



## *The Sacrament of Holy Crowning in the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church*

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*Marriage* is one of the seven basic Sacraments of the Armenian Orthodox Church. It is directly related to the experience of being God's people and with the mystical experience of membership in the Church. This Sacrament, which blesses the union of a man and woman, begins with the partners themselves belonging to the Body of Christ, His Holy Church, and their sharing in the fullness of its liturgical life of prayer. Their witness to the Armenian Orthodox Faith becomes visible in their frequent reception of Holy Communion. Therefore, it is at the Divine Liturgy that they can together experience their union in Christ the Lord as husband and wife forever.

It is significant that in the early Christian Church the marriage of a couple was validated by attending the Divine Liturgy, partaking of Holy Communion together, and finally, receiving a blessing from the bishop who offered a simple prayer for their life together. The formal rites of marriage as celebrated today evolved from these early practices.

Indeed, the free consent of the couple, both then and now, is essential in order to receive the sacramental blessing; not only their free consent, but also much more. The gathered body of the Church, the sharing of the Eucharist, the experience of prayer at the Divine Liturgy as well as the blessing of the Priest – all these together represented Christ in the celebration of this event as “sacrament” and were important. With our Lord at the center of this event, marriage becomes truly a Christian celebration, giving birth to a union that is sanctified, blessed and hallowed by the grace of God. The initial practice of Eucharistic sharing in marriage as the central experience of faith is still preserved by the Armenian Orthodox as the couple, both communicant members of the church, are instructed to receive the Sacrament of Penance prior to and Holy Communion on the Sunday preceding their marriage.

This pre-nuptial sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ clearly shows that marriage is not only contractual or a legal validation of a man and a woman but more so a true celebration of the entire church, i.e., the couple, the congregation of believers, and the Priest who are themselves all witnesses to a new life centered in the Eucharist.

Today, this Eucharistic tradition is confronted with many challenges. In our pluralistic society the great diversity of religious faith confessions makes the ‘ideal’ of a marriage between Armenian Orthodox partners less a reality in the Church community. The Church now encounters the condition of a ‘mixed marriage’; a marriage between an Armenian Orthodox and a Christian from another faith confession. Such situations do not change the general meaning of marriage with regard to its intent, but certainly present problems when celebrating the rites of blessing.

It should be understood that mixed marriages are neither encouraged nor forbidden by the Armenian Orthodox Church. Sacramental blessing by the church, granted through the person of the Officiant Priest, could only be administered and celebrated for those who are baptized Christians. Canonically there is no separate liturgical rite for an Armenian Orthodox and a non-Christian.

As stated, mixed marriages are those between Armenian Orthodox and persons from Christian confessions that acknowledge belief in the Holy Trinity and the Divinity of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The celebration of the Sacrament of Crowning, as it is traditionally called, is allowed for a mixed faith union out of concern for the couple's well being inviting them both to share in prayer and affirm, however possible, their common faith within the rite without compromise of personal or Church integrity. This practice of 'oekonomia' thus allows both to share as much as possible. It should remain clear that the acceptance and participation of a non-Armenian Orthodox Christian in the marriage rite does not imply his/her conversion, nor does it grant him/her the privilege to actively receive the other Sacraments of the Church. It is only by the Sacrament of Chrismation that one becomes a member of the faith community; after proper catechizes before or after marriage.

The key to the success of a mixed-marriage, from the day of the ceremony to the eventual Christian formation of family, and the interpersonal relationship of the couple as well as their extended relationships with friends and family members, is the extra sensitivity to the spirit of love and sacrifice. Armenian Orthodox partners should make every effort to be sensitive to the feelings, beliefs, practices and perspectives of their spouses. It is likewise hoped that the non-Armenian spouse will do the same.

There are basic standards that exist in all Oriental Orthodox Churches regarding the meaning of marriage and its sanctification by the Church in the office of her priesthood and by the witness of her faithful. However, even within this unified bodies of ancient Churches there are differing interpretations and practices of these standards.

For example, the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches require re-baptism of Protestants or conversion to Oriental Orthodoxy from Roman Catholicism and Byzantine (Chalcedonian) Orthodoxy. Such a requirement precludes altogether the existence of mixed marriages in these Churches. The Armenian and Syrian Churches, however, never mandate conversion or practice re-baptism, provided that the baptism of the non-Oriental Orthodox has been admitted with the Trinitarian formula. In all cases, the Christian formation of children is expected to develop in the particular Church in which the marriage was blessed. No promissory document must be signed.

