

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382  
83 (2), pp. 137-153, 2020

# **E**xplanation of Betrothal and of the Mystery of Holy Matrimony

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## **Abstract**

In this text, we want to expose the liturgical, dogmatic and moral meanings of the important moments in the service of Betrothal and the Mystery of the Holy Matrimony and of the main objects of worship used during these religious services, as well as their implications in the conjugal life of spouses. Betrothal or Engagement is a Church hierarchy through which the bridegroom and bride confess their mutual love and receive God's blessing, and the Mystery of Matrimony or Crowning is a religious service through which God blesses and sanctifies marriage, i.e. the bond between man and woman for the rest of life. The meanings of the candles, the wedding rings, the crowns, the Holy Gospel, the thrice circling the table and the glass of wine will be presented, as well as the purpose and importance of the godparents, as the spiritual parents of the grooms. We propose this approach on the occasion of the proclamation of 2020 as the Homage Year of the Pastoral Care of Parents and Children and the Commemorative Year of the Romanian Orthodox Philanthropists by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

## **Keywords**

Betrothal, Holy Matrimony, bridegroom and bride, candles, crowns, communion, sacrifice

## I. Introduction

The service of Betrothal and the Mystery of the Holy Matrimony represents the beginning of the establishment of a family, the basic cell of the Church and of society. This must cultivate the love, good understanding, respect, appreciation and mutual honour of spouses, poured out on the education of children, the holy fruit of married life. The marriage of a man and a woman, that is, the founding of a family, is “a holy act of divine origin”, instituted by God the Father in heaven (cf. *Genesis* 2, 18.21-24) and commanded by the Son of God in the New Testament: “But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (*Mark* 10, 6-9).

The two services of the Church, Engagement and Holy Crowning, contain prayers, symbols and liturgical acts that speak, explicitly or mystically, about the communion of spouses in the family, the unity of married life, the responsibility and greatness of marriage, God’s blessing and help, the importance of children’s education and raising them in the fear of God, the role of godparents as “spiritual parents” of the grooms during the service and marriage, the need of the sacrifice, etc.

## II. Explanation of the Service of Betrothal

Betrothal is a hierurgy<sup>1</sup>, that is, a special service of the Church through which the bridegroom and the bride promise each other forever and express their commitment publicly in front of the holy altar, through the blessing of the Church. Based on the testimony and confession of the love of young people, the Engagement is a liturgical ordinance by which “the Church blesses and sanctifies an old ancestral tradition respected among the people, namely covenant or settlement”<sup>2</sup> of the marriage of the bride and

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<sup>1</sup> Hierurgies are “services, ordinances, and prayers for the blessing and sanctification of man at various times and circumstances in his life, as well as the blessing and sanctification of the surrounding nature and of various things and objects useful to man”. For example: betrothal, sanctification of water, consecration of the house, burial, etc. Pr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica specială*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1980, p. 437.

<sup>2</sup> Pr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica specială*, p. 406.

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groom. According the American Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff, “the Betrothal service is the new form of the marriage contract, with the bridegroom and bride pledging mutual faithfulness”<sup>3</sup>.

#### **Candles**

Candles have a special significance both for the rite of Engagement and for the Mystery of the Holy Matrimony: the burning candles show that the spouses “will walk in the light of Christ and of His will, thus making their marriage one filled with a higher meaning”<sup>4</sup>, regardless of the context in which they will also live and of the conditions they have (according to God’s permission).

The burning candles held by the groom’s godparents (or by the bridesmaid and the groomsman) have a special symbolism, because they spread light and warmth around. In the same way, the bride and bridegroom are called to spread light and warmth around them through everything they think, through what they do and through the dedication and seriousness with which they raise their children. The fiancés are called into family life for sacrifice, dedication and total involvement, just as the candle can only provide light and warmth if it is sacrificed, if it is consumed itself. An arrogant and selfish man cannot spread light around him. In this case, he “darkens” and closes in on himself.

