

The Marriage Liturgy and the Married Life

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Just as the great deeds of the Lord not fixed in an unreachable past but are renewed with each reading of the Scriptures, so, too, His Mysteries are not merely once-only rituals which remain only in memory, but they continue to radiate Christ's light even after the blessing. Such is true not only of those Mysteries we can come to time and again, but even those we experience only once or—in some occasions—merely a couple of times. I speak here not of a Mystery that is absolutely singular, but one that we hope is singular: the Mystery of Crowning. In this Mystery, man and woman are united by the blessing of Christ through His priest, and they become one flesh, indivisible. The many fruits of this Mystery and its liturgy do not only occur at the moment of crowning, but they ever continue in the lives of those yoked together, those who “made holiness the marriage agreement.”¹ These blessings do not recur only when one relives the liturgy itself—maybe through attending another's crowning, or from an anniversary blessing—but in every moment of the day, for the Spirit is sleepless. Here I hope to shine light on the riches of the liturgy of that Mystery and the blessings it contained, so that couples may come to a greater relationship of the grace which has been bestowed upon them; in this way, I hope to lead them to an ever greater understanding of this holy Mystery.

The rite they underwent, though having many details changed over time and space, has a core that reaches back to the Garden. “O Holy God, You formed man out of the dust of the earth. You fashioned a woman from his rib and joined her to him as a helpmate.”² We are, of course, of a differed origin from our first forefathers, for we were born of the union of God, man, and woman, while Adam was born of God and dust, and Eve was born of God and man. He was unbegotten, being formed from the dust; she proceeded, as out of his side; but we are like Seth (a type of the Son in his being begotten) the only one who was begotten of the three—God, man, and woman.³ Yet despite the fact that we are all begotten as was Seth, the indissoluble marriage bond sealed by Adam and Eve continues to apply to us as well. For this we remember their original bond, a bond that Christ points us to as well in His discussion with the Pharisees over divorce. Such a discussion is recalled by the priest when he declares, “Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder.”⁴ For this marriage bond is unbreakable by man, and even God Himself will not shatter the bond so that it can be remade with another—for it is only destroyed by death.⁵ As Adam and Eve were joined together, a bond that is

¹ St. Jacob of Serug, *On the Mother of God*, trans. Mary Hansbury, Popular Patristics Series 19 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 60.

² *Ritual of Marriage*, 7.

³ See Pseudo-Athanasius, *Other Questions* §15 (PG 28:785C-D) and St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 31.11 (PG 36:144D-145B).

⁴ *Ritual*, 6.

⁵ This leaves aside the rare instances of the Pauline or Petrine privilege.

made by the hand of God, under the patronage of Christ, so are the bonds of our married brethren now.

And what is the goal of such marriage? The Lord declared to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it,” and, as the priest prays, “Through marriage You made them two in one flesh; for this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”⁶ These characteristics of marriage, which we will trace through the entire liturgy—the fruitfulness and multiplication, the ruling of the earth, the unity of flesh, and the making of a new family—are already seen in the origins of human history itself. For these characteristics were willed by God, as Moses’ first book reveals. These were not merely temporary, time-chained aspects of marriage which were to be removed when the fullness of time came—though some such aspects arose later, as we will see—rather, the Lord Himself reaffirmed them, the Lord Himself blessed them, for the Lord Himself decreed them. As long as we are married on earth, our marriages will be characterized thusly; when we are in Heaven, we do not know how our earthly marital relationships will be reflected, but we know there will be a change, for there will be no bodily, sexual union and procreation. What it shall be like in heaven we may see from those who live heaven on earth, those monastics who consecrate themselves to the Lord, marrying their souls to Him. For their fruitfulness is spiritual, giving birth to myriads of sanctified souls and spiritual children, and they rule the earth with mighty power and judge it (“do you not know that angels we judge?”), and they unite with the Lord both in spirit and flesh (through His Body and Blood in the Mysteries), and they are joined with the universal family of those united to Christ through His New Covenant.⁷

In marriage, man and woman are no longer alone, “for it pleased your great generosity that man should not be alone upon earth.”⁸ There are, of course, other ways for us to have communion with one another—particularly the Body of Christ, of which the Christian couple are also members—but marriage is a particular type of communion, one will by God and characterized by the aspects mentioned above. The first man, Adam, was created alone amidst the animals, alone in his spiritual superiority to them; but the Lord did not wish him to remain so. He thus created Eve from Adam’s side. Yet, though they were both in the garden, sharing the same land, they were still, as yet, alone. (For every man is, in some sense, alone, through his individuality, though, at the same time, he is united with others, whether through kinship, friendship, or grace.) The Lord did not will either of them to be alone, so—for the benefit of both—“You have united those who were alone, and instituted

⁶ *Ritual*, 6.

