Holy Matrimony is a Sacrament of Greek Orthodox Church in which a man and woman solemnly vow before God, the priest and the congregation to be true to each other for life. Their conjugal union is blessed by God through the church. God’s grace is imparted to them to live together in His Love, mutually fulfilling and perfecting each other. The beauty and richness of this service is steeped in tradition and symbolism and has remained unchanged through the centuries. The rituals you will observe have special meaning and significance. Each is performed three times to honor the mystical presence of the Holy Trinity.

## The Rings

The rings are blessed by the priest who takes them in his hand, and making the sign of the cross over the couple’s heads, saying: “The servant of God, Spilios is betrothed to the hand-maid of God, Eleni, in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The Koubara then exchanges the rings three times, taking Eleni’s ring and placing it on Spilios’ finger and vice-versa. The rings are placed on the right hand; the right hand being the hand of blessing. The rings are the symbol of betrothal from the most ancient times. The exchange signifies that in married life the weaknesses of the one partner will be compensated for by the strength of the other, the imperfections of one by the perfections of the other. By themselves, the newly betrothed are incomplete; together they are made perfect. Thus the exchange of rings gives expression to the fact that the spouses in marriage will constantly be complementing each other and each will be enriched by the union.

## The Candles

Eleni and Spilios are handed candles which they hold throughout the service. The candles represent the lamps of the five wise maidens of the Bible, which because they contained enough oil, enabled the maidens to light the way for the Bridegroom Christ, when He came in the darkness of night. The candles symbolize the spiritual willingness of the couple to receive Christ, who will bless them through this Sacrament.

## The Joining of the Hands

As the final prayer concludes, the priest invokes God to “Join these servants, unite them in one mind and flesh.” He then places the right hand of Spilios on the right hand of Eleni. At this sacred moment, the couple is joined as husband and wife in the Greek Orthodox Church. The hands remain joined throughout the service to symbolize the “oneness” of their love.

## The Crowning - The Stefana

The Crowns (Stefana) signify the glory and honor of God given to the couple during the Sacrament. Eleni and Spilios are crowned as the Queen and King of their Kingdom, the home, which they will rule with wisdom, justice and integrity. The crowns are joined together with a ribbon symbolizing that the two are now one. The priest places the crows upon their heads; blessing each partner he says, “The servants of God Spilios and Eleni are crowned in the name of the Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.” The Koubara exchanges the crowns three times over the heads of Spilios and Eleni as witness to the sealing of the union. Some interpret the Stefana as being symbols of the crowns of martyrdom, since every true marriage involves immeasurable self-sacrifice.

## The Scripture Readings

There are two readings from the New Testament. An excerpt from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians (5:20-33) is read, expressing the strength and sacrifices required of a husband and wife, advising them to have unconditional love and service to one another and a marriage “holy and without blemish.” The second reading from the Gospel of St. John (2:1–11) relates the story of Christ at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, when Christ blessed the institution of marriage and performed the first of His miracles, transforming water into wine.

## The Common Cup

Eleni and Spilios sip three times the blessed wine from a common cup, remembering the first miracle Christ performed. The common cup designates a mutual sharing of life in its fullest, a common support for every joy and sorrow experienced in Life’s walk. The drinking of wine serves to impress upon the couple that, from this moment on they will share everything in life, joys as well as sorrows, and they are to “bear one another’s burdens.”

## The Ceremonial Walk – The Dance of Isaiah

The priest then takes the arm of Spilios and leads him and Eleni around the table as an expression of joy. The walk around the table on which are placed the Gospel and the Cross, Christ’s symbols of hope and redemption, is seen as a religious dance. These first steps as husband and wife are to emphasize the focus of their “Life’s walk” together. They are accompanied by their Koubara who will support them throughout their married life.

In this respect it is an expression of gratitude to God for His blessings, and joyfulness at the receiving of those blessings. As Eleni and Spilios are led around the table three times, three significant hymns are sung. The first speaks of the indescribable joy that Isaiah the Prophet experienced when he envisioned the coming of the Messiah upon the earth. The second reminds us of the martyrs of the Faith, who received their crowns of glory from God through the sacrifice of their lives. The third is an exaltation to the Holy Trinity.

## The Blessing

Eleni and Spilios return to their places and in a final prayer, the priest blesses and removes the crowns, beseeching to God to grant the newlyweds a long, happy and fruitful life. He then lifts the Holy Gospel and brings it down between the bride and groom, separating the couple’s joined hands, thus symbolizing that only the word of God should come between them.

## The Tradition of Koufeta

The sugar-coated almonds, or “koufeta,” which are placed on the tray with the crowns and given to the guests at the reception, are symbolic of an ancient tradition. The hard bitterness of the almond represents the endurance of marriage and the sweetness of the sugar symbolizes the sweetness of future life. The guests are given an odd number of almonds which is indivisible, just as the newlyweds will remain undivided.