

The Mystery of Marriage by Fr. Meletios Webber

It is perhaps no accident that Holy Matrimony is the one rite of the Church that is actually called a “mystery” in the Holy Scriptures. The presence of Jesus at the wedding in Cana is, in the tradition of the Church, indication enough that marriage is something wonderful and something to be treasured, a “great mystery” (Ephesians 5:32).

We need always to bear in mind that a large number of the most important commentators on the Orthodox life have been monastic men and women. It is hardly surprising that when monastics are writing for other monks and nuns, they tend to praise the virtues of chastity and celibacy and to be on guard against any possible infringement of those virtues. Nevertheless, the experience of the Church as a whole has never suggested that the monastic state is somehow spiritually superior to that of married people, and the theology of the Mysteries guarantees that the path to sanctity is open to the married person and the single person alike.

Marriage and Society

Perhaps the most interesting fact about marriage is that, without the help of God, it cannot work. What couples are trying to achieve is impossible, unless the grace of God is allowed to help.

Certainly, if marriage was difficult in times past, it is all but impossible now. There are many reasons for this. The vision of what marriage is all about has changed considerably since the Church was born over two thousand years ago. Even when we assume that certain things have remained constant—that people fall in love, that they subconsciously seek to prolong the species by having children—other enormous changes have taken place, mainly because of economic and sociological factors that have little to do with the experience of the Church, and more to do with society in general.

The immediate ancestor of Christian marriage is Jewish marriage, and the focus of Jewish marriage is to do with contracts. Two entire families are bound to each other through the man and the woman getting married. It is important to specify exactly what the financial and social implications of the marriage union are. This forms both a spiritual and secular backdrop to the experience of the Orthodox Church.

Another important factor is that almost everything Christian theology has to say about marriage and the family assumes the context of the extended family. The so-called “nuclear” family so common today is a modern invention, dating more or less from the time of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The trend away from the extended family continues today in those countries (which appear to be many) in which people, particularly young people, are leaving villages and going to look for work in the towns and cities. The factors causing this drift seem to be entirely economic, since it is probably true that it is easier to earn a living in a town than

in the countryside. I well remember, many years ago, showing Montana to someone from California, who commented that there was no money to be made in Montana—there were simply not enough people there. Many young Montanans appear to agree—with their feet, if not in their hearts.

However, there are other important factors in the urban migration, some of which are not so obvious. People are actually abandoning a situation in which everyone knows them in favor of a situation where it is possible to be completely anonymous.

I experienced the lack of anonymity on a basic level when I was sent to live in the Monastery of St. John on Patmos. Having been born in a large city, I was used to living in a situation where most of the people I passed on the street on a daily basis were total strangers. On Patmos, not only was I an outsider, but everyone on the island had known everyone else on the island since they were born. I could not do or say anything without everyone seemingly getting to know about it. When I made a purchase in the village store, the other monks seemed to know all about what I had bought before I got back to the monastery. They were not being particularly intrusive, no matter how I felt about it. They were simply living their vision of everyday life, which included knowing almost everything about the lives of those around them.

Escape from this kind of situation looks attractive at first, as does any indication of personal autonomy and freedom. You go to the city, and no one knows or particularly cares what you get up to. After a while, however, a person can begin to notice that in this situation there is also no silent support, no caring. In the village, the interference of relatives and other villagers might be irksome. When everyone knows everyone else's business, tensions are bound to exist. However, in the city, when a problem comes along, there are no concerned neighbors and there is no hidden network of caring; in the city, people are expected to sink or swim on their own. In a real crisis, state agencies and curious neighbors are of little use compared with the safety net provided by village life. And village life provides support in everyday matters as well. In a village, childcare is almost never an issue. In a city, it is a major problem, underlying many of the difficulties faced by couples, generally in the earlier years of marriage when other issues also appear difficult.

Anonymity allows people to be more courageous in the ways they differ from their fellow citizens, and it may be partly for that reason that so many changes are occurring in people's lifestyles in the modern world. Change may or may not be good, but it always carries anxiety in its wake.

The answer to some of the problems posed by this sense of disintegration consists not in forcing people into lives of misery based on the model of the nuclear family, but in reviewing the importance of the extended family, and in adapting that as a model for community life in the future. It is likely that any new form of extended family will be different from the old, traditional one, since the older pattern is largely based on rural life, and the majority of human beings are no longer able to choose the rural environment.

