

# 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 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 in an Orthodox church. Funeral services at other locations such as at the funeral home or at the cemetery would be performed as a Trisagion service only, without a full Orthodox funeral. **It must be kept in mind that if the funeral service is not conducted in the Orthodox Church or if the person is cremated, then koliva and memorial services cannot be offered by the family in the Orthodox Church. This includes the situation of bringing the person to the Orthodox church for an Orthodox funeral service and then having the person cremated.**

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



## Options Available for an Orthodox Burial

1. Burial in a cemetery
2. Ossuary
3. Burial at sea
4. Burial at a US National Cemetery
5. Donation of Body to science

**1. Standard Orthodox Burial** This is certainly the most common method of burial for not only Orthodox but almost all other religious denominations. There are typically no restrictions here and burial on private property, in accordance with all State and Federal regulations, is allowed. Also the burial can be above ground or in a mausoleum.

**2. Ossuary** This is an above ground burial chamber, building, chest, or box made to serve as the final resting place of human skeletal remains and are used where burial space is scarce such as Europe or the Middle East. The word comes from the Latin word for bone – “os.” In Greek an ossuary is a οστεοφυλάκιο (οστέα -bone and φυλάκιο –to guard or protect)

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Before the bones are placed in the ossuaries the body is first buried in a temporary grave. Then after 2-3 years the remains are removed and cleaned by family members who collect the bones and place them permanently in a niche in the family tomb. Typically, the skulls are identified with a mark, number or writing to identify who the person is, and the remaining bones are used to decorate the building or chamber. Since the ossuary is not a coffin, bones of multiple individuals can be placed. This greatly reduces space thus making it is possible to store more people than could be done with individual caskets.

The Jews of Jerusalem during the Second Temple period (30 BCE to 70 AD) practiced ossilegium. This was mainly done by the wealthy who could afford this practice with one of the more notable ones being an ossuary inscribed "Simon the temple Builder." However, this practice declined after this period.

While The practice of ossilegium among the Jews disappeared by the 3rd century, the practice was common among both the Orthodox and Catholic countries and continues to the present day. Ossilegium was an important family event and a religious act. Many ossuaries were richly decorated, symbolizing the soul's immortality.

Today in Greece the practice of ossilegium is still active. About three years after the funeral, family members or a delegated person will return to the cemetery and attend the removal and cleaning of the remains of their deceased which is then placed into a small box and moved into an οστεοφυλάκιο at a cost of about €300. This is possible as the practice of embalming is foreign to the traditional Eastern culture.

One of the significant advantages to ossilegium is the reduced cost associated with this practice when compared to burial. Costs to maintain the ossuary run about € 50-100 per month whereas the cost to maintain a cemetery plot with headstone can be much more expensive. Unfortunately, if payments cease, the body is put into a mass grave called a χωνευτήριο, or mass grave.



While the government legalized cremation in 2006, the Greek Orthodox religion continues to forbid cremation based on belief in the preservation of the whole human body, thus the only options left are burial or the ossuary. (see the section below on *Burial or Cremation?* for why this is so.)

Due the ongoing expense with either burial or an ossuary, younger Greeks seem to be moving away from traditional Orthodox burial practices and are opting for cremation.

**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 members 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 it is in accordance with both State and Federal regulations.

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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 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** (watch our YouTube video on the [Orthodox Funeral service](#))

The Orthodox funeral service is arranged in both theologically and practically to transmits our theology of the sorrow of death with the hope and promise of our bodily resurrection through Jesus Christ in a compassionate and loving way. To accomplish this, the 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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 40<sup>th</sup> day and at the one year<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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

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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 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.

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 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, wine, and sometimes bread over the casket and into the grave at the close of the trisagion service. (ref Book of Tobit, Chapter 4 verse 17) 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.



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## 40 Day Memorial Service<sup>2</sup>



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.

## ISSUES RELATED TO DEATH AND DYING

### Cremation

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. Thus the Church considers cremation to be the deliberate desecration and destruction of what God has made and ordained for us. As was stated above the Orthodox Church does not grant funerals to persons who have chosen to be cremated. Watch our YouTube video [Why is Cremation Not Allowed in the Orthodox Church](#) for an explanation of the Orthodox theological position on cremation.

### 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

Although not explicitly stated in Scripture, the taking of one's own life, is considered self-murder and as such, a sin in the Orthodox Church. This is because it may be evidence of a lack of faith in our loving, forgiving, sustaining God. Also, if a person has committed suicide because of an unrepentant belief that such an action is rationally or ethically defensible, the Orthodox Church can deny that person a Church funeral, because such beliefs and actions separate a person from the community of faith.

The Church, however, shows *οικονομία* (compassion) by allowing an Orthodox funeral for 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.