The candle also has a significant feature that it can shine in the dark, without the darkness covering it. Every candle, no matter how small, can pierce the thickest darkness. If the candle is slightly larger, then the distance from which it can be seen is even greater<sup>5</sup>. Husbands are called to illuminate in the same way through their thoughts and deeds the “darkness” of ignorance, arrogance and indifference around them.

#### **Wedding Rings**

The main moment of the Betrothal service is putting the wedding rings on the grooms’ hands and changing them from the right hand to the left

<sup>3</sup> John MEYENDORFF, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2000, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology. Vol. 5 The Sanctifying Mysteries*, Transl. Ioan Ionita and Robert Baringer, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, USA, 2012, p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> For further details on this subject see Pr. Mihai IORDACHE, *Lumina Învierii. Spiritualitatea Sfințelor Paști*, Ed. Basilica, București, 2019, pp. 23-26.

hand by the priest and godparents. They are placed by the priest on the right hand, because this liturgical gesture signifies the power and dignity with which the bridegroom and bride are invested by God for the new mission of their lives, but the tradition of the Church has kept the custom of keeping the wedding rings on the left hand during marriage.

Regarding the betrothal ring, Clement of Alexandria remarked: “The Pedagogue gives women a gold ring not as an ornament but as a seals, to show them that they must be the guardians of the house, to take care of the household”<sup>6</sup>. Father Ene Braniste, quoting St. Simeon of Thessaloniki, pointed out that “in ancient times, the bridegroom’s ring was made of iron, symbolizing masculine strength, and the bride’s ring was made of gold, symbolizing beauty, tenderness and feminine purity”<sup>7</sup>.

The ring also means the mutual love between spouses that must be endless, just as the ring is endless. This does not happened by itself, the Church teaches us, but it takes a lot of effort, a lot of patience, understanding and growth and development within love, to gain full trust in each other, to respect each other and to keep the promise made before the holy altar.

Love has no end when it starts from physical love and rises to spiritual love, climbing the steps of Christian virtues and perfection. When we limit ourselves to physical love, it slowly disappears after consuming itself. But complemented by spiritual love, it is constantly renewed and improved. Misunderstanding this important aspect of married life can easily lead to the gradual individualization of spouses, the distancing from each other, the “weakening or disintegration of this structure, the primary cell for raising children”<sup>8</sup> and often even divorce, which is widespread in our society.

At the blessing of the bride and groom and putting the wedding rings on their hands, each time, the names of both are pronounced, tying them with an indestructible bond that yearns for eternity. They are not blessed individually, in isolation, but only together, because from this day on, they will form a unity for which they are both responsible. They are called from now on to take care first of the other and then of himself/herself. The Church

<sup>6</sup> CLEMENT ALEXANDRINUL, “Pedagogul”, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești. Serie Nouă* 16, trad. Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Ed. Basilica, București, 2016, p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> Pr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica specială*, p. 411.

<sup>8</sup> Andreea OLTEANU, “Provocările familiei contemporane în creșterea copiilor”, in *Ziarul Lumina*, 6 Jan. 2020, p. 12.

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herself teaches us that family means giving the other's joy and happiness and not looking at our partner as "the main generator of personal happiness"<sup>9</sup>.

In the mystery of family life, it is beautiful to see the other first and then ourselves, to be more concerned with caring for the other than caring for our person. This involves self-sacrifice, selflessness, restraint, perseverance, giving up one's own pleasures and whims, getting to know the one next to us better, understanding the mystery of one's person, etc. In the family, the fulfilling of these virtues is aided by the grace of the Holy Spirit received before the holy altar. In fact, through the service of Espousal, the bridegroom and bride make a promise before God that they will love one another, that they will take special care of each other, and that they will be together in all good things and in the latest pleasant.

