

Funeral Services

according to

The Byzantine-Slavonic Rite

by

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With Ecclesiastical Approval



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FOREWARD

The Funeral Services according to the Byzantine-Slavonic Rite make a deep impression on those who are present at them. In their contents they are highly mystical, while in their expression they are very poetical. Their melancholic mood is often broken by the chords of a triumphant music, since by the departure of every devoted Christian **"death is swallowed up in victory"** (1 Cor. 15:54). Thus sorrow becomes soothed by hopeful expectation of heavenly bliss; and sadness of inevitable departure is alleviated by a prayerful assurance.

In our funeral services two main themes are artistically interwoven into one most meaningful ritual: the theme of awesome judgment of God, and that of resurrection and life everlasting. The expectation of judgment by the deceased prompts us to sincere prayer for him, while the vision of immortality soothes our sorrow of his parting; and this is done in the spirit of St. Paul: **"Brethren, we want you to be quite certain about those who are asleep [dead], to make sure that you do not grieve about them as those people who have no hope."** (1 Thess. 4:13).

An earnest prayer for the deceased and constant reminder of our resurrection in Christ slowly dispel grief from our bereaved heart, replacing it with the **"hope full of immortality"** (Wisdom 3:4). Therefore, St. John Chrysostom (†407) reminded his people: **"Think what you sing on that occasion [at the funeral], Return to your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you"** (Ps. 116:7). **And again, 'I will fear no evil, for You are with me'** (Ps. 23:4). **And again, 'You are my shelter; from distress You will preserve me'** (Ps. 32:7). **Think what these Psalms mean. But you do not give heed, but are drunk with grief... For if indeed you really believe the things you say, your sorrow is superfluous"** (cf. *Homilies on Hebrews*, IV, 7).

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1. Liturgical Commemorations

At the conclusion of every burial service the celebrant implores the merciful God to make the memory of the deceased "everlasting." Then the relatives and the faithful who are present, as though re-echoing the celebrant's prayer, sing with all gravity, "Everlasting Memory" — *Vičnaja Pamjat'*. Thus they publicly commit themselves to keep the memory of the departed alive "from generation unto generation" (Sir. 44:14). In this way, to each and every Christian, the commemoration of the deceased becomes a solemn commitment to his church community.

Since Apostolic times, true to her commitment, the Church has included the commemoration of her deceased members in the Divine Liturgy, praying after the Consecration: "Remember also, O Lord, all who have departed in the hope of resurrection unto eternal life, and grant them rest where the light of your face shines" (cf. *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*). Thus the Church preserves the memory of her departed children "everlasting."

As a provident and solicitous mother, the Church also designates special days of the liturgical year to commemorate her deceased children who are referred to most appropriately in our liturgy as *fallen-asleep* (Old Slavonic: *usopši*; comp. 1 Thess. 4:14), since they are only waiting for "the last trumpet" to rise again (comp. 1 Cor. 15:52). As a rule there are five Saturdays (O. Sl. *subota*) set aside by the Church to commemorate the souls (O. Sl. *duša*) of the departed, called *Zadušni Suboty*, which is literally translated *Saturdays for the Souls*. These five *Saturdays for the Deceased* are as follows:

1. Saturday before Meat-fare Sunday
2. Saturday before the second Sunday of Lent
3. Saturday before the third Sunday of Lent
4. Saturday before the fourth Sunday of Lent
5. Saturday before Pentecost.

The Liturgists generally give the following reasons for the choice of these particular Saturdays:

MEAT-FARE SATURDAY: on account of the Last Judgment which is the main theme of the following day, Meat-fare Sunday, and which is described by St. Matthew in the gospel for that Sunday. Before describing to us the second coming of Jesus Christ **“to judge the living and the dead”** as we sing in the Symbol or Nicene Creed, the Church invites us to a fervent prayer in behalf of all those who have **“fallen asleep in the hope of resurrection and life eternal.”** Since the deceased are no longer able to intercede for themselves, we do it for them on account of our Christian love, recommending their souls to the compassionate mercy of our Savior.

The reservation of Meat-fare Saturday as the day of liturgical prayer for the **“fallen-asleep”** can be traced back to the fifth century, as noted in the Typikon of St. Sabas.

