

Homily on the “Sacrament of Marriage” -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

His Grace, Michael – Bishop of New York & the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

Question #1: What is the purpose of the Sacrament of Marriage?

Answer: For Orthodox Christians, there are two “bless-able” paths in life: marriage, between a man and a woman; or consecrated celibacy, which is most fully expressed in monasticism. It is within these two paths, or vocations, that we can cultivate the selfless, self-giving, self-emptying, love for the other which is the prerequisite of salvation – that is an example of the self-giving, self-emptying love for the other that was demonstrated by Our Lord when He sacrificed His life for our salvation. Indeed, the goal of marriage, for any married Christian seeking to walk in faithfulness to the 2,000 year witness of the Lord, the Apostles, the Scriptures, and the Saints – is nothing short of the working out of your salvation, and assisting in the salvation of your spouse. The husband and the wife achieve this by working toward an ever deepening relationship of self-emptying love, within what St. Paul calls the “Mystery” – the Sacrament - of Marriage. They are to live together in love and faith, having as an example the love of Christ for His Church ... and provide in every way for the welfare of the children they may be blessed with by God.

Question #2: Can an Orthodox Christian marry someone who is not an Orthodox Christian?

Answer: Typically an Orthodox Christian may marry a non-Orthodox Christian who has been baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – with the recommendation of the priest and the blessing of the Bishop. Such a so-called “mixed marriage”, is not the ideal of the Church. Rather, it is a concession by the Church to the fact that, very often, Orthodox Christians fall in love with non-Orthodox Christians! The desire of the Church, however, is always to bring those who are not yet sacramentally received in the fullness of the Orthodox Faith, into that fullness. And this means that the Orthodox spouse must live the Orthodox life as an example to the spouse who is not yet Orthodox ... that they should worship together in an Orthodox parish ... that they should raise their children in the Orthodox faith and daily practice. The studies of sociologists unconnected with the Church show that, of all the bonds that strengthen a marriage, none is stronger than the bond of a common, practiced faith between a husband and a wife. So, even if this bond is not present at the beginning of a courtship or of a marriage, the couple, together with their priest, should strive to create that bond of a common, practiced, Orthodox faith.

Question #3: In the Orthodox wedding service, what do the crowns mean?

Answer: The crowns worn by a couple in the Orthodox wedding are crowns of martyrdom. In getting married, we die to the temptations and distractions of the outside world. We say, to God, to the Church, and to the devil, “I choose this person to the exclusion of all others to spend the rest of my life with.” Martyrdom literally means “witness.” And so, the martyr crowns of marriage also mean that the husband

and wife witness the self-emptying love of Christ to one another. Couples can witness this radical love together every day of their marriage. Three simple ways would be: 1) Every day, exchange at least one meaningful kiss; that means never let a day go by without saying “I love you” or as St. Paul tells us, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). 2) Show your spouse you’re thinking of her, or of him, while you are away at the office, or at school, or spending the day with friends ... either with a gift, with flowers, with a note or a text message... because if your mind isn’t on him or her... it’s on somebody else. And 3) Pray together every night before you go to sleep. And that prayer should include asking one another for forgiveness – just as we do in our Church the Sunday before Great Lent begins. We never want human weakness to come between our love for one another.

Question #4: St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians that is read in the Orthodox wedding service says wives must be subject to their husbands. Does the Church really hold to this outdated viewpoint?

Answer: The vision expressed by the Church in that reading, is the vision of the whole reading. We have to listen to the end! Yes, the wife is called to be obedient to her husband as the Church is to Christ. But, think about it: Did Christ lead by intimidation ... abuse ... coercion? Never! He led by humble, loving, sometimes firm but always radically selfless word and example – up to, and including, dying for His Bride – the Church. Continuing in that reading, we hear, Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her. A Christian husband is always the leader of the couple, and of the family – by the words he says and doesn’t say; by the way he spends or does not spend his time, money, talents and affections. If a woman sees in her husband an image of that Christ-like love – that willingness to die for his wife and his family whether in the small daily sacrifices or even in the literal, ultimate sacrifice if need be ... who wouldn’t follow a leader like that?

Question #5: Why is the Orthodox marriage service missing so many parts we modern people are used to like vows, scripture readings chosen by the couple, and the phrase “till death do us part”?

Answer: It is true that the couple has very little to say either about the wedding, or during the wedding! That is because, as with all Orthodox Christian liturgical worship, it is not about us. It is about God. We come to church to stand in God’s presence ... to hear His Word ... to be taught, corrected, shaped like clay in His image – not in ours. The wedding is no exception. The two Scripture readings are the same at every Orthodox Christian wedding: the Epistle to the Ephesians, where St. Paul gives his most detailed explanation of who the husband and the wife are to be for one another ... and the Gospel story of Christ’s very first public miracle: the changing of water into wine, which took place at – where else? – a wedding. And, the Orthodox wedding does not include the phrase, “till death do us part”... because we reject the notion that death parts us! The unique love forged between a husband and

wife, deepened by the grace of God, in this lifetime, will be perfected in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Question #6: Does the Orthodox Church allow divorce and remarriage?

Answer: The Orthodox Church acknowledges that sometimes because of human weakness, sometimes because of sin, marriage relationships break down. While our theology does not require an attempt to annul a broken marriage, still the Church treats the prospect of remarriage with great care. Christ speaks sternly of divorce and remarriage; yet St. Paul gives a glimpse into the mercy of the Church when he writes, “It is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:9). The breaking down of a relationship which God intended to last forever, is a great tragedy ... but as the vessel of Christ’s mercy, the Church offers a way of pursuing that path of marriage again for those who demonstrate – by their faith, their recognition of past sins, and the sincerity of their repentance – that they are serious about making a new marriage work, unto their salvation. The Service of Second Marriage reflects in its very words the sober, penitent attitude of those entering into marriage again.

Question #7: Does the Orthodox Church have anything to say about preparing for marriage?

Answer:

Absolutely – and it starts with dating. You are looking for someone with whom you are compatible not for a night, not for a summer, but forever. Someone with whom, after the first sparks of physical attraction have cooled, you will be able to strive to love in the same self-emptying way that Christ loves us. As I mentioned earlier, this would presuppose someone who either shares, or is open to sharing, your commitment to the Orthodox vision of marriage and your participation in the Sacramental life of the Orthodox Church.

A word about living together before you are married – don’t. It robs God of the opportunity to give you the blessings He has in store for your marriage – and, sociologists have found that cohabitation before marriage significantly increases the likelihood of divorce.

When you become engaged – or even before that – tell your priest. Talk with your fiancé and your priest, together. Get your priest’s direction on choosing a date, a time, and the persons who will carry your crowns and act as your sponsors. And – it is vital that you invest the time to participate in pre-marital counseling sessions with your priest, to learn more about the Lord’s vision and His expectations for your marriage, and to spend time together reflecting on the histories, strengths, challenges, anxieties, and hopes that each of you brings to the marriage. Studies show that pre-marital counseling results in marriages that endure.

In conclusion: In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we read: “A three-stranded cord is not easily broken” (Eccl. 4:12). For the Fathers, this means that a marriage is not easily broken if the husband and the wife unite themselves and their love unto the Lord!

My prayer is that these brief reflections have been helpful in understanding the joy and life that can be experienced in Orthodox Christian marriage ... and for those of you who are married, I pray that God will bless your marriage as He blessed the marriage of Cana in Galilee.

