



## **Guidelines For Orthodox Christian Burial**

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#### **Funeral Instructions and Directives**

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## **Guidelines for Orthodox Christian Burial**

*....all things should be done decently and in order.... (1 Corinthians 14:40)*

The Orthodox Liturgy of Death (a term used to describe all services - memorials, funerals, Divine Liturgies - that are usually celebrated in connection with death) presupposes that the deceased had been baptized, was a communicant of the Eucharist and, in life, strove to be obedient to the Lord's commandments in pursuit of that "holiness without which no one will see God" (Hebrews 12:14).

Through prayer and remembrance, the function of the Liturgy of Death is to incorporate and affirm the departed in the death and resurrection of Christ, which are the very content of the life of the Church. The primary function of the Liturgy of Death is to make and proclaim that connection - and even identification - between the death of each Christian and Christ's death. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3).

The Liturgy of Death celebrates the tragedy of the spiritual and physical death of each Christian as being the very sign and victory of Christ's death and resurrection. In that way, the Liturgy of Death preserves the unique Christian vision of death - and life - and calls on the rest of the community to persevere more deeply and zealously in the baptismal way of dying and rising in Christ, so that one's last breath can become a witness to the "glory of the Father." It was, after all, to living people that Saint Paul wrote: "You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth" (Revelation 14:13). They are "blessed" because their death is their final and supreme offering, witness and "Eucharist" through which the Lord is declared and "made known." The death of an authentic Christian builds up the community of faith, enabling it to declare more powerfully that "death is no more!"

### **I. AT THE TIME OF DEATH**

When a person is dying, the priest is called. A Canon of Supplication is served, asking that the soul be parted from the body and escorted by angels to the throne of God. This Canon of Supplication is not the "last rites" of the church. The chief means of divine grace, the Mysteries of Confession and Holy Communion, are the normal "rites" we hope to receive before our death. These Mysteries should be received as soon as possible if we be very ill and near death's door.

If the priest is not at hand at the time of death, he should be called immediately. If he cannot come to the site of the departed one's death, he will perform the Canon of Supplication where he is as quickly as possible. These prayers for the act of dying are of great aid for the one leaving this world. The faithful should request this Canon without fail for the loved one.

Immediately after a person has died, if the priest is at hand, a short Litya (Supplication Prayer) for the newly departed takes place. If the priest again, is not present, he should be called by the family with the request for immediate prayers.

## **II. THE FUNERAL**

### **A. Place of Service**

- The body of a departed communicant of the Church should be brought into the temple, at least on the day of burial.
- According to Orthodox practice, the coffin is to remain open, until the “Last Kiss” at the end of the service. The deceased is made in the image and likeness of God; the physical body is not to be shunned or rejected because it is in an altered state.

### **B. Services**

Presently there are two main ways of celebrating the feast of Christian death, ways that reflect the inner experience of the Church:

- A memorial service is sung in the funeral home (or the temple) on the eve of burial. The funeral service is celebrated in the temple on the day of burial.
- The body is brought into the temple on the eve of burial and the funeral service is sung. Divine Liturgy is celebrated on the day of burial, provided Orthodox family members and friends of the departed are prepared to receive Communion. (Divine Liturgy, however, is precluded during Great Lent, when weekday liturgy is forbidden, or at other times at the priest’s discretion.)

### **C. Times and Days of the Liturgy of Death**

- Burials may not be celebrated on Sundays during the year. The body is not to be brought into the temple on that day except towards evening.
- Burials should not be celebrated on Great Feast days and the body should not be brought into the temple, except towards evening.
- Burials may not be celebrated on Holy Friday, Holy Saturday or the Sunday of Pascha. The body is not brought into the temple on those days.

### **D. The Preparation Of The Body**

The body of the departed should be washed, and honorably prepared for burial. The decision to embalm or not embalm the body remains with the family. The departed should be dressed in decent clothing and an icon or cross placed by their hands which will remain in the coffin.

It is the custom among some Orthodox Christians to have prepared for themselves a white garment for their burial (or use a Burial Shroud – see section XI below). This garment symbolizes and recalls the white baptismal garment they received when they became a follower of Jesus Christ. Adornments placed in the coffin should be minimal and not over-shadow the central icon in the coffin.

### **E. Viewing Of The Body In Church**

If the body of the departed rests in the church, before and after the funeral matins it is customary for relatives and friends to take turns in periodic reading from the Book of Psalms by the coffin. Talking should be done quietly. It may be necessary for Orthodox believers to gently provide an example and a word to those not familiar with quiet behavior in church.

