

Guidelines for Marriage



St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

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Pre-marital Counseling

Pre-marital counseling is offered by Father Stavros to assist you in preparation for a successful marriage. Pre-marital counseling is required of all couples, who are marrying in the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Atlanta. Typically, two sessions are conducted privately with Fr. Stavros which last 1.5-2 hours each. You are to do your pre-marital counseling at least three months prior to your wedding.

During the sessions, the religious, social, emotional and moral issues of marriage are examined, as well as what marriage means to Orthodox Christians. This is done through open dialogue between Father Stavros and the couple. Marriage, as many things in life are, is a learning experience. Learning how to give, how to love, how to share; how to make mutual decisions with your spouse, so as to become one in thought, one in action, one in flesh. Holy Matrimony is not only a sacrament on the day of your wedding, but throughout your entire life.

In addition to pre-marital counseling sessions with Father Stavros, it is a requirement from the Metropolis of Atlanta that every couple married within the Metropolis participate in "The Journey of Marriage" a seminar for engaged couples. The seminar will be held in the Tampa Bay area at least two times per calendar year. If you are unable to attend this seminar in the Tampa Bay Area, it is offered in other areas of the Metropolis. It is an all-day seminar usually held on a Saturday. Father Stavros can get you a schedule of the upcoming dates. A certificate will be given to each couple at the end of the seminar and the certificate is required for a wedding license to be issued in the Metropolis of Atlanta.

Setting the Date

Careful planning is needed when setting the date for your wedding, because the Church has set aside certain times and dates when marriages cannot be performed. These dates are during Lenten periods and various Feast Days of the Church Calendar. Also, it is important to contact Father Stavros as soon as possible to ensure that there are no conflicts on the parish calendar.

The Church has designated the following days when marriage cannot be performed:

December 24 and 25 (Christmas)

January 5 and 6 (Epiphany)

February 1 and 2 (the Presentation of Christ to the Temple)

August 29 (the Beheading of St. John the Baptist)

September 14 (The Exaltation of the Holy Cross)

Marriages are also not performed during the moveable Feasts of Easter, Ascension and Pentecost or on the day before these feasts. Marriages are not performed during the forty days of the Great Lent, Holy Week, the Lent and Feast of the Virgin Mary Theotokos (August 1-15) and the Christmas Feast (December 13-25). The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony can be performed on the above days only in extreme emergency and by dispensation of the Metropolis.

Time of Service

A wedding may be conducted at any time of the day. Generally, weddings are conducted between 11:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. If the wedding is on Sunday, the earliest the service may begin is 3:00 p.m. because of Liturgy in the morning. A good rule of thumb is that it is four hours between the starting time of the ceremony and what time you eat dinner. It is important to discuss with Father Stavros the time the wedding service will begin in relation to expectations for the reception, i.e. – if you are planning on serving dinner at a certain time, you may work backwards to allow time for photographs, time in the receiving line and one hour for the sacrament; this will establish the starting time for the wedding ceremony. It is important that the wedding starts on time and church photos be done efficiently after the ceremony (one-half hour maximum) as there are often more than one sacrament scheduled in a day.

Who may Marry

A marriage in the Orthodox Church is performed only for Christians, one of whom must be an Orthodox Christian. The other party must have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. A marriage between an Orthodox Christian and a non-Christian or an individual not baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity **CANNOT** be celebrated in the Orthodox Church.

Prior Marriages

If either of the parties has been previously married, the death certificate of the deceased spouse or civil divorce decree must be presented to the parish priest. If the marriage ceremony was in the Orthodox Church, then an the original Ecclesiastical Divorce Decree must be presented. If the divorced party has not obtained an Ecclesiastical Divorce, Father Stavros must be notified as soon as possible, so that the process of securing one may begin immediately. It often takes several months to complete the procedure. If you are not an Orthodox Christian, it is recommended that you check with your church to determine what you may need to do to assure your good standing as you prepare for the sacrament of marriage.

Membership in the Church

All persons who are baptized in the Orthodox Church are members of the Orthodox Church. Every Orthodox Christian over the age of 18 should support financially the work of God. The Uniform Parish Regulations of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese specify that a marriage cannot be performed unless those desiring to be married provide evidence of such financial support; it applies to both the Bride and the Groom, as well as the Koumbaro/Sponsor.

