

The Orthodox Christian Funeral

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One of the most beautiful and meaningful services of the Orthodox Church is undoubtedly the funeral. When served piously it is truly a fitting climax to the life of a devoted member of the Church who strove to “follow the narrow path”, and live the Christian life here on earth. It gives the family and friends present the opportunity to unite their hearts in prayer, to experience the comfort of the Church, to properly say good-bye and part from their loved one not in despair or sadness, but in hope and love.

In preparing for the final step in our earthly life - death - we should consider how the Orthodox Christian funeral should properly be served. Under normal circumstances what issues should we have in mind when we make arrangements for the burial of a loved one, or are planning our own funeral? As we know, the funeral industry here in the western world is a big business: what should our approach be as Orthodox Christian consumers?

If we approach the funeral from the Orthodox perspective, the text and rubrics of the service itself (found in the Trebnyk, or book of needs) tell us that all we really need is a coffin, a grave, and a priest. Embalming is a custom which is usually found only where people are very well off financially, or where there is a particular religious significance (mummification in ancient Egypt, for example). While embalming has no religious significance at all for the Orthodox, it has become common in the west, where people tend to have large amounts of disposable income. As far as the Church is concerned, embalming is unnecessary. The burial of unembalmed remains, in a natural, “biodegradable” casket, most completely reflects the teaching of the Church that our bodies literally “return to the earth from which they were created”. While there may be specific requirements for the burial of unembalmed remains in different jurisdictions, this is still the practice followed today in most areas of the world, followed by our ancestors both in Europe and here in Canada until recently, and still meticulously followed by Orthodox Jews and Moslems in the new world with no particular difficulty.

The casket is an important item - it is specifically stated in the order of service that the casket is to be blessed by the priest. From the standpoint of the Church a casket should be simple and need not be expensive. While the burial of remains in cheap cardboard or particleboard coffins is not particularly desirable, it is not necessary to purchase the "top of the line" or the more expensive models. A simple, wooden coffin is sufficient.

A more recent phenomenon is the "vault", a concrete sarcophagus into which the casket is placed. Regarding vaults, as opposed to coffins, the situation is different. Some cemeteries require the use of a vault. In this instance the choice is either to purchase a vault or change cemeteries. In the majority of cemeteries where this restriction is not in effect, however, a vault is simply an added expense and an item that does not reflect a Christian understanding of death. From a Christian standpoint it would be better to take the money that would be spent on a vault (or an expensive casket) and simply give it to the poor.

Generally, after death the remains are washed, prepared, dressed and laid out by the funeral home workers. Until recently it was the family and friends of the deceased who performed this service. In the Moslem, Jewish, and Hindu communities here in Canada there are special brotherhoods and sisterhoods who perform this work - the funeral home is only responsible for the transportation of the remains. This practice is still maintained to a certain degree in our Church when a priest dies - he is washed and dressed by other priests. Where possible it would be good to return to this practice for all the faithful. It is a concrete reminder that we are called to serve each other in death as in life, and will help to build stronger relationships among parishioners and with God.

What should be in the casket with the remains? One occasionally sees various things put into the casket with the remains of the deceased - things of religious value, sentimental value, historical value, etc. According to our Orthodox Christian practice a cross should be placed in the hand of the deceased, and an icon placed either on their chest or on the corner of the casket for the veneration of the faithful. Sometimes photographs, military medals, or other sentimental items are included - but it's important to underline the fact that under no circumstances should items which have an overtly non-Christian content or symbolism be placed in the casket of a deceased member of the Church. For Christians everything is meaningful - but we especially strive to be surrounded (in death as in life) with that

which is of God, of the Church, of that which reflects the Heavenly Kingdom and our hope in eternal happiness. For this reason things like “dream catchers”, rabbit’s feet, or masonic regalia which reflect superstitious, pagan or anti-Christian beliefs are absolutely unacceptable, and even something like a rosary in the hand (which is popular among the Catholics) which is symbolic of the Catholic as opposed to the Orthodox faith should be avoided.

It is important that during the “viewing” a proper atmosphere be maintained. Those who wish to pray should be able to do so. Joking, laughing and worldly conversation having nothing to do with the deceased or their family, etc. should not be done in the presence of the deceased and family, but in another room or outside. Our traditional custom, which we would do well to resume, is to read the psalter during the visitation. Ideally there will be a number of members of the faithful or the family who will volunteer to do so, perhaps under the direction of the cantor, so that God’s word will constantly be heard by those present as it is being heard by the soul of the deceased.

The Orthodox funeral service is properly served in the Church itself - the custom of serving the Funeral only from the Funeral home is neither traditional nor desirable. This is especially true in the case of our devoted members who spent their entire life in and with the Church. It is important that no one decide to have a funeral served in the funeral home only “out of convenience”. Occasionally there may be a real need to do so - because infirm family members cannot access the Church, because the deceased live very far away from the Church, etc., but this is definitely exceptional. Having the funeral served in Church beautifully reflects our belief that the Church is composed of both the (currently) living and the (seemingly) dead, and that as we part in the earthly heaven (i.e., the Church), we hope to be united in the true heaven, where we will worship God face-to-face.

