

# **The Importance of the Holy Matrimony's Secret in the Liturgical Life of the Orthodox Church**

**Vasile MIRON**

*Arhim.Prof. PhD, Ovidius University from Constanta, Romania,  
vasile1960miron@yahoo.com*

**ABSTRACT:** The wedding is that Holy Mystery in which, through the priest's prayers and blessing, the grace of the Holy Spirit is given to those who come together as one through the union of the wedding (man and woman), thus, helping them build a Christian family.

**KEYWORDS:** sacrament, love, union, holiness, help, procreation

## **The marriage celebrant**

This is the Bishop and the Priest. The old teachings say that the priest can officiate even the matrimony of his son or his daughter, if there is no other priest available, and the hieromonks can officiate the service of the matrimony, even though, in the past, the old teachings clearly forbade this on the account that they had sworn a life of chastity and, in consequence, they weren't allowed to take part at the ritual dance or at the wedding party (The Pravila of Matei Basarab 1962, 149).

## **The receivers of the Mystery**

The subjects or the receivers of this Mystery are the man and the woman (both adults), who willingly agreed to make a home. Besides the legal and canonical conditions requested for the creation of a family (age, physical ability, etc.), the two grooms have to be orthodox Christians. Built on the decisions of the holy canons, the Orthodox Church has never allowed mixed matrimony. The canons are very clear about it. The resolution of canon 72 of Trulan Synod (692) firmly says that: the orthodox man is not allowed to marry a heretical woman nor the orthodox woman to marry a heretic man, and if someone does so, the marriage will be considered null (Floca 1991, 138). Mixed marriages, between an orthodox partner and one that is not a Christian are approved by the bishop on the condition that, the ones that are not orthodox, before the wedding, to fulfill the formalities of joining the Orthodox Church (the approval of the bishop and the customs of joining the Orthodoxy, as written in the Molitfelnic). In this regard, the Orthodox Church completely submits to the rules imposed by the holy canons. Thus, the Rules of Procedure of trial and disciplinary courts of the Romanian Orthodox Church (1953, 63), art. 47 says: "Clergy must officiate the Secret of Matrimony only between orthodox people. People belonging to another cult must fulfill the formalities of joining the Orthodoxy, before the Wedding. The priests that will not respect these rules will be punished and sent to a monastery until transfer, excepting the situation in which the priest had the acceptance of the bishop. This is the official position of our Church, and the priests must strictly obey it. When performing the matrimony, the priest must make sure that the civil and religious rules are followed and not perform the service without

the marriage certificate issued by the City Hall: otherwise, he will be punished by rebuke (if he did it unconsciously or recklessly) or by suspension of service for a certain amount of time, if he did it consciously.

### **The Godparents**

At the engagement and at the wedding the grooms are accompanied by their godparents. They are witnesses and endorsers of the strong, moral and spiritual link of the grooms and their mutual commitments, being, at the same time, like their parents, counselors and mentors. The godparents must be orthodox and older than the grooms; usually, the godparents from the baptism or their children. During the engagement and wedding, they touch the rings and the crowns of the grooms together with the priest, to bear witness that they are partakers at the holy act of the wedding and that they will be like spiritual parents and mentors of the grooms.

### **Where the wedding takes place**

The wedding is celebrated into the church, the House of God, so that it can be done in front of God and with His blessing, because the Church is the place where the other Holy Secrets are celebrated. On the other hand, the church is also known to be the place where Christians gather and that is why the wedding must be done in front of the people; this way, the grooms can share their joy with everyone. In private houses, the wedding can be celebrated only in very exceptional situations and for very good reasons.

### **When the wedding takes place**

The weddings are done in holydays (usually on Sundays, right after the Holy Liturgy, following the indications in the Molitfelnic). In the Church's learning, from the ninth command, one can find the periods of time and the days when no weddings can be made: the four fasts and all the isolated fast days (Wednesday, Friday, the 14th of September – The Rising of the Holy Cross, the 29th of August – the Cutting of John the Baptizer's head, the 5th of January - Epiphany's Eve), because parties and wedding cheerfulness are in contrast with the atmosphere of prayer, restraint and sadness, specific to a fast. That is why there are no weddings in the Bright Week, since the Birth of the Virgin Mary until Epiphany, in Whitsunday, on all the Royal Feasts and the day before them, whereas the joy and the party of a wedding tempt us to ignore the significance and the joy of all these great holidays and turn them into worldly celebrations (1996, 281).

