

# A Ukrainian Wedding Ceremony

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In Ukraine, Holy Matrimony is the mystery (sacrament) in which a man and a woman solemnly declare before Christ, and in the presence of the ordained ministry and the assembly of family and friends, their love and faithfulness for one another for life. This mystery reveals to us the dignity of the human person when blessed by Christ. The community comes together to rejoice in this revelation, the divination of two persons becoming one in His love, mutually fulfilling and perfecting one another. The marriage liturgy of the Ukrainian Church is rich in ritual and symbolism.

## The Rite of Betrothal

The rite of betrothal and declaration of consent properly takes place in the narthex (entrance to the temple). In early Church this was a civil ceremony which was later followed and made complete by the crowning through the ministry of the Church.

## Bestowal of the Rings

The rings are visible signs of the exclusive commitment, faith, and love the couple have for one another. Each ring is a circle without beginning or end - expressing the eternal love to which they are called - a love that finds its source and model in the Holy Trinity. The essential meaning of the rings is beautifully brought out in the prayer in which the presbyter recites various examples from Sacred Scripture where rings are given. The couple exchange rings at the conclusion of this prayer.

## The Entrance

After the betrothal the clergy lead the couple into the temple. Psalm 127(128) is sung - a psalm which recounts for us how God blesses those who revere Him. The entrance itself may symbolize for us the entrance of the marriage from the world into the Church, into the "world to come."

## The Candles

Candles are given to the couple to be held throughout the service. They symbolize the lamps of the five wise virgins who, because of their foresight, were able to go out and greet the Bridegroom Christ with light. We, too, are called upon to do the same.

## The Wedding Icons

The Wedding Icons are used to bless the couple before they set out for the church. The icons are to remind the couple of Christ, our Lord, who is ever present among us, and the example of Mary, His Mother, who points to her Son Jesus as our focus. These icons are carried reverently in the wedding procession and are placed on or near the tetrapod for the service, or held by the "starosti" (wedding elders) if present. Afterwards, they are placed prominently in the home of the couple and will serve as the spiritual center of the household.

## Ukrainian Embroidery

Two white linen towels decorated with Ukrainian embroidery are used in the wedding ceremony. The first, on which the couple stands, symbolizes the "newness" of their married life. The second, used to join hands, symbolizes the "oneness" of the bride and groom.

## The Crowning

This is the most solemn moment of the wedding service. Crowns, or wreaths of myrtle, are placed on the heads of the couple, symbolizing that both the husband and wife reign over the newly-established family with love, peace, and harmony. The bishop or presbyter proclaims: "Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor!" (Psalm 8:5). The entire psalm is a hymn to the dignity of man who was created by God to be master of creation, king and queen of heaven on earth. In early Church these crowns were worn for eight days. Now we remove them at the end of the service.

## The Scripture Readings

The first reading is from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:20-33), where he compares marriage to the relationship Christ has with His Church. Just as the Church is obedient to Christ, the couple is obedient to their marriage, as Christ gives Himself totally to His Church, the couple gives themselves totally to their marriage even unto death. The second reading is from John (2:1-11), and describes for us the first miracle worked by our Lord, a miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

## The Common Cup

This cup of wine reminds us of the miracle at Cana and is a sign of God's blessing of lawful wedlock. It also symbolizes the oneness of life of the couple, a life which will contain hardship as well as joy, now to be shared equally by both. In the early Church this cup was the communion chalice and at this point the couple would approach for Holy Communion, the "Seal" of their marriage in Christ. Today the couple is encouraged to approach for Confession and Communion as near as possible to their wedding day.

## The Ceremonial Walk

The ceremonial walk reminds us that we should center our lives upon Christ who is present in the Holy Gospel and His Icon on the tetrapod. The presbyter represents the Church as he leads the couple as husband and wife. It is fitting that they revolve around Christ. A hymn to the Theotokos (God-bearer) is sung as well as hymns to the holy martyrs and apostles who have already received their crowns, that they might always intercede for the couple before the Lord.

## The Removal of the Wreaths

Originally, the couple would wear their wreaths, or crowns, for a full week, returning to the temple to have them ceremoniously removed. In more recent usage, the wreaths, or crowns, are removed at the end of the rite of crowning.

## The Recessional

With the singing of the "Mnohaya Lita" (MNO-ha-ya-Lee-ta), "Many Happy Years," the couple walks out of the church and into the world as husband and wife. They do so with prayers of their family and friends and the blessing of the Church.