When the wedding rings are placed on the grooms' hands when the bridegroom is blessed with his own wedding ring, it is also touched by the bride's forehead and vice versa. The same thing happens with the blessing of crowns. These liturgical gestures mean that the bridegroom's ring is also the bride's and vice versa, and bride's crown (glory or magnification) is also the bridegroom's and vice versa. Each mysteriously wears the wedding ring and crown of the other, which testifies to the deep and permanent responsibility of one for the other. After marriage we belong no longer ours but the others. His/her life is in fact my life and I have all the responsibility for his/her life as I have it for my life.

### **III. Explanation of the Mystery of Holy Matrimony**

The Mystery of the Holy Matrimony, Order of Crowning or Wedding is one of the seven Holy Mysteries of the Church through which God blesses and sanctifies marriage, that is, the bond between man and woman for the rest of life. The service of the Holy Matrimony is called "mystery" or "sacrament" because, as in the other Mysteries or Sacraments<sup>10</sup>, a part of it is "mystical", unseen, and unobservable through the senses, hidden from those not strengthened in the faith. "A sacrament, therefore, is not

<sup>9</sup> Andreea OLTEANU, "Provocările familiei contemporane în creșterea copiilor", p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> The Orthodox Church performs seven Holy Mysteries: Baptism, Chrismation (or Anointing), Eucharist, Repentance (or Confession), Ordination, Marriage and Holy Unction (or Divine Healing).

magic” and “is not an imaginary abstraction”<sup>11</sup>, as John Meyendorff argues. Contrariwise the mystery

“is an experience where man is not involved alone, but where he acts in communion with God. In a sacrament, humanity participates in the higher reality of the Spirit, without, however, ceasing to be fully humanity. Actually, as we have said above, it becomes more authentically human and fulfils its original destiny. A sacrament is a «passage» to true life; it is man’s salvation. It is an open door into true, unadulterated humanity”<sup>12</sup>.

The bridegroom and bride receive from God through the Mystery of Crowning the capacity and responsibility to transform and transfigure their communion, good understanding and family into the reality of Kingdom of heaven “descended” on earth. The newly created family begins already to “enter” the realm of eternity through the Sacrament of Matrimony where it is called to advance step by step, little by little, towards the spiritualization and pneumatization of human relationships, or as Father Staniloae stated, “in the beginning of their pneumatization, which is not realized without the cross or without the Spirit, and also in the beginning of the actualization of a transporence through which they see Christ’s infinite life and partake of it partially”<sup>13</sup>. Father John Meyendorff noted that “the very notion of marriage as a sacrament presupposes that man is not only a being with physiological, psychological, and social functions, but that he is a citizen of God’s Kingdom, i.e., that his entire life – and especially its most decisive moments – involves *eternal values* and God Himself”<sup>14</sup>.

In this sense, the service itself can be said to have two “parts”: one that we can see and another that we do not see. The invisible part is *the main element* of the sacrament, because it represents the direct work of God through His Holy Grace. In the case of the Mystery of Matrimony, this is embodied in the *divine blessing and power* that the two spouses receive before the holy altar, the *sanctification* of their love and bond, as well as

<sup>11</sup> John MEYENDORFF, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> John MEYENDORFF, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Fr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Experience of God. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology. Vol. 4 The Church: Communion in the Holy Spirit*, Transl. Ioan Ionita, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, USA, 2012, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> John MEYENDORFF, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, p. 10.

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their *union* in one family. The mystery itself becomes more a work of God than a human work.

This aspect is confessed by the very liturgical formula of the sacrament, which says “the servant of God, (name), is crowned unto the handmaid of God, (name)”. If we ask ourselves *who* performs this “crowning”, that is, “enthronement” or “coronation” (following the pattern of royal and imperial enthroning that is of divine origin *1 Kings* 10, 1), the liturgical formula itself further testifies: “in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”<sup>15</sup>, and the participants strengthen the words through “Amen”<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, the Three Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are the Ones who *truly* perform the Sacrament. Therefore, the Orthodox Church does not use liturgical formulas, such as “I (the priest) crown you”, “we (the celebrants) crown you”, or “the Church is crowning you”.