⁷ 1 Cor 6:3.

⁸ *Ritual*, 7.

an indissoluble bond of love in marriage for them.”⁹ This is the loving marital bond that seals couples even today, though now it is incomparably greater due to the grace of Christ.

Such a bond continued to be formed throughout the many, many generations after our first parents. So, in the liturgy, we remember many couples: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and Asenath, Zachary and Elizabeth. We know from the Scriptures—we cannot deny it—that some of these did not keep the marriage bond unstained. While recognizing the failures of our forefathers’ part, though, we should also recognize the good they did, and this is why the Church remembers them in the liturgy. For Abraham and Sarah were exalted by the Lord, and so we pray that both bridegroom and bride be exalted like them.¹⁰ And why were they exalted? For one, because the Lord chose them from among the peoples to be the origin of His chosen race. For another, because they believed in the Lord. They were not perfect—as we see in Sarah’s laughing at the Lord’s promise and in the incident with Hagar—yet they can still be a model for us. For, though they at first did not fully believe, they came to trust in the Lord, as is seen so strikingly in the binding of Isaac. The one who did not trust that the Lord would give him a son trusted most assuredly that the Lord would give him back his only son in resurrection. We can see in his change a foretaste of what was to come with Peter, who first denied the Lord Jesus and later died for Him. Thus Sirach praises Abraham: “Abraham, great father of multitudes of nations, and there is not found one like in glory; who kept the law of the Most High and became in covenant with Him; in his flesh he set the covenant, and in temptation was found faithful.”¹¹ (For he kept the covenant in his flesh through circumcision, foreshadowing darkly the One Who would covenant with the world through His flesh.)

Yet what does this have to do with our marriages? In marriage, we are called forth from our loneliness into the trial of wedded life, as Abraham was called forth from Ur of the Chaldees; we unite for children, though we may never receive them; we keep the Lord’s law, together, and hold fast to covenants, both with Him and with each other; and we must be faithful, even in the darkest, deepest temptations. (And the Enemy most definitely tempts married Christians, for their marriages symbolize something he hates so strongly: the union of Christ and His Church.) Finally, in our desire for children, we pray to be blessed like Abraham and Sarah, who were granted fruitfulness by the Lord, and because the forefathers of a multitude of nations.¹² Even if we never receive a child from the Lord, our marriage can still be spiritually fruitful. Yet, as Abraham and Sarah received a child miraculously

⁹ *Ritual*, 1.

¹⁰ See *Ritual*, 13.

¹¹ Sir 44:19-20.

¹² See *Ritual*, 6.

from the Lord, despite their senility and infertility, so may Christian couples still receive children, despite their infertility. The Lord has not ceased to work miracles, even among the infertile.

Next, we hear of Isaac and Rebekah. Abraham's blessed fruitfulness continued through them, for the multitude of nations originates in the multitude of Isaac's seed. Thus we pray, "You gave Isaac to Rebekah and blessed them with children."¹³ Here we can pause and point out an interesting aspect of this text. We often hear of the woman being given to the man, though God truly gives them both to each other, as they are engaged to each other, espoused to each other, and crowned for each other.¹⁴ In this line, the Church reminds us of the gift of the man to the woman. For it is not just that the man receives a gift and a blessing in his wife; likewise, the woman, too, receives a gift and a blessing in her husband. We can see this in the story of Isaac and Rebekah, for Rebekah recognizes the beauty of Isaac before they are wed; not only that, but she is blessed to become the mother of "thousands of myriads," and such motherhood is granted her through her marriage.¹⁵ As Isaac receives a beautiful woman to marry, so does Rebekah receive a handsome man, and both, through one another, receive children, children who will populate the nation of Israel, the people of God. Despite how it may often be viewed, marriage is not about a man acquiring a woman as property: it is about a man and woman wholly giving themselves to one another with the blessing of God. Though there is a common tradition in the West of a father giving his daughter away on her marriage day, it is truly God Who gives the spouses to each other, in conjunction with their own gift: that is why the priest, in the person of the Lord Christ, places the rings, the symbols of fidelity and bondage, on the hands of the bride and groom.¹⁶

To return to Isaac and Rebekah, it was God Who gave them to each other—including giving Isaac to Rebekah—and He "blessed Isaac and Rebekah and made them heirs to [His] promise."¹⁷ For the promise was first given to Abraham, and Isaac, we could say, inherited the promise from his fathers, so he was born an heir, but Rebekah became an heir through marriage. So close is the bond between husband and wife, that what one receives as inheritance is passed to the other; the two are united so closely that they become co-inheritors. Not only do our marriages replicate them in this, but we, too, are made heirs to the promise through Christ, and we receive the fullness of the inheritance,

¹³ *Ritual*, 6.

