘I have not, Reverend Father’ — though they may say ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ or ‘I do’ and ‘No’; the wording is not essential, so long as the Priest receives a positive, audible response from each to the first question and a negative one to the second.

The Priest then turns to face east, standing in front of the couple, and proclaims ‘Blessed is the Kingdom...’ followed by the Great Litany and the three prayers of the Sacrament of Marriage. After the third prayer, the Priest picks up the groom’s crown (usually adorned with an icon of Christ), turns to the groom, and blessing him cross-wise with the crown, says: ‘The servant of God *N.* is crowned to the handmaiden of God *NN.*, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.’ This is done three times, the groom each time also making the sign of the Cross. The Priest then presents the icon of the Saviour on the crown to the groom, who kisses it; then the Priest rotates it so the icon faces forward and, holding it above the head of the groom, passes it to the groomsmen, who moves to stand directly behind the groom, together with all the other groomsmen who line up two by two behind the bride and groom, to bear their crowns. It is customary that they hold the crowns with clean white handkerchiefs, provided by the groom, and given to them before the service starts. The groomsmen hold the crowns directly over the heads of the groom and bride, and they take turns so doing, as it is not easy to hold a heavy crown for a rather long time with an arm thus upraised; the change of crown-holders should be done at the same time on both sides.⁹ The same is repeated for the bride; then the Priest blesses the couple with his hand thrice, each time saying: ‘O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honour.’

Still facing the couple, the Priest then says: ‘Let us attend: peace to all,’ while blessing them again with his hand, then turns towards the east. The reader answers, ‘And to thy spirit,’ and the normal exchange of exclamations occurs, as at Liturgy, concluding with the reading of the Apostle and the Alleluia (sung only twice, there being only one verse). The Priest then exclaims: ‘Wisdom,

⁹ It should be noted that this practice of the groomsmen holding the crowns above the heads of the bride and groom, rather than these being placed upon their heads directly, is a custom rather than a rubric, and while ancient is not universal in Russian Orthodox practice. It is also an ancient and entirely acceptable practice that the crowns be lain directly upon the heads of the bride and groom, in which case the groomsmen do not play an active part in this aspect of the service. In our Diocese, either practice is blessed, according to the wishes of the couple and the guidance of the local Priest.

stand aright, let us listen to the Holy Gospel. Peace to all,' while turning towards the couple. The Gospel is read facing the bride and groom, the Priest taking up the Gospel book from the central analoy and holding it in his hands. The Gospel must *not* be read from the Service Book, but from the Gospel book itself. At the end of the reading, the Priest kisses the page, closes the book, then holds it up for the groom and bride to kiss in turn before placing it back on the analoy. The beginning of the Augmented Litany is then read, with the Priest facing east commemorating therein the bride and groom, their relatives, and all there present. The next prayer is read, continuing with the litany of petitions (be it known that many Service Books do not write out in full the text of standard petitions in the marriage rite, presuming the Priest will have these memorised; if he does not, he should have the Service Book for the Divine Liturgy with him as well, from which these standard petitions can be read). This is followed by the Lord's Prayer, and the prayer for the blessing of the common cup, which the Priest blesses with his hand at the appropriate place in the prayer. The Priest then picks up the cup by its base, turning it so that the handle (if it has one) is on the groom's right, then gives the groom to drink a sip (the Priest continuing always to hold the cup), then the bride — alternating between them three times, while saying: 'In the Name of the Father' on the first, while the groom drinks, then the bride, then 'Amen'; then 'and of the Son': groom drinks, bride drinks, 'Amen'; and 'and of the Holy Spirit': groom drinks, bride drinks, 'Amen.'

The Priest returns the cup to the table, then picks up the Cross from the analoy and holds in in his left hand. He turns to the couple and instructs them to join right hands (the groom's hand over the bride's), then covers their hands with the end of his epitrachelion and puts his own right hand on top, holding the couple's joined hands through the epitrachelion. Holding the Cross up high in his left hand, the Priest leads the couple slowly around the analoy (and more significantly, the Gospel of Christ that lays upon it) three times, anti-clockwise, holding on to the couple's hands throughout as the choir solemnly sings the three appointed troparia — this procession marking the first steps taken by the couple as man and wife. The Priest and choir time the singing and the pace of walking so that each tropar starts at the beginning of new circuit around the analoy — this means either the Priest or the choir will wait for the other to finish each part, before advancing.¹⁰ At the conclusion of the third circuit of the procession, the Priest releases the couple's hands, takes away the epitrachelion and replaces the Cross on the analoy.

