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## Death, Funeral, Requiem -- Orthodox Christian Traditions, Customs and Practice

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Death is something that awaits all of us and yet we often wish to avoid thinking about it. As Christians, we understand earthly death as a gateway to life eternal. Preparing ourselves spiritually and making practical arrangements in advance for our funeral is very important. Here is some practical information about Orthodox rites and funeral planning.

#### Why Funeral Planning is Important

- It helps give meaning to a person's life;
- It enables family and friends to come together to express feelings of love, grief and sadness;
- It helps family and friends accept the reality of death, so that they can overcome the emotional pain.

Funeral planning helps ease the pain. By planning now, you can relieve stress and take away some burden on family and friends later.

#### The Basic Funeral Question

One of the most basic decisions in funeral planning is what to do with the body. However, for the Orthodox Christian there is no choice: according to the Holy Canons of the Church, the body of a deceased Christian must be returned to the earth. Cremation is specifically forbidden. The body is placed in a casket and set in a grave. It is necessary to have a cemetery plot, a grave liner or vault (if required by law), and a marker or monument with the image of the Cross.

#### 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.

#### Orthodox Burial Rites

The mystery, the human anguish, the sense of loss, the desire for continued communion... these things have from antiquity found their ritualized form of expression in each culture and age. Some of these expressions have been sanctified in the liturgical life of the Church. One needs only to call to mind the Church's orderly way of visiting the graves of

the departed (St. Thomas Sunday, the Day of Rejoicing) and how we remember them liturgically.

Orthodox liturgical rites for the dying, the burial of the dead, and the remembrance of the dead include the following:

- **Office of the Parting of the Soul from the Body.** The relatives or close friends of the gravely ill should invite the priest (and a chanter) to his bedside so that this moving and spiritually enriching rite can be sung.
- **Office of the Parting of the Soul from the Body, when a Person Endures Prolonged Suffering.** Together with the priest, we sing prayers asking God to mercifully let His servant depart in peace.
- **Office of the Burial of the Dead.** Essentially, this is the Matins service, with the canon and other hymns closely resembling those of Great Saturday Matins - Christ's burial. Ideally, this rite should be performed in the church temple, with the coffin positioned in the middle of the temple. However, exceptions are possible and this rite can be performed either at the funeral home's chapel or in the cemetery chapel. In any case, contact your priest as soon as possible or instruct your funeral director to do so on your behalf so that all details of the funeral can be arranged in accordance with the traditions of the Church.
- **The Panichida, Lite, Parastas, etc.** The Panichida (also called a Parastas, Lite, or Trisagion) for the departed is served:
  1. at the funeral home on the evening before the burial;
  2. on the days of special commemoration: 9th day, 40th day, yearly anniversaries, Memorial Saturdays. Since these days are known, your priest (as well as a choir director) should be informed and asked to celebrate the services well in advance.
  3. The Lite (or Trisagion) for the departed can be celebrated at the conclusion of almost any service. However, it is not proper to sing the Panichida 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.
- 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 *kolivo* 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 RSV). 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.)

- *Can we offer a Panichida for our dead relatives and friends who were not members of the Orthodox Christian Church?* Strictly speaking, no. It is not that we cannot pray for them (we can and should!), but that the service itself is entirely geared to Orthodox Christians who have died. It would be inappropriate to "make" an Orthodox Christian of someone who was not and perhaps would not have wanted to be! So, what can we do? There is, in the priest's service book, a memorial rite for non-Orthodox Christians. It does not include the specific litanies and hymns which would not be appropriate, but does include the Psalms and hymns which are general and not specifically aimed towards Orthodox Christians.

### **Funeral Service in the Church**

- The body of the dead person, having been placed in a coffin, is carried -- feet first -- into the church for the burial service and set in the center of the nave -- facing the altar.
- The coffin is opened and an icon of Christ or the patron Saint is placed in the hands of the departed.
- A wreath (with the Trisagion printed on it) is placed on the forehead of the departed.
- The hand-cross is placed in the coffin near the head of the departed.
- Candles are distributed to the worshipers who, receiving the light from the priest, hold them lit throughout the service until near the end.
- After the Dismissal and "Memory Eternal," friends come to say a last 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.
- The funeral cortege proceeds to the cemetery where a short grave-side service of entombment is sung by the priest.

### **The Blessing of the Cross at the Grave**

Since pre-Christian times, it has been customary to mark the place of burial by the erection of a grave mound. The Christian Church has adopted this tradition, beatifying the grave mound with the victorious sign of our salvation -- the Holy Life-giving Cross, which may be depicted on a gravestone or elevated over it. The cross on the grave mound is placed at the feet of the buried Christian, so that he will be facing the Crucifix.

When the monument is placed on the grave, the relatives of the departed invite the parish priest to the cemetery for The Rite of Blessing of the Cross.

### **Other Questions**

Again, there are many questions and problems which the relatives of the departed may face. For example, they may like to have flowers specially arranged; to have a guest book; acknowledgment cards; prayer cards; to arrange a memorial meal, etc. Whenever these questions arise, feel free to ask the funeral director and/or your parish priest: they understand how you feel and will do everything possible to ease your burden.

They will advise you on gifts or donations that you may give on behalf of the deceased: it is always a good idea to commemorate the conclusion of the earthly journey of a believer by making a memorial donation to his or her church.

*-Fr. Victor Sokolov*

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