¹⁴ See *Ritual*, 2, 8, 9.

¹⁵ Gen 24:64-65,60.

¹⁶ See *Ritual*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ritual*, 1.

the one Isaac and Rebekah did not receive on their own, for “God foresaw about us something better, so that not without us would [they] be perfected.”¹⁸

And what are the blessings of this couple? The groom is to be “blessed as Isaac,” while the bride is to be “happy as Rebekah.”¹⁹ Many are the blessings Isaac received: a miraculous conception, an inherited promise, a foreshadowing redemption, a glorious wife, and nations from his seed. Rebekah received many such blessings, for she became a co-inheritor of the promise, she received a glorious husband, and thousands of myriads were born from her seed. She, however, was not born of a miraculous conception, nor did she receive the redemption Isaac did on Moriah. Is it for this reason that she is called “happy” and not “blessed”? I am unsure, but it is clear that both Isaac and Rebekah received both blessings and joy from the Lord, and so the groom and the bride are blessed, respectively, in their names. We also see that these two—whose time of courtship, we may so call it, is explicitly detailed in the Scriptures—are the only ones whose example is recalled during the liturgy of betrothal.

Now we proceed to the third couple of the blessing, that of Jacob and Rachel, from whom arose the twelve patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel.²⁰ We know, of course, that Jacob received two wives from his father-in-law Laban; but it was Rachel whom he loved. It was for her that he said, “I will serve you seven years.”²¹ (What concerns us here is not the faults of our fathers, but their good deeds and example. For we remember the principle of Patriarch Photios: “if they happened to fall into something unbecoming, then I would imitate the good sons of Noë and hide my father’s shame, by using silence and gratitude as a cloak. I would not follow Cham’s example, as do you....But you did not consider that they were human, and that no one constituted from clay and mutable matter can maintain himself forever superior to a human blunder. Indeed, it happens that a trace of some blemish clings even to the best of men.”²²) After their wedding, though, Rachel was cursed with sterility for many years, having such a zeal for children that she said to her husband, “Give me children; and if not, I will die.”²³ May all married couples so desire children from the Lord as did Rachel: may they not reject any fertility that the Lord has blessed them with! Such a blessing did Rachel eventually receive, when she bore Joseph and declared, “God removed my burden.”²⁴ From Jacob were begotten the twelve patriarchs of Israel, though from many women—yet Rachel can be seen as the spiritual mother

¹⁸ Heb 11:40.

¹⁹ *Ritual*, 13,

²⁰ See *Ritual*, 6.

²¹ Gen 29:18.

²² Photios the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople, *On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Astoria, NY: Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983), §70.

²³ Gen 30:1.

²⁴ Gen 30:23.

of all. Thus we can still see her as our spiritual mother, even though our entrance into the people of Israel is through Christ, a descendant of Judah, son of Leah.²⁵

In the liturgy, we remember particularly the union of Jacob and Rachel, for she was the one he truly loved, and from them was born Joseph, whom we also remember. But what are the blessings of Jacob and Rachel? They are, primarily, multiplication, as the twelve patriarchs came from them.²⁶ A special blessing is also brought for each, the bride and the groom, at this point, either because they are specifically connected to Jacob and Rachel or because they crown the blessings of these three couples: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel. (And why do these three have such importance? For they are the three patriarchs, and God names Himself by them: “I am the God of your father, God of Abraham and God of Isaac and God of Jacob.”²⁷) For the groom, the blessing is that he be “walking in peace and keeping the commandments of God in righteousness”; for the bride, the blessing is that she be “rejoicing [her] husband and observing the prescriptions of the law, for such is the will of God.”²⁸ We see similar blessings regarding God’s law, for all Christians are bound by this Law, so that we can still declare, “A lamp to my feet [is] Your Law, and a light to my paths” and “How I loved Your Law, O Lord! All the day my meditation [it] is.”²⁹ This Law is no longer simply the Mosaic Law in all its prescriptions, but it is the Law of Love, the Law of Christ—and yet it is still a Law, a yoke. As both bride and groom are bound by this yoke, they are “yoked together” in the Law, as the Christ’s words intimate.³⁰ Their unity is thus not only of flesh, but it is also a unity in the Law and in Love and Grace. The groom also receives the blessing of peace for his keeping of the Law, per the saying of David, “Great peace to those loving Your Law”; it may also be the peace of the Christ, Who said, “Peace I leave to you, My peace I give to you.”³¹ On the other hand, the bride receives the blessing of rejoicing in her husband. Does this mean that the husband should not rejoice in his wife? By no means! But, as we saw with Isaac and Rebekah above, many think that the husband receives a blessing and a cause for rejoicing in his wife, but not as many see the blessing the wife receives in her husband, and so the liturgy reminds us of this.