The nuclear family is, unfortunately, a very difficult standard to live by. In an extended family, the various tensions that arise in normal family life tend to be diffused among its members. Sons and daughters are parented as much by grandparents, uncles, and aunts as by their own parents, who may be out working most of the time. In particular, the various problems Freud predicts as normative—boys with their fathers, daughters with their mothers—are made of less importance in the extended family, where it is possible for a boy to escape a source of constant conflict (perhaps with a father) and seek out the less “dangerous” company and counsel of a grandfather, an uncle, or even a cousin.

Tensions between the married couple are also magnified and exaggerated by placing that couple in isolation in a little box together with their children and all that they own. There is no escape, little room to retreat, and no place to hide. It is ironic, but largely true, that the nuclear family is designed to explode.

Place on top of this almost impossible situation a number of highly unrealistic expectations, as fostered in modern customs and traditions, and the situation becomes a great deal worse.

The commonly held belief that people get married because they are “in love” with each other makes marriage more difficult, not less. The fairy-tale romance followed by the “perfect” wedding and honeymoon are often viewed as the “happily ever after” ending of children’s tales. The reality is that courtship and wedding are simply a prelude—often a pleasant one—to the hard work to come. Infatuation, the state of being in love, is not designed to last forever. But often couples who stop being in love with each other assume that they made a mistake, and they should not have married in the first place.

Love, by anyone’s standard, is not essentially a feeling, but a decision. Feelings are wonderful and meaningful and poetic and sometimes contribute to a peak experience in our lives. However, they are also vapid, transitory, and often untrustworthy in conveying reality. The eye of the lover smitten with the beloved is not an eye that sees straight.

Genuine love that can sustain a lifelong relationship actually starts where infatuation leaves off. At that point, the fantasy of seeking for idealized happiness has disappeared, and it is slowly replaced by a more realistic expectation in which the process of love itself is manifested.

Another difficulty confronted by couples getting married is simply that marriage is now much easier to dissolve than was the case in earlier times. The statistics are not particularly helpful when a couple comes to a point where nothing less than hard work will keep the marriage going. When effort is called for, it is not helpful to see other marriages falling apart left and right.

Two people planning to get married have to examine their expectations carefully. Each will come to the marriage with an image of what marriage should be like—often based either on their view of their parents’ marriage, or the very opposite of their parents’ marriage. People assume that their partners have exactly the same view of marriage as

they themselves do, even when they know that this is extremely unlikely. The final, sometimes fatal, expectation is that once married, people will have the right and the ability to change their partner to suit their own needs. In reality, this never happens.

This picture I am painting is purposefully bleak, because I feel it is better to go into marriage knowing that it is going to be difficult. In fact, marriage as we know it is impossible without God's help. The Mystery here is not an optional extra, but the very stuff of which a good marriage is made.

At this point, a brief history of marriage in the Church might be helpful. For a long period, marriage was regarded as a civil act, not one of particular spiritual significance. What was of significance was that the newly married Christian couple came to the church and there together took part in the Mystery of Holy Communion, both partners receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord. That action sealed the civil marriage in terms of the Church. The couple brought their decision to church, and it was blessed by taking part in the supreme experience of Christian living.

Sometimes we assume that a big decision, such as getting married, is somehow different from a small decision, such as choosing which shoes to wear. Unfortunately, that does not appear to be the case. No matter how complex a matter might be, and no matter how far-reaching its consequences, a decision is a decision. As human beings possess finite wisdom, no human decision is likely to be entirely correct or entirely wrong. Indeed, to be perfectly sure that one has made a good decision in any event is not a good sign.

A decision almost always carries with it a sense of regret, and the decision to get married is just as likely to carry this sense as is the decision to buy a particular refrigerator or automobile. If people are looking inside themselves for the "perfect" decision in getting married, they are setting themselves up for a ludicrously high set of expectations. These are likely to be dashed at the first sign of difficulty, causing the marriage to be abandoned when it has hardly begun.

A marriage relationship is, and remains, a matter of choice on a daily basis. A once-and-for-all attitude, commonly held in a Western setting where marriage is based on vows, is foreign to Orthodox life. In the Orthodox setting, a marriage is created each day, not fashioned at the wedding ceremony. The wedding ceremony is the Church's blessing on the work that starts there and then, not a standard of rigid determination pronounced on a work completed.

