

## **MARRIAGE**

The relation between husband and wife. [*Marriage is a sacrament in the Coptic church. The wedding is celebrated in a special church ceremony, and a multitude of customs traditionally surround the occasion. This entry consists of three articles: The Sacrament of Marriage and The Marriage Ceremony by Bishop Gregorios, and Marriage Customs by Cérés Wissa Wassef.*]

### **The Sacrament of Marriage**

Marriage is a spiritual bond between a man and a woman, sanctified by the grace of the Holy Spirit, joining them into an indissoluble unit for the purpose of establishing a caring and harmonious Christian family.

These distinctive characteristics were culled from the Old Testament, the teachings of Christ, the commandments of the apostles, and decrees of various ecumenical councils. God blessed Adam and Eve, and later, Noah, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gn. 1:28; 9:1). Likewise, Christ rebuked the Pharisees who importuned Him for a facile justification of divorce by reminding them that “God made them at the beginning male and female, and for this cause a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the twain shall be one flesh” (Mt. 19:5-6).

The presence of Christ at the marriage of Cana was a very significant event. That the Lord accepted an invitation to a wedding and performed His first miracle there reflects the importance He attached to marriage as a sacrosanct institution in the structure of society. On this basis rests the sacramental approach of the Coptic church to matrimony. Consequently, during the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, the priest says this prayer: “O Thou Who wert present at the marriage feast at Cana of Galilee, and blest it, and changed the water into real wine by Thy Divine power, do [bless](#) the marriage of Thy servants [names].”

In the early centuries of Christianity, the fathers and theologians of the church strove to establish a permanent solid base for the institution of marriage. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA laid special stress on the recognition of the divine process by which man and woman are unified through marriage. His student and successor at the Catechetical School, Origen, in his commentaries on Matthew wrote, "Certainly it is God who joins two in one, so that when he marries a woman to a man there are no longer two.

And since it is God who joins them, there is in this joining a grace for those who are joined by God. Paul knew this, and he said that just as holy celibacy was a grace, so also was marriage, according to the Word of God, a grace." The same attitude was expressed by Ambrose, fourth-century bishop of Milan, in a letter to Pope Siricius: "Neither do we deny that marriage has been sanctified by Christ, since the Divine Word says: "The two shall become one flesh."

In the fifth century Saint CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA remarked that "when the wedding was celebrated [at Cana] it is clear that it was entirely decorous: for indeed, the Mother of the Saviour was there; and, invited along with His disciples, the Saviour too was there, working miracles more than being entertained in feasting, and especially that He might sanctify the very beginning of human generation, which certainly is a matter concerning the flesh."

The fifth-century theologian Saint Augustine maintained that "having been invited, the Lord came to the marriage in order to affirm conjugal [chastity](#) and to show that marriage is a Sacrament." Similarly, Epiphanius, fourth-century bishop of Salamis, adduced that "two reasons can be advanced to explain why the marriage was celebrated with external festivities in Cana of Galilee, and why the water was truly changed into wine: so that the tide of bacchanalian frenetics in the world might be turned to chastity and dignity in marriage, and so that the rest might be directed aright to the enjoyment both of wine free of toil and of

the favor that presented it; so that in every way it might stop the mouths of those aroused against the Lord, and so that it might show that He is God with the Father and His Holy Spirit.”

In contrast to that wave of bacchanalian dissipation and intemperance to which Epiphanius refers, there arose a tendency that veered to the other extreme in advocating strict celibacy and harsh self-restraint. MANICHAISM and GNOSTICISM frowned upon marriage, and many of their adherents flouted Christian teachings on this subject with derision and contempt. The church, however, continued to affirm the sanctity of marriage. In 345 the Council of Gangra in Asia Minor adopted far-reaching resolutions that were directed against his spirit of false asceticism that condemned marriage and boycotted ordinary services of the church.