Now we have seen the blessings of the three patriarchs and their example, but the righteous couples of the past are still being paraded before us. Next we see Joseph and Asenath, who were

²⁵ See Mt 1:2; Gen 35:23.

²⁶ See *Ritual*, 13, 6.

²⁷ Ex 3:6.

²⁸ *Ritual*, 13.

²⁹ Ps 118:105,97.

³⁰ See Mt 19:6; Mk 10:9.

³¹ Ps 118:165; Jn 14:27.

united by the Lord and blessed with their children, the half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.³² For his great wisdom, Joseph was exalted by Pharaoh, lord of Egypt, and the latter renamed him, gave him a place of power, and gave him Asenath, daughter of a pagan priest, as wife; she bore him his two children before the years of famine.³³ Joseph, thus marrying a pagan, as would Moses later—as Zipporah was a daughter of the priest of pagan Midian—made her share in the inheritance of Israel; thus he fulfilled in advance the saying of Paul, “The unbelieving wife will be sanctified in the husband.”³⁴ Asenath, too, bore children with the help of the Lord, the half-tribes of Israel, the only children of the patriarchs to be singled out as divisions of Israel themselves. (Thus they are remembered, by name, by Moses in his song, and they receive individual allotments of land by Joshua in the Promised Land.)³⁵ But what two we learn from these two? We see that the children of married couples can become nations in themselves, as were Ephraim and Manasseh; we see that even the pagan wife, as Asenath, can become joined to the people of God through marriage; and we see an example of another righteous couple—indeed, with Joseph we see a fully faithful husband, for his only children are by Asenath, and he even resisted the seduction of Potiphar’s wife, for which he suffered.³⁶

The Church does not stop at recalling the memory of these ancient patriarchs, but she continues up until the time of the Christ, pointing us to the blessed couple of Zachariah and Elizabeth. For the Lord, “accepting the prayer of Zachary and Elizabeth...revealed in their child the Forerunner, John the Baptist.”³⁷ Much has been said, and much more could be said, about this wondrous couple, the priest and his wife. For Zachary was a priest of the ancient order, who, some say, was slain between the altar and the house.³⁸ Such a priesthood was replaced by the priesthood in Christ, yet he was still a sacred man, a man consecrated for service. Did this, however, mean that he was perfect in his service? No, for we see his reluctance to believe the message of Gabriel, and so he was cursed, that the fetter of sterility pass from his generating organs to his vocal ones, that he may be silent until the birth of the Lord’s voice, the friend of the Bridegroom, the blessed John.³⁹ Elizabeth, on the other hand, accepted the Lord’s promise, and she became the waning evening that gave way to the morning of the Theotokos: “Morning which carries the great Sun of Righteousness, / and evening in which is the star that proclaims concerning the Light.”⁴⁰ So we have two examples from this couple:

³² See *Ritual*, 6.

³³ See Gen 41:45,50-52.

³⁴ 1 Cor 7:14; see Ex 2:16-21.

³⁵ See Dt 33:17; Jos 16:1-17:18.

³⁶ See Gen 46:20; 39:6-20.

³⁷ *Ritual*, 6.

³⁸ See Lk 11:51.

³⁹ See Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* 1.7 (PG 85:1772).

⁴⁰ St. Jacob of Serug, 72.

the priest who at first hesitated but later rejoiced in the Lord's promise, exalting it in song, and perhaps even being martyred for his joy, and the priest's wife who humbly accepted the promise and praised the Theotokos.

