# Introduction

The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, the most ancient of Christian wedding rites, is steeped in rite and symbolism. In the Orthodox Church, marriage is a mystery through which Bride and Groom become united together “in oneness of mind, in truth, and in love.” The ceremony in its present form dates back to the fifth century and consists of two distinct services, The Betrothal and the Crowning.

# The Service of the Betrothal

The Betrothal Service begins with a series of petitions for Peace on Earth, and for the spiritual well-being of Elizabeth and Henry, asking that they be granted a perfect and peaceful love, and that their lives be blessed with fair children. The ring bearer brings forth the rings, symbol of eternity. The priest first petitions God for His Blessings of the rings, then thrice blesses the couple with the rings, saying, “The Servant of God, Henry, is betrothed to the Maiden of God, Elizabeth, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Maiden of God, Elizabeth, is betrothed to the Servant of God, Henry, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The alternating text between Elizabeth and Henry in the three blessings symbolically entwines their lives through Love.

## The Exchange of the Rings

While the final prayer is being read, the Koumbaro steps forward, takes the rings, and exchanges the rings again three times between Henry and Liz, as witness to the expression of two lives entwined as one. The exchange signifies that in married life, the weakness of one partner will be compensated by the strength of the other; the Imperfection of one partner will be compensated by the Perfection of the Other; and alone, the newly betrothed are neither complete nor perfect - but through the oneness of two people, they are made whole, and perfect by the Grace of the Holy Trinity. The rings are then placed on Elizabeth and Henry’s fingers and the Betrothal ends with the priest’s petition that God give their lives purpose - strengthened by truth, faith, love, and oneness of mind.

# The Sacrament of Marriage

The service of the Crowning is the wedding proper. It is comprised of five parts: The Prayers, The Crowning, Readings from the Scriptures; The Common Cup; and the Dance of Isaiah. It begins with the lighting of candles and joining of hands.

## Lighting of Candles

The Bride and Groom are given lit candles to hold throughout the ceremony. The light of the candles symbolizes their willingness and purity, which are illuminated by the light of Virtue.

## Joining of Hands

Three long prayers ask God to bless Elizabeth and Henry with a long and peaceful life, to unite them in one mind and one flesh, and to protect their mutual love with happiness and health. The priest joins the right hands of Henry and Liz. For the rest of the service, their hands remain joined to symbolize their oneness and unity as a couple.

## The Crowning

The Crowning is the central act of the Holy Sacrament. The Crowning is a visible expression of receiving the Grace of the Holy Spirit, whereby the Bride and Groom are united by the ribbon as One, to be the founders of a new generation blessed with Virtue and Truth. With the crowns, or “stefana,” Elizabeth and Henry are blessed with Honor, Devotion, Wisdom, and the Transcendent Beauty of God.

During this blessing, the couple are crowned with, and accept, the responsibility to serve as the King and Queen of their own Dominion, which they alone will rule, with the Wisdom, Justice and Integrity that are also bestowed upon them during these prayers.

The matching and interchangeable pair of crowns, two plaits of lemon blossoms, represents equality, expressed by the priest when he thrice says, “The servant of God Henry, takes as his Crown the servant of God Elizabeth, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Making the Cross above the Bride’s forehead, the priest repeats, “The Servant of God Elizabeth takes as her Crown the Servant of God Henry, in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit.” (Three times.) The Koumbaro, Stefanos, then step forward to exchange the crowns three times over the Bride and Groom to complete the entwining of two individuals as One.

## Readings from the Scriptures

The crowns of flowers now uniting them in marriage, Elizabeth and Henry listen to Saint Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians about the mystery and holiness of Christian marriage and the duties and responsibilities of husband and wife to each other. The Gospel of Saint John (2:1-12) is then read wherein John describes the marriage at Cana of Galilee, the occasion where Christ performed His first miracle.

## The Common Cup

Ever since this first miracle, the changing of water into wine at Cana, Christ has continued to change the ‘water’ of ordinary relationships into the ‘wine’ of Sacramental marriage. As a token of this miracle, the priest offers a common cup of wine, which Henry and Elizabeth will sip three times. This is not Holy Communion; rather it represents the common “Cup of Life”. The drinking of wine from a common cup impresses upon the couple that from that moment forward, they will share everything in life: joys as well as sorrows, and that they are to “bear one another’s burdens.” They learn that in sharing, they can experience a life of harmony. Their joys will be doubled and their sorrows halved, because they will be shared.

## The Dance of Isaiah

The priest then leads the couple, with their attendants of honor, in a circular procession around the marriage table, on which are placed the Gospel and the Cross: the Word and the Symbol of God. Through this symbolically joyful procession, the couple accepts the eternity of marriage, and accepts that the way of living as one is to move in an orbit around the very ‘center’ of life, which is their faith together. The dance of Isaiah is the first of three hymns. Isaiah’s hymn expresses the soaring joy that Isaiah felt when he foresaw the birth of Christ. It says, “Rejoice Isaiah, the Virgin has conceived and has brought forth a son, the Emmanuel, both God and Man. Dayspring is His name. We magnify him! Blessed be the Virgin!...” The second and third hymns, more solemn, are sung for the couple to remind them of the virtue of the Saints and of the great sacrifices of the Martyrs. Henry and Liz are thus reminded that love involves sacrifice, and they learn that the love they have for each other in marriage is a love that seeks not its own, but is willing to make sacrifices for the other.

## The Final Blessing

At the conclusion of the procession, the priest removes the crowns and beseeches God to grant Henry and Elizabeth a long, happy and productive life together. He asks God to “receive their crowns into His Kingdom, preserving them and this union as spotless, blameless, and without reproach, and making their lives ever purposeful.” Holding the Holy Gospel, the priest now separates Elizabeth and Henry’s joined hands, reminding them that only God, who forgives, unites and strengthens, can break the bond of perfect love and knowledge that they have mystically acquired. After this final message, the priests wish Henry and Liz many years of blessings and grace as they delight in their love for one another, a love that can always refresh from its source and its fulfillment in God, Who Is the Essence of Love Itself.

## The Symbolism of the Koufeta

The white of the sugar-coated almond symbolizes purity. Its egg shape represents fertility and the blessing that the couple enjoy a productive life together. The hardness of the candy represents the difficulties in life, and the sweetness of the sugar symbolizes the sweetness of Henry and Liz, now and in the future. There are always an odd number of almonds offered, the odd-number to represent that which cannot be divided, just as the newlyweds shall remain undivided.