Among other measures, the council decreed the excommunication of those who inveighed against lawful church marriage, those who refused to receive Holy Communion from the hand of a married priest, and those who remained celibate not because of a genuine pursuit of a state of celibacy but because of contempt for marriage and hatred of married persons. The council also condemned women who deserted their husbands as a result of a similar disdainful outlook on marriage and a false sense of decorum and affected propriety. Likewise, it decreed that members of the clergy who turned away their wives on the grounds of a more pious relationship could be expelled. Clement of Alexandria, in his *Stromateis* (Miscellanies) wrote, “If, however, marriage, though commanded by the Law, were yet sinful—really, I do not see how anyone could say that sin has been commanded by God. If the Law is sacred, then marriage is a holy estate.”

In light of these religious sanctions, the marriage ceremony, in harmony with other sacraments, must be conducted in the church. (It is true that in certain cases it can be held in a private house, but this is the exception to the rule, similar to baptizing an invalid at home or administering the

HOLY [UNCTION](#) of the sick to a dying person in a hospital or at home.) The officiating priest must be in full ecclesiastical vestments, not omitting to take off his shoes.

According to Safi ibn al-'Assal, "a wedding may be conducted only in the presence of a priest who shall pray for the bridal couple and administer Holy Communion to them in the *iklil* ceremony, by which they are united and become one flesh, as God Almighty has ordained. [Contrary](#) to this it shall not be deemed a proper marriage, for it is through Church prayer alone that man and woman can become mutually legitimate."

This sanctity of marriage makes it an indissoluble bond that may be broken only on the grounds of adultery (Mt. 5:23, 19:9; Mk. 10:11-12; Jn. 16:18) or death (1 Cor. 7:39; Rom.7:2-3). The church also concedes that certain circumstances may be considered tantamount to death, as when a husband or wife renounces the Christian faith or is absent for a designated number of years, in which cases the partner may be allowed to divorce and remarry.

Marriage is thus a lifelong relationship between man and woman, the purpose of which is the enjoyment of mutual company on the basis of equal partnership, the procreation of children, and the avoidance of sin. The annals of the Coptic church, however, are not devoid of instances in which a couple entered voluntarily into a chaste relationship of spiritual communion, although they were married. According to the SYNAXARION, Saint DEMETRIUS I, third-century patriarch of Alexandria, had been married to his wife for forty-seven years before he was chosen patriarch, but both had lived in strict chastity. Anba Ammonius, in the fourth century, lived with his wife for seventeen years in complete [chastity](#) until her death, when he became a monk. Other examples are Anba Cyrus of Jawjar in the eighth century and Saint JOHN KAMA, in the ninth century.

## The Marriage Ceremony

The marriage ceremony, interspersed with making the sign of the cross, unfolds stage by stage. To solemnize the contract of marriage, the priest, holding a cross in his right hand in the presence of the bridal couple, their relatives, and the church congregation, begins by saying, "In the Name of our Lord, our God and our Saviour Jesus Christ Who has instituted the law of virtuousness and rectitude, we ratify the betrothal of the blessed Orthodox virgin son [name of bridegroom] to his betrothed the blessed Orthodox virgin daughter [name of bride]." Here he makes the sign of the cross and says, "In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God. Blessed be God the Father Almighty, Amen." Thereupon, the deacons chant "Amen" three times, and the congregation recites the Lord's Prayer.

Once again the priest says, "In the Name of our Lord, our God and our Savior Jesus Christ . . .," this time mentioning the name of the bride before that of the bridegroom, and makes the sign of the cross and adds, "Blessed be His Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen." The deacons again chant "Amen" three times, and the congregation again recites the Lord's Prayer. The priest then repeats the same formula as he said it the first time, making the sign of the cross, and adds, "Blessed be the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, Amen," and the deacons chant "Amen" three times. Then the priest says, "Glory and honour, honour and glory to the All-holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and at all times, world without end, Amen."

After the prayer of thanksgiving and the prayer of incense, the epistle is read, followed by the TRISAGION and the prayer of the Gospel. The reading of the Gospel is taken from Matthew 19:5-6: "For this reason a man shall leave father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. . . . What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." Certain prayers and intercessions follow, then the creed, the prayers of betrothal, and the prayer of absolution. The priest places

rings on the ring finger of the left hand of the bridegroom and the bride and ties a girdle (Arabic, *zunnar*) around the man's shoulder.

