

## CHAPTER 7

### *On Marriage*

*Inquirer: Please, Father, tell me whether the Mystery of Marriage was instituted by our Saviour, and what its exact meaning is.*

ELDER CLEOPA: Marriage is the Mystery whereby a man and a woman make a free and mutual decision to live a life in common, helping one another in the birth and raising of children, and receiving from an Orthodox priest the grace which sanctifies them in this union and which helps them to fulfill their goals.

The Mystery of Marriage was a re-institution of marriage by our Lord Jesus Christ, but God the Father established marriage even from the time of the creation of the world, granting a co-helper to the first man, Adam: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18). And God immediately made a woman out of the flesh and bones of the man (Gen. 2:21-24). After He made them in the image and likeness, He blessed them, saying: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:27-28). For us Orthodox, this Mystery is also known as crowning. So, we can say that the first people were crowned directly from God, that is, they were blessed to live together and prosper

in their lives. Because Adam and Eve sinned before God by breaking His commandments, by eating of the forbidden fruit, God shut them out of the Garden of Eden. Since then, the first blessing of God has been accompanied by a curse on all people, and this curse alienated people from each other. It is true that God repeated His blessing many times, by saying: "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 9:1). God blessed Abraham (Gen.22:17), later Isaac (Gen. 26:1-4), while through Isaac God also blessed Jacob (Gen. 26:1-29). But the ancestral sin corrupted relations between people. Thus, the man had a right to take one wife, and if he ceased to be attracted to her, he gave her a paper of divorce and let her go, and he was free to take another wife. And if he ceased to care for the second wife, he could repeat the whole process again and take third wife (Deut. 24:1-4 and Matt. 5:31).

When the Wisdom of God came to the earth, the incarnate Word (John 1:1-14) established his house, founded on seven pillars (Prov. 9:1). Truly, our Lord, with seven Mysteries, came to complete what was prophesied by the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17). Marriage is one of these pillars of the faith, as a Mystery which Christ Himself instituted. In this way, the Law of Moses was changed (Heb.7:12) for the Law of faith (Rom. 3:27), that is, with the New Law (Matt. 26:26-28). This Law addressed the imperfection of the institution of marriage in the Old Testament, which not only lacked the joy and the blessing of heaven [bestowed in the Christian Mystery] but also had the disadvantage that a man was able to leave his wife for whatever reason.

Christ, coming to right all these wrongs, said to the people listening to Him: "It has been said, Whoever shall put away

his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced, committeth adultery” (Matt. 5:31-32). At another time, the Pharisees came to Jesus to try and tempt Him, and asked: “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And He answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery” (Matt. 19:3-9). In this way, marriage, through Christ, was elevated to a higher plane. It became a Mystery.

*Inq.: In the Holy Scripture it doesn't appear that marriage is a Mystery in the way the Orthodox mean.*

**EC:** Even if the Saviour doesn't say explicitly that marriage is a Mystery, it is enough that it is shown [in Scripture] to be such, as is the case with the other Mysteries. There is no need for them to be identified outright as mysteries, since

they are represented as visible acts through which the invisible grace of God works. As regards marriage, it is likewise revealed [by Scripture] that there is a mystical work taking place, which is not apparent to our bodily or mental eyes, in particular, the union of the two spouses by the power of God in a way which renders them no longer two, but one. This in itself says much. But the Holy Scriptures also explicitly tell us that this conjugal union of the spouses in marriage is a Mystery, and indeed “a great Mystery” (Eph. 5:32), and that it reflects the union of Christ and His Church.

*Inq.: In Ephesians 5:32, the Apostle Paul does not talk about marriage as a Mystery, but as [representing] the Mystery of the union between Christ and the Church: “This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” It seems that the Apostle anticipates that the reader may receive a false impression, specifically, that he is speaking of marriage as a Mystery. Do the Orthodox interpret this verse differently?*

**EC:** To see more clearly what the Apostle means by a “great Mystery”, it is necessary to look at the context. Hence, from the context it is evident that he is talking about marriage, because, starting from verse 22, the Apostle refers to the special relations between the spouses. Indeed, to explain in a more convincing and appropriate way the meaning of marriage, he likens it to the relation between Christ and the Church. It is well known that Christ called Himself the “Bridegroom” (Matt. 9:15), while His Church is represented by the Apostle as a Bride, and that this comparison (see also Revelation 22:17), even though it is not precise, is quite vivid.

Our Lord Jesus Christ revealed that He sanctions and blesses marriage at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, with His Mother and His disciples, where He performed His first miracle, changing the water into wine (John 2:1-11). Afterwards, the Apostle Paul tells us: "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4). Drunkards, revelers and carousers bring about the wrath of God on themselves and have nothing to plead in their defense, with such works as these (1 Pet. 4:3-6). If one of the spouses dies, however, the other is free to marry again, without sinning, in this case (Rom. 7:2-8), but whoever lives with a woman without marrying her, that is, without the blessing of the Church, lives in sin (1 Cor. 6:16-20). Husbands must love their wives, as Christ loves the Church, while the wives must revere their husbands and must submit themselves to them as to the Lord (Eph. 5:22-23).

*Inq.: Nowhere is there any reference to a particular wedding ceremony, celebrated only by priests. Some say that this ritual should be nothing more than a religious ceremony whereby the future spouses give their consent in a formal way, to live together, in view of establishing a family or raising children.*

**EC:** Despite the fact that nowhere is there mention of a special ceremony for the celebration of this Mystery, as it is a Mystery it has its own typikon, like every other Mystery. The service, the centre of which is the phrase "The servant of the Lord ...is crowned...", is only the external or visible part of the Mystery of the Wedding, which is necessary for the fulfillment of any Mystery. In the ritual of the wedding

service there are various symbolic acts (for example, the crowning of the future spouses, the exchanging of rings, the tasting of the wine, the dance around the ritual table and others) designated by the Church, each of which has its own meaning and significance, and together with the blessing from God lay the foundation for the family. So, the crowning symbolizes to the spouses the crown of virtues which they must have in their life together, and the joining of hands symbolizes the union which they must have as one body. The exchanging of rings symbolizes the mutual faith and love of the spouses, which virtues must be unfaltering in their lives. The tasting of the wine has, likewise, come to symbolize the harmonious life together of the new spouses, in both the happy as well as the difficult times.

*Inq.: Where is the wedding service celebrated?*

**EC:** The wedding service should be celebrated in the temple of God, the Church, since it is one of the Seven Mysteries and the Church is the holy place where the Mysteries are celebrated. Here is where the people gather: Church means a place where the people assemble, where they enjoy the various blessings in their lives, and where, again, they participate in each others' trials and tribulations. This is why the celebration of the wedding ceremony is done in Church, and it is rarely permitted – except under certain special circumstances – to be done at home, with the permission of the bishop, who must decide according to the circumstances.

*Inq.: And when is the crowning done?*

**EC:** According to the Canons of the Church, a wedding cannot be celebrated during the following periods of the year: the four fasting periods of the year, Wednesdays and Fridays, the day we celebrate the Holy Cross [September 14th], and the day we commemorate the beheading of Saint John the Baptist [August 29th]. This is so because the amusement, entertainment, eating, and drinking which usually follow weddings is inappropriate on the above days, which are set aside for repentance and abstinence.

During Great Lent, it is permissible, if necessary, for engagements to take place on the day of the Annunciation, but only if it does not fall on the week of the Lord's Passion or on Palm Sunday.





Mosaic, *Moni Chora*, Constantinople.

*And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four. And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.*

**Mark 2:3-5**