

Orthodox Catechism

Session 10 – Orthodox Guidance on End-of-Life Issues

Chapter 1	Death, Dying, Euthanasia, and Suicide
Chapter 2	Burial and Cremation
Chapter 3	Orthodox Funeral Guidelines

Death, Dying, Euthanasia, and Suicide

An Orthodox definition of physical death is "the separation of soul and body." However, it is impossible for medical science or human theology to determine when this moment occurs.

Physical life is generally understood to imply the ability of the person to sustain his or her vital activities. While science understands that the body begins to break down from the moment of birth, medical science cannot precisely recognize when this process of breakdown becomes irreversible and imminent.

The conflict between the Church and medical science occurs when the Hippocratic Oath of the medical practitioner, which is to do everything possible to maintain life, hinders the natural process of death.

In this light the Orthodox ethos does not prohibit the medical use of drugs, surgical operations, or organ or body (hip, knee, etc.) replacement when *there is a reasonable expectation that these procedures will aid the return in due time to normal or close to normal functioning of the whole organic system*¹.

End of Life Decisions

There are two unique situations that have arose as medical science has advanced to the point where it is possible to keep the body "alive" with a complex array of medical interventions. These situations often require the family to make "end of life" decisions which become difficult and painful in the face of pressure from both family members and the hospital.

Situation A) The condition where it may not be feasible to expect the restoration of the organic functioning of the body, especially, when there is no evidence of brain activity. If this is truly the case the Orthodox ethos will support the family's decision to withdraw extraordinary life care to allow a natural passing since an argument can be made that the *person is no longer alive in any religiously significant way*².

Situation B) The condition where the person is of an advanced age and/or has been diagnosed with a terminal and aggressively progressive disease or illness. In this case it is within the Orthodox ethos to withdraw extraordinary life care to allow a natural passing. It is also within the Orthodox ethos to allow the person to refuse extraordinary treatments.

In each of these cases, where the quality of life has degraded to the point where use of these procedures and treatments to extend life could constitute unnecessary suffering, the Church would support a family's decision to discontinue extraordinary measures just to preserve "existence."

Also, the Orthodox Church does not prohibit the use of DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) to allow for a natural passing without the use of extraordinary measures. The Orthodox Church also supports the use of Hospice care that focuses on palliative care allowing the person to pass away naturally in their home surrounded by their loved ones. Whatever medical processes are used are only for the comfort of the terminal individual, such as use of morphine.

As an aid to the family during this time the Orthodox Church offers the family support in making this decision by offering the *Prayer of the Separation of Body and Soul* (found in the *Orthodox Priest Service Book*). In either situation presented above the family can request that the priest offer this prayer to ask for God's mercy on "His suffering servant" to not prolong his/her suffering and grant them eternal rest.

¹ From the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America website (goarch.org)

² Ibid.

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It must be emphasized that this is a prayer directed to God, who, for the Orthodox, has ultimate dominion over life and death and thus this prayer is only a request and not some type of guarantee of the person's passing.

Euthanasia

It must be made clear that the preceding discussion in no way supports the practice of euthanasia. The term is from the Greek; ευ (easy), + θάνατος (death). Merriam Webster defines euthanasia as,

The act or practice of killing or permitting the death of hopelessly sick or injured individuals (such as persons or domestic animals) in a relatively painless way for reasons of mercy.

Some have elevated euthanasia to a right or an obligation claiming that it is humane and morally justified to terminate the life of an incurably sick person. According to Orthodox theology *this argument is in direct conflict with the fundamental ethical affirmation that as human beings we are custodians of life, which comes from a source other than ourselves. Furthermore, the immense possibilities, not only for error but also for decision making based on self-serving disregard the fundamental principle of the sanctity of human life*³.

To permit a dying person to die naturally, when there is no real expectation that life can sustain itself, and even to pray to the Author of Life to take the life of one "struggling to die" is one thing; euthanasia is another, i.e., the active intervention to terminate the life of another.

