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## Celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony at St. Nicholas Orthodox Church

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A Guide for the Bride and Groom

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## To the Bride and Groom

On behalf of our entire parish family, we extend our love and encouragement as you prepare for both your wedding day, and more importantly, the marriage that will begin that day and will continue for all eternity!

Your decision to celebrate the *Sacrament of Holy Matrimony* is truly one of the great milestones of your life. But while accepting the joy of it all, you will also take on a very great and even eternal responsibility, not only to each other and any children God may grant in your future life together, but especially to our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. Because this is such a momentous great undertaking, the three of us will spend time together in a series of Marriage Preparation sessions, as outlined in this booklet.

Since marriage is a Sacrament of the Church, at least one of you must be a practicing Orthodox Christians, striving to live the Faith with regular participation in the Sacraments of Confession and Communion. Since I am prohibited by both Church and Civil Law from marrying persons who are not active members of our Church, if the Orthodox spouse is not actively participating in the life of the Church, the wedding service may need to be postponed. Make time before your wedding to be prayerful, both with personal prayer and frequent attendance at liturgical services, asking for God's blessing, strength and help as you embark this eternal journey together. It is easy to allow all the details of the wedding to crowd out the spiritual significance of this *Holy Mystery* (Sacrament). It is my hope that by good preparation you will most fully benefit from this sacred act, so please read the contents of this booklet carefully and know that I am always open to answer any questions or concerns.

May the Lord Jesus Christ, who blessed the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee with His presence, bless you with a long and joyous life together in faithfulness and love for God and for each other. As always, I remain

Your father in Christ,



V. Rev. Michael Nasser  
Pastor

## Guiding Principles To Assist in Your Planning

The following instructions are offered to you so that your marriage ceremony may be as orderly and meaningful as possible. The requirements below are set by the *Sacred Canons of the Church* and by the current Guidelines of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.

**Selection of Date:** The letter accompanying this booklet confirms the date and time of the ceremony, but this confirmation is also subject to your cooperation with the various requirements laid out in this booklet. Any variance not approved by the parish priest may put the celebration of the Sacrament as scheduled into question, so please discuss any proposed variations as soon as possible.

Please be aware and respectful that there are seasons and days when marriages cannot take place in the Orthodox Church. These include:

- Every Wednesday and Friday
- The eve of every Sunday (after sundown Saturday night) and *Great Feasts*
- The *Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross* on September 14
- The *Beheading of John the Baptist* on August 29
- *Advent* (Christmas Lent) beginning November 15 thru Christmas
- *Great Lent*, including *Cheesefare* week until the week after *Pascha*
- The *Fast of the Dormition of the Theotokos*, August 1 thru 15.

Saturday weddings must commence no later than 4:00 P.M. so as not to conflict with the *Great Vespers* service. Although not currently practiced often, Sundays are the most preferable day for a wedding, as the couple can receive Holy Communion prior to being blessed by the Sacrament of Marriage. Any variation to the above prohibited days will be requested by the parish priest to the Diocesan Bishop and are only given in extenuating circumstances.

**Marriage Preparation Sessions:** Our first priority will be marriage preparation and not simply preparing you for the ceremony which begins the marriage. We will do that by scheduling you for a minimum of six private sessions in which the parish priest will guide you both through an examination of the issues most important to a successful marriage. Your sessions will explore topics such as our understanding of who God is, the meaning of marriage in the Church, conflict management, child rearing in an Orthodox home, etc.

*Building an Orthodox Marriage* by Bishop John Abdalah and the Workbook Companion will be the material we use for these sessions and are available from our church bookstore. You can share the book if you like, but each of you will need your own copy of the Workbook so please purchase two copies. Before our first session, please:

- 1) Read Chapter One of the book
- 2) Each of you *separately* answer the questions for the corresponding section in your copy of the Workbook
- 3) Discuss your answers, and from that discussion bring some topics to discuss further when we meet.

Couples that have already participated in this exploration have expressed deep appreciation for the experience, so we hope you also will experience it as time well spent. Because at least six sessions are needed, please schedule these sessions with the priest well in advance of the wedding date.

If you both don't live locally, we may need to arrange for you to meet with your local Orthodox priest, who can certify his preparation with you for the *Sacrament of Marriage* through premarital counseling, or the sessions can be held with our priest via video conference.

**Facility Usage Details:** Please arrange a meeting with our Parish Administrator to discuss important details such as the dos and don'ts of decorations/flowers in the church and Narthex, building access, cleaning fee, etc. (Refer to page 10).

**The Wedding Service:** The Orthodox Wedding Service may not be altered in any way. To keep the sanctity and integrity of this ancient rite, non-Orthodox elements may not be added e.g. non-Orthodox hymns, prayers, poems, recitations, instrumental and vocal arrangements.

**Music:** You may either request the St. Nicholas Choir (members of which may be available to sing the responses for the ceremony) or a Chanter or Chanters to assist with the ceremonial music. You should meet with them well in advance of the wedding to select from the available music. You are welcome to invite them to the wedding reception, but it is not required or expected.

