

Orthodox Wedding Traditions

By Philip Greentree CMC



Philip Greentree performs a civil ceremony which includes orthodox rituals

The Eastern Orthodox form of Christianity includes the churches from Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Lebanon and others. The churches are called “Orthodox”, since they have continued to practice Pauline Christianity in its original form, which evolved directly out of Judaism. On the other hand, following the Eastern Schism, the Roman Church has significantly altered from the original form of ceremony.

There are a number of core beliefs and rituals which are common to each branch of the Orthodox Church, despite the country of origin. Undoubtedly, the most famous is the crowning ceremony, which most Australians consider to be Greek tradition; however it is integral to the entire Orthodox world. Of course, there are some individual rituals that are found in some countries, but not others.

For Australians who may be attending their first Greek or other Orthodox wedding, be prepared for a long ceremony, around 1 to 1½ hours duration and with lots of religion. Some of the various rituals that occur do so three times each, this represents the Holy Trinity; The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost. The right hand is also paramount, since the Bible refers to the right hand as being of goodness.

Another traditional characteristic of Orthodox weddings is the lack of distinction between the guests of either the bride or groom, they often mill around together outside with the groom while waiting for the bride to arrive. However, in Australia, where many, if not most of the guests may be of non Orthodox heritage, there is a tendency to sit

according to the Australian tradition; bride’s family and guests to the left, the groom’s to the right.

An important (but certainly not the most important) person in the ceremony is/are the Koumbaros, the couple’s religious sponsors, they have important roles throughout the ceremony.

The Orthodox ceremony consists of two parts; the Betrothal Service and the Ceremony of the Sacrament of Marriage.

The Betrothal Ceremony

ENTRY TO THE CHURCH

The first stage of the wedding ceremony begins at the doors of the church, where the bride and groom, and their attendants are all waiting in the vestibule of the church. The priest moves to the doorway and greets them. The bride and groom stand before the priest, who then asks if they come of their own free will, and if they have not promised themselves to someone else. The priest then invites the couple and their party to enter the church and stand before the altar.

THE RING EXCHANGE

The main focus of this stage is the exchange of rings, which are first blessed by the priest, who holds them in his right hand and makes the sign of the cross over the couple’s heads. The rings are then placed on the 4th finger of the right hands of the couple. The koumbaro then exchanges the rings between the couple three times.

The Marriage Ceremony

The marriage ceremony contains several key parts, the first revolving around prayers. During this time, the priest hands the couple a lighted candle each, which they hold in their left hands throughout the remainder of the service. The candles represent the Christ, the Light of the World, who will light the way of the newlyweds in the life together.

There is a further series of prayers at the end of which the priest joins the right hands of the couple, thus symbolising their union. Their hands remain joined until the end of the wedding ceremony. This is followed by the crowning with the stefana.

THE CROWNING WITH THE STEFANA

Without doubt, the most well known part of an Orthodox wedding is the crowning ceremony. The crowns or stefana are symbols representing a varied, deep and rich history. They represent the creation of a new household or “kingdom” in which the couple are given the responsibility of ruling wisely and with full responsibility for each other and to God. It is the peak moment of the ceremony.

Traditionally, the stefana could have been a wreath of flowers, or be an actual crown made from gold, red velvet and jewels. In Australia, especially within the Greek community, they are generally made from a wire frame covered in satin and tied together with a good length of white satin. Of course, some brides ensure their stefana are excellent representations of tiara like crowns. In various Orthodox churches, especially the Serbian Church, high-domed crowns made from real gold are used, these are owned and retained by the church the ceremony took place within.

The crowns are said to represent martyrdom, sacrifice and unwavering devotion. In their marriage, the couple is required to forgo their own pleasures and concentrate on building their marriage together and to commit themselves responsibly to their children and their children’s futures. The actual crowns symbolise the glory and honour that is being

bestowed upon them by God, while the joining ribbon symbolises the couple’s union.

In most Greek weddings, the bride’s mother or a dear aunt will carry the crowns into the church and when the time comes, the koumbaro will fetch them from her. It is a wonderful and very proud moment for the person carrying the stefana as she hands them over, generally a moment of sheer joy.

The priest takes the stefana and makes the Sign of The Cross three times over the couple. The crown is then kissed by the groom before it is placed, then the same with his bride. The koumbaro then exchanges the crowns three times between the heads of the couple.

THE COMMON CUP

The priest reads the story from the Gospel that tells of the marriage at Galilee, where Jesus performed his first miracle in which he changed water into wine. The couple then drink wine from a chalice to symbolise that they will be sharing the happiness and sorrows of life together. They do this three times. In some parts of the varied Greek culture, bread is dipped into the wine and given to the couple.

THE CEREMONIAL WALK

The Common Cup is followed by the priest leading the bride and groom three times around the altar on their first steps as a married couple. The koumbaro follows close behind in case the stefana, which the couple are still wearing, slips off. It was at this time when, traditionally, the couple and all those nearby were showered with rice.

REMOVAL OF THE CROWNS

Following the ceremonial walk around the altar, the priest then blesses the couple, then removes the stefana. He then separates the couple’s hands using the Bible, reminding them that their union can only be broken by God.



In reality, many of Greek heritage have been in Australia now for 4 or 5 generations; the children of these generations, while wanting to celebrate their cultural heritage with the various rituals, simply don’t want the religion and lengthy service that goes with it. Until now, they have generally had to have a conventional civil ceremony containing some rudimentary form of crowning ceremony.

To resolve this issue, Port Stephens celebrant Philip Greentree has taken the main elements of the Orthodox ceremony and written a civil ceremony that retains all the core Orthodox rituals, including the various rituals pertaining to specific cultures, be they Greek, Serbian, Russian, etc., but without the religion. Philip performs these ceremonies across the entire Hunter Region and as far afield as Sydney. See the Greentree Ceremonies advertisement on page 69 for further details on these and other styles of ceremony performed by Philip Greentree.