The seen celebrant of the sacrament is the priest or bishop, as a direct representative of the Saviour Christ, Who is Himself present and actually performs, unseen, the union of the spouses. St Ignatius of Antioch or Theophorus mentioned this at the end of the first century: “Those who marry must unite them with the approval of the bishop, so that their marriage may be according to the Lord, and not according to lust. Let everything be done for the honour of God”<sup>17</sup>.

Through the Mystery of Crowning, the bridegroom and bride receive power from the power of God, but this power does not work *by itself*. We must not fall into the trap of believing that we must not put too much effort into our married life because everything is accomplished *by* divine power. God’s power strengthen the unity of the family and strengthens it more and more only through the mutual effort of the spouses through the personal involvement and sacrifice of each other. If the spouses love each other with all their strength and conviction, as required by the prayers of the holy sacrament, if they “sacrifice” for each other in daily life after the model of the holy martyrs who “fought the good fight and have received

<sup>15</sup> *The Holy Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. The Sacrament of Baptism. The Sacrament of Matrimony*, transl. Prof. Dr. Lucreția Vasilescu et. al., Ed. Sfânta Arhiepiscopie a Bucureștilor, București, 2007, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> “Let it be so!”

<sup>17</sup> SF. IGNATIE TEOFORUL, “Către Policarp”, trad. Pr. Prof. Dumitru Fecioru, in: *Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1995, p. 227.

their crowns”, then the unity of their family is strengthened by the grace of God and nothing outside can frustrate it. But if the spouses are careless and indifferent, the divine power does not force their freedom and does not work *in their place*.

If we do not *put to work* the power of God in the unity of our family and do not *constantly actualize* the grace of the Holy Spirit in our marriage by faith and the work of virtues, the unity of the family weakens and diminishes, and distances may occur between spouses and other members. It is our fault and no one else’s, because God has given us everything we need for a normal and joyful life. But we, because we are weak, have not formed and perfected ourselves, nor have we properly “used” the divine gifts. We must not blame the evil one, the circumstances of life (which often prove to be approved and accepted by us) or the “destructive” action of other people. God’s grace gives us the power and responsibility to create “images” (faces or models) in the image of God.

The Mystery of Holy Matrimony *arises* and *sanctifies* the love between man and woman through the grace of the Holy Spirit. It elevates the love of spouses to a higher spiritual and heavenly level by giving it durability and continuity. Otherwise, the physical love between man and woman disappears after a while, because it does not have a solid spiritual foundation. The Sacrament of Crowning bases the love between man and woman on the connection between Christ the Saviour and His Church, for which “He gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant Church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (*Ephesians 5, 25-27*). Christ’s love for the Church becomes a *model* of the husband’s love for his wife, and the Church’s attitude towards Christ a *model* of the wife’s standing towards her husband.

It is the duty of both spouses to understand each other, to respect each other and to be honest with each other. Through love and good understanding, they lay the “brick by brick” foundation of their home to build their house on stone, in the words of the Saviour Christ, like “a wise man who build his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (*Matthew 7, 24-25*). On the contrary, the lack of love and respect, the misunderstanding, the dissensions and the deepening distances caused by the passage of time will



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erode the strength of their family, and they will resemble “the foolish man who build his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash” (*Matthew* 7, 26-27).

### **The Wedding Crowns**

The wedding crowns or royal weddings offered to the bridegroom and the bride by the Church as a direct work of God, added by the hand of priest and of godparents, signify primarily the dignity and greatness to which the grooms were raised by God, by “giving birth” to a new family for eternity. Crowns are the sign of greatness and honor, as the liturgical song says: “O Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor”<sup>18</sup> (*Psalms* 8, 5).

“The wedding crown is at the same time a diadem – affirms Father Staniloae – a sign of honor and dignity. The crown is worn by the king, and both Christ and the high priest are kings. It is a sign of a certain seriousness, maturity, and responsibility entrusted to a particular person for the protection, safeguarding, and guidance of others. By the act of their crowning, it is apparent that the two have emerged from the care of their parents and have received responsibility for their own lives; a mutual responsibility for one another; and a common responsibility for their own family and their own future children, their own fortress”<sup>19</sup>.