SECOND, THIRD, and FOURTH SATURDAYS OF LENT: The liturgical cycle of Meat-fare Saturday serves as a pattern for all other commemorations of the deceased, especially for these three Saturdays of Lent. Since Lent is a time set aside for prayer, fasting, and good works, the Fathers established these three Saturdays as days of prayer for the departed in order to enable us to renew our love for them and to give us an opportunity to practice good works in their behalf.

Even in the Old Testament we read that **“it is a holy and wholesome thing to pray for the dead, that they may be**

loosed from their sins" (2 Macc. 12:46). The Church, since Apostolic times, considered prayer for the deceased as a work of mercy, admonishing all: "Let us pray for our brethren who have fallen asleep in Christ, that God, the Lover of Mankind, who has received their souls, may forgive them every sin, voluntary and involuntary, and may be merciful to them" (cf. *Constitutions of the Apostles*, VIII, 41).

Concerned with the fate of his fallen warriors, Judas Maccabee, already in the Old Testament, sent to the temple in Jerusalem a collection, made among his soldiers, of "twelve thousand drachmas of silver for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead" (2 Macc. 12:43). To this, St. Augustine (†430) remarks: "In the books of the Maccabees we read about the sacrifices offered for the dead. Even if it were nowhere at all read in the Old Testament, not small is the authority of the whole Church [Western as well as of the Eastern], which in this usage is clear, namely, that in the prayers of the priests which are offered to the Lord God at his altar, the commendation of the dead has also its place" (*Care for the Dead*, 1, 3).

Also relevant are the words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (†387), saying: "When we offer to Him [God] our supplications for those who have fallen asleep, though they be sinners, and offer up Christ sacrificed also for our sins, we pacify our merciful God for them as well as for ourselves" (*Catech.* 23, 10).

According to the ancient custom of the Byzantine Church, during Lent the Divine Liturgy was celebrated only on Saturday and Sunday. On the other days, the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts was celebrated. This custom prompted Fathers of the eighth century to establish the second, third, and fourth Saturdays of Lent as the days of prayer for the deceased, climaxed with the celebration of the Divine Liturgy for the dead during which the names of the departed were read from folded tablets called diptychs (*O. Sl. hramoty*).

They had to choose these three Saturdays of Lent because the others were already assigned to commemorate other events: *the First Saturday of Lent* was dedicated to a great warrior, St. Theodore Tyro, since the fourth century; *the Fifth Saturday of Lent*, known as **Akathistos Saturday**, was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary in thanksgiving for her protection of the city of Constantinople, 626 A.D.; *the Sixth Saturday of Lent*, called **Saturday of Lazarus**, already in the time of St. John Chrysostom (†407) was a festive day in commemoration of the resurrection of Lazarus and also a day when Catechumens were solemnly baptized. Thus, only the second, third, and fourth Saturdays of Lent were dedicated to the commemoration of the deceased.

SATURDAY BEFORE PENTECOST is the fifth day set aside for liturgical commemoration of the deceased. Since the economy of salvation was completed by the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Church invites her children to pray for the fallen asleep on the preceding day in order to make them also partakers of the salvific work of redemption. This is clearly evident from the *Pentecostal Prayers*, ascribed to St. Basil the Great (†379) as their author. In these prayers, the celebrant is interceding for **“fathers, brothers, and all other relatives according to the flesh, and all those who, sharing with us our faith, have fallen asleep — all of whom we remember today”** (cf. *Third Pentecostal Prayer*).

Sometime during the fifth or sixth century, the Saturday before Pentecost was dedicated to prayer for the deceased. Thus, faithful to her solemn commitment, the Church keeps alive the memory of her departed children in her liturgical services and also invites us to fulfill our commitment in like manner by prayerfully attending these liturgical services and constantly repeating our movingly somber **“Vičnaja pamjat.”**

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2. Individual Commemorations

In one of his spiritual conferences, the famous English Cardinal, Nicholas P. Wiseman (†1865), says: "The dying, aware of their own transgressions, console themselves with sweet hope that they leave behind their relatives and many good friends who will implore the mercy of God for them by their prayers and sacrifices. This is also a consoling thought for the bereaved family, since they, too, are convinced that, although losing a beloved person, they still can be helpful by their prayers and good works" (*Conference XI*).

