

The Sacrament of Marriage in the Ukrainian Catholic Church

Father George Perejda, CSsR.

Marriage is a public profession of love by which a man and a woman commit themselves, body and soul, to each other for life. It is a contract, a covenant, and when it is done in faith and in the presence of Christ's representative, it is a sacrament: a mystery, a sign of God's continuing activity among us. It was at the wedding feast in Cana that Jesus gave the first sign or signal of his kingdom, of his Good News: he changed water into wine. This shows the primary importance of marriage for his kingdom. Later, he promised: "Where two or three come together in my name. I am there with them" (Matthew 18:20). The beloved disciple reassures us: "If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made perfect in us...God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him" (1 Jn 4:12,16).

The mystery of marriage is this: the man and woman in love, who come together in Christ, are a sign to all of us of God's loving presence among us; and we are strengthened in faith and hope and love. Furthermore, when a man and a woman, by such a public profession of their love, commit themselves to each other for life, they are assured by the priest present that God commits himself to being present in their union, in their new community, in order to perfect their love, to help them grow in the garden of earth's kingdom, and blossom and bear fruit, and reach up and be crowned with everlasting glory in the eternal kingdom of God. The wedding day is truly a Happy Day — a sign of new life begun, renewed life together, and hope for eternal joy and glory. All of this is reflected in the celebration of the marriage.

Before the couple proceed to their public profession of love and commitment. Their purpose and intent in coming together is first verified (The Marriage Consent). Then the community of God's faithful people prays that the marriage to be celebrated now reflect indeed the blessedness of the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and for ever and ever (Psalm 128 & Litany).

A powerful prayer telescopes and synthesizes the plan and purpose of God's love as evidenced in the history of God's people and particularly for today's special couple -- in the beginning of creation, with the first

couple Adam and Eve, down through the generations to Mary, of whom Christ was born. Christ's presence at the wedding in Cana in the very beginning of his ministry is recalled; and finally the same caring Christ is invited to be present at this wedding today to bless and make bountiful today's couple gathered in his Name, and to transform the water of their human love into the spirited wine of divine, never-ending love.

Then the rings are blessed, circular, unending symbols of never-ending love, reminders that the couple are joined together and their lives are strengthened and multiplied by their couple power. The exchange of rings signifies the interchange and interplay of strengths and weaknesses that must be theirs. The placing of the rings on the fingers of the hands means that both must work together handily to achieve oneness and togetherness.

The vows are solemn public promises, made with hands held together upon the Gospel Book, by which the couple offer themselves, body and soul, to each other for life. This is the sacrifice of love, than which there is none greater to offer one's life for another, wholesomely, one hundred percent. This solemn moment, with the priest's hand impressively covering the joined hands upon the Gospel Book, expresses the Good News that Christ is present here, in image and reality, and that his sacrifice and his love and his holy Word is the foundation and firm basis for this marriage.

Because of the sacrifice of love offered by the couple, there follows the crowning reward and glory of the Happy Day: joy and radiance and hope forever, a new and renewed life in the royal kingdom of love, the Divine Kingdom, where in Christ those who live their love will reign forever. The radiant couple, made supreme and royal through love, are rewarded with crowns of precious meaningfulness, and declared independent and free to create their own little kingdom in the dominion of their home. And if they live the royal life of love, their kingdom will have no end, and they will be received into God's eternal Kingdom.

The crowns, or wreaths, that encircle the heads of the bride and groom amplify the meaning of the rings that encircle their fingers; the joining of hands which reflects the joining of their hearts, in marriage, is magnified by the encircling of their heads; their hearts and hands

and heads must work together in love. This is the high point of the ceremony.

As the couple stands crowned with joy and hopefulness for the future, the lessons to be learned for maintaining their love are read. The Epistle reminds the couple that they are called to holiness. Hence, they should "put on" the virtues of kindness, humility, patience, understanding, forgiveness and over all, love. They must strive for the peace of Christ, accept his word, and always be thankful to God. The Gospel recalls Jesus' presence at the wedding in Cana and his first sign or miracle there; and his followers must learn how primary and important is marriage -living lives of committed love and service -- for Christ's kingdom. This lesson of royal service, of readiness to serve each other, rather than to be served, is what will make the crowned couple truly worthy to be counted among Christ's royal inheritance. Living their new life together according to this law of Christ will ensure for the couple the crowning glory of the heavenly kingdom. As the priest removes the crowns he wishes them many long and happy years.

The couple, with their attendants, proceed to sign the registration forms, and then circle back to the center of the church and receive blessings and congratulations; then, with the images of Christ and the Mother of God close by them, they walk down the aisle and out into the world outside to begin, with joy and celebration, their renewed life together in Christ. May God be with them and bless them.