

Cultivating Love and Oneness: Reflecting on the Candles and Crowns of Marriage

Opening Prayer: Prayer of a Married Person

Lord Jesus Christ, by Your presence You blessed the wedding in Cana and showed us that You are the true priest of mystical and pure marriage. We thank You for the day on which by Your heavenly blessing You joined us in the sacrament of marriage. Lord, continue to bless and enrich our marriage in love companionship, mutual support, oneness of heart and progress in faith and life. Protect our Holy wedlock from sin, evil and danger. Nurture between us the spirit of understanding, the spirit of forgiveness and the spirit of peace, that no resentment, quarrel or other problem may cause us to stumble and fall. Grant us to see our own faults and not to judge each other. Keep our bond of love always new. Gladden our lives with the joys of marriage, that with one heart we may praise and glorify You. Amen

Ice breaker:
Feel free to add your own.

Introduction:

The Sacrament of Marriage is replete with symbolic meaning. It is an intimate time between God and the couple. However, in the flurry of activities to prepare for a wedding and in the excitement of the actual day, sometimes the depth of the symbolic truths represented in the ceremony can be overlooked. Christ unites us to each other in marriage and even from our very first breath as husband and wife, He is guiding us. The foundation of our marriage is the truth that we have been spiritually joined together as one. For this reason, let's take a closer look at a few of the rituals of the Holy Sacrament of Marriage.

Think back when the priest handed each of you the bride and groom a white candle; the candle flame symbolizes divine light that has come into the world through Christ, who is the Light of the world.ⁱ As the couples receive the candles, they demonstrate outwardly an inner spiritual truth: the receiving of Christ, both personally with their individually lit candles and as a couple, as they stand, side by side in the glow of their candles.

The wedding crowns, Stefana, represent the glory and honor given from the Lord through His sacrament. The ribbon joining the crowns together signify how the two shall be made one. Through the crowns, Christ establishes the couple as the King and Queen of their home, which they are to rule with wisdom, justice, and integrity.ⁱⁱ The crowns are also referred to as the crowns of martyrdom. This is a fitting analogy as the marriage relationship requires the mutual self-sacrificing of one another.

When the time in the ceremony comes for the crowns to be removed, the Priest places them on the center table, upon which also sits the Gospel book, which is an icon of Christ. This action symbolizes how the marriage is to be an offering to the Lord.ⁱⁱⁱ Then he prays, "Accept their crowns in Your Kingdom unsoiled and undefiled; and preserve them without offense to the ages of ages."^{iv}

Through the Sacraments of the Church, God lavishes His grace, love and power upon us. It has been said that, "The sacraments are the kiss of God where He pours out the riches of His love. They communicate to us the very life of God."^v The love that is needed for oneness in marriage is love from God. For God Himself is Love and from Him comes self-sacrificing, life-giving love. The Holy Spirit through the Sacrament of Marriage bestows this type of self-giving love upon the couple. As the couple grow individually in their relationship with the Lord and as they grow in their relationship with one another, it is the gifts of God's grace and love which sustain them.

We have a beautiful tradition of displaying our marriage candles and crowns in our homes. There they serve as a wonderful reminder of the nature of marriage. Just as the icons of Christ and His saints are displayed and cause us to meditate on the truths that Christ is ever-present, may our marriage candles and crowns also cause us to ponder the truths they represent. As we receive the Light of Christ and love our spouse in a self-sacrificing way, we will be living out the symbolic meaning of the candles and crowns of our marriage.

Cultivating Love and Oneness: Reflecting on the Candles and Crowns of Marriage

1. Why is the light of the candles important in a marriage?

2. What can we do as couples to be sure our relationship continues to have the light of Christ shine upon it?

3. How does the relationship of Christ and His Church help us to understand the unity of marriage?

4. How does an understanding of how Christ loves the Church, enable us to love our spouses better?

5. Why do you think the crown's symbolic representation of martyrdom is significant in our journey as married couples?

Leader's Guide:

- Have enough copies of the discussion, and hand out to each participant
- Have the Orthodox Bible Study Bible on hand.
- Have a clock nearby so you are conscious of time.
- Throughout the study there are parenthetical Scriptural references which are not intended to be read aloud. The parenthetical references are to be used, on an as needed basis, in order to enhance the study.
- Open the discussion with prayer. Read the Introduction to the group. Then begin the discussion by asking the questions listed. After the group is given adequate time to share their responses to each question, read aloud the Leader's Notes answer summary before going on to the next question. Close the discussion with prayer.

Leader's Notes:

1. Why is the light of the candles important in a marriage?

The light of the candles represents Christ, the true Light who enlightens everyone born into the world (John 1:9). He is sanctifying the couple, setting them apart from everyone else in the world and making them become as one through the Sacrament of Marriage. Just as the couple stood in the illumination of their candles when they were united as one, their lives together need to grow in the light and warmth of this flame.

“God who commanded light to shine out of darkness” has also “shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). In our relationships, sin isolates us from God and each other, causing strife in our marriage. But the light of the Good News of Jesus Christ grants forgiveness and peace, bringing the couple back into a right relationship with God and with each other.

The candles can remind the couple that Christ is not only the Light of the world for all men, but also personally, the Light of their marriage. Psalm 35:10 (LXX) states that “For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we shall see light.” In the illumination of divine light one is given empowerment from the Holy Spirit. In loving one another, the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control and gentleness increase in measure, causing a couple’s relationships to flourish as oneness is cultivated (Galatians 5:22-23).

When Christian couples “let their lights shine” this demonstrates that they are “children of the light” (Matthew 5:16; I Thessalonians 5:5) and helps keep Christ as the center of their marriage. When both couples are growing spiritually, following the teachings of Christ and His Church, then they are growing in the same direction and are also drawing closer to one another.

