



End of Life Decisions and Services

1. Death, Dying, and Euthanasia
2. Burial or Cremation?
3. Orthodox Funeral

Death, Dying, and Euthanasia

The traditional definition of physical death is "the separation of soul and body." Such a definition is not subject to objective observation. Thus it is not within the province of theology to determine the medical indications of death and the onset of the dying process. However, in reference to the terminally ill person, certain distinctions can be made.

Physical life is generally understood to imply the ability of the person to sustain his or her vital activities. Physical death begins when interrelated systems of the body begin to break down. Death occurs when the systemic breakdown becomes irreversible. It may well be that physical life and death are events in a continuum in which it is impossible to discern when the dying process actually begins.

Nevertheless, the bias of the Church and the traditional bias of the medical practitioner (cf. Oath of Hippocrates) is to do everything possible to maintain life and hinder the onset of dying and death. The medical use of drugs, surgical operations, and even artificial organs (mechanical kidneys, lungs, hearts, etc.) are considered legitimately used when there is a reasonable expectation that they will aid the return in due time to normal or close to normal functioning of the whole organic system.

The special case arises in that it is now medically possible to keep the body "alive" with a complex array of artificial organs, medications, transfusions, and the like. Under these conditions it may not be feasible to expect, with any degree of probability, the restoration of the organic functioning of the body. When, especially, there is no evidence of brain activity in conjunction with the systemic breakdown, we can safely say that the patient is no longer alive in any religiously significant way, and that, in fact, only certain organs are functioning. In such a case there is no moral responsibility to continue the use of artificial, means.

It is of interest that the Prayer book of the Eastern Orthodox Church includes a whole service devoted to those in the process of dying. In the case of the individual whose death is prolonged and attended by much "struggling to die," the key sentence in the prayer calls upon God to separate the soul from the body, thus giving rest to the dying person. It asks God "to release His servant (by name) from this unbearable suffering and this continuing bitter illness and grant rest to him" (*Service Book of the Priest*).

However, it must be emphasized that this is a prayer directed to God, who, for the Orthodox, has ultimate dominion over life and death. Consequently, the preceding discussion in no way supports the practice of euthanasia. Euthanasia is held by some to be morally justified and/or morally required to terminate the life of an incurably sick person. To permit a dying person to die, 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.

Orthodox Christian ethics rejects the alternative of the willful termination of dying patients, regarding it as a special case of murder if done without the knowledge and consent of the patient, and suicide if it is permitted by the patient (Antoniades, II, pp. 125-127). One of the most serious criticisms of euthanasia is the grave difficulty in drawing the line between "bearable suffering" and "unbearable suffering," especially from an Eastern Orthodox

Death, Dying, and Euthanasia

perspective, which has taken seriously the spiritual growth that may take place through suffering (Rom. 8:17-39).

Ethical decision making is never precise and absolute. The principles that govern it are in a measure fluid and subject to interpretation. But to elevate euthanasia to a right or an obligation would bring it into 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 ends, which may disregard the fundamental principle of the sanctity of human life, argue against euthanasia.

Generally speaking, the Orthodox Church teaches that it is the duty of both physician and family to make the patient as comfortable as possible, to provide the opportunity for the exercise of patience, courage, repentance, and prayer. The Church has always rejected inflicted, and unnecessary voluntary suffering and pain as immoral; 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."

The only "*eu-thanasia*" (Greek for "a good death") recognized in Orthodox ethics is that death in which the human person accepts the end of his or her life in the spirit of moral and spiritual purity, in hope and trust in God, and as a member of his kingdom. True humanity may be achieved even on a deathbed.

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.

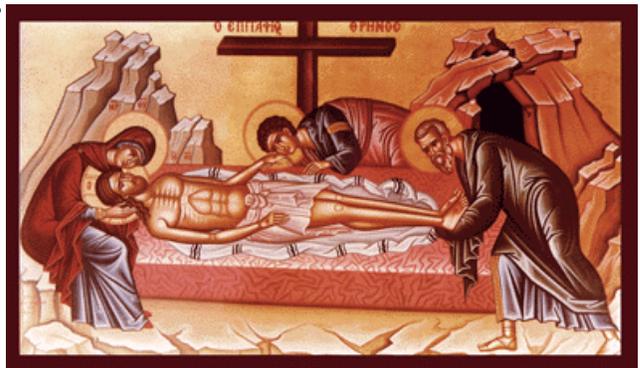
Among a few of the religions, and for most secular people, the idea of cremation seems simple and environmentally “green” in their eyes. In fact the Protestant faith allows cremation and although the Roman Catholic faith forbade cremations until 1983, according to current Canon Law, they will allow

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?

Burial has been a traditional way of disposing the dead 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.

The Old Testament, which for Christians is an "educator in Christ", contains many references to the subject of 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 Septu.). 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.

