

FUNERAL PRACTICES IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

1. Funerals in the Orthodox Church are for Orthodox Faithful in good standing. i.e. Those who believe the tenets of the Orthodox Church and have been faithfully attending all the services, of partaking of the sacraments, of fasting, and of giving alms. Catechumens are giving the privilege of a Church Funeral.
2. When an Orthodox Christian is close to death the parish priest may be called for prayers which can be comforting.
 1. **Office of the Parting of the Soul from the Body:** The relatives or close friends of the gravely ill should invite the priest to his bedside so that this moving and spiritually enriching rite can be sung. The service asks the Theotokos for help and offers the prayer of absolution by the priest.
 2. **Office of the Parting of the Soul from the Body:** we sing prayers asking God to mercifully let His servant depart in peace. The Service shows the hope of the remission of sins and the future resurrection rooted in the love and compassion of Christ.
3. **A Requiem Litya** (AKA Trisagion) is specified to be sung by the priest before carrying the departed from the house to the church (“A Christian Ending” Barna is a proponent of preparing the body for burial yourself or with a burial society in a home parlor). Otherwise this should be done before the body is moved to the funeral home. Sometimes this may not be possible due to timing.
4. **The All Night Vigil for the Departed** - The Memorial for the departed is served the evening before the Funeral.
 1. This service is also known as a **Parastas** (which is technically not a Panikhida).
 1. This service consists of Great Vespers to Matins; at Matins there is a censuring during "Blessed are the undefiled in the way" for which the Panikhida is placed in the middle.
 2. Often today a Panikhida is served in lieu of the entire Vigil if Liturgy is not served the day of the Funeral.
5. **The Panikhida** -By Tradition this is served in the Church Temple itself (As opposed to a funeral home) and following this service friends and family can remain reading the Psalter over the body throughout the night. (*Gospel is read for priest or bishop*)
 1. It has become more common today that this occur in the Funeral Home.
6. **The Liturgy and Funeral (Office of the Burial of the Dead)**
 1. If the Evening before the service was done at the Funeral home then on the day of the funeral, the priest will meet the casket in the parking lot and sing “Holy God” as the casket is brought into the church.
 2. The coffin positioned in the middle of the temple with the Reposed Facing the Altar.
 3. Funerals are open casket unless there is some extenuating circumstance.
 4. The departed should be buried in a simple burial shroud without fancy clothes or jewelry. (A white baptismal gown is best).
 5. It is also recommended that the coffin or casket be simple. A simple wooden box will also do.
 6. Often Christ or the patron Saint is placed in the hands of the departed.
 7. A wreath (with the Trisagion printed on it) is placed on the forehead of the departed.
 8. The hand-cross is placed in the coffin near the head of the departed.
 9. Liturgy is served before the Funeral (In parish practice this may not occur).
 1. The Eucharistic liturgy should be served in possible so that the faithful meet the Risen Lord, and all those who are alive in him, in the glory of his Kingdom of Life.
 2. Some practices transfer the Divine liturgy for the departed to the 40th day due to sorrowful moods or visiting non-orthodox friends and family.
10. **Office of the Burial of the Dead** is essentially a Matins service, with the canon and other hymns closely resembling those of Great Saturday Matins – Christ’s burial. This service is different depending if the departed is Laity, Clergy, Child, or done during Bright week.

11. Candles are distributed to the worshipers who, receiving the light from the priest, hold them lit throughout the service until near the end.
12. After the Dismissal and “Memory Eternal,” friends come to say a their last kiss and say good-bye to the departed. They may kiss the hand-cross which is set on the side of the coffin or the icon placed in the hands of the departed. The closest relatives should be given an opportunity to spend several minutes with the departed alone. Then the coffin is closed and carried out from the church to the hearse. The choir sings the Trisagion, and the bells are rung slowly.
13. The funeral cortege proceeds to the cemetery

7. The Burial Site Internment Service (**Litia/Trisiagon**)

1. Once they have reached the burial site, the priest will offer the Litya/Trisagion prayers.
2. The priest will bless the burial plot and seal the site until the second coming of Christ.
3. The reposed shall be laid to rest facing East.
4. A marker or monument with the image of the Cross is Traditional.
5. After the burial it is customary for there to be a memorial meal (mercy meal). Memorial meals usually take place at the church hall or trapeza.