Thus, Orthodox ethics reject the willful termination of dying patients, regardless of whether it is done with or without the knowledge and consent of the patient. While the Church is sympathetic to the suffering of the person and the family, She cannot condone the active taking of (life) which belongs to God. The Church, through the words of St Paul, sees that suffering is part of our humanity which was darkened by sin and disease and that He Himself participated in, and has experienced, our suffering, ¹⁷ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory...* ²⁵ *But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.* (Romans 8)

However, God does not abandon us in our sufferings, as we read just one verse further,

²⁶ *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness.*

The Church has always rejected inflicted, and unnecessary voluntary suffering and pain, but at the same time, the Church also has perceived in suffering a positive value that often goes unrecognized in the "logic of the world." Orthodox ethics teach of the importance of the person accepting their end of life, with hope and trust in the One True God, as a member of His kingdom.

Suicide

As tragic as suicide is the reasons for committing suicide can be complex and varied. Certain suicides are not simply aimed at extinguishing one's own life but uses this self-destruction as a way of inflicting grief upon the survivors and is as much an act of aggression as of self-harm.

However, if you ask most priests, they will tell you that for the majority of suicides they were involved with the primary motivation was not to inflict guilt or pain upon those surviving, but simply to make their own internal pain stop. They do not want to die; but feel that their pain is too great to bear and

³ Ibid.

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suicide seems to them the only way to make the pain and suffering stop. Most, if not all these cases are the result of severe depression, isolation, and abuse of some kind such as pills, drugs, or alcohol.

The official position of the Orthodox Church in the matter of suicides is that if a person *is considered in his or her right mind and commits suicide*, the only interpretation that the Church can give is that such a person rejects the life given to them by the Holy Spirit. In this case a funeral service cannot be performed since an Orthodox funeral is reserved only for those who believe in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life after the resurrection⁴.

However, a funeral can be performed for a suicide based on a doctor's reputable statement that the person committing suicide was not in his or her right mind. Such people deserve our sympathy and our prayers—including the liturgical prayers of the entire church community.

⁴ Ibid.

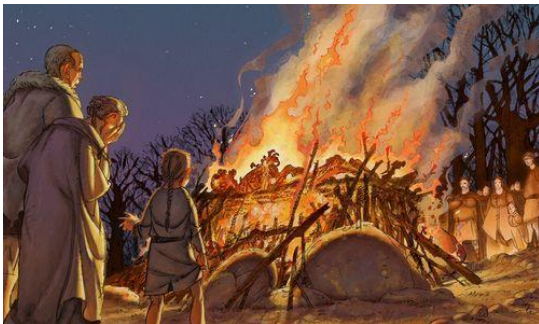
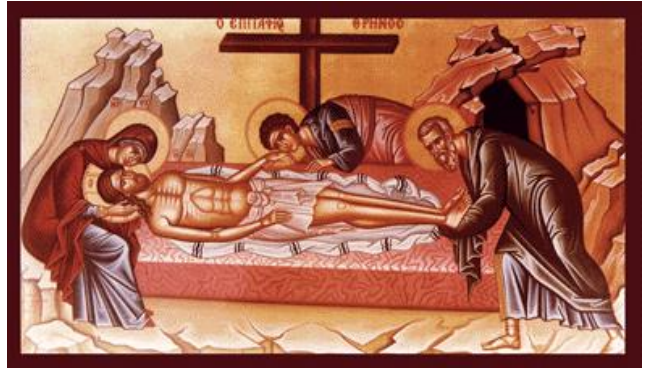
Burial or Cremation of the Dead?

Living in a multicultural and multi-faith society by its nature allows for different attitudes and beliefs about death, and the disposal of the dead.

Among a few of the religions, and for most secular people, the idea of cremation seems simple and environmentally “green” in their eyes. In fact the Protestant faith allows cremation and although the Roman Catholic faith forbade cremations until 1983,

according to current Canon Law, they will allow cremations as long as they are not done for reasons contrary to the Christian teaching, but still advises burial as the norm. So as it isn't just a non-Christian practice, it seems only natural to question why the Orthodox Church takes issue with cremation. One of the questions asked of clergy today, is whether cremation is proper or not, and if not, why not?