The Bridal Party

Every couple that is being married in the Orthodox Church must have a Koumbaro/Sponsor, who must be a member in good standing of the Orthodox Church. The individual must be very carefully chosen for he/she is important. In the strict interpretation of the Church, the Koumbaro/Sponsor is not the same as the best man/maid of honor, although they can be the same individual in a wedding.

In celebrations of marriage of other Christian Denominations, the best man/maid of honor is considered as nothing more than a legal witness to the ceremony. In the Orthodox Church, the Koumbaro/Sponsor is an ecclesiastical witness, the person who, in many instances, is given the privilege of baptizing (as God-parent) your first child. He/she is also the person you turn to for advice and counsel in your lives. You may have in your wedding party of both a Koumbaros and a best man/maid of honor, or they may be the same person. While the role of best man/maid of honor is that of a witness, a Koumbaro/Sponsor often-times purchases the wedding crowns, the silver tray, the almonds, the wine goblet used during the ceremony, etc. He/she may also cover the expenses for the wedding service itself, such as gratuity for the Chanter and the Priest.

If the Koumbaro/Sponsor is from another parish, he/she must bring a **Certificate of Good Standing**, signed by his/her Priest. This needs to be sent to Father Stavros no later than one month prior to the wedding. A person, who is a non-Orthodox or who belongs to a parish that is not in communion with the Orthodox Church cannot serve in this important role. A person whose marriage has not been blessed in the Orthodox Church will not be allowed to serve in a sacramental canonical capacity in the wedding. Non-Orthodox persons cannot serve in such capacity precisely because such are sacramental, canonical responsibilities of Orthodox Church Members.

It is a beautiful sight to have a bridal party with attendants, groomsmen, and ushers. If such is your plan, know that they do not have to be Orthodox Christians, except for the Koumbaro/Sponsor. Those whom you select for the bridal party must agree to observe the practice of the Greek Orthodox tradition. There is no restriction as to the age of the participants in the bridal party. If you have a ring bearer, he is not to carry the real rings. Children under age 10 are not allowed to stand up on the solea for the wedding as it is usually too difficult for them to stand for the entire service.

The Bridal Dress and Attendants' Gowns

Care must be taken in selecting the bride's dress. Since the crowns are an integral part of the wedding ceremony, hats should not be worn, and headpieces must not interfere with the proper placing of the crowns on the head of the bride. The bridal dress and attendants' gowns should also exercise a decorum befitting a Church ceremony. The bride may have a strapless dress provide there is a veil that covers her shoulders from the back. For the attendants, if it is a strapless dress, or has less than a three inch width shoulder, a throw shawl or wrap should be worn over the dress, so that the shoulders are covered. There should be no exposed shoulders or cleavage.

Items used during the Wedding Ceremony

1. Silver tray with koufeta (White Jordan Almonds) on it.
2. Stefana or Crowns
3. Two small candles for the couple to hold.
4. Rings
5. Civil wedding license (to be brought to the wedding rehearsal)
6. Wine goblet (optional).

Items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 are oftentimes provided by the Koumbaro/Koumbara.

All items should be brought to the Wedding Rehearsal.

Crowns/Stefana, Wedding Wreaths and Candles

Crowns, Stefana, and Wedding Wreaths are words that are used interchangeably. They are placed on your heads. They may be purchased or you may wish to make them yourself; they are to be joined by a white ribbon. Consult with Father Stavros for the dimensions of the ribbon and other questions you may have. White candles are also necessary for the ceremony, and should be brought with the Stefana to the wedding rehearsal. They need not be large and are connected with a white ribbon, but are not to be attached to each other.

Photographs/Videos

Photographs and video recordings of your wedding ceremony are permitted as long as they do not impede or distract from the Sacrament. The photographer should be inconspicuous about what he/she is doing. The photographer and videographer must consult with Father Stavros prior to the ceremony, and he will inform them of the procedures to be followed. No photographer or videographer may interfere with the ceremony or stand in a place where they are either noticeable on in the way.

It is the bridal couple's responsibility to inform the photographers that the must complete their photo session in the church within one-half hour after the ceremony. No inappropriate photo poses are permitted inside the church.

Flowers - PLEASE, READ VERY CAREFULLY!

