

With the Saints Give Rest

Understanding an Orthodox Funeral

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St. Paul exhorted us not to grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). God alone judges the living and the dead; our hope and our prayers are based on the fact of His infinite goodness and mercy and the love of Christ for His people. The Church teaches us that our prayers are of benefit to the deceased.

It is traditional for the body to be present at a funeral and for the casket to be open. Often a cross or icon will be placed in the hands of the departed. Modern thought often treats the body as a mere

IT HAS BECOME COMMONPLACE in American culture to keep funerals somewhat “light.” Our culture seems fearful of sad emotions and grief. Indeed, it is not unusual to hear it said that funerals are for the living, not for the deceased. An Orthodox funeral, however, consists primarily of prayers and actions *offered on behalf of the departed.*

shell, something that has been discarded, while the soul is seen as the true self. This is not the teaching of the New Testament nor the understanding of the Orthodox Church. We were created as body and soul, a “living being” in the words of Genesis. Death is tragic in that it represents the temporary departure of the soul from the body. The body and the soul are not meant to be apart.

We believe that God holds our souls in existence while we await the resurrection of our bodies at the day of Christ’s Second Coming. The Scriptures speak any number of times about those who are now with God. We believe they are aware of us and pray for us (Heb. 12:1; Rev. 7:13-17).

Having made those observations, we should add that there is much about our life with God after death that we simply do not know. The Orthodox Church prefers silence in such things rather than speculation. What we do speak are the words heard repeatedly in the funeral itself:

Again, we pray for the repose of the servant of God, departed this life; and that he/she may be pardoned all his/her sins, both voluntary and involuntary. . . . That the Lord will establish his/her soul where the just repose. . . . The mercies of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the remission of his/her sins, let us ask of Christ, the immortal King and God.

And most especially:

*O God of spirits and of all flesh,
who has trampled down death by death
and overthrown the devil, and given life to
Your world: give rest, O Lord, to the soul
of Your departed servant, _____, in a place
of brightness, a place of refreshment,
a place of repose, where all sickness, sighing,
and sorrow have fled away. Pardon every
transgression which he/she has committed,
whether by word or deed or thought. For You are
a good God and love mankind; because there is
no man who lives yet does not sin. For You only
are without sin; Your righteousness is to
all eternity, and Your word is truth.*

During the service, various psalms and hymns will be sung between the clergy and the choir, and incense will be offered along with the prayers.

When circumstances permit, the funeral takes place on the third day after death. Additional prayers are offered on the ninth day and the fortieth day, and then on the anniversary of the death each year. These prayers are a common and vital part of Orthodox life. In fact, there is no service in the Orthodox Church where the departed are not remembered. The funeral is the beginning of a new relationship with someone who has died, something that, in one form or another, will continue until the end of the world.

The heart of our life in Christ is found in communion, our sharing in Christ's own life. This communion finds an expression in the liturgical prayers of the Church. The Church prays (itself an act of communion) as one. We "commend ourselves and each other and all our life unto Christ our God." The prayers for the departed are an integral part of this life-in-communion. Our prayers for them affirm that they remain alive in Christ and remain a part of the Church. In ancient Israel, this same understanding was expressed in prayers as God was invoked as the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Christ said of this, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt. 22:32).

But just as we hold the souls of the departed in our prayers, so we treat their bodies with honor and lay them respectfully to rest. It is out of this respect that the Orthodox Church requests that bodies of the faithful not be cremated. It is traditional for the Orthodox to visit the graves of the departed and to have services of prayers and blessing there, particularly in the week following Pascha (Easter).



Indeed, it is only in the light of Pascha that Orthodox prayers and practices concerning death can be fully understood. Though we grieve for our loss, we are joyfully confident that Christ has "trampled down death by death" and promised that same triumph to His people. The unbridled joy that is a hallmark of the Paschal celebrations is always in mind as we offer our prayers for those who have died.

Often, a memorial meal is held following a funeral, in which we share memories of the departed, strengthen our common hope, and comfort those who have suffered loss. Nothing in an Orthodox funeral or treatment of death is morbid or wrongly focused. Rather, proper attention to the death of those we love and their continued remembrance before God are healthy and allow our grief to resolve into its proper form.

With the saints give rest, O Lord, to the soul of Your departed servant where there is neither sickness nor sorrow, but life everlasting. AMEN.

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Funeral
IN THE
Orthodox Church