Rather than just the callous disposal of a human body the formal rite of a burial has been a tradition for thousands of years. This is proven by the fact that we find graves of all sorts, ranging from pyramids to the simplest kind. Most of them include various artifacts from the dead people's everyday life, which tells archaeologists that they had a belief in the afterlife and eternity, or at least the continuation of life to a certain degree after death.



Other religions such as Buddhism, Ancient Greeks, Norse, etc.) considered cremation honorable and believed that the bodies should be burnt to release the soul from the prison of the body, which was thought to be bad, with the hope that the deceased would be reincarnated into either a better life or into a new body. A contempt for the flesh was held by several religions in the spirit of many Ancient Greek philosophers, and included the

Gnostics, Montanists, and Manichaeans, and were condemned by the Church Fathers. In opposition to this Ancient Greek (Platonic) philosophy, the Orthodox Church maintains that,

“...the soul and body are 'betrothed' and inseparable. Only the totality of soul and body together comprises a complete personality, a hypostasis...the unbreakable link between soul and body an 'inclination of affection', 'commixture', 'community', 'attraction' and 'acquaintance', are preserved even after death. Physical evil, namely the deprivation of some good physical quality, may come either by accident or by the exercise of human will. Evil arises in the soul due to misinformed choice, whether by the darkness of deception or a plot of the enemy.”

The Old Testament, which for Christians is an “*educator in Christ*”, contains many references to the subject of

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burial, but no references of the dead being consumed by fire, at least not where that was considered proper before God. For Israel, the "chosen people" of God and also for the surrounding tribes and nations, it was considered a terrible misfortune for someone to be denied burial (Psalm 78:3), and one of the worst punishments which the prophets foretold, would take place for sinners (3 Kings 14:11 also Jeremiah 22, 18:19). The Israelites took great care, while living to prepare for their burial. The sons of the dead person had the obligation of properly burying their parents. It was a sign of respect which was obligatory to the army, at a time of war, and to every faithful Israelite. In fact, even today for Orthodox Jews cremation is not an accepted practice.

The New Testament, also talks about burial. The contemporaries of our Lord Jesus Christ kept this tradition of the Old Testament for burial; a good example being the case of Lazarus. Jesus Christ does not condemn this practice, even when he stressed that it was more important to follow him than to perform this holy obligation of burying one's father ("...leave the dead to bury heir own dead" Matt. 8:22). Christ was aware that He would die a dishonorable death as a criminal, without funerary honors, and even mentions this preparation for burial when He spoke of Mary Magdalene having to anoint my body "with myrrh for my burial" (Mark 14:8, John 12:7). However the Lord died was not left on the cross as was normal for those executed as criminals, but He was cared for by Joseph of Arimathea and placed in his tomb for burial. The early Christians, following the Apostles example, also buried their dead in the catacombs rather than cremate them.

This practice of burying the dead is held by all Orthodox Christian's Churches throughout the world. It follows in the steps of our faith, and of the resurrection of the bodies together with the souls. There are several primary reasons for the Orthodox stance against the practice of cremation.

1. The Orthodox Church considers human life as a gift from God which, although we have free will, is His possession and should be returned to Him. As St. Paul says to the Corinthians, *"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own."* (Cor 6:19)
2. There is no example in the Old or New Testament where the burning of a body was done to honor the person. All accounts demonstrate an act to disgrace the person or peoples. *"And Joshua said, 'Why have you troubled us? The Lord will trouble you this day.' And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones."* Joshua 7:25 Other examples include Samuel 31, verses 11-13 and 2 Kings 23:15-20
3. The process of cremation is a violent destruction of the body and thus dishonors the image and likeness of God. (See figures 3 and 4)
4. There is a spiritual, emotional, and psychological importance for those left behind to have the opportunity to mourn and witness with their own eyes the finality of death. This is best expressed in the final hymn of the Orthodox Funeral.

