

THE Marriage Ceremony

H. G. Bishop Moussa

Marriage in the Coptic Orthodox Church --- as well as in all the other traditional churches --- is a sacrament; and this means that all three conditions of the other sacraments have to be fulfilled. These cover:

1. Those receiving the sacrament.
2. The sacramental prayers and their content.
3. The ordained priest.

"Mystery" is not the ecclesiastical definition of a sacrament; for "mystery" means "obscurity", whereas "sacrament" means the "unseen gift" that we obtain as a result of our conscious participation in the holy sacrament. It is "the invisible blessing that we receive in the midst of physical, visible manifestations."

1. Those Receiving the Sacraments

The couple approaching holy matrimony are like those who come for baptism or confirmation. As they approach this holy sacrament, they have to meet certain special conditions, such as:

- + The legal minimum age (16 for her and 18 for him).
- + The absence of any legal impediments or any kinship which might disqualify them as marriage partners.
- + The full consent of both parties.
- + Suitable spiritual preparation, such as repentance, confession, and receiving Holy Communion.
- + Mental, psychological and social readiness.
- + A sound understanding of Christian marriage.

2. The Sacramental Prayers and Their Content.

Everything is "sanctified by the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4: 5). So are the bride and groom. They must listen carefully to extensive prayers, to readings from St. Paul's epistles, the Psalms, and the Gospels. These deal with every aspect of Christian marriage. The couple are also anointed with holy oil. It is above all after they have been anointed in the name of the Holy Trinity three times that they receive the Spirit of God and He makes them one in Christ.

3. The Ordained Priest.

If the sacrament is to be effective, the priest is essential, for he has the authority of the church to carry it out. It is not just the prospect of parenthood for the bride and groom, or even the spiritual aspects of a marriage that are involved in the performance of the sacrament. The sacrament also involves canonical rites, and these depend on the ecclesiastical authority handed down to the priest.

As a holy sacrament, marriage requires canonical prayers. In those prayers we call on God's Spirit to bless the bride and groom and to sanctify their union. Is it possible for that to happen in a civil marriage, a marriage by private contract or in a mixed marriage between persons from different religious backgrounds? Definitely not! For those marriages are made by man and not of God, and Christianity rejects them.

The Wedding Ceremony

It includes successive important steps. In fact, the ceremony used to take place between the Raising of Incense at Matins and the Eucharistic Liturgy, just as the rites of monasticism do now. For just as the monk becomes wed to the Lord, so do the bride and groom become wed to each other in the Lord. In this way, they are prepared to receive Holy Communion as the first action taken immediately after their marriage. In the old days, there was a custom, based on the Book of Tobit, that the newly married couple should spend the first three days of marriage abstaining from physical contact in order to deepen their spiritual love and thus to unite in and with the Lord.

1. The Contract of Appropriation

The vow to belong to one another used to be taken immediately upon the engagement in the form of public prayers. However, these prayers have since been separated from the

engagement rites, for whereas the engagement can be broken, the 'contract of appropriation' is binding. Saying the prayers amounts to a real, legal marriage contract that cannot be broken except for legal reasons.

These prayers, or at least the most significant part of them, are now transferred to the wedding itself. We take from them the Triple Sign of the Cross which is at the heart of those prayers.

2. The Triple Sign of the Cross

This is just like the blessing given for the engagement: "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen! Blessed is God the Father, blessed is the only Son, and blessed is the Holy Spirit." This is done for the newly married couple and their wedding rings, as a blessing for the partners and for their partnership, and for the covenant of love between them.

3. St. Paul's Epistle

A passage is read from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5: 22 - 6: 3) in which the Apostle draws our attention to the proper foundations for the Christian home: a husband who loves his wife as much as himself and a wife who obeys her husband. As much as the husband gives love, the wife gives obedience and vice versa. It is a wonderful recipe for the unity and the continuity of the Christian home.

4. The Gospel

After Psalm 19: "Like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber" (verses 5,6) and Psalm 128: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house" (verse 3) are read, there follows the Gospel according to St. Matthew where the Lord stresses:

- a. The law of monogamy (one wife): "He who made them at the beginning ' made them male and female'" (Mt. 19: 4).
- b. The unity of the married couple: "The two shall become one flesh" (Mt. 19: 5).
- c. The continuity of the marriage: "What God has joined together let not man separate." (Mt. 19: 6).

5. The Litany

In this, the priest and all the congregation ask God for His mercy to bless the groom and bride as He blessed Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and Asemath, and as He also blessed the wedding at Cana of Galilee by His gracious presence.

6. The Three Prayers

The priest asks for spiritual blessing and real unity for the couple, "That they may have happiness and keep the right faith, and enter into the mystery of joyfulness." He also prays that God will "Grant them prosperity, wisdom, and the blessings of salvation" and grant them godly children, "For life, O Lord, comes from You, and the fruit of life from the womb."

7. Anointing With Oil

This is done after a special prayer to bless the oil: "As a weapon for righteousness and justice; an anointing for purity and incorruptibility; radiance and beauty that will never fade, and a renewal and salvation for their souls, their bodies and their spirits." The deacons respond at the end of each section by singing a joyful 'Amen.'

8. The Chasuble and the Crown

The priest prays over the chasuble and the crown so that the couple may receive, "Crowns of glory and honor, blessing and salvation, joy and happiness, virtue and justice, strength and stability." Thus, when the priest crowns the newly married couple, this means crowning them in spiritual glory in their new church. When the groom puts on the chasuble, this means that he has become the family priest. He is to present daily sacrifices, such as prayers, praises and offerings, on the altar of Christian love and the altar of the inmost heart.

As for the wedding rings, they are a mark of the covenant of love. That is why they are transferred from the right hand to the left, which is closer to the heart.

9. The Presentation

The priest presents the bride to the groom with a special prayer. Then he covers both their hands with a Communion napkin that was originally given to them as a preparation for Holy Communion. It is now just to remind them that they should receive Holy Communion at their earliest convenience.

10. The Exhortation, the Blessings and the Absolution

Now the priest urges both bride and groom to take special care to nurture their love for each other and to cherish their family ties. After they have promised at the altar to keep the family altar, to have daily prayers and Bible reading, he blesses them. Then he prays for the forgiveness of their sins and sends them out with the congregation in peace. After this, they should receive Holy Communion and the other sacraments regularly.

This is how the prayers of the sacrament reach their climax; on a high point of spirituality and exhortation. although the bride and groom will then be very busy with the photographs and social niceties, which are not that appropriate, we still hope that they will reflect on all the prayers of this sacrament which are usually recorded on video tape.

**May the Lord keep our homes in purity, understanding and cohesion.
May He make them model homes, models of witness to Jesus Christ,
their Founder and Shepherd.**