With Glory and Honor

Catechesis on the Mystery of Crowning
INTRODUCTION

It’s a busy time for you both. Preparing for a wedding demands a lot of attention, if everything is to go the way that you want. But while preparing for the wedding is important, preparing for the marriage is even more so. The wedding will be over in a few hours; the marriage will - or should - last a lifetime. This is why the Church puts such stress on entering marriage with our eyes fully open to the reality which awaits us.

The ideas in this booklet and the sessions in which it may be used are but a part of the Church’s pre-marital instruction. You should have already had the opportunity to discuss some of the basic principles which are essential to any marriage, Christian or not, such as self esteem, communication, sexuality, finances and your plans for the future. The Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church help you deal with these universal questions in a Christian perspective.

With Glory and Honor takes us to the next level of understanding: what a specifically Christian, sacramental marriage involves. The liturgical services of betrothal and crowning have been formulated to proclaim in prayer the Church’s thinking on this mystery. And so this part of your pre-marital instruction will look to the ritual of the sacrament to discern what the Lord is calling you to. The prayers, chants and gestures all convey something of what is the unique calling of a sacramentially married couple.

Because the rite of this mystery is actually speaking about your whole life together, we trust that you will return to these pages from time to time after your wedding. In addition we refer you to the following items prepared by this Office to assist you in living your married life within the Tradition of our Church:

A Guide for the Domestic Church - an easy to read presentation of our Church’s vision for the Christian home along with specific directions on how to implement this vision through the year. This guide explains both the “whys” and the “hows” of Eastern Christian family practice, including where to find icons, lamps, incense, etc. and what to do with them in your domestic Church.

Anne Gallagher, Blessed Is the Fruit of Your Womb - a reflection for expectant parents on the miracle of new life. This booklet helps you grasp the wonder of co-creating as well as assists you in making specific plans for naming your child, welcoming him or her into your domestic Church and celebrating the birth according to our Eastern Christian tradition.

The prayers of your Church are with you as you enter into the mystery of crowning, confident that the Lord is calling you through this mystery to come close to Him in new ways. May you respond to His call with the same depth of love that you feel for one another in these days.
The Office of Educational Services is grateful to the following couples who shared photographs with us for use in this publication:

St. George Parish, Birmingham, Alabama -
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Approbation:
Archbishop Joseph Tawil
Eparch of Newton
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"EVERYONE GETS MARRIED, BUT Christians get married in Church." This is the level of understanding many people have about Christian marriage. They think that Christian and non-Christian marriages are the same, but in a church wedding they pray for you. Happily, Christian marriage is more than just a prayer accompaniment to the marriage rite.

For Christians of Eastern and Western Traditions, marriage is regarded as a sacrament: one of the principal experiences of God in the life of the Church. To understand what is different about Christian marriage, then, we must know what a sacrament is.

A sacrament is a prayer of the Church whereby we ask the Lord to transform a natural situation by the presence of His Spirit into a vehicle of His saving grace. Thus in baptism we pray that the Lord transform the water into a means of holiness. The candidate submits to the rite and his submission is transformed into a sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ. In the Eucharist we pray that the Spirit transform the earthly food of bread and wine into the divine nourishment of the body and blood of Christ so that we may be transformed into His Body through them.

MARRIAGE, A MYSTERY

So too in the mystery of crowning, there is an element to be transformed into something higher: something of the kingdom of God. The Christian sacrament of marriage, then, is more than a mere blessing or prayer for aid. The mystery of crowning is a prayer of the Church that a marriage be transformed into a sign of God's kingdom.

What is transformed in sacramental marriage? Here the perspective of the Eastern Churches differ from the general Western practice. The Eastern view of marriage holds that an existing relationship is transformed into a Christian marriage. This means that the rite does not establish the relationship. Rather it presumes that the relationship already exists and is presented to be transformed.
This is clear in the rite where there are actually two ceremonies: the first centered around the exchange of rings and the second which is the sacramental crowning of husband and wife. Originally in the Church there were no distinct marriage ceremonies. People married according to the rules of the State and then brought their marriage to the Liturgy to be sacramentalized. The exchange of rings now performed in the narthex of the church is the remnant of this earlier civil rite.
"Bless the union of these your servants and confirm the word they have spoken. Establish them in a holy union which is from You ... and make their pledge firm in faith, in oneness of mind, in truth and in love."