There follow immediately the prayers for the removing of the crowns (historically done on the eighth day, but no longer).¹¹ When reading the words 'Be thou exalted...', the Priest takes the groom's crown from the groomsman (or from the groom's head, if being worn), rotates it so the icon is facing the groom and presents it to him to kiss, then places it back on the table. The same is done with the crown of the bride.

Then two more prayers are read, as in the Service Book: the first is read facing east, as usual, but the second ('The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...') is read by the Priest facing the couple, and he blesses them with his hand at the appropriate place in the prayer. After its conclusion, the Priest instructs the couple to extinguish their candles, takes them and places them on the table, then leads the couple to the foot of the amvon (himself carrying the Cross from the central

¹⁰ If employing the practice of the groomsmen holding the crowns, rather than them being worn, they follow behind the couple during this threefold procession, holding the crowns over their heads throughout. It is customary, if there are several groomsmen, to give as many as possible a turn around the analoy, so they usually switch each time around.

¹¹ Be it known that in many Slavonic Service Books printed in the 19th and 20th centuries, these prayers are provided later, not at this place: they need to be inserted here if so.

analog) where they stand during the dismissal, which the Priest gives, facing the people, from atop the amvon.

It is at this point that the Priest gives his exhortation to the newly-wedded couple, providing words of instruction and encouragement in their new life together. He then turns to the east and intones 'Many Years' to the newly-wedded, their parents and relatives, and to all present. The choir sings joyfully, usually three times by three, while the Priest blesses with the Cross (nine times altogether).

The Priest then leads the couple up onto the solea, where they (moving together, as a couple) venerate first their wedding icon of the Saviour on its analog, then the icon of the Mother of God. The Priest then leads them to the centre of the amvon, where the newly-weds congratulate each other with an appropriate kiss; he then takes the wedding icon of Christ and places it in the groom's hands, and that of the Theotokos and places it in the bride's, then leads them down to the foot of the amvon where they stand, facing the people, the groom at the bride's right hand. The families and all those present then come up to congratulate the couple, each first venerating the icons in the couple's hands, then greeting the couple themselves. They then form a sort of 'receiving line': the bride, the groom, the bride's mother, the bride's father, the groom's mother, the groom's father, best man, maid of honour, etc. As the faithful and friends come forward, congratulations are shared between all in turn. When this is completed, the icons are reverently taken from the couple (ultimately to be taken to adorn their home icon corner), the bouquet of flowers returned to the bride, and they depart the church together via the main western doors. While the throwing of flower petals or rice is not itself a church practice, it is traditional enough that it is commonplace at Orthodox weddings, and is permitted on the church steps, solely outside of the temple.

The Priest, while all of the above is taking place, himself returns quietly to the centre of the temple and takes up the Gospel Book from the analog, and takes it, together with the Cross he already has in his hands, into the Altar and returns them to their normal place on the Holy Table, which he in turn venerates before closing the Royal Doors and the curtain. He does not participate in the reception line, or the flower / rice throwing outside.

A reception is customarily organised by the newly-married couple and their families, which may take place in the Parish Hall, or at a restaurant or other venue. Traditionally the wedding icons of Christ and the Theotokos are brought to the venue and placed on analogs there, the prayers of the blessing of the meal being sung before them: the reception being carried out in the presence of the holy icons also helps ensure that, while being festal and joyous, the conduct of participants does not become overly-worldly and inappropriate to a venue containing sacred icons. By the rules of the Nomocanon, the Priest goes to the reception to read a prayer, bless the food, and share the meal with the rejoicing family members. By custom he may be invited to give a toast to the newly-wedded couple. However, when dancing begins, the Priest must leave.

Finally, the Priest bears the responsibility to ensure that, as with each and every Divine Service he performs, proper records are kept in the Parish Register and archives. For every wedding, this includes (a) copies of the baptismal certificates for both bride and groom; (b) a copy of the document of civil registration of the marriage; (c) a copy of the certificate of marriage produced by the Priest himself to confirm the Church wedding — the original of which is given to the couple — on which must be noted the date and place of the wedding, the full baptismal and legal names of both bride and groom, the names of two witnesses present during the wedding, and the signature of the Priest; and (d) written notes on any special circumstances relating to the marriage, such as noting whether it is a second or third marriage for either spouse (in which case,

copies of both ecclesiastical and civil divorce documentation must be included), whether it is a mixed marriage that was blessed by the Bishop, or any other relevant notes; this document should likewise be signed by the Priest.