

The relationship between the Eucharist and marriage, especially within the context of Orthodoxy, provides resources for forming spouses who embrace the vocation of discipleship together as embodied persons.

This presentation examines the relationship between the Eucharist and marriage in Eastern Orthodoxy as liturgical practices that provide resources for strengthening spouses to pursue the vocation of discipleship as embodied persons. While focusing on Orthodox theology and practice, the paper identifies points of contact that may inspire dialogue toward the end of enriching understandings of the relationship between Eucharist, marriage, and discipleship in ecumenically Christian settings.

The presentation is organized around three central themes. First, Eucharist and marriage both manifest a covenantal communion that changes the identity of the persons who participate in them from isolated individuals to participants in “one flesh” unions (in both Communion and matrimony) within the context of the Church as Body of Christ. Second, these practices both involve physical actions that transcend the merely physical in their significance, such as the consumption of the eucharistic gifts and marital intimacy. Reflecting the deeply incarnational sensibilities of Orthodoxy, they challenge historical and contemporary tendencies to separate the spiritual from the physical and the body from the person. Third, sacrifice is central to both holy mysteries or sacraments. Not only do communicants receive the body and blood of the sacrificed Lamb of God, but husbands and wives wear crowns of martyrdom in the wedding service as they offer themselves to one another and to the Lord.

These themes lead to the conclusion that the Eucharist and the wedding service strengthen married couples for the pursuit of a common life oriented toward the blessedness of the heavenly reign as they manifest the healing of the fractured relationship between man and woman. Jesus Christ’s turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee provides a shaping context for viewing marriage as a calling to enter into the holy joy of the messianic banquet as a sign of the salvation of the world (Jn. 2:1-11). Marriage provides spouses with the opportunity to fulfill that vocation through the asceticism of mutual self-sacrifice, faithfulness, forgiveness, and support as they find healing together for their passions and conform their character to that of Christ. Marriage provides limitless opportunities for spouses to take up their crosses and become more faithful disciples. The vocation of matrimony is ultimately to provide a sign of the salvation of the world as husband and wife grow in their communion with Christ in every dimension of their “one flesh” union.

While the presentation focuses on the theology and practice of Eastern Orthodoxy, it does so in ways that invite dialogue with other Christian traditions. Since the themes of the paper concern central Christian themes and practices grounded in Scripture, opportunities for critical appropriation of the presentation’s insights by scholars of other communities abound. Differences in belief and practice concerning Communion and matrimony do not rule out mutually enriching discussion on points of commonality concerning the calling of husbands and wives to become more faithful disciples as they live out their “one flesh” relationship with one another and with the Lord.