The human being was created by God as the “emperor of creation”, but he reaches this state only through a “chiselled” maturity gradually. During the Wedding, when the crown is placed on his head, the human person is meant to become the “emperor of creation” and to assume this sacred responsibility for his family. We could say that the person is not whole until he/she receives this enthroning of maturity, which must be amplified and perfected every day. Seriousness, maturity, responsibility must always accompany him on the path of perfection and of his family.

As a natural consequence, after the Holy Mystery of Marriage, the spouses will be the sole masters over their lives. God gave them these crowns as a sign that they should be the only “kings” over the new

<sup>18</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> Fr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 188.

“kingdom” of their home. Many will join this “kingdom”, many will come as guests to the “marital palace”, each seeking to advise the new rulers. The parents of the spouses are the ones who advise them the most and, in a way, it is good to be like that because they have a much richer life experience than their children.

But the only ones who will decide what is good to do and follow in their lives are the “emperors” themselves, the husband and wife. Naturally, it is good to take from everyone what is good and useful, but to keep permanently the verticality, the principles and the sanctity of their family. Things will not go well if someone gets too involved in the life of the new family, seeking to determine and influence its main areas, be they even parents of the spouses.

At the same time, the bridegroom and bride are two persons with two distinct thoughts, with two different wills, but the end result must be a single decision, a single work and a single family path. Children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren must follow this path of virtues and of good deeds.

The wedding crowning of bridegroom and bride is also a sign that they have reached full maturity, in which they can freely assume the responsibility of establishing a family. Father Staniloae remarked that

“human beings are not truly whole until they have come to the point at which they are capable of receiving this responsibility for themselves and for others. But human beings were brought into existence by God to be «sovereigns over creation», and they realize this dignity – which is a dignity of responsibility – in a special and concrete way when they take upon themselves the responsibilities bound up with family life, because their future responsibilities for the life of society and of the world in general are implicit in these”<sup>20</sup>.

It is important that spouses do not forget this essential aspect of the family and do not let anyone else make major decisions for them.

From another point of view, the crowns represent the sign of the sacrifice, of the oblation made by the martyrs of the Christian Church, to whom the signs of the victory were offered “sending down upon them

<sup>20</sup> Fr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 188.

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crowns from heaven”. The priest make the sign of the Holy Cross over the head of the bridegroom and of the bride with the wedding crown of the Church (and the wedding ring at the service of Betrothal), when he marries them and place them in the dignity of emperors, marking in their lives the Cross of suffering, patience and victory. “Christianity is realistic – added Father Dumitru Staniloae. It makes no exaggerated promises of unclouded happiness, free of all burdens and difficulties, for life is made up of both of these dimensions. Happiness will win out in the end, but whoever expects from marriage only happiness, only pleasures, will not be able to stand it for long”<sup>21</sup>.

The husband and wife have to endure on family life many trials, sufferings and troubles that “harden” their souls and characters, bearing them with faith. Thus they will be able to receive the “crown of victory” through the honour and purity of their home, through the pure and generous soul of the children, and through the blessing of God.

The imperial crowns remain “symbolically” on the heads of the spouses until the end of life and even in the kingdom of heaven, as the prayer says: “Receive their crowns into Thy Kingdom”<sup>22</sup>. After the priest takes the wedding crowns from the heads of the grooms, he prays to God for “preserving them spotless, blameless and without reproach, unto ages of ages”<sup>23</sup>.

### **Godparents or spiritual parents**

After the Mystery of Holy Matrimony, the bridegroom’s parents also become the bride’s “parents” and vice versa. Each became a parent for the other. Therefore, the bridegroom has four parents, whom he must respect and honour equally, and the bride as well.