Floral decorations are permitted in the church for your wedding. Please, consult with Father Stavros, so that the flowers may be placed in the church for the wedding so as not to interfere with the service. Arrange with Father Stavros a time for the delivery. You may use an aisle runner, if you wish. They are available through most florists. The aisle is 100 feet from the entrance to first step of the Solea. There are 15 pews on each side of the body of the church, each holding 8-9 persons. There are 3 pews on each side at the front, each holding approximately 7 persons.

Absolutely no glitter decorations are permitted as part of the decorations, and no flower pedals may be strewn on the aisle(s) of the church as part of the decorations. In the event that real or artificial floral petals are used by the flower girl during the processional, it is strongly recommended that those petals be collected after the ceremony along with any other decorations placed in the church; they may be removed by the wedding party or the church will do it (for a fee - see fee schedule)

Chanter

The chanter is the person who responds to the petitions and prayers offered by the priest. The chanter of St. John will participate in the service. Use of any other chanter must be approved by Father Stavros. The Chanter of St. John will automatically come to the service. You don't have to personally ask for him to attend. The fee for the chanter is \$100.

Organist, Music and Musical Instruments

Although it is not essential to the Sacrament, organ music has become part of the wedding ceremony. The organist may play as the guests enter the church and as they depart. You must provide your own organist. You may contact Ruth Losovitz who is the church organist. You may wish to use someone else, but arrangements with the organist are the responsibility of the couple. The fee for the organist is arranged between the organist and the wedding couple. A soloist may sing songs/hymns prior to the wedding, (an example would be "Ave Maria", "Our Father", etc.) and all these arrangements must be approved by Father Stavros prior to the ceremony. The organist of St. John the Baptist charges a \$150 fee for her services. The organ is the only instrument allowed to be played in the church. i.e. no trumpets, string quartet, etc.

Choice of Language to be used

English and Greek may be used interchangeably in the service.. Father Stavros will do another language for the Rings and Crowns if you provide a phonetic text in that language. Just express your wishes to Father Stavros. Of course, if there is a party from another Orthodox jurisdiction that would like the use of another language, it is permitted.

Visiting Priests

Guest clergy may participate in a wedding in the Orthodox Church if Father Stavros extends an invitation to them. Please, inform Father Stavros if you wish to invite any guest clergy. If they are Orthodox Christian clergy in communion with our Archdiocese there are no hindrances. If they are non-Orthodox clergymen, the following are to be observed:

They are not to take part in any of the prayers, readings or liturgical parts of the service.

At the conclusion of the Sacrament, they may be acknowledged, they may read a suitable prayer, and address brief words of good wishes to the couple and guests.

Length of Service

The length of the wedding ceremony is approximately 45 minutes, depending on the length of the processional and recessional. You should plan for about one hour from beginning to end.

Throwing of Rice

The throwing of rice, almonds or confetti in any part of the church proper is prohibited. Such behavior does not lend itself to the dignity of the ceremony, and detracts from the sacredness of the occasion. Rice (or bird seed) may be used outside the church to be thrown as the couple exit the church and head to the car.

Rehearsal

A rehearsal is usually held one or two days prior to the ceremony. It familiarizes everyone in the wedding party with the ceremony and with what is expected on the day of your wedding. The rehearsal should be planned with Father Stavros. You must bring your civil wedding license to the rehearsal and may wish to bring the items needed for the wedding to the rehearsal as well. The rehearsal usually lasts about an hour, and with people arriving late, you should allow 1.5 hours for the rehearsal, i.e. hold it two hours before the scheduled rehearsal dinner (if rehearsal dinner is at 7, do the rehearsal at 5). It is not required for you to hire a wedding coordinator, but you should appoint someone who can "coordinate" getting everyone as-

sembled and in position for the processional. This person should come to the wedding rehearsal as well as the wedding, and be someone who you trust who is not in the wedding party.

Spiritual Preparation

You are urged, if you are an Orthodox Christian, to receive the sacrament of Confession and the Sacrament of Holy Communion as preparation for your marriage. By doing so, you will bring a new vitality, a spirit and a bond to your marriage that will enhance and deepen your lives. If you are not an Orthodox Christian, you are urged to contact your parish and partake in a spiritual preparation, which will grant you a renewal, thus enabling you too to prepare for your wedding.

