

ORTHODOX FUNERALS GUIDELINES & INFORMATION

Eligibility for an Orthodox Funeral Although there are always exceptions and special cases, typically any parishioner in good standing with the Orthodox Church from a spiritual perspective and who's life has been lived in obedience to the Orthodox Faith is entitled to a funeral service. Any deviation from this requires the permission of the local Hierarchy.

It is important for family members to understand those wishes of the departed that are contrary to Orthodox belief do not need to be fulfilled. Sometimes end-of-life decisions on the part of the dying person can become irrational and not be the intentional desires of the dying. Examples would be cremation, scattering of ashes, or body donation for inappropriate reasons.

The Orthodox Funeral service is composed of four (4) parts:

1. Trisagion Service (Wake)
2. Funeral Service
3. Interment at the cemetery
4. Makaria (Mercy meal)

The Trisagion (Thrice-Holy) Service

After a person dies, the priest should be immediately notified so that a [Trisagion prayer](#) can be said. The Trisagion service will be performed again the night before the funeral at the wake, either in the church or in the funeral home. These prayers entreat God to grant rest to the departed souls and that it may receive mercy. The title "Trisagion" comes from the two Greek words Tri (three) and Agion (Holy) as this hymn is repeated three times in the opening of the Trisagion service, "*Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.*" The Trisagion service (Memorial Service) may be repeated for a loved one in church or at the grave throughout the first year: usually at the 3rd, 9th, and 40th day and at the one year¹. Prayers said after the one year are at the discretion of the family.

The Funeral Service

The Orthodox funeral service emphasizes the reality of death and the new life of the deceased. It is a compassionate and beautiful service which features prayers for forgiveness and mercy from God for the departed's soul. Priest vestments are white to symbolize the joy of the resurrection.

Orthodox funerals must take place within the Church and are only allowed at a cemetery or mortuary chapel with special permission. The deceased and the family arrive at the church about half hour to 45 minutes prior to the actual funeral service. The priest begins the service by meeting the family, friends, and casket at the Narthex of the church. Chanting the Trisagion hymn, he leads them into the sanctuary to prepare the reposed for the funeral service.



The family traditionally sits in the front row before the icon of Christ in the iconostasion. Orthodox funeral services require the casket to be open except in the case where there has been significant visible trauma to the body. Symbolically the open casket is arranged so that the eyes of the deceased look east towards the altar, the direction for which Christ will rise again, however the practical reason is that the

¹ Although some regions of Greece have the tradition of a memorial service at 6 months.

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Church understands the psychological importance of looking upon death and being able to offer a proper farewell to the departed. The priest leads the bereaved in hymns, scripture, readings and prayers, asking God to grant rest to the departed soul and forgive his/her sins and offenses.

The priest then invites the visitors to pay respect the departed while chanting the final hymn *"Let us offer a farewell kiss"*. To conclude, the priest pours oil and ash on the body in the form of a cross, quoting from Psalm 50, "Wash me with hyssop and I shall be pure, cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow." and Psalm 24 *"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness therein. From ashes you came and to ashes you shall return"*. In some Orthodox traditions this portion of the service is performed at the cemetery just prior to the interment.

The final act before closing the casket is to cover the body with the traditional Orthodox Burial Shroud (figure 1) which depicts the resurrection of Christ. The casket is then closed and the departed is led out to the funeral hearse. The family then escorts the hearse to the cemetery. At the cemetery, the priest repeats the Trisagion service graveside. A tradition of Northern Greece, Macedonia, and the Slavic region is for the priest to pour oil and wine over the casket at the close of the trisagion service. Family members may stay and witness the lowering of the casket if they desire.

Makaria (Mercy Meal)

Following the interment at the cemetery the family and others typically share a meal called a "Makaria." It is at this event where family and friends can speak about the departed and celebrate their life. It provides an opportunity for the relatives and friends to remember their loved one in an informal setting. Although traditionally fish is served the meal can be whatever the family would prefer. In the Greek tradition *παξιμαδια* (paximathia), a dry cookie similar to biscotti, is served with the meal.



Usually small glasses of Metaxa (Greek Brandy) are also made available to honor the departed in a toast.

40 Day Memorial Service



At the 40 days following the death of the person the family will arrange to have a Memorial Service performed at the church. Nowadays this service is typically conducted on the Sunday closest to the 40 days following the person's death. Boiled wheat, known as Koliva, is prepared as a symbol of the Resurrection and emphasizes the similarity between the "kernel of wheat" and the "body" (John 12:24). Koliva is restricted to only those persons who have had a funeral in the Orthodox Church. For those who have not had a proper Orthodox funeral due to cremation or other funeral rites not sanctioned by the Church, a Trisagion service can still be conducted.

RELATED ISSUES TO FUNERALS

Cremation (See article entitled *Burial or Cremation?* for a more complete explanation)

Because the Orthodox Faith affirms the fundamental goodness of creation, it understands the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, (1 Cor. 6:19) and will reunite with the soul at the time of the Final

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Judgement. The Church considers cremation to be the deliberate desecration and destruction of what God has made and ordained for us. The Church does not grant funerals, either in the sanctuary, or at the funeral home, or at any other place, to persons who have chosen to be cremated. Additionally, memorial services with koliva (boiled wheat) are not allowed in such instances.

Organ Donation

Although nothing in the Orthodox tradition requires the faithful to donate their organs to others, nevertheless, this practice is allowed. Permission from the next of kin is always obtained prior to the recovery of organs and tissue. Telling your family now that you want to be an organ and tissue donor is the best way to ensure that your wishes are carried out. For an organ donation to take place the person must be pronounced legally dead. The decision to donate a duplicate organ, such as a kidney, while the donor is living is also in line with the Orthodox faith. However, this decision requires much consideration and should be made in consultation with medical professionals and one's spiritual father.

Suicide

The taking of one's own life, is considered self-murder and as such, a sin. More importantly, it may be evidence of a lack of faith in our loving, forgiving, sustaining God. If a person has committed suicide because of a belief that: such an action is rationally or ethically defensible, the Orthodox Church denies that person a Church funeral, because such beliefs and actions separate a person from the community of faith. The Church shows compassion, however, on those who have taken their own life because of mental illness, severe emotional stress, or when a physician can verify a condition of impaired rationality.

Donation of Body to Science

Whole body donation, is similar to Conservative (not Orthodox) Jewish principles in that a person can donate their body to science as long as ideally the entire body, but at least the remaining body parts are preserved for burial and the deceased's, and his or her family's wishes are respected. The purpose of the donation must be something that will honor the deceased's dignity and not involve acts that will desecrate the deceased body.