Both during the Engagement and the Holy Wedding, the bridegroom and bride are assisted by godparents who are witnesses or guarantors of the seriousness of the mutual commitments made by the grooms and the durability of their relationship<sup>24</sup>, i.e. they must testify to the love, maturity and responsibility of future spouses. The Church does not allow the

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<sup>21</sup> Fr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 190.

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> Pr. Ene BRANIȘTE, *Liturgica specială*, p. 404.

celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage without godparents. Godparents must be religiously married, of the Orthodox faith, and well acquainted with and practicing the teaching and life of the Church. Therefore, they are “key” people during the service and after that in the family life of the spouses.

The teaching of the Church considers that for the future family that will be institute by the union of the bride and groom, two pairs of physical parents (of the groom and the bride) *are not enough*. There is a need for the third pair of parents, another kind of parents, “spiritual parents”, who will take care mainly of the moral and spiritual life of the new family. While the natural parents of the bride and groom are concerned with material and administrative problems (a house for the new family, procuring what is necessary for a normal life, financial and social stability, caring for future grandchildren, etc.), spiritual parents have the holy mission to take care of spiritual and moral aspect of the new family. They are meant by God to pursue and sustain their growth in virtue and to avoid sins and passions as much as possible. The mission of the godparents contains in itself the mystery of sacrifice and devotion.

Therefore, godparents have a great responsibility before God and people for their godchildren, which involves a permanent concern, efforts and sacrifices, but also boundless joy and moments of authentic spiritual experience. They are also obliged to support and guide their godchildren in order to find moral stability and to begin a spiritual life together that cultivates good, truth and beauty.

First of all, the godparents can support the godchildren through their pure and sincere *prayers* to God for them. Spiritual parents have a duty to pray with holiness to God for their godchildren.

Secondly, godparents must themselves be a *living personal example* of understanding, love, devotion, holiness, and genuine joy, that is, of virtuous and upright people.

Thirdly, godparents are obliged to *advise* and *help* the bride and groom whenever they need it, when they are asked for help or when they themselves notice that support is needed, like the Mother of God at the wedding in the Cana of Galilee.

A very beautiful thing is that godchildren and godparents to be close, to be together with each other, to have a permanent spiritual connection throughout the life, of mutual understanding, in which to support and help each other. They can gradually accomplish each other and form each other.

*Explanation of Betrothal and of the Mystery of Holy Matrimony***The Holy Gospel**

The evangelical pericope uttered during the Holy Matrimony discreetly conveys a special message. The first miracle performed by Christ the Saviour at the wedding in Cana of Galilee has a special significance. God can change His plan out of perfect love and mercy for creation, in the face of man's strong faith and earnest prayer. Jesus Christ change His divine plan in the face of His Mother's intervention and prayer. "The significance – affirms Archbishop Bartolomeu Anania – is attested by the fact that Jesus listens to His mother's request to begin here and now the long line of miracles that prove His divinity"<sup>25</sup>.

Apparently, the Saviour is doing something we did not expect: instead of immediately approving His Mother's implicit observation and request, Jesus Christ rebukes His Mother, saying: "Woman, why do you involve Me? My hour has not yet come" (*John 2, 4*). This means that the Son of God did not have in His plan the beginning of miracles *than* and *in that place*.

First of all, from the Holy Gospel of the Crowning we learn that through prayer and perseverance, the Mother of God changes God's plan. Anyone who prays in faith and toils in the work of virtues can do the same, according to the words of the Saviour. "Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain 'Move from here to there', and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (*Matthew 17, 20*).

Secondly, the Virgin Mary helps the bride and groom in Cana of Galilee *on her own initiative* without being asked to do so by them or anyone else. Therefore, it is very important to have a lot of faith in God and to pray to Him, the Mother of God and the saints, because they will help us even when we do not ask for their support in a concrete way.