(Prayer of Betrothal)
After the exchange of rings, the couple enter the church and approach the sanctuary together. There is no *Here Comes the Bride*, no being ‘given away’, which many today see as sexist in any case. The couple is bringing their relationship as their offering to the Lord and asking Him to take it further than they ever could.
Marriage the sacrament is the transformation of the man-woman relationship into one involving the man and woman and Christ in His Church. It is a transformation of the earthly 'till death do us part' relationship into an eternal bond of love which death will not rupture because it is in Christ. It is a transformation into an image or sign of the relationship between Christ and His Church. It is an anticipation of the Kingdom to come, and a witness to the fact that union with another is the very purpose of man's existence.

For such a dimension to be at all possible, it presumes that a couple has already begun the work of transforming their physical and emotional needs, their desires for personal gratification into a more selfless love. Unless this is already in progress, it is useless to speak of sacrament. This is why a couple must manifest, usually through a series of pre-marital inquiries, that they show sufficient maturity to consider sanctifying their relationship in this way.

Another sign of this essential quality of transformation is found in the scripture reading for the crowning service. We do not hear, as might be expected, the familiar gospel telling of Christ's teaching on marriage. Rather we hear of the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana. There an existing drink, water, was transformed by the action of Christ into an even better one. This is the image of marriage which the Christian East presents: the transformation of a human relationship into something greater by the divinizing action of Christ.

Questions For Reflection

1. According to our Tradition, what essential quality in Christian marriage makes it a mystery or sacrament?

2. What elements in the rite of this sacrament point to this essential characteristic?

3. In many churches, bride and groom exchange their own rings while in the sacramental rite the crowns are placed on them by the priest. What might this signify?

4. How would you characterize your present relationship: the one you are bringing to be transformed in the mystery of crowning?

5. If it could be transformed in any way, what would you want it to be?
From the beginning marriage was conceived of as a union of two persons becoming “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), an obvious allusion to the physical relationship involved. In the New Testament Christ recalls this sense of oneness in terms of the permanency of marriage. He opposes the system of divorce practiced by the Jews on the grounds that man and wife are one and cannot be divided by any mere legal procedure (cf. Mt 19:3-9).

All the historic Churches understand this unity to be fundamental to any spirituality of marriage. United in Christ, the Christian family is, as St. Ephrem the Syrian has said, “the perfect sacrament”. Their love for one another reflect the mutual love of the Trinity and mirror the communal nature of God, the sacred ‘family’ of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is why many Fathers understood that it was the original family in paradise, rather than any single individual, which is created in God’s image:

“God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

(Gen 1:27)

A living icon of the Trinity, the married couple is a new creation. As the Byzantine canonist Balsamon defined it, marriage is “the unity of two persons in a single substance”. A
joining of two persons on the most profound level, marriage implies permanency and indissolubility by its very nature. This sense of unity is heightened by the fact that in a sacramental marriage this relationship is one involving the Lord.

In the crowning service this oneness is proclaimed in the ritual of the sacrament when husband and wife drink together from the Common Cup of blessed wine. Eucharistic in origin, this Cup signifies the absolute unity of their life together in and with the Lord.
"Holy God, You fashioned man from dust and formed a woman from his rib, joining her to him as a helpmate like himself, for it pleased your majesty that man should not be alone on earth. Now, O Master, extend Your hand from Your holy dwelling place and join your servants to one another, for it is by You that a wife is joined to her husband. Join them together in oneness of mind; crown them in love; unite them in one flesh; grant them the fruit of their womb in the procreation of fair children, and bestow on them a blameless life. ..."

(Prayer before the Crowning)
The natural unity of husband and wife is thus transformed in this mystery. Previously one flesh on the natural level of ordinary marital relationships, they become one in respect to the life of the Spirit as well. God deals with them, no longer as two, but as one. He who proclaims their unity accepts it and deals with it as His ordinary manner of relating to them.

The spiritual life of husband and wife is now one as well as their natural life. This does not simply mean that they are meant to be faithful to one another or to share their life together. All of that is still on a natural level. Rather it suggests that all the dimensions of their life in Christ are in and for one another as well. If one receives a grace or a blessing, it is in and for the other. If there is a calling to serve the Lord in a particular way, it is given, not to one or the other, but to the two-in-one. The spectacle so often seen of one spouse busy working for the church while the other stewed resentfully at home is not the Lord’s way. God does not separate what He has joined together.

**GOD’S ORDER IN THE HOME**

The quality of this unity of husband and wife is further seen in the kind of relationship they have with one another. In describing another single Body, the Church, St. Paul frequently notes that each one has a particular function for the good of all. Not each member is an eye or a hand or a foot. Their relationship is determined by their function, not because one part is better than another.