Yes, it is indeed a great consolation for the dying to know that they will not be abandoned by their loved ones in the "dreadful expectation of the judgment" of God (Heb. 10:27), but will be accompanied by their prayers. At the same time, the Church fills the hearts of those left behind with a consoling reminder that they still can be helpful and preserve the bond of love with their beloved departed. St. John Chrysostom teaches: "Such is the power of love that it embraces, unites, and fastens together not only those who are present and near to us, but also those who are far and distant from us. Neither length of time, nor separation in space, nor anything else can break up and destroy the affection of our soul" (cf. *Letter to a Young Widow*, 3).

At the commemoration of Emperor Theodosius (†395) on the fortieth day of his death, St. Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan, said: "I love the man who in his dying hour kept asking for me with his last breath... I love him and so I accompany him to the land of the living (Ps. 114:9) by my tears and prayers; and I will not abandon him until I lead the man whither his merits summon him, unto the holy mountain of God (Ps. 2:6), where there is eternal life" (cf. *Oration on Theodosius*, 35, 37).

It is the teaching of the Church that the souls in purgatory can be helped by the prayers and good works of the living. Therefore, St. John Chrysostom begged his people: "Let us assist them [the deceased] according to our power; let us think of some help for them, small though it may be; yet, still let us assist them. How and in what way? By our prayers and by entreating others to make prayers for them; by giving alms to the poor on their behalf" (cf. *Homilies of Philipians*, 3, 4).

The commemoration of the deceased was already practiced in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 50: 2-3; Num. 20:29; Deut. 34:8; 2 Macc. 12:45-46). It was continued by the Apostles within the framework of the Eucharistic Sacrifice when they commemorated those "who died in the Lord" (Rm. 14:8). This apostolic practice is witnessed by the inscriptions and epitaphs in the Catacombs, dating back to the first and to the second centuries. One of them reads: "We prayed for the soul of our beloved departed and God has heard our prayer; and the soul has passed into a place of light and refreshment." For other prayers one can refer to Hammon-Mitchell, *Early Christian Prayers*, Regnery Co., Chicago, Illinois, 1961, pp. 78-87.

On the tombs of the faithful, from ancient times, there were inscribed words of hope: "In hope of resurrection and the mercy of Christ"; imploring rest: "Give rest to the soul of my father"; and, most of all, peace: "May he live in peace." The idea of peace occurs very often in our funeral services and prayers. In the light of St. Paul's teaching, the peace of departed souls consists in a serene and lasting friendship with God (Eph. 2:13-14). Then again, the idea of rest in "the bosom of Abraham" is often expressed: "Remember, O Lord, your servant Chrysis and give her a place of light in the bosom of Abraham, a place where she may find her rest." The expression "in the bosom of Abraham" was taken from the Holy Gospel and was used by our Lord Himself: "Eventually the beggar [Lazarus] died. He was carried by Angels to the bosom of Abraham" (Lk. 16:22).

St. Gregory of Nyssa (†394) gives us the following explanation: "It seems to me that Scripture uses the '*bosom of Abraham*,' in which the patient sufferer finds rest, as a symbol of the good state of the soul. For this patriarch [Abraham] was the first of men recorded to have chosen the hope of things to come in preference to the enjoyment of the moment" (cf. *The Fathers of the Church*, Wash., D.C., 1967, Vol. 58, p. 234).

In different times and places there were various customs to commemorate the deceased. In our Rite, the custom was accepted to commemorate our dead on the *third*, *ninth*, and *fortieth day*, as well as on the *anniversary day* of their death.

The third day was chosen in honor of the resurrection of Christ, when we implore Jesus to make our deceased "**partakers of His glorious resurrection**" (comp. I Thess. 4: 13-18).

The ninth day was introduced in honor of the nine choirs of the Angels who surround the throne of the Almighty. The Angels are believed to carry the soul of the deceased before the judgment-seat of God (comp. Ex. 23:20; Lk. 16: 22), and to be able to intercede for them at the judgment (comp. Mt. 18:10). Thus, on the ninth day, in behalf of our departed, we seek the intercession of the Angels and of the Saints who already joined the angelic choirs in praising God, asking them to help the departed reach their "**heavenly glory**" (comp. Apoc. 5: 11, 12).

The fortieth day was chosen in honor of Christ's ascension into heaven where He went "**to prepare a place**" for us (Jn. 14:2). In behalf of our deceased, we implore the Savior to take them to Himself in order that "**where He is, there they also may be**" (Jn. 14:3).