But what does the Church wish to tell us with this exemplar couple? They are another couple burdened with infertility, as were Abraham and Sarah, before the miraculous blessing of the Lord, and their child became the last of the ancient prophets. Who cannot hope for such a blessing, as we all worship the same Lord as they did, the Lord Who bestows children on the barren? So any couple should approach the mystery in trust, knowing that, even if by nature they are sterile, if they offer sweet-smelling prayers to the Lord, He may, if it be His will, bestow on them a child of promise, as He did to Zachary and Elizabeth. So, too, all should hope and pray that the fruit of their womb be great and wondrous saints in the Hand of God, as was John.

And at the cusp of the Lord's entry into our race, at the cusp of His becoming man, we encounter the blessed Theotokos, the ever-virgin Mary, who was caused by God "to blossom forth in the order of nature from the root of Jesse," for she was born from the marital embrace of Joachim and Anna, as were every child upon earth except hers.⁴¹ Thus, again, we see a glorious child coming from righteous parents, and every couple is called to pray and to work that their children may receive some sliver of the honor Joachim and Anna's daughter received in the sight of God. For from righteous parents oft come righteous seed, though no fervor of the parents can force the free will of the child. Nevertheless, the parents' deeds can have a grand influence on the child.

But this, of course, is really a side note on the Theotokos. What is most wondrous, most paradoxical and glorious and awful, is that the Son of God "became incarnate of her and [was] born of her for the salvation of the human race."⁴² For now we have passed beyond mere remembrance of examples for Christian couples, and what was implicit in the previous lines of the blessing is explicit here: we are recalling the salvation history that the Lord has guided over thousands of years, a history that culminated in the coming of the Son, and now we reside in the latter days, members of His Mystical Body. All of the previous history of the Jews is now ours, since we have joined the great family of Christ, born a Jew. Christian couples share in this history and this family, and they have each been redeemed by the Son Who was incarnate of the all-pure Theotokos. What a wondrous thing, that at one's marriage one recalls the greatest gifts that could be received, the gift of salvation and the gift of the Christ!

⁴¹ *Ritual*, 6.

⁴² *Ritual*, 6.

We do not just reveal in the Lord's coming, but we recall His deeds. And what deed is more fitting than when He attended a wedding, as He does now, at every Crowning? For where two are gathered, the Lord is present, and here He is present to unite them.⁴³ What wedding could be mentioned but the wedding at Cana? Of this wedding, Augustine declared, "The Lord confirmed that marriage is something of value...because He attended a wedding."⁴⁴ Likewise the priest prays, "In Your indescribable graciousness and great goodness You came to Cana in Galilee, and blessed the marriage which took place there. Thus You made it clear that it is Your will that there should be lawful marriage and from it the procreation of children."⁴⁵ Indeed, this event is so momentous, so monumental, that we hear of it over and over during the liturgy of this Mystery. Thus we pray "that this marriage may be blessed as was the marriage in Cana of Galilee," for the presence of the Lord is itself a blessing.⁴⁶ Thus we hear proclaimed the Gospel passage recounted this great event.⁴⁷ Thus we hear that the Lord came to Cana "according to [His] saving providence" and thusly "by [His] presence [He] manifested that marriage is an honorable state."⁴⁸ Thus the priest asks the Christ after Communion to bless the couple as at Cana, and even the final blessing of the liturgy recalls the Lord's recognition of marriage's honor by His very presence there.⁴⁹

Christ's honoring of marriage is not something to be taken for granted. Throughout the centuries, many groups, Christian and non-Christian, have tried to portray marriage as something foul and immoral. While virginity is more blessed, as a state considered in itself, than marriage, as the Scripture's and the Church's teaching shows, that in no way paints marriage as something evil. We can think of the teaching of Paul: "Therefore I will all men to be as even myself"—that is, a eunuch for Christ, a celibate man—"but each his own charism has from God, one thusly, and one thusly."⁵⁰ Both marriage and virginity are charisms from God. John Chrysostom shows that degrading marriage does not even make sense for one who wishes to exalt virginity: "Whoever denigrates marriage also diminishes the glory of virginity. Whoever praises it makes virginity more admirable and resplendent. What appears good only in comparison with evil would not be particularly good. It is something better

⁴³ See Mt 18:20.

⁴⁴ St. Augustine, *The Excellence of Marriage*, §3,3, trans. Ray Kearney, in St. Augustine, *Marriage and Virginity*, ed. David G. Hunter and John E. Rotelle, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part I, Volume 9 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1999).