### **The content of the religious service**

a) The Engagement. The wedding service is preceded by the engagement, a way through which the Church gives its blessing to an old tradition, the mutual understanding of two young people to form a family. When time is right, a table is set in the middle of the church and on it there are: The Holly Cross, The Holly Gospel, candlestick with candles, the Holly Crowns and a glass of wine.

When the grooms come to church accompanied by their godparents, they are welcomed by the priest, who is dressed with the epitrahil and the phelonion. The priest takes the candles, blesses them and he gives them to the godparents, then he takes the grooms' rings and places them on the Holly Gospel: the ring that is engraved with the

initials of the man is placed on the right and the other one is placed on the other side. The priest gives the blessing over the heads of the grooms three times and after censuring around the table and for the wedding guests he comes in front of the table and gives the blessing: “Blessed is our Lord...”. Then he tells the Great Litany which includes special requests for those who get engaged. After the ending of the request he reads the two prayers for the blessing of the engagement, the first one out loud and the other one secretly. Then, taking the ring that is placed on the right side, the priest makes the sign of the Holy Cross across the man’s face, saying thrice: “ God’s servant becomes engaged (N)( he touches the forehead of the man with the ring) with God’s servant (N) (he touches the forehead of the woman with the ring), in the name of the Father (forehead), of the Son (chest),and of the Holy Spirit (the shoulders); at the third time he adds : “Now and forever...” and then he places the ring on the groom’s finger. He does the same thing with the bride’s ring. Next, the priest reads the prayer of sanctioning the engagement, blessing the grooms when saying their names. After that, he reads the triple Litany. The ending of the engagement is done only when the wedding doesn’t follow.

b) The wedding. If the wedding follows right after the engagement, then, after the engagement prayer, the Psalm 127 is read with the refrain: “Glory to Thee, our Lord, glory to Thee.” Meanwhile, the priest censes around the table, the grooms and the wedding guests, then he kisses the Holy Cross and the Holy Gospel, making the sign of the Holy Cross above the wedding crowns with the Holy Gospel and he says: “Blessed is the father’s Kingdom...”. He places the Holy Gospel on the table, he puts the wedding crowns on it and says the great Litany, with special requests for the grooms, followed by the three blessing prayers of the grooms. As he reads the third prayer, at the words:”... Unite your servant (N) with your servant (N)...” he unites the right hand of the groom with the right hand of the bride and he carries on with the prayer. Once this prayer is ended, the priest takes the groom’s wedding crown and he makes the sign of the Holy Cross over his face, saying thrice: :God’s servant is marrying (N) ( he touches the forehead of the man with the wedding crown) God’s servant (N) (He touches the forehead of the woman with the wedding crown), in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, adding after the third time :” Now and forever..”. The groom kisses the wedding crown and, the priest and the godfather place the crown on the groom’s head. The priest does the same with the bride’s wedding crown. The priest blesses the grooms thrice while the choir sings: “Our Lord, with honor and glory crown them”.

While the Apostle is being read, the priest censes and after that he reads the Gospel facing the grooms. When he is finished, he kisses the Holy Gospel and he uses It to bless the people that are present. A triple Litany follows, a prayer and the Litany of requests, Our Heavenly Father, the wine blessing prayer, from which the priest allows the grooms taste three times each, while the choir sings: “The salvation cup I will take...”. Taking the censer, the priest walks around the table three times with the grooms and the godfathers while the following hymns are sang: “Isaie is dancing...”, “Holy martyrs ...”, and “Glory to Thee our Lord...” (meanwhile, in some churches, people through candies, as a symbol of the richness of the Holy Ghost’s gifts that the grooms receive now that the wedding is blessed). After the circle around the table is done, the groom makes three worships, places his hands on the Holy Gospel while bending his head, and the priest with the godfather take the wedding crown from his head saying: “Thee shall be worshipped as Abraham...”, then the groom kisses the crown and places it on the Holy Gospel. He does the same with the bride when he says: “You bride shall be blessed like Sara”.... . The priest now reads the two blessing prayers of weds, gives a speech if he wishes followed by the end of the ceremony. The

choir sings "Happy birthday..." while the weds, the godparents, the parents and the relatives kiss the Holy Gospel, The Saint Cross and the wedding crowns, receiving at the same time the priest's congratulations.

c) The prayer in the eighth day since the wedding

After eight days from the wedding, weds come to church, kneel in the narthex and the priest reads them a blessing prayer.