### ***The Meaning of Marriage***

Christian marriage is essentially a meeting of two beings in love, a human love that can be transformed by the sacramental grace of the Holy Spirit into an eternal bond, indissoluble even by death. Marriage in the Armenian Church is a Sacrament (in Armenian, *Khorhoort*, translated as "*Mystery*") directly relating to the experience of the faithful being the mystical body of the Church. Marriage is also a sign of God's Kingdom, for it begins to restore the unity of mankind, broken by sin, and, represents a greater mystery, the unity of redeemed mankind in Jesus Christ.

Scripture teaches God created humanity as male and female with the intent that they should join and be together as one. Christ blessed the wedding at Cana with His presence and performed a miracle, which assisted in the joyous celebration of the event. The Letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians and Ephesians become the basis for the Christian teaching on marriage.

The Christian doctrine of marriage is a joyful responsibility giving legitimate satisfaction to the body and to the soul showing what it means to be truly man, created in the image and likeness of God.

## **Guidelines in the Administration of Holy Marriage or Crowning in the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church**

*Compiled in part from the Canons and practices of the Armenian Church the directives issued by the Primates of the Diocese of the Armenian Church (Eastern), and local conditions.*

In our Mission Parishes who have their own Church sanctuary, prior to any other arrangements being made, couples are advised to contact their local Parish Council at least eight to ten months prior to the date of a wedding to confirm the availability of an Officiating Priest and sanctuary. In the situation of Mission Parishes without a permanent sanctuary, the couple need contact the Parish Council who in turn will contact the Diocese and/or the assigned visiting Pastor. In either case, the couple is to meet with the Officiating Priest for premarital counseling on at least two or three occasions.



All weddings are to follow the Canons of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church.

It is the responsibility of the couple to present a valid license to the Officiating Priest prior to the service.

The wedding ceremony is to take place in the church proper.

Both parties must be baptized and chrismated Christians, and, at least one must be a confirmed member of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church.

Those who are to enter into the chancel are to be Christians. The Brother-in-the-Cross (*Khatchnyekhpayr*), who participates in the ceremony by holding a cross over the heads of the bride and groom, is to be a baptized and chrismated communicant member of the Armenian Church. The Maid/Matron-of-Honor is to be a baptized Christian, but not necessarily of the Armenian Church.

When either party has been divorced from a living spouse, a dispensation from the Diocesan Primate, based upon legal documents presented to the Officiating Priest, is necessary. This information is to be provided to the Officiating Priest well in advance of the wedding date in order to secure the permission of the Diocesan Bishop for a second marriage to take place.

No marriage can be solemnized in the Armenian Church when it is the intent that a second religious ceremony be held in another church or any other place. The reverse is also not acceptable. By the same token, a marriage done in a civil court is not sacramental and requires the proper blessing of the Church in order for it to be considered a Sacrament.

Music played prior to the ceremony, the processional and recessional, is to be liturgical in origin and is ordinarily selected from the Armenian Church hymnal. Popular/secular music is deemed inappropriate. Final decisions shall be made in consultation with the Officiating Priest.

Invitation of other participating clergy must first be discussed with the Officiating Priest who, upon approval, shall make all arrangements of invitation for such through his office. If the guest priest is a member of the Armenian Church Clergy, he may be invited to share in the service. Clergy of other denominations shall be allowed participation in extent to the faith traditions of the Armenian Orthodox Church. The same applies to deacons, soloists and other participants.

The Officiating Priest shall make all necessary arrangements for the deacon, organist and/or soloist. The Parish Council will provide the couple with all additional details and forms regarding donations to the church, honorariums, and fees. If the Officiating Priest or other clergy are to be invited to the reception, a wedding invitation properly is to be sent.

Decorations and flower arrangements for the church or altar and their placement should first be discussed with the Officiating Priest. No nails, screws, or adhesive tape may be used. Open light candles that may be potential fire hazards will not be allowed. The Officiating Priest, his designee, or the local church personnel may remove decorations contrary to the above in advance of the service. No furniture in the sanctuary shall be moved from its place.

Wedding rehearsals shall be arranged with the Officiating Priest. All bridal party members who are to participate in the ceremony are asked to be present.

Photographs and/or video recordings may be taken at any time during the service. The bridal couple should instruct the photographers to speak with the Officiating Priest prior to the service for instruction. At no time may photographers or guests enter into the chancel area, ascend the steps of the Altar bema area, or be at the altar itself.

The attire of the bride and her attendants must be tasteful in accord with proper attire for attendance at worship. Low cut gowns, short pants, costumes and such are deemed inappropriate.

Keeping in mind that during the ceremony, either wedding braids (*narods*) will be tied around the heads of the couple, or, crowns will be placed upon their heads, bridal head covering should be such as to accommodate these. Hats cannot be worn.

In preparation of their new life together, the bride and/or groom who is a member of the Armenian Church is encouraged to come before the Officiating Priest for individual confession and the reception of Holy Communion, at a time prior to the wedding ceremony.

