**The Funeral Service in the Orthodox Church**

*Introduction:*

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:

* Utilizes the occasion of death to help us develop a more profound understanding of the meaning and purpose of life
* Helps us to deal with the emotions we have at the time of death and as time passes after the death
* Emphasizes the fact that death for the Christian is not the end, and affirms our hope in salvation and eternal life
* 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.

*Order of the Funeral Service:*

The Orthodox Funeral consists of three Services. First, there is a Vigil Service after death, which is usually conducted at the time of the wake. This service is called the Trisagion Service. The Church prays to Christ “to give rest with the Saints to the soul of Your servant where there is neither pain, grief, nor sighing but life everlasting.” While the Church prays for the soul of the deceased, great respect is paid to the body. Orthodoxy believes the body of the Christian is sacred since it was the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

The body will share also in the final restoration of all creation. The Funeral Service is continued at the Church, where the body is brought on the day of burial. Ideally, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. After the Funeral Service, the congregation offers its Farewell to the deceased. The Trisagion Service is repeated at the graveside.

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 1 175, 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 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 proceeded 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 is 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 the 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 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.