There is also the concept of how a candle shines forth light, casting out darkness. When couples communicate with each other in an open and honest way, this helps there not be “dark corners” in their relationship.

2. What can we do as couples to be sure our relationship continues to have the light of Christ shine upon it?

Couples desiring for their marriages to be enlivened by Christ need to be growing as Christians.

As one draws near to the Lord, the Lord draws near to him (James 4:8). Christ said that He is the Truth and in drawing near to Him we learn what is true about ourselves (John 14:6). We see more clearly how we are sinners in need of salvation. Living in the light of this understanding enables us to see our constant need of grace and helps us to be gracious with our spouse. In receiving grace and love from God, a spouse has a “well of divine life” that they can draw from in trying to interact with unconditional love with their spouse.

To encourage spiritual growth couples can pray together, meditate on Scripture together, attend Divine Liturgies together, partake of the

Eucharist, attend Bible studies together, repent of sins against God and each other, forgive one another, “spur one another on to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24) and encourage one another to be diligent to add to their faith virtue, knowledge, perseverance, kindness and love (2 Peter 1:5-9).

3. How does the relationship of Christ and His Church help us to understand the unity of marriage?

Just as Eve was created from the side of Adam, while he slept, the Church has been formed from the side of Christ when He died. When Christ was on the cross, His side was pierced with a spear and water and blood came out from His body (John 19:34). The water signifies Holy Baptism that gives the Church life and the blood represents the Eucharist, which nourishes the life of God within.

Christ’s desire for the Church is for her to be one with Him as He is one with the Father. John 17:21 records Jesus’ prayer to His Father, He asks, “that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.” Just as Christ, the Bridegroom, desires to increase in oneness with His Bride, the Church, spouses are to seek to increase in oneness with the Lord and with each other.

Ephesians 5 gives specific guidelines for how couples are to live together as one. As the husband and wife submit to one another in love and respect, they increase in oneness. These truths will be covered in depth in future discussions.

4. How does an understanding of how Christ loves the Church, enable us to love our spouses better?

Understanding how Christ loves the Church enables couples to love each other freely.

Romans 5: 6 and 8 states. “For when we were still **without strength**, in due time Christ died for the **ungodly**. God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were **still sinners**, Christ died for us.”

All of humanity was in weakness, in sin and at enmity with God and while in this state, Christ set His love on all the world. God's love is not given on the basis of performance. His love is not deserved or earned.

The thinking of this present world is that one should bestow love on someone else because in some way, whether in appearance or appeal, the recipient is worthy of the bestowal of love. Yet we have seen this is not how Christ loves and in following Him, couples are to love one another how they have been loved by Christ, in their weakness and sin. Couples are not to require certain criteria to be met or demand that their spouse make themselves worthy (in their estimation) in some particular way, rather they are to love each other freely and without inhibition.

To maintain marital oneness, couples are not to judge each other, for the Lord Himself does "not deal with us according to our sins, nor reward us according to our transgressions" (Psalm 102:10 LXX). It is love that covers a multitude of sins. I Peter 4:8 states, "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins.'"

5. Why do you think the crown's symbolic representation of martyrdom is significant in our journey as married couples?

The crown's symbolism of martyrdom is important to married couples because in striving to live together as one, often individual desires need to be sacrificed in order to maintain love and unity.

Christ has told us and shown us what the greatest of love looks like – it is the laying down of one's life for another (John 15:12-13). "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I John 3:16). God is love and love is self-giving.

Self-sacrificing love which comes through God is bestowed upon a couple through the Sacrament of Marriage. Through this self-emptying love, partners can set aside their self-centeredness, pride and the 'me-first mentality' in order to prefer their spouse before themselves. Philippians 2:3 states, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or

conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than him or herself.”

The crowns of marriage also remind us that in our relationship with each other we must die to sin. In Christ, we have been set free from being a slave of sin. So we are to consider ourselves to be dead to sin by not letting sin control our lives (Rom 6:12). In crucifying our sinful passions, dying to ourselves, the life of Christ’s righteousness is lived out by faith working through love (Gal 5:6). In future discussions, we will look more closely at the concept of dying to ourselves in order to serve one another in love.

At the end of the Sacrament of Marriage, the marriage crowns are placed on the table around which the whole ceremony took place. The placement of the crowns is symbolic of the couple’s surrender and sacrifice of their marriage to the Lord. And as Father Steve Dalber says, “You cannot out give God,” for as the couple continues to offer their marriage (which was given to them from the Lord) back to the Lord, their union is showered continually with the abundant grace and the self-giving love of God.

Closing Prayer:

The prayer that we will pray in closing is the combination of two prayers that are prayed during the Sacrament of Marriage.

O God, our God, Who was present in Cana of Galilee and blessed the marriage there, do You also bless these Your servants, who, by Your providence, have been joined in the community of marriage. Bless their comings-in and their goings-out. Replenish their life with all good things. Accept their crowns in Your Kingdom unsoiled and undefiled, and preserve them without offense to the ages of ages.

For You are our God, the God of mercy and salvation, and to You we send up glory, together with Your Father Who is without beginning, and Your all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, always, now and forever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.^{vi}

ⁱⁱ Anthony M. Coniaris, *These are the Sacraments; The Life-Giving Mysteries of the Orthodox Church* (Minneapolis: Light and life Publishing Company, 1981), 149.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.antiochian.org/sites/default/files/CustomizableBrochure.pdf>

^{iv} http://www.goarch.org/chapel/liturgical_texts/wedding

^v Anthony M. Coniaris, *These are the Sacraments; The Life-Giving Mysteries of the Orthodox Church* (Minneapolis: Light and life Publishing Company, 1981), 8.

^{vi} <http://www.goarch.org/archdiocese/departments/family/prayers/couples-prayers>