Needless to say, a “closed casket funeral” should always be avoided. The order of service is quite clear - the casket should be open during the funeral not just for the important psychological and theological reasons already mentioned, but because the remains are to be blessed with holy water, the “vinchyk” (garland) is to be placed on the forehead of the deceased, the absolution prayer is read and then placed in the hand of the deceased, and at the end of the service all the faithful are to proceed

forward to give a final kiss to the departed. None of this is possible with the casket closed.

It's important to emphasize that the final kiss is not the time to extend condolences to the family. It is the time to say farewell to the mortal remains of the departed. Traditionally this is done by kissing the icon of Christ on the garland (on the forehead) of the deceased. During the time of the final kiss the cantors sing the prescribed verses, and they should continue to be sung until all present, ending with the family, have made their farewells. This is a very powerful moment, and a very strong statement of our belief. To make all of this impossible by having a "closed casket funeral" is to impoverish our faith. While there occasionally might be a real necessity to have the coffin closed (e.g. if someone has died and lain undiscovered for several days) in this case it is still important that the priest be called to bless the remains before the coffin is closed.

Another aspect of the funeral which is unduly influenced by non-Orthodox or secular practice is the custom of lay people delivering eulogies. Eulogies given by lay people are not a part of the funeral service. Traditionally, if there are members of the family or community who wish to deliver a eulogy, this is done either over the grave at the conclusion of the service, or at the Memorial Meal following the interment. In certain exceptional instances, where the service has taken place in the funeral home, I have received a blessing from the bishop to permit a eulogy to be spoken by a layperson immediately before the service began, but it is important to stress that it is forbidden for those not in orders (not to mention non-Orthodox) to preach or speak during the holy services, and that our funeral service begins with "Blessed is our God . . ." and ends with the interment.

The order of service assumes that the body is to be buried. The custom (common in southern Ontario) of leaving the coffin or vault above the ground for the graveside service and not interring it until the family and mourners have left doesn't reflect our practice or our faith, and should be avoided. After all, what's an interment when nothing's been interred? During the singing of the Lita at the grave the body should be lowered into the earth, the priest then throws the first shovelful of earth onto the grave, then everyone present does the same before the grave is filled in.

One of the most important traditions we have in regard to the funeral is the memorial luncheon afterwards. I've been told by funeral home

workers that it's often the case that the family is more concerned about the meal than about the actual funeral arrangements! We should again remember that the meal should reflect our faith and the teachings of our Church. If the meal takes place on a Wednesday, Friday or during a fasting period it should be fastworthy. If there is any particular problem with people feeling badly because they didn't provide as "rich" a meal as someone else who wasn't bound by the fasting period, it could become a parish tradition that every memorial meal would be of a fasting menu. We would not expect to go to a Jewish or Moslem meal and be served pork, nor would we expect to be served meat at a Buddhist meal, so perhaps all the non-Orthodox guests who attend our funeral luncheons should see that the Orthodox take their spiritual discipline seriously, too!

We occasionally have situations occur which are out of the ordinary. Under normal circumstances, the Church has would insist on a minimum set of conditions for Christian burial to take place, i.e., that the deceased should be a member in good standing of the Orthodox Church, having received the Holy Mysteries of Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist, and that the remains should be buried, not cremated, as cremation is a disrespectful violation of the integrity of the body.

Some issues, e.g., the burial of non-Orthodox, services over cremated remains or services for those who have committed suicide are of an exceptional nature, and are normally determined not by the parish priest, but by the local bishop. It is very important to understand that the position of the Church is not "judgemental", consigning people to hell for not following the dictates of the Church, but rather is pastoral. Jesus taught us what is good for us; the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit teaches us what is good for our souls, and this Christian discipline is reflected in every aspect of Church life - including how we die and are buried. Needless to say, immediately following the death of a loved one is not the best time to try to explain to people the why's and wherefore's of the Church's teaching on things like cremation, suicide or sin. If this hasn't taken place during the lifetime of the person involved there is no priest in the world who can do it in a 5 or 10 minute conversation to a bereaved family member. It should suffice to say that if at all possible these matters should be dealt with and discussed (during sermons, bible studies, private meetings, etc.) publicly and regularly so that the faithful are aware of the issues involved, and to underline that no matter what happens any good

priest will do his best to serve the needs of the bereaved without compromising the tenets of the Church.

Regarding the funeral, as in many other aspects of our Church life, we see that the influence of our western, secularized popular culture is slowly creeping in - sometimes for good, but mostly reflecting a mind-set which is decidedly not Christian. By re-discovering and maintaining the traditions which reflect our beliefs - in our baptisms, funerals, holy mysteries, or daily life - we will see a decided increase in faith, devotion, and dedication among our faithful and in our parishes.