

St. George Newsletter

December 2011

In place of our regular column From the Pages of the Trebnik, this month's column on services that take place after the death of an Orthodox Christian was contributed by priest Sergei Sveshnikov.

FUNERALS AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

priest Sergei Sveshnikov

The final hours before death

The leaving behind of the earthly life full of suffering, and the translation into eternity is the most solemn moment in the life of any Christian. However, friends and relatives, sometimes removed from Christian traditions, bear the death of a dear one with great grief. They often lose their orientation and leave the important job of the setting an Orthodox Christian on his final path in the hands of a funeral home.

The most important thing that we can do for a friend or relative before his or her death is to invite a priest, so that he can send the departing one on his or her way with the Holy Gifts. One must not worry about Father being busy or tired, or that it is too early, or too late, or too far. One must simply fulfill one's responsibilities before the dear friend. One must neither be concerned with thoughts of whether the sick one will get well. If this is God's will, then he will, and if the hour of the meeting with eternity has come, then nothing can delay this hour, but all is in the hands of God. It is entirely unnecessary to be at death's door in order to commune of the Holy Mysteries of Christ. While there is still time, let the priest come and commune the sick one, pray for his recovery, and perform the sacrament of unction (anointing with oil).

Finally, the important moment of passing from temporal to eternal has come to our dear one. If

the priest has not yet arrived, then we can and should begin to read the service on the departure of the soul from the body, that is, the particular rule of prayers which is read while a person is still alive, but cannot pray with his own lips. In this service, the departing one joins in heart and soul to the words of the prayers that we read, and offers them up to the creator. If you do not have the rule available, it is good to read psalms. It seems wrong, even if it is sincere, to simply mourn, depriving our friend of this final prayerful comfort in this life, and increasing his sufferings, which were already enough without this deprivation.

Funeral and burial

The body of a reposed Orthodox Christian is washed, clothed in clean clothing, covered with a burial sheet, and a special headband is placed on his head to remind us of the incorruptible crowns of righteousness, which the Lord has prepared for those who love Him (cf. 2 Tim. 4:8). A cross is placed in the reposed person's hands to symbolize that this person, taking up his cross, followed after Christ (Lk. 9:23). Besides the cross, there is nothing else that should be placed in the coffin together with the departed one. Perhaps during his life, the reposed loved or collected certain items, but he can take nothing earthly with him on the way to eternal life, but only the spiritual riches he has built up. Thus, nothing should be put in the coffin with the departed except the Cross of Christ. There is a practice of placing icons in the coffin with the reposed. This is not the best practice. It is far better after the funeral to take the icons out of the coffin and keep them at home as a prayerful reminder of the departed.

The burial of an Orthodox Christian can be on the first day after death, the second day, the third day, or later, depending on circumstances. The coffin with the body of the reposed is

brought to the church, where the burial services are held. At our church, the day and time of the funeral must be pre-arranged with the rector. An Orthodox Christian should be buried in an Orthodox Cemetery, where this is possible.

Forty-days commemoration

The Russian word “Sorokoust” (forty commemorations) refers to the commemoration of a reposed Orthodox Christian at Liturgy every day for forty days after death; as in the first forty days after death, the newly-presented soul has special need of our prayers. Forty-days commemoration is possible only in those churches that have daily Liturgy, usually these are cathedrals with a great number of priests, or monasteries. In the majority of parish churches, where one or two priests serve, Liturgy is not served daily, and thus forty-days commemoration is not possible. In our Western American diocese, forty-days commemoration can be ordered at the cathedral church in San Francisco. For more information, please see the rector.

Memorial meals

Memorial meals and services are held on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after death, and also on the anniversary of the death. If possible, not only friends and relatives should be invited, but also the poor, lonely, and those who sorrow. Besides this, it is a praiseworthy custom to help the poor and donate to worthy causes in memory of a departed one.

Memorial services

A memorial service is an order of church prayers for a reposed Orthodox Christian. Memorial services may be held not only on the third, ninth, and fortieth days and on the anniversary of the death, but also on the reposed person’s name’s day or any other appropriate day (except for a few days of the year). At our church, one must contact the rector to arrange a day and time for a memorial service.

One may bring kolivo to a memorial service. This is cooked wheat with honey or sweet fruits added. The wheat reminds us that we are buried in the ground in order to be resurrected into new life. The honey and sweet fruits remind us of the sweetness of the future life with God.

How much does it cost?

Prayers for the reposed, like all other prayers, are priceless. They cannot be bought or sold. However, it is customary to thank the priest for his time and efforts, and also contribute for the upkeep of the church. The amounts of these donations are determined by the relatives of the reposed in accordance with their individual financial situation. Poverty or financial difficulties should never be an impediment to serving a funeral or memorial service. To pray for the departed is the duty of every priest, the fulfillment of which is far more important than any sum of money.