### **III. MEMORIAL SERVICES**

- Memorial services may be requested at any time but are customarily offered on the 40<sup>th</sup> day, the 1-year anniversaries, and other meaningful times.
- The practice of celebrating requested memorial services after Sunday Liturgy should not be encouraged for it tends to nominalize the Liturgy in which all - the living and the dead - have already been incorporated into the Kingdom of God. The practice tends to disintegrate the Eucharist from the reality of death when, in fact, it is precisely the Eucharist - as the sacrament of the Kingdom - that most fully and adequately "proclaim the Lord's death and confess his resurrection" (cf. Hebrews 12:22-24). The best time for memorial services on weekends is Saturday, before evening vigil.

### **IV. NON-COMMUNICANT "MEMBERS"**

Non-communicant "members" (that is: people identifying themselves as Orthodox, who may have attended church services in life and even supported the church financially, but who willfully did not receive the Eucharist at all), are not to be brought into the temple upon their death. By refusing the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of membership, and membership as sacrament, they have refused as well to "proclaim the Lord's death and confess his resurrection" (1 Corinthians 11:26) - which is the very content of the Liturgy of Death and of Orthodox Christian life.

The burial of such people, not taking place in the temple, may only include a memorial service, with the celebrant vested only in a stole. The service may include scriptural readings for the dead.

### **V. THE BURIAL OF NON-ORTHODOX PERSONS**

If a priest is asked to bury a non-Orthodox person, he must consult with his diocesan bishop, and with his blessing bury the person according to the service prescribed in the Book of Needs or as specified.

An Orthodox priest may not participate in a funeral service of a non-Orthodox person, even if that person is related to a parishioner. If invited, however, he may offer some words of consolation at the graveside or funeral repast.

Non-Orthodox clergy may not be invited to participate in any service or offer any form of homily or public statement in the temple or the graveside service.

### **VI. SUICIDE**

Like "non-communicant membership" (which is a form of suicide), suicide itself remains a profound tragedy and sin that should elicit from the community of faith a deep prayer for forgiveness, repentance and sorrow - for the sake of the suicide and for the members of the community as well.

The Orthodox Church normally denies a Church burial to a person who has committed suicide. However, special pastoral considerations may allow a determination to be made, in consultation with the bishop, to permit a service of burial. Such a determination has, as its goal, to build up the community of faith and not lead it to scandal or confusion.

## **VII. THE BURIAL OF MASONS AND SECRET SOCIETIES**

If a parish priest is aware that a member of his flock is a Freemason, he should make it a pastoral concern to speak privately with the person, showing the incompatibility of Orthodoxy with Freemasonry.

When a communicating member of a parish falls asleep in the Lord and that person is also a member of one of these societies, the priest will show love and concern for the deceased. In his counseling of the bereaved family, he must not be hostile, but must inform the family that only the funeral service for an Orthodox Christian will be served. Patiently and tactfully, and with discretion, he will state that no words or symbols other than those of the Orthodox faith can be introduced into the church or the funeral home.

## **VIII. CREMATION**

The witness of how the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ was treated, as well as that of His Pure Mother, the Holy Theotokos, makes clear the honor, respect and love given to the body. The holy relics – the physical remains of the saints – reveal that the body even after the soul has left it, remains “grace-filled” and may be at times “incorruptible.”

The practice of cremation is not a Christian one and is to be discouraged. Cremated remains are not to be brought into the temple for burial or for any other reason.

Funeral services over cremated remains are forbidden.

## **IX. AUTOPSIES AND ORGAN DONATION**

Autopsies and donations of bodily organs after death may be done so long as respectful care is exercised towards the body. In a broad sense, all Christian bodies, as anointed temples of the holy Spirit, are “relics” and they are organic components of the wholeness of human personhood.

The priest should be sufficiently informed to help guide the faithful in this area of medical procedure. Some people think they cannot refuse an autopsy to be performed on a loved one. No one is obliged to give approval for this procedure.

Unless there is a specific legal reason, such as determining the cause of death, an autopsy ought to be avoided. The desire for scientific information through experimentation is not enough reason to merit an autopsy. Nevertheless, this is a decision that the family itself must make. The Church is concerned that respect for the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit be maintained.

Donation of body organ(s) after death may be allowed as long as respectful care is exercised towards the body, before, during and after the extraction operation. Care must be taken that the organ(s) are given as a gesture of altruism, free of any commercial overtones.

The Church does not consider the sharing of organs as a lessening of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the deceased, or as a transmigration of part of the donor into the recipient. A healthy person not in expectation of imminent death may donate non-vital organs so long as his/her quality and integrity of life is not diminished or endangered.