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). He himself was aware that He would die a dishonorable death as a criminal, without funerary honors. Christ even mentions this preparation for burial when He spoke of Mary Magdelene having to undertake to anoint my body with myrrh for my burial" (Mark 14:8, John 12:7). Even though the Lord died a death on the cross he was not left on the cross as was normal for those executed as criminals, but



Burial or cremation of the dead?

He was buried. The early Christians in the catacombs, following the Apostles example, also buried their dead 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, of the resurrection of the bodies together with the souls. Other religions (Buddhism, Ancient Greeks, Norse, etc) believed that the bodies should be burnt to release the soul which is bad with the hope that they will be reincarnated into a better one.

Another very important matter from a Christian point of view is that with burial we have kept the relics of many Saints, many of which being full of Grace give off a most pleasing 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: as they are free to choose the method of disposal of their bodies, but the Church is free to follow her Holy Tradition and teaching, and can therefore deny to those wanting cremation a Christian funeral service. 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.

Among the other Christian Confessions of faith, most of the protestant denominations accept cremation.

In the Orthodox Christian Funeral Service 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).

In conclusion

1. The burial of the dead is an ancient custom of most civilizations. It 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 together with the soul, or to suffer the result of rejecting God. Therefore we must respect the body even after death. Respect is shown by burying the body and not burning it.
3. The Church has no objection to people who are not firm believers and who wish to have themselves cremated, but reserves the right not to conduct a funeral service for in respect of the Church's long-held and justifiable canon law.

The Funeral Service of the Orthodox Church

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God's mercy is infinite and His goodness is beyond measure. This is what our Holy Church has always maintained, and thus believes and hopes that the loving Lord will be merciful even to the deceased. For this reason the hymnographers of the Orthodox Church have composed a most moving Funeral Service that is virtually a treasure-house of profound spiritual thoughts

From the earliest Christian times, psalms and hymns were sung to our life-giving God when a believer died. But the basic parts of the Funeral Service in use today can be traced mainly to the fifth century. With the passage of time the Service has been enriched with psalms and hymns so that it has become one of the most versatile, dramatic and impassionate services of our Church.

The Funeral Service of the Orthodox Church is an example of how Orthodox theology influences the formation of a healthy understanding of the true nature of life and death. The Service accomplishes the following: a) utilizes the occasion of death to help us develop a more profound understanding of the meaning and purpose of life; b) helps us to deal with the emotions we have at the time of death and as time passes after the death; c) emphasizes the fact that death for the Christian is not the end, and affirms our hope in salvation and eternal life; d) recognizes the existence of the emotions of grief caused by the separation from a loved one, and encourages their expression.

In the readings, prayers, and hymns of the Funeral Service a dramatic dialogue takes place between the faithful and God and the deceased and God. The Service acknowledges the reality of human existence—the frailty of life and the vanity of worldly things—and directs our minds and hearts to contemplate the incomparable value of the eternal blessings of God's kingdom. At the same time with a contrite spirit, the priests and people invoke the infinite mercy of the Almighty God for the departed.

Anyone who attentively follows the hymns and prayers of the Funeral Service will be edified and consoled in many ways. The Service is not only an opportunity to express our love for our loved one who has fallen asleep; it is also a sacred time, a marvelous opportunity for reflection and inner meditation on our own relationship with God and on the orientation of our lives. When we reflect on the sublime thoughts of the Funeral Service our souls become contrite, our hearts are softened, and we pray fervently for the forgiveness and the repose of the person who has been transferred to the life beyond the grave. Also, we who are still alive are beckoned to live the rest of our lives in repentance and in full dedication to Christ.

Saint John Chrysostom beautifully observes:

“The Jews of the Old Testament wept for Jacob and for Moses for forty days. Today, however, during the funeral of the faithful, the Church raises hymns and prayers and psalms. We glorify and thank God, because “He crowned the departing,” because “He

The Funeral Service of the Orthodox Church

relieved the pains," because "He expelled the fear," and has the deceased believer near Him. This is why the hymns and psalms reveal that in the event of death there is pleasure and joy following the glorious Resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ. For the psalms and hymns are symbols of joy, according to the Apostolic word: "Is any cheerful? Let him sing praises" (James 5:13). This is why we sing psalms over the dead—psalms which move us to have courage and not to despair over the death of our brother." (St. John Chrysostom, On the Holy Martyrs Bernice and Prosdoke the Virgins and their Mother Domnina)

"With the spirits of the righteous made perfect, give rest to the soul of Your servant, O Savior, and preserve it in that life of blessedness which is with You, O You Who loves mankind." (Troparion for the Departed)

Order of the Funeral Service

The Funeral Service of the Eastern Orthodox Church consists of hymns, prayers, and readings from the Scriptures. The order of the Service is as follows:

The Trisagion Service, chanted at the funeral home or in the church on the evening before the funeral service and on the day of the funeral, at the graveside following the funeral service, and for memorial services.

Selection of verses from Psalm 119 (LXX 118), in three stanzas: (Part I -verses 1, 20, 28, 36, 53, 63; Part II -verses 73, 83, 94, 102, 112, 126; Part III -verses 132, 141, 149, 161 175, 176)

Blessings (Evlogetaria): "Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes!" (Psalm 119:12).

