

When Someone You Love Dies

PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR FAMILIES OF THE DECEASED

“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek that city which is to come.”

The Letter to the Hebrews 12:13

Death is something that awaits all of us and our loved ones. Yet we often wish to avoid thinking about it. As Orthodox Christians, we know that "Christ is risen from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:20) and understand earthly death both as an encounter with the Risen Christ and the door to what the Lord Jesus calls “eternal life” (John 3:16). In this sense, for believers, death is not the end but a new beginning. Christians, as St. Paul writes, “do not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

When a loved one dies, especially if this happens at home, please contact the church immediately and ask your priest to come and pray a *Trisagion* with the family at the bedside of the deceased before his/her body is taken to the mortuary in preparation for the funeral.

In preparation for the funeral: Choose the mortuary you will be using and contact them. The church can recommend a mortuary if needed.

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is to bury the dead. The body of the deceased is respectfully placed in a casket and set in a grave. The body of the deceased, which St. Paul describes as “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19), is returned to the earth from which it was taken (Genesis 2:7). For an Orthodox Funeral Service to be held, cremation is *not* an option.

Choose the cemetery where your loved one will be buried and contact them to make the necessary arrangements: the choosing and purchasing of a burial plot, headstone, etc.

Bring a set of clothes (suit/dress) for your loved one to the mortuary to provide the necessary clothing for burial. Sometimes a recent photo of the deceased will be requested by the mortuary to be used in their preparation of the body.

Choose a casket.

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is that the casket normally be open during services at the mortuary and the Church. The casket is closed for the graveside *Trisagion*.

Choose icon memorial cards and a guest book for those attending services. These are usually provided by the mortuary.

The mortuary will ask about obituary notices both in print and online.

The mortuary will ask about the number of death certificates that need to be ordered from the State for legal and financial purposes such as insurance policies, veterans and social security benefits, etc. Normally, 5-10 death certificates will be needed.

Choose pallbearers. (Six are needed.)

Choose a florist.

For Consideration: In times past, thousands of dollars might be spent on flowers for a funeral. As Orthodox Christians, we believe it is far more consistent with our values to choose a charity for memorial donations to be made. Many people choose the church and/or other Orthodox charities – such as Project Mexico, OCMC and IOCC – to receive memorial donations.

In coordination with the church and mortuary set the date and times for:

The *Trisagion* the night before the funeral service is usually held in the evening at 7:00, 7:30 or 8:00 PM. The *Trisagion* is a brief service, no more than ten minutes in length. During this service – as at the Funeral Service the next day – we pray that the Lord will grant forgiveness of sins and rest to soul of the deceased "in the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:22-23) with Christ and the saints where "there is no pain no sorrow and no suffering" (Revelation 21:4).

The Orthodox Funeral Service is held at the Church and is normally about an hour long. The Funeral Service consists primarily of the singing of verses from Psalm 119, a series of hymns on the meaning of life and death composed by St. John of Damascus (676-749AD), Scripture readings from St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians 4:13-18 and the Gospel of John 5:24-30 and a brief homily/eulogy by the priest. In the Scripture readings, prayers and hymns of the Funeral Service, a dramatic dialogue takes place between God, the deceased and everyone in attendance. The service acknowledges the painful realities of human existence and the frailty of life, yet reminds those present of God's infinite mercy and love. It asks that we "ponder how brief our life is" but also speaks of the power of the Risen Christ, the Kingdom of God, the resurrection of the dead and immortality. At the conclusion of the service, everyone present is invited to come forward to kiss an icon of the Resurrection and offer their final respects to the deceased. After the congregation and family have offered what the Funeral Service calls "the final kiss" to their loved one, the priest anoints the body of the deceased in the form of a cross with oil and earth reciting several verses from the Scriptures. During the anointing with oil, the priest says: "Wash me with hyssop and I shall be pure; cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7); and then, with the placing of earth, he says: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. The world and all who dwell on it belong to Him" (Psalm 24:1) and "You are dust and unto dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is that **only** the priest offers the homily/eulogy during services in Church. Family members and friends who wish to speak and share memories may do so at the *Makaria*.

Following the Funeral Service held at the Church the deceased is taken to the cemetery where another *Trisagion* is prayed at the graveside. The deceased is then lowered into his/her grave to await the Second Coming of Christ and, as we confess in the Creed at every celebration of the Liturgy, "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come."

The *Makaria* or Meal of Blessing: Following the graveside service, it is customary to invite everyone to a meal called, in Greek, the *Makaria*. Questions to be asked about the *Makaria*: Where will it be held? Will it be held at the parish hall, a restaurant, or someone's home? Will a caterer be used? The church office staff can recommend caterers if needed.

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is for the main dish at the *Makaria* to be some type of broiled fish. This is because the first meal that the Lord Jesus ate with His disciples following His resurrection from the dead consisted of broiled fish and bread, as recorded in the Gospel of John 21:12-13. This meal is a reminder of Christ's resurrection and His closeness to those who believe in Him. It is **not** appropriate to serve meat at a *Makaria*.

A Christian funeral places a person's entire life and even death in the context of our faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ. It also enables family and friends to gather together to begin the process of accepting the painful reality of death and express their love, grief and support for one another.



Remember your last days and set enmity aside. Remember death and decay and cease from sin!

- *The Wisdom of Sirach 28:6*

Memorial Services

Set me as a seal upon your heart; for love is as strong as death.

The Song of Songs 8:6

Prayer for the dead is seen by Orthodox Christians as an essential component of our faith in Jesus Christ. Praying for those who have died is not merely an expression of mourning, it is a proclamation that Christ has risen from the dead and that, in His love, even death cannot separate us from one another! Forty days after the death of a loved one (or on the Sunday nearest to the 40 days), it is the custom of our Church to celebrate a prayer service in remembrance of the deceased known in English as a Memorial Service. In this service we ask God to “grant rest” to the deceased “in the bosom of Abraham” (Luke 16:22-23) and to place him/her “in a place of light, a place of happiness, a place of refreshment, where there is no pain, no sorrow and no suffering” (Revelation 21:4) as we did during the funeral service.

A tray of boiled wheat, raisins and powdered sugar called “*kolyva*” in Greek is prepared for the service and is later, at the parish coffee hour, distributed to the community. This practice is based on the words of the Lord Jesus used to describe His own death and resurrection, “Amen, I say to you: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain of wheat. But if it dies, it brings forth a good harvest” (John 12:24). The tray of *kolyva* is a symbol of our faith in the life giving death and resurrection of Christ.

Point of information: If you do not know how to prepare a tray of *kolyva*, arrangements can be made for its preparation by calling the parish office.

In addition to the 40 day Memorial Service, Memorial Services are normally held annually on or near the anniversary of the loved one’s death. The parish office must be informed of the family’s intention to offer a Memorial Service at least two weeks prior to the desired date. Please note that, in keeping with the ancient way in which we conduct our worship, Memorial Services may not be prayed from Lazarus Saturday through Holy Week, Pascha and the Sunday of St. Thomas; nor on the major feast days of our Church (December 25th - Christmas; January 6th - Epiphany; February 2nd - the Presentation of the Lord to the Temple; August 6th - the Transfiguration of our Lord; August 15th - the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos; September 14th - the Exaltation of the Cross; etc.).

Everyone is also encouraged to remember their departed loved ones annually by submitting their names to be commemorated on the Saturdays of Souls associated with Great Lent and the celebration of Pentecost.

“For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.
So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

Romans 14:8