The Marriage Service

The Orthodox wedding ceremony generally consists of two separate services joined together. Betrothal (engagement) is one thing and marriage (wedding) is another. Why it should be so is lost in the mists of time, but most cultures seem to have this two-stage process of getting married. Since marriage is older than Christian tradition, and indeed the Church seems to have been little concerned with it until comparatively late in her history, both betrothal and marriage have been incorporated into the blessings the

Orthodox Church liberally dispenses in the name of God to those who seek them.

In modern usage, the two services are celebrated together, with an engagement blessing of a fairly informal nature taking place weeks or months earlier outside the church building, and then being repeated officially at the start of the marriage service. It appears some confusion existed in the minds of some laypeople as to when the marriage became official, and since this matter has serious legal and social implications, the Church decided to solve the problem by putting the two services together. Now everyone knows that the couple is not actually married until they have taken part in both ceremonies.

The first service, the betrothal, has as its central theme the blessing and exchanging of rings. Rings have all sorts of symbolism, but the one the Church concentrates on is the role rings have played in various biblical stories. This sets the tone of both the betrothal and the marriage, since both are packed with references to events in both the Old and New Testaments. In order to appreciate the full depth of what is being said, it might be good for the bridal couple (and anyone else involved) to spend some time reading the various episodes in the Bible referred to in the service. When listened to with inner stillness, such reading is most beneficial to spiritual development.

Once the rings are in place, the service quickly moves on to the marriage itself. The prayers for peace are recited for a second time (with small differences), then two long, beautiful prayers, the second of which is particularly full of references to marriage in Holy Scripture.

The joining of hands, followed by the crowning, lies at the heart of the service. In a mystical way, the two people become one flesh (though, of course, not one person!), and having done so through the joining of hands, they are “crowned” to each other. To most people living in the West, this does not mean much until it is witnessed.

The crowns, like the rings, are full of symbolism. Here the Church becomes a little more subtle and suggests two major themes: glory and honor (such as one might expect at a coronation), but also martyrdom. A martyr is called to witness to Christ with every ounce of his being, and both the bride and groom will need to learn to emulate that behavior if the marriage is to be successful. The themes of honor, restraint, social responsibility, and harmony flutter through the words of the service, giving active lessons as to how to bring the marriage to fruition.

These lessons include the epistle reading, in which St. Paul calls marriage a “great mystery.” In describing what a marriage looks like, he uses the image of the relationship between Christ and His Church. Here we need to bear in mind what St. Paul was referring to as the Church. For him the Church was no institution, had no buildings, no social influence (except on her own members), and not much interest in the political and social life of the times. Rather, he saw the Church as a select group of people waiting impatiently for the second coming of the Lord, which was expected at any minute. People who are expecting the end of the world to occur very soon do not place a great deal of significance in marriage. Marriage is a long-term, generational matter, and would be

pretty much irrelevant if today were to be the last day of your life. Having come to this awareness, we are ready to hear him say, “It is better to marry than to burn” (1 Corinthians 7:9)!

The epistle we hear in the marriage service (Ephesians 5:22–33), with its seeming bias towards male leadership in the marriage, is balanced somewhat in a Greek practice (not encouraged or sanctioned by the Church) in which the bride attempts to stamp on the toe of the groom at this point. She thereby takes her “power” in the face of the physically stronger male, and becomes, at the very least, an equal member of the partnership.

The Gospel reading in the service (John 2:1–11) recounts the central, most important event in the Church’s understanding of marriage, which occurred when Jesus Himself attended a marriage at Cana in Galilee. He had been invited, together with His disciples. His mother was also there.

This provides us with one of the rare glimpses we have of anything approaching domesticity in Jesus’ life. The Gospels are keen to give us a picture of His mission, His message, and the key events of His life, but we are left wondering what life was like in the small details—the level at which we recognize our own existence. Here in Cana, not far from the village of Capernaum, the place He called home, we can see that there was indeed some human interaction in His life, and that He did not live in a social vacuum.

There is an obvious social context here, since Jesus and His mother were invited. His brothers and sisters are not mentioned, nor His father, Joseph, and the Gospel writer does nothing to pander to our curiosity. However, since Jesus was invited with His disciples, there is obviously a spiritual context also. Whoever invited Jesus did so not just as a family friend, but in the context of Jesus’ mission.

Equally lacking from the story in St. John’s Gospel is any commentary that might show something of Jesus’ views on marriage. There is a puzzle here, since Jewish tradition sees marriage as the norm if not a necessity, ordained by God and the subject of the very first commandment in the Torah. Yet, Jesus is not married, and no comment is made on that subject here or elsewhere in the Gospels.