Weddings may not take place on Sunday mornings, during Great Lent or Holy Week, or on the five major feast days: Epiphany, January 6; Easter; The Feast of the Transfiguration; The Feast of the Assumption of Mary the Mother of God; and The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

## ***The Armenian Rite***

The Armenian Church requires that a Priest be the minister of the Sacrament, as he, in the name and with the authority of the Diocesan Bishop, brings the marriage into being by conferring upon the couple, the blessings of the Church. Each action accomplished in the service is done to emphasize the relationship of oneness of the couple to each other and to the Church body.

### ***The Blessing of Rings***

The ring has been a symbol of faithfulness from the earliest of biblical times, both of God to man and of man to his bond of marriage. As the circle is the perfect shape symbolizing eternity, so the love and faithfulness of bridegroom and bride to each other is also to be the same. As the rings are blessed, they are placed on the third finger of the left hand with the words: For the bridegroom;

*“The king shall rejoice in Thy strength, O Lord, and in Thy salvation he shall be exceedingly glad.”*

And for the bride;

*“The maiden shall be led unto the king after him, and the maidens, her companions that follow her, shall be brought unto him.”*

### ***The Joining of the Right Hands and The Exhortation***

The Priest joins the right hand of the bride to the right hand of the bridegroom, recalling the oneness of Adam and Eve. He places his hand over theirs symbolizing the sanctifying blessing of their union, proclaiming *“...Wherefore them that God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”*

### ***The Vows***

The bridegroom and bride are asked to respond three times to the inquiry of the priest. They each state their willingness to assume their proper roles as husband and wife in the context of St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. The bridegroom is asked if he will be **lord** to this woman unto death. By his *yes* he promises to give of himself in total love and faithfulness to his spouse as Christ gave to his bride, the Church, in total love, even unto death. The bride is asked if she will be **obedient** to this man, even unto death. Her *yes* testifies to her willingness to be obedient to her husband, as the faithful are to be obedient to the Lord as the head of the Body, the Church. Lordship and obedience are dynamics of a special covenant and expression of a sacrificial love, enduring even to eternity. In no way does it suppose a worldly master/servant relationship, but rather that of Jesus as Lord and Master who gave of himself as servant to the world.

### ***The Reading from Holy Scripture***

The Scripture readings include the most revealing sections of the New Testament relative to marriage. The important point made by Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians is that of the union of Christ with the Church, His Body, is the model – the absolute model – of the relationship between husband and wife. Marriage as a Sacrament is the introduction and the transposition of man-woman relationship into the already Kingdom of God, where Christ and the Church are one body. The Epistle gives further lucidity to the promises made earlier of the man and woman on being *lord* and *obedient*.

### ***The Crowning***

The weddings chaplets placed upon the bridegroom and the bride are of Biblical origin. Traditionally a sign of victory in athletic competition, St. Paul writes; *“Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline; he does so in order to be crowned with a crown that will not last; but we do it for one that will last forever.”* (I Cor. 9:25) Thus the chaplets become a symbol of eternal reward for righteousness. The prayer recalls the marriages of the Holy couples of Israel, asking God to place the bridegroom and bride in the company of these ancestors of Christ, to bestow upon them the same blessings they received as God’s chosen. The Priest beseeches God to *“make their marriage fruitful with offspring.”* God continues to act through human creative fertility; the “Temple of His body” is still being built and child bearing is participation in the Mystery of Christ. Childbirth and the raising of children are indeed a great joy and God’s blessing. In giving life to others, man consciously imitates God’s creative act. The Gospel is read of the marriage in Cana of Galilee. The changing of water into wine points to a transfiguration of the old to the new, a passage from death to life. It announces the possibility of transforming the natural order of things into a joyful celebration of God’s presence among men.

### ***The Common Cup***

Wine is a gift of God to man and symbolic of life itself. Wine is something that makes us happy, something that sparkles, is used medicinally, and is sweet. That same wine that makes us happy can make us sad, can become flat and dull, can make us sick, and can go sour. It depends on how we use it. The couple shares in this common cup, as they are to share in the joys and difficulties of life together.

### ***The Final Blessing***

After the offering of the “Lord’s Prayer”, the newly married couple receives the blessing of the Church, sending them into the world to now live as husband and wife, king and queen of their kingdom and family.



## **Armenian Orthodox/Roman Catholic Marriages\*\***

*\*\* (Adapted from the document "Guideline for Oriental Orthodox / Roman Catholic Marriages [revised June 1993] by the Reverend Father Garabed Kochakian and Very Reverend Chorepiscopus John Meno)*

Before focusing on these particular issues, a general overview of the understanding of a Roman Catholic/Armenian Orthodox marriage, from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, would be helpful to clearly set basic guidelines for the Armenian Orthodox.