**Only the traditional music of the Orthodox Marriage service may be used. Other**

music may be allowed for either the prelude or dismissal, but only with a specific written request to the parish priest, which may need to be forwarded to the Bishop. A written response will be given. Please make any requests no later than **two months** before the wedding.

**A Marriage License:** The license must be in the possession of the priest BEFORE the marriage can take place. There are NO EXCEPTIONS to this requirement. The license may be obtained from any County Clerk's office and is good for 30 days. To obtain a wedding license, please visit [accesskent.com](http://accesskent.com) to apply online, or visit the Kent County Clerks office in Downtown Grand Rapids. You will need your Social Security Card, Proof of Age (such as a State ID), and proof of Residence in Kent County. If you do not reside in Kent County, the church can supply proof you are being married at St. Nicholas.

To ensure a smooth wedding day, you must bring the license to the Wedding Rehearsal. The Priest will complete the license and process it with the County, returning to you a ceremonial copy.

You will also receive a *Certificate of Marriage* from the Archdiocese. In order for the church to file that appropriately, please complete the *Marriage Information* form given to you with this booklet and return it to the Church Office.

**Previous Marriage/Divorce:** Orthodox Christians that have been previously married and divorced are required to petition the Archbishop for restoration to the sacramental life of the Church, since divorce breaks that communion. If it has not been already completed, it must be completed before a wedding can be scheduled. The parish priest will guide you through the process. Such a petition is drawn up by you and the priest and should include the date and reason for the divorce, a summary of reconciliation attempts, copies of the legal divorce decree and your desire to come back in to communion with the Church. An administrative fee of \$200.00 payable to the *Antiochian Archdiocese* is sent with the letter to handle the processing of this documentation. All such petitions are considered on an individual basis by the Archbishop. Please be aware that a period of penance is necessary before re-marriage is possible. All such proceedings are confidential.

**Member of a non-Antiochian Orthodox Church:** If either of you belong to an Orthodox Church not within the Antiochian Archdiocese, you must obtain a letter from

your parish priest attesting to your good spiritual standing and membership. If you were born outside of the United States and came to this country after your eighteenth birthday, a certificate verifying that you are single and eligible to marry should be obtained from the parish priest in your home country.

**Concerning Mixed Marriages:** The only mixed marriages permitted by the Orthodox Church is one between an Orthodox Christian and a non-Orthodox Christian who has been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. We ask that the non-Orthodox Christian provide a copy of his/her baptismal certificate at least one month prior to your wedding date and submit it to the Parish Administrator. Orthodox Christians who wish to marry non-Christians risk their good standing in the Church, so these situations should be discussed immediately with our Parish Priest.

Of course, no one is ever coerced to accept the Faith, and marriage in the Orthodox Church does not automatically result in membership in the Orthodox Church for any non-Orthodox. This being said, anyone desiring to embrace the Orthodox Faith must first be properly instructed and participate in the life of the Church for a period of time, generally no less than one year.

**The Sponsors:** At least one of either the best man and/or maid/matron of honor (or sponsors/Cum/Cumbadi depending on which Orthodox tradition you come from), should be active members in good standing of an Orthodox parish. If you desire to have non-Orthodox sponsors, one may be of a non-Orthodox Christian Faith, but at least one Orthodox Christian sponsor in good standing is required. Sponsors are required to schedule a confession prior to the wedding rehearsal.

**Confession:** As participation in the wedding is a major *Sacrament* of the Church, the Orthodox Christian Bride and/or Groom, as well as Orthodox sponsors and attendants, should receive the *Mysteries of Confession and Communion* in the days leading up to the wedding date. This should be considered on a level of importance much higher than dress, hair, and makeup. This is the preparation of the immortal soul approaching one of the *Holy Mysteries of the Church*. Contact the church office to schedule your confession.

**Dress:** Christian modesty should be used in the selection of the attire of the Bridal Couple and the wedding party for modern fashions may not be accommodating. Clothing should not be revealing. Dresses which allow for uncovered shoulders,

cleavage, back, or legs above the knees should be accessorized to cover those areas while present in the Church for the *Sacrament of Marriage*. Please remember that any bridal head dress should not prevent the placing of the crown during the service.

**Rehearsals:** These are normally done a day or two before the wedding. Please schedule with the Parish Administrator before announcing the date and time to your bridal party. Like the ceremony, these are requested and confirmed in writing to avoid any confusion. Dress Code: Please inform your bridal party to dress appropriately for the rehearsal. No shorts or halter tops.

**Rings:** Every marriage in the Orthodox Church is solemnized with a ring for both the Bride and Groom, which should be brought to the Wedding Rehearsal.

**Crowns:** We have a few styles of ceremonial Crowns for you to select from, or if you prefer the Greek tradition, you may have a set made of fresh or silk flowers, with a three foot ribbon connecting them. They can then be kept by you as a remembrance of your wedding, often by having them encased and displayed. The Parish Administrator can assist you in finding providers of these flower crowns (*stephana*).