d) The molitfelnic also contains the ordinance of a second wedding, for those who get married a second time; this is done after a very special ordinance. The engagement is one with the wedding; at the beginning, the little blessing is given and the prayers that are read contain requests of repentance and absolution, because the second marriage was seen, in the past, as a concession made by the Church for the weakness of the human nature. Since the placing of the weddings the ordinance is the same as at the first wedding. The same happens with the third wedding. Nowadays, because this kind of marriages is quite frequent, the Church had to bless them in order not to allow its spiritual sons to live in sin. Long time ago, the second and the third wedding were allowed by the Church through stewardship as an exception for the sinful ways of the human nature, and the grooms were forbidden the Holy Communion and submitted to canons of repentance (Nițu 1907, 119). The ordinance of the second wedding has more the aspect of a blessing religious service than the aspect of a Holy Mystery.

### **The symbolic-mystical significance of the ordinance of the Holy Matrimony and its importance in the promoting religious and moral family life**

The service of the wedding is preceded by that of the engagement, which is a service through which the commitment of weds is blessed. The matrimony is the secret that sanctifies the natural connection between spouses, turning it into a pure and perfect moral connection, like Christ and the Church. The ring that is put on weds' finger symbolizes their uninterrupted link with Christ and the Church and, since the circle symbolizes the eternity, he also represents the endless love and the mutual fidelity that the plighted lovers promised to each other (Fecioru 1982a, 218-220). The ring also represents the unity and resistance of the matrimony. The lighted candles that the godfathers keep symbolize the purity and the holiness of the life that the grooms have to live, according to what the Savior says: "This is how your light should light before people and seeing your good deeds he should glorify our heavenly Father." They also symbolize the light of the human grace (Cherasie 1865, 181) that unites, strengthens and brings to perfection the moral and religious life of the grooms. Changing the rings means communication and the sharing of thoughts, intentions, ideas and feelings.

Psalm 127, whose lines are sung before the wedding ceremony, describes the blessed life of pious husbands. The ordinance of the Holy Matrimony begins with the big blessing: Blessed is the Kingdom", through the crossed mark with the Holy Gospel, because the purpose of the mystery is to establish the Kingdom of God into the hearts and lives of the couple, to help them live in peace, harmony, understanding and love since, The kingdom of God is justice, joy and peace with the Holy Ghost (Romani 14: 17). The life of the newlyweds is building Trinitarian (husband-wife-children). It is meant to be perfected in the communion of love following the trinity life model. That is why, in a prayer from the service, the priest says: "... unite them with the Holy union that comes from you". In the three prayers from the ordinance's beginning of the Holy secret of matrimony, the priest asks God to bless the wedding like he blessed the one from Cana Galileii (II Ioan 1:12) and the weddings of the patriarchs from the Old Testament: Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joseph, etc. Each wedding, secretly represents the wedding from Cana Galileii and is filled with joy and Godly blessing.

The third prayer contains the epiclesis expressed by the words:” Reach out Your unseen hand from the height of your Holy establishment and unite Your slave (X) with your slave (Y), since You brought the man and woman together...”. At this very moment, the priest unites the groom’s right hand with the bride’s right hand. This is the moment when the link between the man and the woman is established, because, “when their right hands are brought together they show that they have united into Christ and became as one and that the man took the woman from the Church, through the priest’s hand...” (Cherasie 1865, 180). The free union of the two spouses, sanctified by divine grace shows their new way of life (in common). So, marital love is essentially strong”, since the grace of the Holy Ghost makes from it the unbreakable union of love” (Evdokimov 1996, 321), helping the two spouses get over their state of seclusion and egocentric isolation and give themselves to each other. The thing that is blessed in this Secret is Love and it receives the gift of the Holy Ghost (Evdokimov 1994, 53). Love is true when it brings the spouses closer in order to unite them with God. This is the reason why the disciple says: “This secret is big; and I say into Church and Christ”. (Efeseni 5:32). “Only when weds sacrifice themselves for the other one, the wedding touches the depths of a Divine Secret and becomes creative” (Galeriu 1960, 494). On this purpose, Saint Clementin Alexandrin asks himself: “Who are the two or three gathered in the name of Christ and in the middle of whom there is God? Aren’t the man and the woman that united into God?” (Fecioru 1982b, 216).