⁴⁵ *Ritual*, 6.

⁴⁶ *Ritual*, 5.

⁴⁷ Jn 2:1-11; see *Ritual*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ritual*, 12.

⁴⁹ See *Ritual* 15, 16.

⁵⁰ 1 Cor 7:7.

than what is admitted to be good that is the most excellent good.”⁵¹ Many groups in the early Church tried to claim that only virginity was worthy of a Christian, while marriage was a foul and worthless thing. The Church rebuked them without hesitation; St. Cyril of Alexandria spent an entire book of his *Stromateis* (*Miscellanies*) merely rebuking such errors. And to those who think that the Church’s teaching of the supremacy of virginity in itself degrades the blessing of marriage life, I can think of no better retort than the following passage from St. Ephraim, recounting part of a vision he had:

I drew near to the gate of the kingdom of heaven and I saw there those who did not bear the title ‘virgin’ who were crowned with victorious deeds, for their virtues filled the place of virginity. For just as those who had been espoused to Him only in their bodies had been rejected because they were naked of any garment of good deeds, so too those who had espoused their bodies in a chaste marriage while their spirit was bound to the love of their Lord were chosen, and they wore their love for Him like a robe with [their] desire for Him stretched over all their limbs.⁵²

Thus marriage does not condemn one to a lesser blessing; indeed, the faithful, virtuous wife is more resplendent than the wicked virgin, despite her consecration. Though we can judge the worth of the states of marriage and virginity, one in a lesser state can still be more highly glorified. The paradox that bursts the friction between the two states, we might say, is the Theotokos herself, she, the only one, who was both virgin and wife, though she never knew the marital embrace.

But today, we rarely see the issue in the early Church, when virgins claimed marriage was a foul capitulation to lust. Nowadays, we see, instead, an exaltation of lust: marriage is no longer seen as an allowance of lust but as a hindrance to it. Today, couples are mocked for their monogamy, for their unwavering devotion to each other. Such a rebuke is of the devil! For he, the father of lies, is also the father of adulterers, of fornicators, and of all the other sinners. But, oh great glory and mercy of God!, that He would accept the children of such a dreadful father into His own roof, into His own family, calling them by His Name, and becoming their Father! For no one, if he repents, is barred from the sonship or daughtership of the Lord. At Cana, Christ, too, rejects these, by blessing marriage in its devotions and “constraints” (if we can truly call faithful love a constraint!). For Christ preaches both love and law, and so He blesses marriage, calling it honored, in opposition to all that would bid us to revel in shameful lusts. So Christ’s presence solidifies the honor of marriage against all opponents, whether those mandating absolute celibacy for all or those promoting unbridled lust for all.

⁵¹ St. John Chrysostom, quoted in St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §16.

⁵² St. Ephraim the Syrian, *Letter to Publius* §15.

What more do we see at Cana besides this honoring of marriage? The miracle here is a miracle of joy, for it is a miracle of wine, and “wine delights the heart of man.”⁵³ Thus marriage is not merely something the Lord tolerates, as some might see in Paul’s words, “For better is to marry than to burn.”⁵⁴ No, the Lord does not merely *tolerate* marriage: He rejoices in it! Marriage is the occasion for Jesus to pour out wine to all those nearby, the wine of rejoicing, for which He will later be rebuked: “Behold, a man, a glutton and wine-bibber!”⁵⁵ So this marriage is not a somber, lugubrious event: it is an occasion for dancing and for rejoicing, for singing and for shouting. If there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance,” then, truly, this is a time for laughing and dancing!⁵⁶ With such the Lord Jesus must agree, for why else would He bestow upon the wedding guests wine, the drink of hilarity? Such rejoicing is exemplified so poignantly in the liturgy by the “Dance of Isaiah,” when the bride and groom follow the priest around the tetrapod, simulating a dance, as the congregation chants, among other troparia, the words, “Rejoice, O Isaiah!”⁵⁷ Other aspects of rejoicing appear throughout the liturgy, but a verse that resounds with Cana is the verse of the prokeimenon: “You have them a blessing forever and have made them glad with the *joy* of Your presence.”⁵⁸ In this we see the true source of rejoicing, not the wine, but the Vine.