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"Brethren, come, and let us give a farewell kiss give to him (her) whom death has taken, and offer thanks to God. For he (she) has departed from the bosom of his (her) kin; and he (she) hastens to burial..."

Another very important matter from a Christian point of view is that with burial we have the tradition of relics of many incorrupt saints which demonstrate the miracle of God's Grace upon His faithful servants and serve as a concrete example of God's presence. Many of these incorrupt saints exude a pleasant and fragrant aroma and have proven to offer miraculous qualities of healing.

People who support cremation say that they have a right to choose that, and that the Church should give in to their demands. The Church replies that they *are* free to choose the method of disposal of their bodies, but the Church is also free to follow her Holy Tradition and teaching and can



Figure 4
Cremulator for grinding
of bones remaining after
cremation.

therefore deny to those wanting cremation an Orthodox funeral service and the memorial services which follow. As to the question whether the souls of those cremated are rejected by the Lord, we can only say that the Lord can resurrect any body regardless of how it died and was disintegrated. We have the example of Saints who were burnt alive or were eaten by wild animals in the Colosseum of Rome etc. and it would be foolish to say that they will not be resurrected. This, though, is different from someone voluntarily wishing to be cremated and not buried because of a differing belief about the body and salvation from that of the Church.

In the Orthodox Funeral and Memorial services the hymns and prayers continually refer to burial and for the return of the body "to the earth from which it was taken"

(Gen. 3:19).



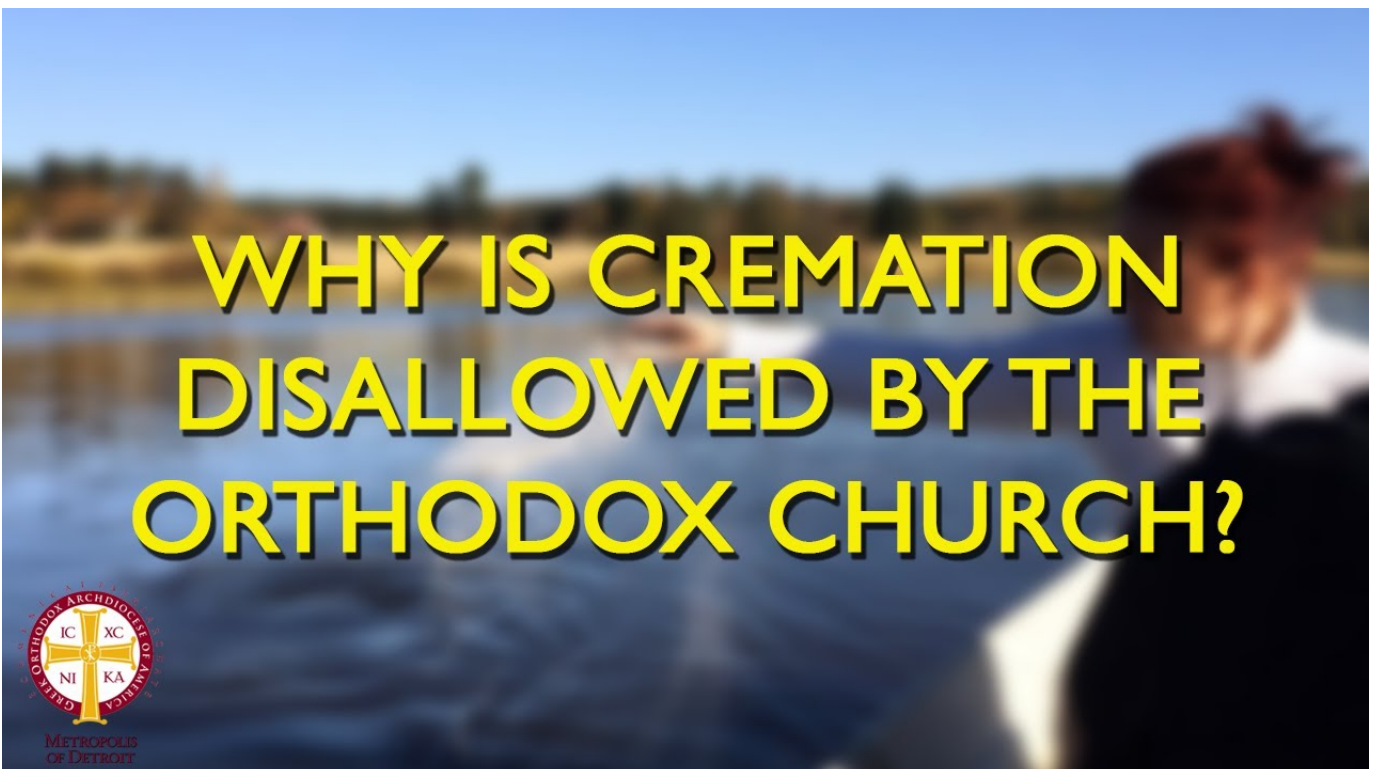
Figure 3
Bones remaining after cremation.