Kontakion and Hymns in each of the Eight Tones.

Scripture Readings: (a) 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and (b) John 5:24-30.

Small Litany, Prayers, and Dismissal.

The Kiss of Peace and the anointing of the body.

The chanting of the Trisagion Service at the cemetery.

Trisagion Service : Before the Funeral Service itself, the brief Trisagion or "Thrice-Holy" Service is served at the place where the deceased lies. This service derives its name because it begins with the familiar prayer, "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us," repeated three times. After the initial prayers, four hymns are chanted asking the Lord to give rest to the deceased among those who have already been perfected in the faith. A litany follows and is concluded with a prayer that includes again the petition to the Lord to grant rest to the deceased and asks for the forgiveness of sins. Before the service is concluded, the faithful sing, "May your memory be eternal."

Psalm 119 : The Funeral Service begins with the chanting in three stanzas of verses from Psalm 119 (118 in the Septuagint). In Greek this is referred to as the *Amomos* (blameless) because the first words are, "Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the

The Funeral Service of the Orthodox Church

law of the Lord.” Following the first stanza, a small litany is said with petitions for the departed. If more than one priest is officiating, this litany is said after each stanza.

Evlogetaria : Following the chanting of Psalm 119 are the Funeral Praises, the Evlogetaria. These hymns are chanted in a solemn tone which highlights their deep theological content. They are called “Evlogetaria” (meaning hymns of praise) because each one is preceded by Psalm 119:12, “Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes.” Their designation as the Funeral Evlogetaria distinguishes them from the Resurrectional Evlogetaria that are chanted during the Sunday Matins service. For the Funeral Service for a member of the clergy, two additional Evlogetaria are included.

Kontakion and Hymns of the Eight Tones : At the conclusion of the Evlogetaria, the Kontakion of the Funeral Service is chanted:

“With the Saints give rest, O Christ, to the soul of Your servant where there is no pain, nor sorrow, nor suffering, but life everlasting.”

During the chanting of this hymn, the priest censes the deceased and the faithful, as well as the Holy Altar Table and icons. Following this are chanted the very moving hymns known as the *Idiomela*. Each hymn has its own particular melody and are sung in the order of the eight modes or tones of Byzantine chant. These hymns and their changing melodic modes express the mixed emotions of grief and consolation that come from the loss of a loved one and in our affirmation of our hope in God’s promise of rest for the departed and eternal life.

Scripture Readings : In addition to the prayers and hymnody, the Funeral Service also includes two Scripture lessons, one from the *Apostolos* (the liturgical book that contains the lections from the Book of Acts and the Epistles) and another from the *Evangelion* (the liturgical book of the four Gospels arranged in pericopes or lections). The assigned readings for the service are I Thessalonians 4:13-17 and John 5:24-30. The *Apostolos* and the *Evangelion* also list several alternate readings which include from the *Apostolos* I Corinthians 15:47-57; I Corinthians 15:20-28; Romans 14:6-9; and from the *Evangelion* John 5:17-24; John 6:35-39; John 6:40-44; and John 6:48-54. All of these passages reflect the Church’s belief in the reality of Christ’s death and Resurrection and of the benefits that we derive from them, namely, the resurrection of our body on the last day, and the promise of incorruption and immortality.

Prayers and Dismissal : Following the readings, the small litany that was said earlier is repeated, and priest offers a prayer for the repose of the deceased. At this point a special prayer is added if a hierarch is officiating and/or the funeral is for a member of the clergy. The priest, addressing Christ who defeated death, asks the “God of spirits and of all humankind” to grant rest to the soul of the deceased, “now asleep in a place of light, a place of renewed life, a joyous place....” The Dismissal prayer of the Funeral Service once again introduces the hope of the resurrection as the priest calls upon the intercessions of the all-holy Theotokos, the holy Apostles, the holy Fathers, the three Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and of the holy and righteous Lazarus, the friend of

The Funeral Service of the Orthodox Church

Christ who was raised from the dead by our Lord. After this prayer the faithful sing, "May your memory be eternal."

The Kiss of Peace and Anointing : Following the dismissal prayer comes the moment of our final farewell greeting to the deceased. As the people come forward to look upon the deceased, the choir or chanters sing hymns that invite them to offer a kiss to the one who has reposed in the faith while they pray for the Lord to give the person rest. The kiss given to the deceased is an expression of love for the departed, but it is also an affirmation that the one who has fallen asleep is worthy of the fulfillment of God's promises having lived a life of faith and known the grace of God.

After the people and the family have come and offered their final greeting, the priest anoints the body in the sign of the Cross with oil and earth. As the priest anoints with the oil he says: "Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7). As the priest anoints the body with earth, he says: "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world and all that dwell in it (Psalm 24:1). You are dust and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

At the Cemetery : Following the Funeral Service, the priest and people proceed to the cemetery. Here, the priest chants the Trisagion and the body is committed to the grave to await the return of our Lord and the resurrection of the dead.