In addition to the honor and the rejoicing, the last aspect we will mention of Cana is in the final words of the Gospel reading. This event is the first (or, beginning) of Jesus’ signs, and “Thus did He reveal His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.”⁵⁹ This miracle was no isolated event; instead, it was one of Jesus’ *signs*, a word particularly used by St. John to refer to specific miracles that revealed the Lord’s glory. Scholars point out six or seven signs mentioned by St. John in his Gospel, and these form a path leading to the account of the Last Supper and the Lord’s Passion and Crucifixion, His long-awaited hour. This is the hour He mentions to His mother at Cana, an hour which will involve, not the pouring of wine, but the pouring of blood. Such hour is not merely a darkened hour, an hour when the sun is overshadowed: it is also an hour of glory, for this hour truly revealed Jesus’ divine love for man. This divine love, the love of the Son’s self-sacrifice, is that choice wine hidden until the last days of the feast, after the lesser vintage of the Old Covenant. Such vintage was in no way poor, yet incomparably greater is this last vintage of the New Covenant. Such a glorious vintage comes with a price, with suffering, for wine is not gotten for free: it takes planting and tilling and plucking and

⁵³ Ps 103:15.

⁵⁴ 1 Cor 7:9.

⁵⁵ Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34.

⁵⁶ Eccl 3:4.

⁵⁷ *Ritual*, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ritual*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ritual* 11; Jn 2:11.

trampling and fermenting until the sweet wine is yielded. We think of the later troparion during the Dance of Isaiah, when we pray, “O Lord, O Lord, look down from heaven and see, and visit this vineyard, and perfect this vine which Your right hand has planted.”⁶⁰ As the prophet Isaiah spoke, “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant planting.”⁶¹ This is the vineyard whose planting and early tilling we traced through the early couples remembered in this liturgy, and it is one from which the Lord expected great fruit, as He continued to till it through the ages; and yet His people rejected Him, so He threatened through Isaiah to lay the vineyard to waste.⁶² He declared, “For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed”; and yet, He joyfully promised, “They shall blossom as the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.”⁶³ How did the Lord reconcile the threat and the promise? Through Himself. For so loving is the Lord, that He Himself became one of His vines, taking flesh from a daughter of Israel and becoming man; He Himself took on the pruning of the vineyard in His death, and He saved the vineyard from destruction, instead renewing it with His Blood as the choice wine. Now He Himself is the vine, the divine son of Israel, and we are branches in Him.⁶⁴ The great tender of the vineyard became a vine and underwent the greatest suffering for us, His branches and vineyard: how great is His love!

And in this we are led to the joining of Christ and the Church, of the tender and the vineyard, of the vine and the branches. For the vine is only one image of Christ and the Church: another is the image of marriage. Thus the Lord spoke to Israel through Hosea, “I will betroth you to Me for ever; I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.”⁶⁵ Such marital imagery is not only in the Old Covenant, but it continues in the New; for this reason, we have the great epistle reading of the liturgy of crowning. For here Paul adjures, “Husbands, love your wives, *as Christ loved the church*.”⁶⁶ And how did He love His Church? “He gave Himself up for her to make her holy.”⁶⁷ This we saw intimated at Cana, and we see it here explicitly proclaimed. Christ the Vine, Christ the Bridegroom, gave His life and spilled His Blood, the wine, for His vineyard and bride. And so husbands, imitating Christ, must give their lives for their wives, but both, being images and temples of Christ, are called to sacrifice for each other. This is why the remaining troparia of the Dance of Isaiah speak of the martyrs

⁶⁰ *Ritual*, 13.

⁶¹ Is 5:7 RSV-CE.

⁶² See Is 5:1-6.

⁶³ Hos 6:11; 14:7 RSV-CE.

⁶⁴ See Jn 15:1,5.

⁶⁵ Hos 2:19-20 RSV-CE.

⁶⁶ *Ritual*, 10; Eph 5:25.

⁶⁷ *Ritual*, 10; Eph 5:25-26.

who “have suffered courageously and received [their] reward” and whom the Church wishes joy upon.⁶⁸ Those married are called to be martyrs, and for this reason are they crowned, a foreshadowing of the heavenly crowns of the martyrs. Of course, the crowns can represent much more: the royalty the couple has in their home as head of the family, or the royal dignity of mankind as a whole. Yet we can perhaps see them best as foretastes of the heavenly crowns. Indeed, they are only foretastes, for they are removed after the Dance of Isaiah, as the blessings of the patriarchal couples are prayed upon them.⁶⁹ Yet they have, by then, received a taste of the heavenly blessings in that they have been crowned “with glory and honor,” receiving the “crowns of precious stones” and the life requested from the Lord.⁷⁰