8. The Ongoing **Memorial Services** (Panikhida, Litia, Parastas, etc.)

1. A Memorial for the dead is offered on certain days of special commemoration: 3rd day, 9th day, 40th day, yearly anniversaries, Memorial Saturdays. Since these days are known, your priest should be informed and asked to celebrate the services well in advance.
2. **Why these days?** Tradition states that an angel once told St. Macarius the reasons why we celebrate the Memorial on particular days.
 1. The 3rd day for several reasons. 1) This is the day when one’s guardian angel provides relief for the soul, which is grieving the loss of its body. Tradition states that the soul is permitted to wander the earth for the two days immediately following death. 2) It is also on the 3rd day that Christ rose from the dead, and so this is the day that the soul goes to heaven to reverence God. For the next 6 days (between the 3rd day and the 9th day) the angels now show the departed soul all the abodes of the saints and the beauty of paradise. If the person lived a faithful Christian life, then the soul rejoices in seeing these things. If, however, the person lived a life of sin, the soul will wail and reproach itself. Then, on the 9th day, the soul again goes to heaven to reverence God. Thus, on the **9th day**, after the soul has viewed paradise, we celebrate a memorial on the 9th day. For the next 30 days the soul now tours Hades and witnesses the torments of the ungodly. The soul will tremble lest it be condemned to imprisonment therein. Then on the 40th day, the soul is again taken to heaven to reverence God. It is on this **40th day** that the soul is judged by Christ and either condemned below or joins the glory of the saints. This is why we celebrate the Memorial Service on the 40th day.
3. The Memorial Service for the departed can be celebrated at the conclusion of almost any service. However, it is not proper to sing the Panikhida at the conclusion of a Resurrectional Divine Liturgy on Sunday (we do not have funerals on Sundays, either): in our parish we usually sing memorial services on Saturday evening, immediately before the Vigil service.
 1. Traditionally, when we celebrate the memorial services, a dish of boiled, soft-shell wheat or barley should be prepared by the relatives or friends of the deceased. It should be sweetened with sugar, honey, raisins or other dry fruit. This koliva is offered to all participants in the service in remembrance of the Lord’s words: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24). Also, those who offer this memorial service to the Lord should purchase and distribute candles to the clergy, the singers, and to all who are in attendance. Lit candles symbolize our hope in the Resurrection — that Christ, the Light of the World, will raise us up to join Him at His glorious Second Coming. (This is the same hope which we express when we hold lit candles at the Resurrectional Service on Pascha night.)

REGARDING CREMATION

The Orthodox Church does not permit cremation. This is one of those hard and fast rules, and there are very few exceptions.

“The Orthodox Church teaches that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (see I Cor. 3:16; 6:19). The truth that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was buried and bodily resurrected is the reason we follow burial of the physical body, rather than cremation. Death is the beginning of the new and abundant life in Christ. A church funeral is denied to an Orthodox Christian who has been or will be cremated. In addition, since cremation contradicts the practice of the Church, there should be no individual Memorial Services offered for a person who has been cremated. (The name of the individual may be given during the Saturday of the Souls memorial. Exceptions may be made by the local Hierarchy.)”

Deacon Mark Barna, in the book “A Christian Ending” has addressed some particular reasons why Orthodox Christians are not to be cremated.

He points out that cremation does violence to the body, which is regarded as an image of Christ. Thus the body is the temple for the Holy Spirit, where the living God dwells. Though some religions - such as Buddhism and Hinduism – teach that the body is a corrupt prison for the soul, Orthodox Christians don’t believe this. Instead, we believe that the whole person is made up of soul and body. We believe that when Christ returns, the body will be resurrected and reunited with the soul, just as it was meant to be. Dn. Mark has several points: **1) that the body is a gift from God, 2) that God breathed life into the body, 3) humanity was meant to know God through its experience in the body, and 4) that when Christ put on a body in the incarnation, even with all its weaknesses, the body was glorified.**

The holiness of the body is seen in **Relics which** are found in every altar, and in every antimins. We venerate the relics of saints, which remind us of their holiness. Obviously, cremation would make relics hard to come by.