**Epistle Reader:** You may choose someone to read the Epistle for the service or one of the Chanters or Choir Members can read it. Discuss this option with the priest before asking anyone to fill this role.

**Ceremony Candles:** Upon request, the Church can provide two plain taper candles needed for the ceremony, or if you desire you may purchase decorative candles or decorate your own. These will be kept at the church for use at the *Removal of the Crowns* (Refer to the "Crown Removal" section on page 9).

**Wedding Service Books:** Should you so desire, we have service books which allow guests to follow the service. If you choose to use them, they should be placed in the pews prior to the guests arrival. The placement and collection of the books is the responsibility of you or your designee. Replacement of lost books will be charged at a rate of \$10 per book.

**Aesthetics:** The color in the church will depend on the liturgical season at the time of your wedding ceremony. As you know, our Church is quite beautiful and does not need anything to enhance its existing beauty. However, we understand when there is a

desire to add flowers and tasteful decorations. Please note that any changes and/or additions to the church interior, including placement of flowers, change of candle and altar cloth colors, moving of tables in the Narthex, etc. must be discussed with the Parish Administrator in advance and will be your (or your designee's) responsibility to complete. Additionally, you (or your designee) are responsible to remove your decorations and flowers, transition the candles back to their original color, and return all furniture back to its original location immediately following the wedding.

**Flowers:** Due to visibility, space, and access for movement, we ask that flowers in front of the iconostas be limited to two arrangements. You (or your designee) will be responsible to arrange access to the building with our Parish Administrator for florists if they need access more than two hours before the time of the ceremony.

**Photographs & Video:** Photographers and videographers should be instructed to speak to the priest prior to the service to understand what is and what is not expected. Please arrange for this conversation to occur at least 20 minutes prior to the start of the service. You (or your designee) will be responsible to arrange access to the building with the Parish Administrator if the photographer and videographer need to arrive more than two hours before the time of the ceremony.

**Visiting Clergy:** The invitation for any clergy to concelebrate the *Sacrament* other than our Parish Priest (including other clergy in the parish) is extended only by our Parish Priest, and thereafter may be also invited by the bridal couple and/or family. The ability for participation by non-Orthodox clergy is extremely limited and must be discussed with our parish priest.

**Place of Service:** The service will take place in the Nave. If there is an extreme need for the service to take place outside of the church building, a written dispensation must be obtained from the Metropolitan Archbishop.

**Schedule of Donations/Honoraria:**

**Church:** There is no charge for the use of the Church, with the exception of a fee of \$350 to help reduce the cost of the heat/cooling and cleaning of the church after your ceremony due at the wedding rehearsal. No additional donation is expected above one's regular giving to the Church. If this has been minimal, preparation for married life should include the renewed practice of a pious offering of one's income to the Church. The Biblical standard of a Tithe (10



percent of income) is a good guideline to aim for.

If the service is taking place in a parish other than St. Nicholas, please consult with that local pastor on any required fees for use of their church and/or hall. If no fees are charged, a donation to the parish is appropriate to express your appreciation and support of the parish and to cover the cost of heating/cooling and cleaning the church.

**Clergy:** No donation is expected. In the case of clergy coming from other parishes, this is up to your own discretion.

**Chanter or Choir:** Consult with our Parish Priest.

**The Cultural Center:** *The Cultural Center* is a wonderful facility to hold your wedding reception. There is no charge for St. Nicholas parishioners who are in good standing to use this room. If you are interested in booking *The Cultural Center*, please use the appropriate contact. (Refer to page 11)

**Crown Removal:** When you return from your honeymoon, on your first Sunday returning to church, you will be called forward at the end of Matins by the priest for the *Prayer of the Removal of Crowns*. This will bestow upon you the final blessing and complete the *Sacrament of Holy Matrimony*. We will schedule this date in our final Marriage Preparation session.

### **Checklist—Prior to the Wedding**

- Marriage Information Form completed and returned
- Marriage Preparation sessions scheduled (Minimum of 6 sessions)
- Confirm date and time for Wedding Rehearsal
- Confirm time for Wedding Ceremony
- Meeting with the Parish Administrator to discuss facility usage
- Apply for Marriage License within 30 days of wedding date
- Purchase candles or request the Church to provide them
- Request use of the Church's Crowns or order Crowns/Stephana

- Arrange for reception of the *Sacraments of Confession and Communion* during the week before the wedding.
- Schedule date of *Removal of the Crowns*

### **List of items to discuss with the Parish Administrator**

- Samples of Programs from previous weddings
- Use of Marriage Service booklets for attendees
- Candle and Crown choice for ceremony
- Appropriate placement of flowers
- Epistle podium and microphone
- Narthex & candle area tables, plants, icon stands, etc.
- Refrigerator and freezer in the kitchen
- Building access
- Cleaning fee
- Meet with the Parish Administrator one week prior to the wedding

### **Checklist of things to bring to the meeting with the Parish Administrator**

- Marriage License
- Wedding Bands
- Candles (Unless the Church is providing them)
- Church usage check

## Contact List

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