Papers, Documents, Certificates

This may seem like a monumental heading, but some documents are needed to ensure that your marriage will meet the criteria of both the Church and Civil authorities. The following documentation is needed as it applies to your particular situation:

- ◇ A certificate of baptism from your parish, (if you are from a Community other than that where the ceremony will take place). If you are not an Orthodox Christian, your Baptismal Certificate will verify that you were baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. This needs to be sent to Father Stavros at least three months prior to the wedding date. If you do not have your baptism certificate, please contact the church where you were baptized and ask for a "Transcription of Baptism", which is a letter certifying that you were baptized in that church.
- ◇ Verification that you are a member in good standing with your local parish. Verification that the Koumbaro (Koumbara) is a member in good standing with an Orthodox Church. If the Koumbaro/Sponsor is not a member of good standing with any parish, they will be required to pay a \$500 fee one month before the weddings to St. John the Baptist in Tampa.
- ◇ If you were born outside the United States and came to this country after your 18th birthday, a certificate verifying that you are single and eligible to marry should be obtained from your home parish priest, signed by the Bishop of the Diocese.
- ◇ A civil license must be obtained. Since a civil license has a time limit of 60 days, please make sure that it is dated properly. For a wedding at St. John the Baptist, a civil license may be obtained in Hillsborough County through the clerk of the Court. Call 813-276-8100 for the location of a clerk's office closest to you. You will need (if you are over 18) a birth certificate and driver's license and there is a fee; the Clerk's office will be able to tell you the fee. The civil wedding license may be brought (not Mailed) to Father Stavros at any time after it is issued and must be brought at the latest to the wedding rehearsal, because you must have it in order that he may perform the wedding. Father Stavros will also register both the civil and ecclesiastical licenses following the wedding.
- ◇ An Ecclesiastical License, which gives the Parish Priest Episcopal Authority to conduct the marriage in a Greek Orthodox Church, is also required. It is obtained through the Parish Priest from the Metropolitan.

A Note to the Non-Orthodox

Conversion to the Orthodox faith is not a requirement. If you desire to become an Orthodox Christian, this matter needs to be addressed separately and apart from the wedding. It should not be a conversion for the sake of convenience, nor should it be "to make someone happy". The decision should be made following thought and prayer. You should also know that your marriage in the Orthodox Christian Church does not automatically grant you membership in the Church. You are always welcome to attend services with your Orthodox mate, but you are not permitted to partake of the Sacraments. Since you are being married in the Orthodox Christian Church, you are expected to baptize and raise your children in the Orthodox Christian Faith. This should be discussed with your Parish Priest.

Explanation of Wedding Fees

Full payment must be received at the Church Office one month prior to the date of the Sacrament. Once payment has been made, we will submit the required documents to the Metropolis of Atlanta for the issuance of the Ecclesiastical Permit for the Marriage. If you have not submitted a pledge form for the current year and the year prior, you will have to pay the Non-Steward Fee. Payment to Priest and Chanter are due the day of the wedding rehearsal.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Security Deposit Damage to Church Property	\$300.00
	If no damage occurs and no cleanup of church is needed following the ceremony, the entire deposit will be refunded. However in the event that cleaning of church property is required, the deposit will be used.	

<input type="checkbox"/>	Stewards of St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church	\$100.00
	Chanter (We will inform you which Chanter will be on Duty.)	\$100.00
	<i>If you elect to offer an honorarium to the priest, make check payable to Fr. Stavros Akrotirianakis.</i>	

<input type="checkbox"/>	Stewards of another Orthodox Church*	\$200.00
	Priest (Make check payable to Fr. Stavros Akrotirianakis)	\$200.00
	Chanter (We will inform you which Chanter will be on Duty.)	\$100.00
	<i>*A Letter of Good Standing must be provided one month before the date of the Wedding.</i>	

<input type="checkbox"/>	Non-Stewards of any Orthodox Church	\$500.00
	Priest (Make check payable to Fr. Stavros Akrotirianakis)	\$200.00
	Chanter (We will inform you which Chanter will be on Duty.)	\$100.00

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sponsor Fee	\$500.00
	<i>Fee is waived if the sponsor can provide A Letter of Good Standing one month before the date of the Wedding.</i>	

Organist Fee is to be negotiated directly with our organist.		
<i>The organist at St. John the Baptist is Ruth Losoviz her number is 727-688-2782 and her email is ruthloso@yahoo.com.</i>		