The Roman Church views as essential the following steps for the blessing of a marriage, to be in complete harmony with her church order.

1. The pastors of both parties involved should conduct proper instruction for marriage so that there are no misgivings or misunderstandings before the Church blesses the marriage.
2. If the marriage is to be celebrated in the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church must grant a dispensation from the impediment of 'mixed-religion'. This document notes that the Orthodox rite is a 'valid substitute' in the eyes of Rome. This form grants the permission of the Bishop through the legislative body of the Roman Catholic Church, the Marriage Tribunal, on the condition of the following statement to which the Catholic party must assent.

I reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ, and with God's help, intent to continue living that faith in the Catholic Church.

I PROMISE to do all in my power to share the faith I have received with our children by having them baptized and reared\* as Catholic.

\*(receiving all other Sacraments of the Roman Church)  
[This is an observance of the discipline of the Roman Church]

3. Regardless of whether the sacramental rite is celebrated in a Roman or Orthodox sanctuary, the Catholic priest with the Bishop's consent may invite an Oriental (Armenian) Orthodox clergyman to be present at the Catholic service and offer a prayer or he himself may respond to an invitation to offer a blessing in an Oriental Orthodox Church.

4. Both churches should record the marriage in their sacramental registries.

As indicated in marriages between Armenian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians, it should be noted that the Roman Church recognizes the validity of the marriage as Sacrament when celebrated by an Armenian Orthodox clergyman.

Also it is important to remember that the Roman Catholic priest, in all weddings, serves as the witness of the Church while he observes the bride and bridegroom impart/administer/celebrate the sacrament upon each other. \* The couple is considered to be ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage. Such an understanding is not theologically consonant regarding the general administration of the sacraments for the Armenian Orthodox who perceives the priest, the representative of the Bishop who is himself the fullness of the Church, as both liturgically and canonically the chief dispenser of God's grace, the celebrant and sole sacramental minister.

\*(This theological teaching with the Roman Catholic Church regarding marriage has evolved within only the past three centuries. It is only since 1970 that the new Roman Catholic rite has been in use in which the participatory action of both the bride and bridegroom legitimate the sacrament itself.)

We have discussed the church as witness in the varied theological explanations of the Orthodox and Catholic understandings. It is necessary to address the issue of the laity as witness to the sacramental blessing of marriage and their participation in the ceremony itself.

The lay witnesses in the ceremony of blessing are the Best Man and the Maid/Matron of Honor. In all the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Best Man should himself be a member of the faith community. In the Armenian and Syrian Orthodox tradition, the primary major witness is the Best Man or more appropriately, the Brother-in-the-Cross, for during the ceremony of both Churches, he holds a Cross between the couple (Syrian) or over their heads (Armenian). In the Armenian Church, the Brother-in-the-Cross serves as baptismal godfather of the child(ren) of the couple. This, however, is a national custom and not a theological regulation or requirement.

### ***The Validity of Sacrament vs. Validity of Marriage***

There is no question with regard to the validity of the Sacrament of Marriage when it is celebrated and blessed in an Oriental Orthodox sanctuary with an Orthodox priest officiating.

When an Oriental (Armenian) Orthodox/Roman Catholic couple is united in Holy Matrimony in a Roman Catholic ceremony, certain questions for the Armenian Orthodox arise relative to the full sacramental validity. The sacramentality of the service would not be a question if an Armenian Orthodox priest were present at the ceremony and offered prayers legitimating the union of the couple at an appropriate point during the service. His presence and active participation would then satisfy the action of the "Church" as bestowing the sacramental blessing.

However, if there were no Oriental (Armenian) Orthodox clergy present at the celebration of the Catholic ceremony, the question as to the sacramental validity arises. There is no question regarding the validity of marriage, but concern as to the authenticity and legitimacy of the sacrament as understood by the Armenian Orthodox Church would exist. The marriage would appear to be deficient in regard to the Orthodox form and the theological concept of sacrament as Grace bestowed through the persona of the priest.

It is hoped that this information will serve as a valuable guide to both Armenian Orthodox and Roman Catholic couples who are preparing for the Sacrament of Marriage. Focusing upon your common aspects of Christian faith and tradition rather than the issues that divide them, will enable you to establish a basic foundation of a spiritually healthy and meaningful Christ-centered relationship.



The decision and choice of living out the faith within the tradition your union has been sacramentally blessed is an important consideration, particularly in regard to family faith formation. Though Eucharistic unity between Roman Catholics and Oriental Orthodox is not presently a reality, this in no manner minimizes the respect that should be extended toward each other's church nor does it preclude, at the least, the sharing of a similar Christian faith. Nonetheless, affirming a commitment to a faith praxis, that is to be lived out, is the major objective of the priest(s) who shall bless this holy union of a man and woman and for the sake of their children.