Dn. Mark continues, “As Christians, particularly Orthodox Christians, our whole life is to be lived in reverence, love, and humility before God and one another as his image. Our obedience and humility is the ultimate show of respect for God and for his creation. After all, it’s disobedience that got us into this mess to start with. If we read the holy Scriptures, the lives of the saints, and the writings of the holy Fathers, we find constant reminders of humility before God. ... “This [cremation], then, rather than humble submission to the will of God, becomes as our final act an act of pride. After a life of work to acquire the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of humility and the Spirit of love, should we throw it away at the last moment with a prideful decision? I don’t think so, and I hope you agree. The prohibition against cremation in the Orthodox Church is not just the Church trying to dictate how we live and die, and it’s not just some antiquated tradition. It is the Church trying, once again, to guide us into a God-pleasing way of life, and in this case, a God pleasing way of death and burial.”

INHUMATION/EMBALMING/CEMETARY

The proper way to bury a person is inhumation, that is, a bodily burial. However, in America, it has become the custom to embalm the body, which is a tradition that started during the Civil War. The reasons given are thus: to disinfect, to preserve, and to restore a life-like appearance for viewing. However, none of these arguments hold up. Referring to “A Christian Ending”, Embalming involves opening the body and draining the blood, which does harm it, and treats the body as less than a sacred temple. The body becomes an it – a thing to be suctioned, plugged, stapled, painted, and put on display.

Because of this, and because the blood is seen as a part of the body and sacred, it is preferred that one does not embalm. Rather a natural burial, sometimes known as a green burial in contemporary America, is to be preferred. It should be noted, though, that although embalming is frowned upon, the Church will still conduct a funeral for one who does undergo this procedure.

The vault is a concrete box in the ground in which the coffin is placed. It is not ideal as it this prevents contact with the earth. “Placed in contact with the earth, the body returns naturally to its maker and is placed in His holy hands to do with as He wills.” A liner, which only covers the sides and top of the coffin, may be acceptable, because the bottom still allows the coffin to rest on the natural ground. This is known to many in the industry as a Muslim Burial. Many cemeteries will not bury a person without vault. It is best to be buried at an Orthodox monastery or cemetery for this reason. You may also find a cemetery that allows Natural or Green burials (there is one in Canton, OH).

As you can see, it is preferred that one keep the funeral arrangements as **simple and natural as possible**. If you are a wealthy person, **the money saved on the funeral should be given away as alms**. We should die as Christians, and so we shouldn't have fancy funerals lest we sin even in death! As Ecclesiastes says, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” (12:8).

ORGAN DONATION

There is nothing in our Church's doctrine prohibiting the donation of needed organs after a person's death. On the contrary, the Lord enthusiastically approves the laying down of one's life for his friends (John 15:13). He would surely welcome the sharing of organs no longer needed with those whose lives could be prolonged and saved. At the Department of Motor Vehicles, they have special Organ Donor cards which are signed in the presence of a witness and carried in your wallet or purse. However, in the case of heart transplants and lung transplants, it should be noted that some Orthodox theologians and hierarchs have objected to such transplants on the basis that the heart and lungs have deeper theological meaning for the body. As well, these transplants do not yet have a high rate of success, which should be considered as a valid moral criterion with reference to potential procedures.

Living Will

In the event you or a loved one experiences a life-threatening illness or injury and are unable to speak for yourself, you should be sure your care provider and family members know your wishes concerning life-sustaining treatment. A Living Will provides you with an opportunity to give those you love direction in making decisions about life-sustaining treatment including artificially or technologically supplied hydration and nutrition. It is the gift of your voice directing those who care for you. This can also direct your funeral wishes.

Advance Directives may also be electronically stored by registering them with the U.S. Living Will Registry. Wherever you travel in the United States, healthcare providers can access your Advance Directive documents by contacting the Registry's computer. A copy will then be sent to them and kept as part of your confidential medical record. For more information about the U.S. Living Will Registry, please call 1-800-548-9455 or connect with their website at <http://www.uslivingwillregistry.com>.

Healthcare Power of Attorney

A healthcare power of attorney provides you with an opportunity to designate someone who would act as your agent in directing medical treatment should you become critically injured or ill and unable to speak for yourself. By designating and talking to the person you name as your healthcare power of attorney now, you can have confidence they will know your wishes.

Should you choose to complete both a living will and a healthcare power of attorney, the living will takes precedence. It would be the primary document your healthcare provider would follow in times of decision-making concerning life-sustaining treatment.