## **X. THE REPAST MEAL**

It is a custom to have a meal after a funeral service and to invite those at the funeral to attend. In the Christian tradition, this meal was called "A Mercy Meal." It was the occasion to invite poor and needy people to a meal as an act of "mercy" or almsgiving, done in the name of the departed one for the benefit of his/her soul. Nowadays, there is very little about this meal that has to do with charity to the poor or helping the needy. It is perhaps best that we do not refer to such meals as "mercy meals." Nevertheless, it is honorable and wise to make offerings to the poor, the church, and charitable causes, at this time as a memorial and for the benefit of the soul of the departed.

Repast meals offered on church premises during lenten seasons as well as on Wednesdays and Fridays (unless fast-free) must observe fasting guidelines, however, it is permitted to serve fish. The repast meal must be in conformity with Church discipline and piety. If catered or held at a restaurant, fish, or lenten foods ought to be provided for Orthodox people, while meat and dairy products may be offered for the non-Orthodox. The meal should start and finish with prayer.

## **XI. WHAT WE CAN DO FOR THE DEPARTED**

Everyone of us who desires to manifest his/her love for the departed and give them real help, can do this best of all through prayer for them, and in particular by commemorating them at the Divine Liturgy, when the particles which are cut out for the living and dead are let fall into the Blood of the Lord, with the words: "Wash away, O Lord, the sins of those who here commemorated by Thy precious Blood, by the prayers of Thy saints." We can do nothing better or greater for the dead than to pray for them, offering commemoration at the Liturgy. Of this they are always in need, and especially during the forty days when the soul of the departed is proceeding on its path to the eternal habitations. The body feels nothing then: it does not see its relatives and friends who have assembled, does not smell the fragrance of the flowers, does not hear the funeral sermon. But the soul senses the prayers offered for it and is grateful to those who make them and is spiritually close to them.

Arrangements should be made the very day of death, to have the loved one commemorated at the Divine Liturgy for the next 40 days. Parishes do not have Divine Liturgy everyday, however, monasteries do any may be called to request commemoration. It is customary to send a donation.

Do then for the one you love, what is best for them. Do for them what is needful for them and what is within your power. Use your money not on outward adornment of the coffin and grave, but in order to help those in need, in memory of the departed, for churches, where prayers are offered for them. Show mercy to the dead, take care of their souls. Before us all stands that same path, and how we shall then wish we would be remembered in prayer, Let us therefore be ourselves merciful to the dead. (St. John of San Francisco)

## **XII. THE BURIAL SHROUD AND CHAPLET**

The bodies of deceased faithful Orthodox Christians have, since ancient times, been wrapped in or covered with a cloth, called a winding sheet or shroud, and have had a cloth band placed across the forehead, called a chaplet or coronet.

The shroud symbolizes that both the grace of God and the prayers of the Church cover the departed one. This shroud has imprinted upon it the ancient Orthodox three-bar Cross with the Spear and Sponge, instruments of our Lords Passion. This signifies that the person has put his hope and faith in the

resurrected Christ who first suffered and was crucified. The verse "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." is from I Corinthians 15:22 and the other, "With the Saints give rest..." is from the Kontakion for the departed. The "IC XC" and "NIKA" is Greek for Jesus Christ conquers. "Memory Eternal" is the usual prayer (and hymn) for the departed and "Christ is Risen" is, of course, the totality of the Orthodox Faith and the foundation of the hope of Christians.

The chaplet or coronet, on which is printed a representation of the Crucifixion and the Trisagion Prayer, Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us, placed on the forehead. The chaplet symbolizes the wreath or crown of victory bestowed on us after having "fought the good fight" as did St. Paul (II Timothy 4:7). Also, as is written in Revelation 2:10, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer... be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

The shroud is placed directly upon the body covering it up to just below the shoulders. Then, it is customary to place a small icon (of the Resurrection, Our Lord, the Theotokos, or Patron Saint of the deceased) on the shroud near the chest. When the faithful approach to venerate the deceased and give the parting kiss, they first kiss the small icon and then the banded forehead. Both the shroud and chaplet are used from the time the body is placed in the coffin and are buried with the person.

It is a common pious custom to obtain the shroud and chaplet at one's baptism and to keep them at one's Icon Corner, thereby reminding us of our death to sin and the world and that we will give an account of ourselves to our Lord at Judgment Day. This also helps us to be vigilant and live each day as if it is our last.

The Burial Shroud may be purchased from various Orthodox distributors. If you are using the Burial Shroud be sure to have a full-length coffin, using a half-opened coffin does not allow for the shroud to be seen.

**Glory be to God for all things!**