**The circling the table**

Surrounding the table three times by the priest together with the grooms, the godparents and possibly those who carry the candles, is a ritual "dance" that symbolizes the holy joy of the Church, in fact, several

<sup>25</sup> *Sfânta Scriptură*, Jubilee Edition of the Holy Synod, annotated by Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, Archbishop of Cluj, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2001, p. 1558.

joys together: of bride and groom, of the godparents, of parents, of people and of the whole Church. It is a reason for joy for the whole ecclesial community, because another family, another “cell” of the Body of Christ was born that can bear future human beings. That is why the troparion is now sung “Rejoice, O Isaiah! For the Virgin was with child; and bore a Son, Emmanuel. He is both God and man; Rising is His name; magnifying Him, we call the Virgin blessed”<sup>26</sup>. “Heaven itself rejoices because of this new extension of the Kingdom of God”<sup>27</sup>, affirms Father Staniloae.

The Church is not based on the individual and isolated people, but on the families and their communion. St John Chrysostom stated that “the world is made of cities; the cities are made of houses; (and) the houses of men and women”<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, good understanding between spouses in the family is fundamental both for the smooth life of their home and for the whole community. For “if there is a quarrel between a man and a woman, quarrels have entered into the houses; and if houses are disturbed, then the cities are also disturbed”<sup>29</sup>. Such ritual dances are also found in the Mystery of Holy Baptism and in the Mystery of Ordination.

During this liturgical gesture, two more troparia are sung. The first is: “O holy martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns: entreat the Lord, that He will have mercy on our souls”. This is in fact the First Ode of “Lord I cried to Thee”, at the Friday Evening Vesper, the 7<sup>th</sup> tone, from the songs of the Octoechos<sup>30</sup>. Second, “Glory to Thee, O Christ our God, the Apostle’s boast, the Martyrs’ joy, who’s peaching was the consubstantial Trinity”. This is the First Ode (martyr) from the Stihovna of the same vesper<sup>31</sup>. The last two troparia remind the bride and groom that they are to become partakers of Christ and His saints through pure life and sacrifice. At the same time, the Church reminds all the people that family life means sacrifices and abnegation in assuming suffering, tribulations

<sup>26</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> Fr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 189.

<sup>28</sup> SF. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Despre desfătarea celor viitoare. Să nu deznădăjduim. Nouă cuvântări la Cartea Facerii*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2008, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> SF. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Despre desfătarea celor viitoare...*, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> *Octoih Mare. Care cuprinde cântările Învierii pentru toate zilele săptămânii pe cele opt glasuri bisericești*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003, p. 577.

<sup>31</sup> *Octoih Mare...*, p. 578.

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and their transfiguration into spiritual joys. The songs evoke the sacrifice within the family and the dedication that husbands are called to give each other in their common life. Nothing lasting can be done without sacrifice and abnegation, neither the sustainability of the family nor the upbringing of children in the Christian spirit.

In approaching marital relations, the Church Fathers insist on the importance of the *state of sacrifice* of spouses and the avoidance of individual selfishness. St Cyril of Alexandria states that one can enter the Father only in a state of sacrifice, and in this state we are raised only if Christ the Lord takes us with Him in His state of sacrifice. “Christ placed the man who had turned away from God and had angered Him because of disobedience and the multitude of sins, again in Himself as in the first, in front of the Father”<sup>32</sup>, asserted St Cyril. Regarding these words, Father Staniloae declares that “we can enter into the Father only in the state of sacrifice which we have in Him”<sup>33</sup>, in Christ the Lord.

The Church Fathers teach us that any selfish closure in ourselves can lead us to the denial of our own nature that ends in suffocation and depersonalization. In this sense, the state of sacrifice of the spouses is not necessarily a moral “must”, but the very life and breath of the Church. Thus Jesus Christ, our Saviour and God, becomes Himself “the life of their lives” (cf. Romans 8, 35)<sup>34</sup>. Offering from what we *have* and from what we *are* forms and gives meaning to the mystery of our existence. The Christian principle of devotion has a universal application in all areas of existence, primarily within the family.

