

## **FUNERALS AND PANNYHIDAS**

### **by 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 oil blessing (unction).

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 sick one joins in heart and soul to the words of the prayers that we read, and offers them up to the creator. 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 wreaths of righteousness, which the Lord has prepared for those who love Him (cf. 2 Tim. 4:8). A cross is placed in the reposed's hands as a symbol of the fact that this person, taking up his cross, followed after Christ (Lk. 9:23).

The burial of an Orthodox Christian can be on the first day after death, the second day, the third day, or later, depending on conditions. The coffin with the body of the reposed is brought to the church, where the burial services are held. The day and time of the funeral, in our church, must be pre-arranged with the rector. An Orthodox Christian should be buried in an Orthodox Cemetery, where this is possible.

#### **Forty day commemoration**

The Russian word “Sorokoust” 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 day 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 day commemoration is not possible. In our Western American diocese, forty day commemoration can be ordered at the cathedral church in San Francisco. For more information, see the rector.

### **Memorial dinners**

Memorial dinners 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 sorrowing. Besides this, it is a praiseworthy custom to help the poor and donate to worthy causes in memory of a departed one.

### **Pannykhidas**

A pannykhida is an order of church prayers for a reposed Orthodox Christian. Pannykhidas may be served not only on the third, ninth, and fortieth days and on the anniversary of the death, but also on the reposed’s name’s day or any other appropriate day (besides certain well-known days of the year). In our church, one must contact the rector and agree on a day and time to order a pannykhida.

One may bring kollyvo to a pannykhida. This is boiled 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, as all other prayers, are priceless. They cannot be bought or sold. However, it is tradition to thank the priest for his time and efforts, and also contribute to the upkeep of the church. The amounts of these donations are decided on by the relatives of the reposed in accordance with their financial situation. Poverty or financial difficulties should never be an impediment to serving a funeral or pannykhida. To pray for the departed is the duty of every priest, the fulfillment of which is far more important than any sum of money.