A checklist for going to the funeral home

One must bear in mind that a funeral home is a commercial organization, whose main goal is to make money. Of course, certain funeral services are very convenient, but often the funeral home benefits from suggest completely unnecessary services to people. Those who are working through a funeral home should keep in mind:

- According to Holy Scripture, a Christian should not be cremated, but buried in the earth.
- The coffin should be wood, so that the body of the departed Christian can naturally return to the earth. Plastic coffins do not allow this.
- Christians are not to be embalmed, as embalming hinders the natural process of the return of the body to the earth. If the funeral needs to be held some days after death, then it is sufficient to ask the funeral home to use cold storage.
- Often a viewing of the body is arranged in funeral homes in a special room. In the Orthodox tradition, funeral services are conducted in the church. Thus it is necessary to ensure that the coffin containing the body of

an Orthodox Christian be taken to the church. After the funeral, the coffin is then carried or driven (depending on distance) to the cemetery for burial.

- A cross is placed over the grave of an Orthodox Christian. Certain municipal cemeteries many not allow standing monuments, but only flat tiles. In this case, it is necessary to ensure that there is a cross on the tile.

An advance directive form that can be prepared in advance to inform your relatives of your desires to have funeral and burial conducted according to Orthodox practice can be found at: <http://www.stgeorgeslc.org/directive.pdf>

GALA BANQUET 2012

Dinner, dancing, and entertainment

Friday, February 10th

from 6:30 pm

ARBAT BANQUET HALL
375 E 3300 S
SALT LAKE CITY

TICKETS

\$100

TABLES (10 SEATS)

\$900

PURCHASE EVENT TICKETS ON OUR

WEBSITE:

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OR CALL:

(801) 281-5560

OR BUY IN PERSON AT

SUNDAY LUNCHES

The Nativity Fast

When?

The fast begins on November 28 (November 15 on the old style), the day of the holy martyrs Gurias, Samonas, and Habib. The eve of the beginning of the fast is the day of the holy apostle Phillip. Thus the Nativity Fast is sometimes referred to as St. Phillip's Fast. The fast ends on the day of the Nativity itself, even if this day happens to be a Wednesday or a Friday. After the Nativity begins the period that in Russian is called the "sviatki", or holy days. These eleven days are free from fasting. The twelfth day is the eve of the Baptism of Christ and is always a fasting day. From this twelve-day separation of these holidays, we get the phrase "The Twelve Days of Christmas", even though Nativity itself is celebrated only seven days.

Why?

We fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, and also before great holidays, in order to weaken ourselves a bit. A person who recognizes his weakness hopes in God, and thus humbles himself. Thus, we should not only refrain from eating meat and dairy products, but also try to limit our food intake. Of course, everything is done according to our strength. In our times, it is easier to fast, since there are always more-or-less fresh products in the store, and there are also vegan substitutes for milk, mayonnaise, and other products. We should all strive to refrain from meat and milk. What we do beyond this we should do in moderation, and according to our strength.

Moreover, if we train ourselves to refrain from these foods, our struggle with sin will become easier. A person who can say "no" to himself and exercise control over his desires is a powerful enemy of the devil.

We do not only mark the passing of holidays in the Orthodox Church, but relive all of the events. The ancient world with anticipation awaited the coming of the Messiah. We wait with them in our fasting.

What should we do on new style Christmas?

We live in a non-Orthodox country, and thus, not all our friends or even our relatives mark Christmas according to the old style. If our friends congratulate us on Christmas, we may return the congratulations. There is no need to lecture them. If we go to Christmas parties, we should all the same observe the fast. Our friends who celebrate Christmas are also Christians, and they should respect our desire to prepare for the birth of Christ by fasting.

What should we do on January 1?

The Russian Orthodox Church celebrates Church New Year in September. This was the case throughout Russia until the reign of Tsar Peter the First. Since that time, the Church also marks the civil new year, but on the old style (the so-called "Old New Year"). In Russian Churches on the day of St. Basil the Great (January 14 -- January 1 on the old style), thanksgiving services are served as on Church New Year.

What if our friends invite us to celebrate with them on January 1? We can certainly have a glass of champagne with them and eat some fasting candies. But we should remember that we are in the fast, and moreover, we are always Orthodox Christians and need to conduct ourselves according to Christ's teachings. Is it any coincidence that the saint celebrated on January 1 on the new style is St. Boniface, to whom Orthodox Christians often pray for help in their struggle with drunkenness or addiction?

What then, is the fast purely physical?

St. John Chrysostom says: "Those who think the fast is only about abstinence from food are mistaken. The true fast is separation from evil, control of the tongue, laying aside of sin, cutting off of our passions, and ending cursing, lying, and broken promises."

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