The wedding crowns that are placed on the heads of the grooms are the symbol of their victory over the bodily passions (Saint Simeon of Tesalonic, 179). It means that the grooms kept their chastity and they appear before the Holy Shrine pure and righteous, and for these virtues, the Church crowns them with royal crown like the emperors that returned victorious from war, with laurels and glorious trophies. As John Chrysostom says: “the couple, at the wedding, is adorned with crowns, symbol of their victory, that they are undefeated and that they come near the wedding bed invincible by pleasures” (Chrysostom 1911, 79).

The Apostle that is read at the wedding service (Efeseni 5: 20-33) renders the mystery and the significance of the Secret, comparing the union between a man and a woman with the union of Christ with the Church and advising the future husbands to love each other with the same holy love that Christ had when He sacrificed Himself for His Church.

The Gospel reveals to us the wonder made by our Savior at the wedding from Cana Galileii since Christ presides all the Christian weddings just like he presided the wedding from Cana Galileii” (Evdokimov 1994, 161). The glass of wine, that is blessed by the priest and from which the grooms have a sip, symbolizes the joy and cheerfulness of the wedding and the common destiny of the grooms. The sip from the glass and the piece of bread means that the grooms are part of the joys and troubles of life (Saint Simeon of Tesalonic, 180). This ritual reminds of the communion of the grooms with the Sacraments because, in the old times, the wedding was done after the Holy Liturgy is over (Saint Simeon of Tesalonic, 182).

The circling around the table for three times (the grooms and the godparents lead by the priest) symbolizes the fact that their life is build around Christ embodied by the Holy Gospel from that table and shows us that their marriage is eternal since the circle is the symbol of eternity. The three hymns that are sung during the ritual dance (“Isaia is dancing...”, “Holy martyrs...”, “Glory to Thee Christ...”) expresses the spiritual joy that the Church lives when a new family is made and blessed. The Church wishes for this union to be made under the ghost of abstinence, following the pattern of Virgin Mary to fulfill its destiny, also having as their ideal the spirit of sacrifice of the martyrs and of the apostles, if they want to be part of Christ and His Saints and wish to be

crowned in Heavens. These hymns teach the grooms to keep the unity of faith and purity in order to make from their home a micro-church of God.

**As a general conclusion** of the things written above, we can say that the Orthodox Church, through the ceremony of the matrimony, shares the grace and blessing of God to the newlyweds for the fulfillment of the three important objectives of the marriage: the birth of sons (Genesis 1:28), the mutual help in the name of love (Genesis 2:18) and the channeling and disciplining the passionate instincts of the human nature since it is well known that the family represents an environment for the practice of moral and Christian virtues and a way of abstinence from bodily passions (I Corinthians 7:2,29). The wedding, for Christians, not only unites two beings but, it also unites two souls. The daily life of the spouses progresses on the way of the moral good, only if the two of them are trying to become better than the other one, “because the unfaithful man is blessed through the faithful woman and the unfaithful woman is blessed through the unfaithful man” (I Corinthians 7:14).

The man, in the house, is the emperor, and the woman his empress. The man is the foreign minister and the woman is the minister of interior. They both are very important factors in building and developing the institution of the family. One supports the family and the other one takes care of it.

Through the wedding, the heirs of God's Kingdom come to life: “Let the children come to Me and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those that are like them” (Mathew 19:14), said the Savior.

Through the birth, the raising and education of children, the parents are raised to the honor and dignity of being collaborators with God at the work of renewing the world and the instauration of God's Kingdom. The wedding is creation. The parents are creators. The wedding, through Christ is joy, life, love and the beginning of eternal life, if it is built on true love, faith, on the fulfillment of Christian deeds and the holy commands of Jesus Christ. If it is built on material interests, on social status or bodily beauty and not on spiritual beauty, the union of the wedding can break.

Only when the spouses want the spiritual progress and the promotion of moral values, through good deeds and keeping God's word, family becomes a place of virtues, a true church where Christ reigns, the Sanctifier of the secret wedding and law maker of the bodily wedding. The purpose of marriage can only be reached if we see the wedding not as a pleasure, but as love, not in a selfish spirit, but generous, not as a party and worldly pleasure but as a holy joy, as a beginning of moral perfection and a way of inheriting the Heavens.

The ritual of the wedding service ends with the grooms' oaths on the Holy Gospel and on the Holy Cross and the blessing of this promise made in the name of the Holy Trinity, from which they ask help and blessing for the achievement of worldly goods and the delight of the eternal goods. “The supreme goal of marriage is for the husband and wife to help each other to enter the Heavens. The Secret of the wedding has no other purpose than this one” (Codrescu 2002, 166).

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