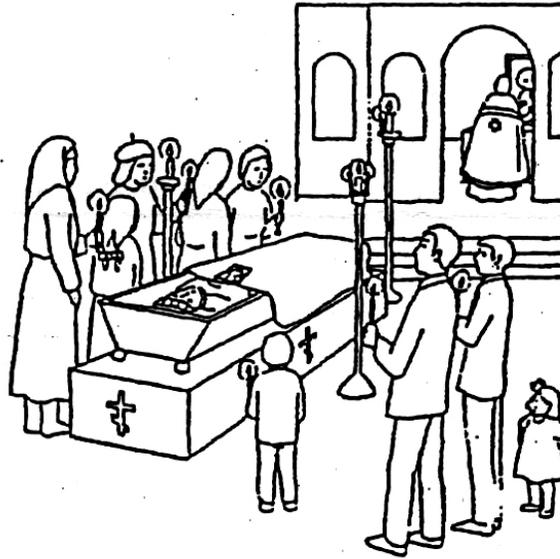


GUIDELINES FOR CHRISTIAN BURIAL
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- 1. The Rite At The Time Of Death***
- 2. Liturgical Expression – The Funeral***
- 3. Panikhida Or Memorial Service***
- 4. Non-Communicant Orthodox Members***
- 5. The Burial Of Non-Orthodox Persons***
- 6. Suicide***
- 7. The Burial Of Masons And Other Secret Fraternal Societies***
- 8. Cremation***
- 9. Autopsies And Organ Donations***
- 10. The Parish Cemetery***
- 11. The Repast Meal***
- 12. What We Can Do For The Departed***
- 13. The Burial Shroud And Chaplet***

Introduction

“...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 – prayer at the departure of the soul, panikhidas, funeral rite, Divine Liturgy – that are usually celebrated in connection with death) presupposes that the departed person had been baptized, was a communicant of the Eucharist (received Holy Communion), 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 – and probably only – 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 of life – and calls on the rest of the community to preserve 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 God.”* (Colossians 3:3) *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.”* (Revelation 14:13) They are *“blessed”* because their death is in 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 the church, enabling it to declare more powerfully that *“death is no more.”*

1. The Rite 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.

2. Liturgical Expression – The Funeral

A. The 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. The Services

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

- 1) A panikhida service is sung in the funeral home (or temple) on the eve of the burial. The funeral matins is celebrated in the temple on the day of burial. In principle, the funeral matins may “stand alone” and does not “require” the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.
- 2) The second way is that the body is brought into the temple on the eve of burial and the funeral matins is sung. Divine Liturgy is celebrated on the day of burial, provided Orthodox family members and friends are prepared to receive Holy Communion. (Divine Liturgy is precluded however, during the season of Great Lent and at other times called For.)

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 the Twelve Great Feast of the Year, as well as the Patronal feast of the parish. Burials may not be celebrated on Great and Holy Friday, Great and Holy Saturday and 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 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. 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. A Cross may be provided by the funeral home. This Cross is not left in the coffin but given to the relatives after the closing of the casket.

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.

3. Panikhida or Memorial Services

A panikhida or Memorial Service is usually offered for the newly departed prior to the funeral matins, often the day before burial. It is the custom to have memorial services on the 3rd, 9th and 40th day after death. The day of death is counted as the first day. The service should be celebrated on the eve of the day or the morning of the day. For example, if the 40th day is Tuesday the 23rd, the memorial service should be celebrated Tuesday morning or afternoon but if celebrated in the evening, it would be on Monday, the 22nd. This practice of commemoration is because the day

begins liturgically at evening. Memorial services may be offered at any time of the year for the departed, usually on the anniversary of death, namesday, birthday, etc.. Memorial services may not be celebrated on the Twelve Great feasts, on any Sunday, during Great and Holy Week nor again in Bright Week. The period between the Nativity of Christ and Theophany does not permit memorial services. Memorial services are offered only for Orthodox Christians.

The Church has set aside definite days on which remembrance of the dead should take place. Among these are Meatfare Saturday, the second, third and fourth Saturdays of Great Lent, the Saturday preceding Pentecost and St. Demetrius Saturday.

4. Non-Communicant Orthodox Members

Membership in the Body of Christ, His holy church, is defined by participation in the Holy Eucharist. Inasmuch as a person by refusing to partake of the Divine Body and Blood of Christ during his/her lifetime, has chosen freely not to be incorporated into the Body of Christ, unless there is a reason to assume that the person has returned to Christ, at the end of his/her earthly existence, that person will not be buried from the temple. The burial service for such a person should only be a panikhida, including scripture readings for the dead.

5. 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 the his blessing bury the person according to the service prescribed in the Book of Needs.

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.

6. Suicide

The act of suicide is a profound tragedy affecting a parish. It necessitates prayers for forgiveness for the sake of the departed and exhorts the members of the parish community to repentance and sorrow. The Orthodox Church normally denies a church burial to a person who has committed suicide. However, factors bearing on the particular case may become known to the priest, who must share this information with the diocesan bishop; the bishop will consider the factors and make a decision concerning funeral services.

7. Masons And Other Secret Fraternal 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.

Patently 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.

The Church's objection to Masonic services is that they do not specifically mention, proclaim or confess Jesus Christ, Son of God, dead and risen, as being the only answer and Victor after death. Neither do they proclaim the resurrection of all flesh as being God's plan for us, nor do they function to incorporate the death of the departed into the death of Christ - the only way death can be overcome. Rather, they presuppose a doctrine of spiritual immortality and tend to view the disconnection of soul and body as the natural end of life. This is not a biblical teaching: a soul-less body and body-less soul, are not natural. Death is the sign and fruit of sin, and mutilation of the human person.

8. 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.

9. Autopsies And Organ Donations

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.

10. The Parish Cemetery

Only Orthodox Christians may be buried within the parish cemetery of Ss. Peter and Paul in Hillsborough, New Jersey. A non-Orthodox spouse of an Orthodox parishioner married in the Orthodox Church by an Orthodox priest, and their children brought up in the Orthodox faith may be buried within the parish Cemetery. Persons who have left the Holy Orthodox Church, either by

adherence to some other religious body or by excommunication or non-fulfillment of their religious obligations, lose their right to burial in the Parish Cemetery. Orthodox Christians who are not members of the parish, may have the privilege of burial in the Parish Cemetery, if they have fulfilled the religious qualifications and if they shall pay the established fees for non-parishioners.

Cremated remains may not be buried in the Parish Cemetery.

11. 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 of this meal that has to do with charity. Usually, meals are paid for to a caterer, with no funds or food given for 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 during lenten seasons as well as on Wednesdays and Fridays (unless fast-free) must not have meat products. The repast meal must be in conformity with church discipline. If catered or held at a restaurant, fish, or lenten foods ought to be provided for Orthodox people, while meat may be offered for the non-Orthodox. Any repast meal held on church grounds must be strictly lenten if held in any lent or on any fasting day. The meal should not start without prayer nor end without prayer.

12. What We Can Do For The Departed

Everyone of us who desire 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 of 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, so ask your priest to call one of the monasteries that do.

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.

13. 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.

"This practice is a beautiful and helpful custom in our Orthodox Tradition and deserves to be observed by all faithful Orthodox Christians. It is another of the many ways the Holy Church gives us means by which we incorporate Christs precepts and teachings in our hectic and distracting life in the world. This reminds us that truly, we are not of this world, though in it, and await the life in the age to come.

The usage of the Burial Shroud and Chaplet is a worthy Orthodox custom to keep. The Burial Shroud may be purchased from the parish church. 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.