Next comes the reading of Ephesians 5:22-6:30, wherein Paul speaks of the married life of devout Christians as the relationship between Christ and the church; the key verses are, "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church," and "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." There follow some petitions and supplications in which reference is frequently made to the [creation](#) of woman from the rib of Adam and to the divine will of Christ to be born of a woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Directing his prayers to Christ, "who was present at the marriage feast of Cana of Galilee, and changed the water to wine," the priest requests the Lord to [bless](#) the marriage of the bridal couple to assist them in their future life that they may live in peace, piety, and patience without offense.

Then the priest takes in his hand two marriage diadems. A marriage diadem is a coronet of gold or silver called in Arabic *taj* or *iklil*, both meaning "crown." (The term *iklil* also refers to the whole marriage ceremony.) The diadem has a cross in the center surrounded by the words "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace." Holding the diadems, the priest prays, "God . . . Who dost crown Thy saints with unfading crowns, . . . do Thou also now [bless](#) these crowns we have prepared to set upon Thy servants. May they be to them a crown of glory and honour, of blessing and salvation, of rejoicing and good pleasure, of virtue and righteousness, of wisdom and understanding, of comfort and strength."

Then he places the diadems, attached by a ribbon, upon the heads of the bridegroom and the bride and says, "Set, Lord, upon Thy servants [names] a crown of invincible grace, of exalted and great glory, of good and unconquerable faith, Amen." At that point he puts a white silk cloth

on their heads, saying, "Crown them with glory and honour, O Father, Amen. [Bless](#) them, O Only-begotten Son, Amen. Sanctify them, O Holy Spirit, Amen." Then he wraps the diadems and the rings in the cloth. Afterward come the Lord's Prayer and prayers of absolution.

The service concludes with an address by the priest that encapsulates certain commandments and pieces of advice. This address is made up of seven sections, the first six of which are each followed by a short hymn sung by the deacons, while the seventh and last section is followed by the Lord's Prayer. First, he reminds the couple of the wisdom of God's [creation](#) of Eve from Adam's rib, so that he may constantly care for her and she may be obedient to him. To the bridegroom the priest says, "It is fitting that you should now receive your wife with a pure heart, upright mind, and guileless intent."

The bride is urged to be always prompted by a genuine sense of obedience, duty, love, and respect, so that, like Sarah, who was respectful and dutiful toward Abraham, her husband, she may be blessed with offspring "as plentiful as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore."

The service for a second marriage, called digamy (for the widowed and the divorced), is nearly the same, with certain relevant minor modifications. If both parties have been widowed, the crowns are not used, since no one may be crowned twice. Where one has not been married before, he or she will receive the diadem.

The church allows second marriages, in conformity with Paul's words, "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, "It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.'" This section is read during the service and is incorporated into the priest's prayers. In *Al- Majmu' al-Safawi* Safi ibn al-'Assal described the second marriage as inferior to the first; thus the church accords it not the blessing of a crowning but a prayer of

forgiveness.

In his “Catechetical Lectures” Saint Cyril of Jerusalem said, “And those who are once married—let them not hold in contempt those who have accommodated themselves to a second marriage. Continence is a good and wonderful thing; but still, it is permissible to enter upon a second marriage.”

The church, however, discountenances a third marriage. This was best expressed by Saint Jerome in his letter to Pammachius: “I do not condemn digamists, not even trigamists, and if I may use such a word, not even octogamists. . . . It is one thing not to condemn, another to commend; one thing to grant forgiveness, another to praise as virtuous” (Jerome, 1979, p. 184)

Further subsequent marriages are unequivocally condemned. Safi ibn al-‘Assal wrote, “He who dares to enter upon a fourth marriage . . . let him not call it marriage, nor the children born of it rightful progeny. . . . Such an action merits punishment due to adultery.”

Finally, it should be noted that marriages cannot be solemnized during the church fasts preceding Christmas, Easter, the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Feast of the Apostles Paul and Peter. In very special circumstances, however, dispensation may be granted by the patriarch or bishop.