The same image applies to the one flesh which is the married couple. Paul notes that the husband holds the headship in the family as Christ holds the headship in the Church. This is a relationship of function, not value. Just as bishops are not ‘better’ than laypeople, so too husbands are not the head of the family because they are better, or even because their sex is better, but because of function. Both must accept and respect this ordering, each in their own way.

The husband, Paul notes, exercises the headship in the family by love and self sacrifice, like Christ, avoiding resentful or nagging relationships with wife and children, and by concern for the family’s growth in the Lord. Wives are to respect this ordering by accepting the leadership of the husband, not because or only if he’s smarter or right, but because a body must have a head. Our society knows the consequences of headless families only too well. What it may not know is that families are headless because God’s order is not being followed and couples are not accepting the fact that they are one body.

Finally, the sacramental unity of husband and wife is most clearly seen in the East in its concept of the eternity of marriage. According to Byzantine tradition, the natural, earthly relationship of marriage is transformed sacramentally into an eternal one. Life in Christ is not turned on and off. It does not expire naturally. Those who abide in Christ shall never see death, and this includes the new person born in a sacramental marriage. Thus the Eastern tradition sees the marriage relationship enduring past death and into the Kingdom to come because it is in Christ.
The Eastern Christian faith in the eternal nature of this union explains its reluctance about second or third marriages. Like St. Paul (1 Cor 7:8-9), it encourages the widowed to remain as they are unless the burden of loneliness is too great. Thus the Church's rite for a subsequent marriage is much more subdued than for a first and expresses this hesitancy in its prayers.

Questions for Reflection

1. - As a couple in a Christian marriage, how do you see yourself as an icon of the Trinity?

2. - How might you as a couple express the unity of your sacramental marriage in your spiritual life?

3. - How can we relate the concept of headship in a marriage with the idea that the couple is truly one?

4. - Are you willing to explore further this aspect of the Lord's way for families?

5. - What is the basis for our seeing marriage as an eternal relationship?

6. - How does this concept influence the Eastern Church practice on second marriages?
The principal moments in the Byzantine rite of crowning are ones which most people reared in the west do not associate with a marriage ceremony at all. Most unusual is the rite of crowning itself, when husband and wife are crowned with wreaths of flowers or precious metal. This is considered the highpoint of the ceremony and it gives its name to the entire rite, which in Byzantine tradition is called the Crowning (Ar.: ikleel). The second element in this rite we should note is the procession, in which the priest leads the couple around the sacramental table. Both rites symbolize an often overlooked dimension of Christian marriage: that is is a unique and heightened example of the royal priesthood of Christians.

Crowns evoke many images for us. The martyrs are often shown in icons as crowned to represent their victory in suffering. Even today beauty queens are crowned as the sign of their victory in the pageant. Also common, of course, is the idea of rule, dominion or lordship, which comes from the days when kings and queens ruled the nations. The crowns of marriage pick up on this second theme and associate it with another image from the Scriptures. When the priest places the crowns on the heads of the husband and wife, a verse from Psalm 8 is sung, which in its original context refers to the Man and Woman in the garden at Eden: “You have crowned them, O Lord, with glory and honor and given them dominion over the works of your hands.”
Husband and wife, like Adam and Eve, find themselves at the beginning of a new creation with endless possibilities before them. Like the couple in the Genesis story, they are given dominion to exercise, a kingdom to preside over, which is their household. They are installed as co-creators with God - not only of the new life their children may bear - but also of the God filled world in which they can move and which they can bring into being about them.
In the Scriptures, kingship is always associated with priesthood. According to Genesis, Adam was the first priest as he united God and the whole creation over which he had dominion. He fulfilled a priestly role, offering the fruits of creation to God and representing Him in the world. He lost this consecrated role when he lost fellowship with God, as priesthood presupposes an intimacy with the Holy One.

The priestly role was restored to humanity and perfected in Christ. As the Divine Liturgy proclaims, Christ is the One "who offers and is offered", the only true priest and mediator who offers Himself as the sacrifice. Christ bridges the gap between God and man - the function of a priest - in His own person. Reuniting God and man, He thus restored the lost sacredness of humanity, the intimacy with God which it had in the beginning.

All Christians, we know, exercise a share in Christ's royal priesthood through our christening. Each believer is called to sanctify his or her corner of the world, raising it to God and transforming it with divine love. All that we touch should be elevated, offered and somehow transfigured because of the presence of God in us. This is especially true of the husband and wife in marriage. Intimately one as they are with Christ, they have the vocation to perform the priestly duties of proclaiming God's presence and making offerings to Him in their corner of creation, which is their family.

