

## **Explanation of the Crowning Ceremony**

*By Father Philip Raczka*

### **Introduction**

The marriage ceremony of the Eastern Churches, called the Mystery of Crowning, is quite different than that of the Western Churches. The greatest difference is the lack of the crowning ritual in the western ceremonies. But, there are other differences as well and it is good to understand our own beautiful ceremony.

### **History**

The marriage ceremony at the time of Our Lord in the Holy Land consisted of two parts the Betrothal and the Crowning. The Betrothal was held in the home of the bride after the marriage contract and bride price had been paid. The father of the family, who was considered to be the priest of the family, would celebrate the exchange of rings between the couple with a prayer. Usually a year later the couple was married. The groom would go to the bride's father's house where the father would impose the marriage crowns on the couple, join their right hands and say a prayer. The crowning of a groom is mentioned in *Isaiah 61:10*. Then the groom would lead the bride to his house. This procession consisted of the groom's friends and the bride's family while Psalms were sung. The Psalms were sung to celebrate a new marriage and family thus insuring the continuation of the Jewish people and fulfilling the promise that God made to Abraham that he would have countless descendants (*Genesis 15:5*). At the groom's house, where the wedding banquet was ready, the groom's father would say a prayer over a cup of wine. This cup was shared by the couple as a sign of their new life together and then the party followed.

The Eastern Christians, who were the majority of Christians until 1453, took this ceremony and made it refer to Christ. The name of Christ was introduced into the prayers and eventually an Epistle, Gospel and Sermon were added to the ceremony. St. John

Chrysostom (+407 AD) mentions that priests and bishops were being called upon to perform the ceremony instead of the father of the family. The earliest copy we have of the actual marriage prayers is found in the *Barberini Codex #336*, which dates from 750 AD. In it we find the same marriage prayers as we use today. Since the *Codex* was copied in Southern Italy, a remote part of the Empire, we can assume that the prayers are much older than the manuscript. Let us examine this ceremony which has roots in the Old Testament times.

### **The Betrothal**

The Betrothal is first in the ceremony and may be performed independently of the crowning. Two prayers are said and the couple exchanges rings. The rings symbolize the promise of the partners to be faithful to each other. The entire marriage ceremony is full of prayers asking for faithfulness and stating that lawfully married couples are chaste in the eyes of God.

### **The Consent**

The consent is the first element of the actual crowning ceremony. The love of God is deep and sacrificial and it is a choice. The couple is asked to have the same Agapé or Covenant love for each other that God has for us. It is a choice to be faithful, loving and true no matter what happens. They express this choice and commitment in the expression of consent.

### **Marriage Prayers**

The heart of the ceremony is the Marriage Prayers after the Litany of Peace. In these prayers the priest prays remembering the origin of mankind and marriage in the Garden of Eden. He asks the Heavenly Father to join the couple together and to grant them all of the good things and blessings that they will need to have a happy life. It is during these prayers that the couple is wed together by the Lord Himself. As a sign of this divine joining together the priest joins the hands of the couple together. Thus he shows that Christ, the Great High Priest of the

Church, is the real celebrant of the wedding ceremony.

### **The Crowning**

The priest crowns the couple as a sign of their union. St. John Chrysostom says that the crowns symbolize the victory of Christ over sin, death and evil. The couple, as baptized Christians, lawfully joined in a sacramental marriage share in this victory. They have overcome the lusts of the world, which seek to separate the soul from the body and love from sex, and are united together in the love of God and each other. They are now joined as God intended man and woman to be joined together; giving themselves totally and freely to the other. The crowns also symbolize the crown of martyrdom or witnessing to Christ for the couple incarnates the love of Christ for the Church. They also represent the royal authority of the children of God. After the crowning the clergy and assembly sing together the coronation hymn (*Psalms 8:6 & 7*): *Crown them O Lord our God with glory and honor and grant them dominion over the works of your hands*. This is a prayer and wish for the newlyweds from all present.

### **Epistle and Gospel**

The Epistle to the *Ephesians* is the only place in the Bible that calls marriage a Sacrament or Mystery. The couple is called to incarnate the love of Christ for the Church proven by his death on the cross. In other words it is a total love and commitment. The Gospel is the Wedding at Cana (*John 2:1-12*). In this story Jesus turns water into wine. Water is good but wine is better. This is understood to be the point when Christ took Old Testament marriage, which was good, and made it into a Sacrament by which the couple brings the love of God into the world and grow in spiritual perfection.

### **The Cup of Wine**

The cup of wine symbolizes the unity of married life. The spouses complete each other and share one life together. The Unity Candle is performing the same function in western ceremonies, but it is

unofficial and not an actual part of the ceremony. There is no need for a Unity Candle in our ceremony since it would duplicate the function of the cup of wine.

### **The Wedding Procession**

In the wedding procession the couple takes their first steps together as man and wife. It is a pilgrimage that will end with death. They go around the table with the Gospel Book on it. Christ is their Sun around which their lives must revolve. This procession also dedicates them to Christ as a couple and reminds them of their priestly role in their new family. They must watch over each other and their future children spiritually as well as physically and emotionally.

### **The Crown Removal**

After all of the prayers and ceremonies have been accomplished the crowns are removed. We ask God to preserve their crowns and marriage forever in his Kingdom. The newlyweds must leave the Church and cooperate together with the Holy Spirit to build their new life day by day.

### **The Western Ceremony**

The earliest witness to the western style ceremony is from Saint Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 250 AD). He mentions that after the couple performs the civil requirements and ceremonies for marriage that they come to the church. There the priest imposes the bridal veil on the bride. He then says a prayer blessing their union followed by giving them Holy Communion together. This reception of Communion recognizes their married state and incorporates them into the Church as a married couple. In the Middle Ages the contract and civil ceremonies were performed in front of the church door. This is when the vows started to loom larger in the consciousness of the participants; whereas previously they were almost never mentioned in sermons and commentaries. The couple then entered the church for the veiling, blessing and Holy Communion. Saint Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century) said that the vows were the essential matter

of the sacrament; this lead to them receiving more importance and the other parts of the ceremony being diminished. According to the Canon Law of the Eastern Catholic Churches the essential elements of our ceremony are the consent, the prayers and blessings of the priest and the marriage crowns.