### **The undefiled bed and the glass of wine**

In the prayer after the Holy Gospel, the priest asks God: “Cause their marriage to be honorable and preserve their bed undefiled”<sup>35</sup>. He prays for the purity and “conjugal chastity” of their home, but also for their spiritualization, “in the pneumatizing of the spouses and of their sexual relations through all of their love, respect, and responsibility to bear

<sup>32</sup> SF. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Închinarea și Slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 38, transl. Pr. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1991, p. 305.

<sup>33</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, note 649 b, in: SF. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *Închinarea și Slujirea în Duh și Adevăr*, p. 604.

<sup>34</sup> † DANIEL, Patriarhul Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, *Teologie și Spiritualitate*, Ed. Basili-ca a Patriarhiei Române, București, 2010, p. 203.

<sup>35</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 79.

with one another, to help each other reciprocally, and to make progress in all these areas<sup>36</sup>. In one of the prayer of the Divine Liturgy, after the consecration of the Holy Gifts, the priest intercedes before God “for those who live pure and honorable lives”<sup>37</sup>.

The glass of wine, called the *common* of public cup, together with the biscuits (pieces of bread or cake) that are blessed by the priest and from which the bridegroom and bride will taste, mysteriously symbolize the Holy Eucharist, which the grooms were receiving at this time in antiquity when the wedding followed immediately after the Divine Liturgy. During this time, the chorus sings the liturgical verse “I will take the cup of salvation and I will call on the name of the Lord”<sup>38</sup>. The same verse is sung during the communion of the faithful at the Divine Liturgy. At the same time, the common chalice embodies the wedding’s joviality and the common fate that the spouses will live together with the same joys and the same troubles.

### Assumption of the Cross

The bridegroom and bride are blessed by God and are marked three times with wedding rings and crowns in the sign of the Holy Cross. This means that they also assume the trials, tribulations, and sufferings that will come into their family, which they will go through together, with patience, hope and faith in God.

Assumption of the Cross and its orientation to Christ strengthen the unity of the family. The Cross and suffering are mentioned several times during the service. The second prayer evokes: “And let that gladness come upon them which the blessed Helen had when she found the precious Cross”<sup>39</sup>. During the third prayer, the priest unites the bridegroom’s right hand with the bride’s right hand in the sign of the Holy Cross. The second prayer also makes the following mention: “Remember them, O Lord our God, as Thou didst remember Thy forty holy martyrs, sending down upon them crowns from heaven”<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Fr. Dumitru STANILOAE, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, p. 189.

<sup>37</sup> *The Divine Liturgy according to Saint John Chrysostom*, Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America, Grass Lake, Michigan, 1997, p. 90.

<sup>38</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 76.



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The most eloquent words in this regard are those spoken to the grooms before the end of service, which highlights their eternal covenant made before God and loved ones, by placing their right hands on the Holy Gospel and the Holy Cross:

“Spiritual children, by placing your hands on the Holy Gospel and on the Holy Cross, you have pledged yourselves to keep the bound of love and union pure, unbroken and honorable till death, to fulfill your duties, following what pleases God and men”<sup>41</sup>.

The cross of life and common difficulties are more easily assumed together in married life. Inconveniences will not cease to appear, but they must be received with patience and hope, strengthened by the grace of God, given through the Mystery of Holy Matrimony. Sufferings must not be avoided (with despair and grief), but they must be assumed and transformed into “opportunities” for strengthening in virtue and personal perfection.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As we have seen, the liturgical objects, acts of worship and prayers of the Church during the service of the Betrothal and the Mystery of Holy Matrimony have a special significance and importance in the life of the new family. Husbands should be aware of these fundamental truths, gathered by the Church over the centuries, to cherish and respect them with all the fear of God, often returning to the special meanings of the beginning services of their married life. The deep meaning of holy words and liturgical rituals is a priceless richness and a precious treasure for the good understanding, love and communion of any family, as well as for the education and formation of children and youth according to Christian moral norms and principles.

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<sup>41</sup> *The Holy Liturgy... The Sacrament of Matrimony*, p. 81.