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## Marriage Customs

### BISHOP GREGORIOS

The Coptic wedding ceremony, called “the coronation ceremony,” takes place generally on Thursday, Saturday, or Sunday. Some traditions related to this sacrament have gradually disappeared among urban dwellers, but they still persist in the countryside. One such custom is the “Night of the Henna,” which takes place on the eve of the wedding day. It is consecrated to the bride, her kinswomen, and her women friends. A trained woman (*mashtah*) prepares the bride, bathes her, and applies henna to the palms of her hands and soles of her feet and those of the attending guests.

The bridegroom is represented at the event by his kinswomen, who arrive loaded with flowers and bearing a candle as tall as the bride, which is supposed to burn all night long in her bedroom. The day ends with a festive dinner for women only.

The bridegroom also spends his day in celebration with his best man (*shibin*) and male friends. The bride’s family presents him with apparel of

silk and cotton and with jewelry, according to the means and social standards of the family.

Another popular tradition that has almost disappeared is the procession of the bride on her wedding day. Everyone parades on foot through the streets with musicians leading. For the more affluent, the bride and her female attendants formerly rode in a decorated palanquin on the back of a camel. The camels have now been replaced by carriages and automobiles.

If the wedding is in a hotel, the parade takes place after the ceremony in the hotel and before the lavish banquet dinner. The bride and bridegroom are paraded through the hotel, preceded by musicians and dancers and followed by the guests.

According to a custom rarely observed at present, upon the arrival of everyone at the home of the bridegroom, a lamb or calf was slaughtered, and its blood sprinkled over the threshold, across which the bride had to step. The flesh of the sacrificial animal was distributed among the poor.

The wedding night itself, or "Night of the Bridegroom," begins with a religious ceremony, which is now held in a church but until only a few decades ago took place in the home of the bridegroom. If the home was too small, a large tent was set up made of many colorful pieces of fabric appliquéd in intricate geometric designs. It was adorned with flags and strings of multicolored lamps, and floors were covered with red carpets. Inside, two gilded armchairs were set on a platform and reserved for the couple. These gilded chairs are still used in the church ceremony.

To begin the festivities, the best man goes to the bride's home with bouquets of flowers for the bride and her attendants. The father or the closest male relative will take the bride to her future husband. However, as she is about to step over the threshold to leave her home, custom demands that the household servants close the door and pretend to

detain her. They consent to reopen the door only after receiving bids in remuneration for allowing the bride to leave. This latter custom is very rarely seen at present.

For the ceremony itself, the bridegroom, wearing a long cape embroidered in white, waits in the chancel for his bride, who approaches on the arm of her father or a relative. She is preceded by the choir and clergy dressed in festive habits and singing to the accompaniment of cymbals and triangles. She takes her place at the right in one of the chairs on the platform. In front of the couple is a table holding the New Testament, a golden cross, the wedding rings, and incense.

The marriage service begins. At the end, after everyone has recited the Lord's Prayer, the priest, preceded by the choir of deacons singing, leads the newlyweds to the exit.

After the ceremony, every guest is presented with a small box (or other container) of sugar-coated almonds. These boxes, according to the means of the family, may be made of sterling silver, porcelain, cardboard, or other material. A lavish dinner is served, usually in the home of the bridegroom or under a tent especially erected for the occasion. For some decades it has been the custom among the bourgeoisie to host a reception in a large hotel. The amount of pomp and splendor depends on the financial situation of the couple, but even the poorest extend themselves for the occasion. In recent years the festivities have generally ended with the religious ceremony in the church, and dinner has been served only to the close family and friends of the newlyweds.

In the countryside, relatives and close friends help defray the wedding expenses by sending gifts such as sheep, poultry, sugar, rice, coffee, candles, and the like, on the understanding that they receive similar consideration when their turn comes.

On the following morning, friends and relatives call at the bridegroom's

house to present their gifts to the newlyweds. Gifts used to consist mainly of cash, which was carefully recorded for reciprocation on later occasions. This custom still exists, although presents of all kinds are also offered.

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**CÉRÈS WISSA WASSEF**

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