Our inquisitiveness should not blur the tremendous significance of what happened at Cana. Here, in verbal iconic form, we are presented with a powerful teaching about the power of marriage to transform the individual. People may or may not be good, may or may not be wise, but alone they are like ordinary water. In marriage, they can, through the intervention of God, be transformed into “good wine” in a process which can only take place at a miraculous, “mysterious” level.

If we listen carefully to the words of Jesus in the Gospels, we often find that they have a sense of mystery wrapped around them. His words often reflect situations in which God interacts with mankind, not just on an obvious and natural level, but also in a profound personal way. It is here, in the deepest parts of the person which only God is able to reach, that the word “mystery” most often has its context. The mind does not like

mystery. The heart knows that mystery is the fullest expression of our relationship with God. It is as it is, because God chooses to do it that way.

After the completion of the Scripture readings, the Lord's Prayer follows, surrounded by other prayers, as is the custom in the Orthodox Church. The words of Christ, which are the Lord's Prayer, are accompanied and surrounded by other prayers, acting like angelic support for the sacred words.

A cup of wine is blessed and then given to the newly married couple. The wine, representing the whole panoply of food, nourishment, joy, sharing, and encouragement, is drunk. Some have suggested that this is a remnant from the times when the couple came to church for Holy Communion and cemented their marriage in that fashion. However, I cannot imagine any circumstance in which the Church would replace the life-giving Blood of Christ from the holy chalice of Holy Communion with another, simple cup of blessed wine. More likely, I think, is a connection with the drinking of wine in the Jewish marriage service.

The procession around the table that follows, reminiscent of the procession around the font at Holy Baptism, allows the couple to take their first steps together blessed by God, guided by the Church, and supported by all the people who have come to be present and give the couple their prayerful encouragement.

After the crowns are removed, more blessings are recited, and then the bride and groom meet the world as a married couple for the first time. Filled with blessings, they leave the church. And the real work of being married begins.

A Pause for Consideration

The mood of a wedding service in church is often far removed from its spiritual significance. Sometimes it seems that the most important person at the ceremony is the photographer, that the rules of etiquette are more important than the words of the service, and that somehow the idea that it is the "bride's day" turns the occasion into a sad display of ego-expansion.

It is such a pity when a Mystery becomes nothing more than a mere ceremony. A ceremony is something people come to watch, whereas a Mystery is, both in principle and in practice, something in which people take part. Admittedly, some roles are more obvious than others—the priest has a specific role to play, and the bride and groom are obviously the focus of attention. However, everyone present is invited to take part and not simply to watch. Even if the task is merely to pray for the couple, that in itself is of great importance.

The flowers, the dresses, the bridesmaids, and the photographs should pale in comparison with the real task at hand, which is to present a decision—a human and fallible decision—into the hands of God and ask Him to create the miracle of married life.

If the Mystery is not the focus of the activity, the vainglory of the world is quick to fill the vacuum. When entire families get together—and in a marriage it is often a matter of two entire families getting together—there are often tensions, and people may concentrate on those. Any of a million distractions might make the day memorable, though far from spiritual.

Three occasions stand out in my memory. In the first, the mother of the bride arrived for the wedding rehearsal fifty minutes late, carrying aloft one of those rather tedious middle-class books of wedding etiquette, exclaiming that she wanted the wedding to be just “like this.” It wasn’t.

On another occasion, I was telephoned by another bride’s mother, a woman I had never met. It was quite obvious that she regarded the church as a sort of wedding shop at which she simply ordered the things she wanted and skipped things that did not look attractive. She didn’t want crowns at her daughter’s wedding, though I cannot now remember why. We had crowns.

On a third occasion, a marriage consultant had been hired to look after the wedding. When we met in the church, she told me that she was going to put in a rose bower right over where the couple would stand, and that she wanted piped music from various show tunes to “set the mood.” She got neither wish.

One of the great blessings in the Orthodox Church is that we do not have to create occasions. The Orthodox wedding service is so powerful, so profound, that we do not have to dress it up, give it atmosphere, or otherwise make it other than it already is. This allows people to relax. They may have problems at the wedding reception—crowds and alcohol are always a bit risky, and banquet food is rarely worth the money—but the marriage service of the Orthodox Church is a glimpse of heaven without making any particular fuss or effort at all.

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