The marriage ritual in the Byzantine tradition strongly emphasizes the priesthood of husband and wife. The procession around the sacramental table mentioned earlier is actually taken from the rite of the sacrament of holy orders. Men being ordained as bishops,
priests or deacons are led in the same way around the Holy Table while the same hymns are sung. This startling identification of marriage and the sacramental priesthood is meant to impress upon us in no uncertain terms the priestly role of husband and wife.

Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways can you see yourselves as co-creators with God in the garden of your home?

2. How does the rite of Crowning point to the kingship of the Christian home?

3. To what aspect of marital spirituality does the procession around the sacramental table point?

4. How do you see yourselves as fulfilling the role of priests in your home?
A living icon of the Trinity and a mystical image of the Church, the family is a community of believers gathered in the name of Christ. The family is in fact a miniature Church, as St. John Chrysostom tells us, a company of priests because of their christening.

As a domestic Church, the family is called to exercise the same functions exercised by the Church at large. Often these aspects of the Church’s life are identified by their original Greek designations, *liturgia* (worship), *didache* (teaching), *koinonia* (fellowship) and *diakonia* (service).

Each Christian, married or not, is called to personal *worship* in the depth of his own being. The Christian family, however, has the added call to worship together. Family prayer, under the leadership of husband and wife, is the principal expression of this aspect of the priesthood of marriage. One of the first things an Eastern Christian couple should do in a new home would be to set up an icon corner where common prayer could be offered. In this way the parents will offer the example to their children as well as their own sacrifice of praise.

Every Christian parent can expect to exercise a *teaching* role in countless aspects of family life. In the formal setting of family prayer time the couple could share their insights into Scripture readings or the meaning of the day’s festival. Likewise, in the many ‘teachable moments’ of daily life, they will have ample opportunities to follow the biblical precept to bring up their children “with the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4).
The Church is meant to be a place of fellowship where brothers and sisters in Christ enjoy increased communication and interdependence. The family, as a domestic Church, has the same calling, and the husband and wife as its priests are the ones meant to make it happen. A continual deepening of the relationship between one another and the other family members is a prime task for husband and wife. Children especially should be learning to relate to others in the family atmosphere: an ability which seems increasingly difficult in modern society.

Finally the Church is called to service, the readiness to share what it has with anyone. In the domestic Church it is the children of the family who are the first to be served. Parents put all that they are and everything they have at the service of their children, sacrificing their own pleasures and comfort for them. What they offer becomes a truly divine service, sanctifying those who receive of it as they learn to love from having received it.

**ENOUGH VS. ABUNDANCE**

However hospitality, to the Christian, must extend beyond the confines of the family circle. As Christ said, "If you love only those who love you, what merit is there in that?" (Mt 5:46) Christians exercise to the fullest their domestic priesthood when their home is open to others in the spirit of Christ. The Christian community should be especially welcome as was the case in the early Church where people put all they had "at the service of the saints" (1 Cor 16:15).

A Christian home, then, should be a place where guests are the rule rather than the exception, as people use what they have been given as a priestly act.

In the domestic priesthood, any abundance of this world's goods should be seen as a bestowal by God for the purpose of hospitality. At the crowning service we pray:

"Fill their house with grain, wine and oil and every good thing that they may have something to give to those in need."

(First Prayer of Crowning)

In this way the Church proclaims, at the very beginning of their marriage that such gifts are bestowed, not for the exclusive gratification of the recipients, but for the good of all. The wedding service, and the whole tradition of our Church, thus echoes St. Paul when he prays that his people always have enough of everything and a surplus for good works (cf. 2 Cor 9:8). Whatever is more than we need for a normal life is understood in terms of these prayers: given that we may share them with others.

Through this conjugal service the family members participate in a school of spirituality whose daily lessons teach the path of God which is love. They learn what it means to put others first and to sacrifice their own wants for
others. It was the prospect of a lifetime of such self-giving that prompted Chrysostom to compare a family to a monastery, and not unfavorably:

“Perfect spouses are not inferior to monks. They can manifest virtues in a much greater way than those who dwell in monasteries.”

In these ways the domestic priesthood of husband and wife indicated in the crowning ritual finds completion and fulfillment. Husband and wife become the kingly priests who offer their household to God and see it transformed in the process into a vehicle of His presence.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you feel about family prayer or study together?

2. What might you need to do in order to deepen communication and strengthen your relationship?

3. Would you be willing to participate in a sharing group with other newlyweds such as yourself to help build up one another and your relationship?

4. How does the idea of Christian hospitality in an always-open house strike you?