(The image of Christ’s marriage to the Church is also mentioned during the engagement liturgy. The last blessing before the betrothal itself remembers how the Lord God “espoused the Church, a pure virgin from among the gentile nations.”⁷¹ Yet the glorious thing is that none of the gentile nations are excluded from becoming part of this pure, virginal Church, if they repent and believe, for all can be part of the bridal Church, purified by Christ “in the bath of water by the power of the word” and thusly be joined in “a glorious church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort.”⁷²)

Now we have seen the whole swath of salvation history, from the Garden through the patriarchs to the last of the prophets, John, seeing Christ’s arrival and sacrifice in order to purify and wed His bride, the Church, the New Jerusalem that, at the end of time, will be “descending from God, from the heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” to celebrate “the wedding of the Lamb.”⁷³ Now we focus on the goods of the earthly marriage which this liturgy creates and celebrates. We have already seen the character of martyrdom present in marriage. What makes marriage mean martyrdom? For some, it may be difficult to keep fidelity or marital virtue: thus we pray that they have “matrimonial chastity,” a “married life beyond reproach,” “a chaste life,” and the strength to be kept “faithful to each other” and a marital life without sin.⁷⁴ For some, it may be the deep communion needed being spouses in all things: thus we pray that they have “peace and oneness of mind,” “mutual love in the bond of peace,” and union “in one mind and flesh.”⁷⁵ We also pray in general for their

⁶⁸ *Ritual*, 13.

⁶⁹ See *Ritual*, 13.

⁷⁰ *Ritual*, 9.

⁷¹ *Ritual*, 1.

⁷² *Ritual*, 10; Eph 5:26-27.

⁷³ Rev 21:2; 19:7.

⁷⁴ *Ritual* 6,7,5,12.

⁷⁵ *Ritual* 1,6-7,7; cf. 12.

“common life of marriage” and that even “the daily course of their life” be blessed, including “dew from heaven and the fruitfulness of the earth” and “an abundance of temporal good things, that they in turn may share their abundance with those in need.”⁷⁶ Then, of course, there are the children: besides the many mentions of children in connection the Patriarchs above, we pray for “devoted children” and “good children” at whose sight the couple may rejoice, since from lawful marriage comes “the procreation of children.”⁷⁷ They are blessed for fruitfulness, “happiness in their children,” and the grace “to see their children’s children.”⁷⁸ The blessing of children is one of the key themes of the Psalm that accompanies the couple’s entrance, which prays for a wife “like a fruitful vine” and children “like olive shoots around your table,” as well as more general blessings and blessings for prosperity for the one that fears the Lord.⁷⁹ Many more prayers for blessings and prosperity on the couple could be gathered, but they often focus on these three categories of marital virtue, a blessed common life, and the blessing of children.

Now we have seen marriage traced throughout salvation history and recalled in the liturgy; we have heard of Jesus’ great miracle at a wedding, and we have heard Paul’s grand exhortation to couples; we have even reviewed the many blessings prayed upon the couple. All this is for the couple who are betrothed, then espoused, then crowned and united by the marital yoke bestowed by Christ. All of these blessings and prayers do not evaporate when the couple leaves for the reception, but the graces remain within them, percolating and flourishing over the years. By looking back at what we experienced—whether days, weeks, months, years, or decades ago—we can come to see even more deeply how the glorious grace of this Mystery continues to remain with us and transform us. Let us pray that we grow greater in those three great blessings of marriage, that we may come to emulate more deeply the Patriarchs and other just couples in their virtues, that we grow closer to Christ and serve each other as Paul exhorted, so that, in the end, after our many years of sacrifice and daily martyrdom for each other and our children, after “[attaining] a ripe old age, observing [God’s] commandments with a pure heart,” the Lord may “accept [our] crowns into [His] kingdom” and grant us “the unfading crown of glory,” so that the words of the prokeimenon may be true in the deepest, most eternal sense: “You have given them a blessing forever and have made them glad with the joy of your presence.”⁸⁰ To the Lord Christ be glory and power and honor, together with His Eternal Father and His All-Holy, Good, and Life-Giving Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages, amen!

⁷⁶ *Ritual*, 15, 7.

⁷⁷ *Ritual*, 5,6.

⁷⁸ *Ritual*, 7.

⁷⁹ *Ritual*, 3; Ps 127.

⁸⁰ *Ritual*, 15,7,9.