In Conclusion

1. The burial of the dead is based on Holy Scripture, according to the belief that man was formed from earth "and to earth he will return".
2. Christianity, especially the Orthodox Church, teaches that the human body will rise at the Second Coming of the Lord, to attain the blessedness of the Heavenly Kingdom. Therefore, the body deserves the same respect given to it by the Apostles and the Early Christians.
3. The Church realizes that some people wish to have themselves cremated but reserves the right not to conduct a funeral service in respect of the Church's long-held and justifiable canon law.

Burial or Cremation of the Dead?

VIDEOS



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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 whose 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.

Options Available for an Orthodox Funeral Rite

Except in special cases where the body is not recoverable or is lost or missing, any Orthodox funeral service must be conducted with the body of the deceased. With this said the options available for an Orthodox funeral rite include;

1. Standard funeral service in an Orthodox Church
2. Burial at sea
3. Burial at a US National Cemetery
4. Donation of Body to science

1. **Standard Orthodox Burial** is described below, however a few points are important to note.

Embalming is not a requirement for burial. Ecological options for burial such as shrouds, wicker baskets or Orthodox style coffins, examples of which are pictured below, are allowed.



2. **Burial at Sea** – This is traditionally reserved for active-duty members or veterans of the naval branch of the military which includes Navy, Merchant Marine and Coast Guard. A cautionary note however is that it is the naval branches reserve the right to decline family member the ability to participate or attend the funeral service, especially if the burial is to be conducted while the ship is on maneuvers. It is possible to perform a burial at sea for non-military providing the proper guidance both state and federal is adhered to.

3. **Burial at a US National Cemetery** - This is reserved only for active-duty members or veterans of the any branch of the US military. Burial at a US National cemetery requires the presentation of a copy of the deceased [DD-214](#) (Release from Active-Duty Service). Also, the service member must have received an Honorable Discharge which is indicated on the DD-214. Except for the cost of the casket and transportation to the cemetery all other costs are covered by the US Government. Note that depending upon the area where you live it may be quite a distance to the



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nearest National cemetery. Most funeral homes are well acquainted with the process for burial at a US National Cemetery.

4. **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. An interesting and informative video that highlights what is involved in donating a body to science can be found [HERE](#).

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, right side, 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 or there is a danger of communicable disease transmission. The open casket is arranged so that (symbolically) the eyes of the deceased look east towards the altar, the direction for which Christ will rise again. The practical reason for the open casket is that the Church understands the psychological importance of

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

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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.

While the priest or bishop will offer a few words at the end of the service with respect to the hope of the resurrection of Christ, no eulogy is allowed to be given by the laity. This is done at the Makaria or Mercy Meal.

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 internment at the cemetery the family and others typically share a meal called a "Makaria." It is at this event where family and friends can eulogize 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 Service²



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

² A detailed explanation of the Orthodox theological position on memorials and prayers for the dead can be found in Services of the Orthodox Church, Session 5 of this Catechism.

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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

Cremation³

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 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.

³ A detailed explanation of the Orthodox theological position on cremation can be found in End of Life Decisions, Session 10 of this Catechism entitled *Burial or Cremation?*

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VIDEOS