St. Ambrose (†397) traced this custom to the Old Testament: "**Recently, we lamented the death of this prince [Emperor Theodosius]; and now we are celebrating the for-**

tieth day with Prince Honorius assisting at the holy altar. For as holy Joseph performed the burial rites for his father, Jacob, during forty days (comp. Gen.50:2-3) so also this son [Honorius] renders his just due to his father, Theodosius" (cf. *Fathers of the Church*, Wash., D.C., 1953, Vol. 22, p. 308).

The Apostolic Constitutions, written about 380 A.D., already mention the liturgical commemorations as is customary in our Rite: "Let the third day of the departed be celebrated with psalms, lessons, and prayers on account of Him who arose within the space of three days; and let the ninth day be celebrated in remembrance of the living and of the departed; and the fortieth day according to the ancient pattern, for so did people lament Moses; and the anniversary day in memory of him. And let alms be given to the poor out of his goods for a memorial of him" (Book VIII, chapter 42).

This custom was accepted in the fourth century by the whole Church both in the East and West. As the anniversaries came, the faithful invited the poor to pray for the deceased and then treated them "in honor of the departed."

St. Augustine mentioned that St. Ambrose had forbidden in Milan "these funeral feasts in honor of our parents in the faith" and therefore his mother, St. Monica (†387), in place of a "basket full of dainties" learned how to offer a "breast full of prayers," while the Eucharistic Sacrifice was celebrated (cf. *Confessions*, VI, 2). Thus, "the annual feast" of commemoration of their departed became for the Christian families the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (†387) explained this custom of celebrating a Divine Liturgy for the deceased in this fashion: "We believe that the souls for whom prayers are offered receive very great relief, while this holy and tremendous Victim [Eucharistic Christ] lies upon the altar" (cf. *Cath. Mysteries*, V, 9).

St. John Chrysostom (†407) is very precise on this point: "Not in vain did the Apostles order that remembrance should be made of the dead in the dreadful Mysteries [Divine Liturgy].

They [the dead] know that great gain results to them — great benefit; for when all the people stand with uplifted hands — a priestly assembly — and that awesome Sacrifice lies displayed, how shall we not prevail with God by our entreaties for them? And this we do for those who have departed in faith”
(Homilies on Philipians, 3, 4).

Let us then faithfully remember our departed on the anniversary of their death with the celebration of the Divine Liturgy as we have always remembered their birthdays or wedding anniversaries while they were with us.

3. Dignity of Dying

The famous Austrian composer, Wolfgang A. Mozart (†1791), when his father became seriously sick, wrote him the following letter:

“Properly speaking, death is the final goal of our lives. Therefore, I have become so well acquainted with this really best friend of man that not only his [death’s] face has no startling feature for me, but, on the contrary, many soothing and consoling ones. And I thank God that He has given me the blessing of knowing death as the key to my happiness. I never lie down to sleep without thinking that, although I am in the prime of youth, perhaps the next day will find me no longer among the living. Yet, no one who knows me could say that I am gloomy or sad with those around me. For this happiness I give thanks to my Maker every day, and sincerely wish the same blessing for each of my fellow-men” (cf. *T. Toth, The Great Teacher*, Herder & Herder, St. Louis, Mo., 1937, page 136).

Young Mozart faced the reality of death with hope which came to him naturally in consequence of his strong faith. Thus, at the thought of his death, he was more happy than afraid. He knew death was coming, so he prepared himself for it. His time came when he was only thirty-five; but, he was ready. He knew how to die; he died with dignity.

Today, dying has become something of which to be ashamed. Instead of preparing himself to die *“in the Lord,”* modern man tries to challenge death even if **“there is no man who can retain the breath of his life nor master the day of his death”** (Eccles. 8:8). Modern man passes away unaware of his hour of decision, with his mind fogged by various drugs

and his veins tapped by plastic tubes. Usually, he is left alone, surrounded only by gadgets and perhaps an oxygen tent, while his family and friends are restlessly awaiting "the verdict" in a smoking-room.

Modern medicine is concerned only with the recovery, and medical science constantly challenges every disease. Today, the schools of medicine inspire false hopes that soon every sickness will be conquered; it is a desperate attempt to ignore the fact of death. To a doctor today, only a cured patient means success, while a dying patient signifies failure in his practice. Thus, he tries to keep away the reality of approaching death from a dying person, warning even the family "not to disturb" the patient by calling a priest.

And yet, death is far more certain than human conception; it is far more critical than man's birth. It is an integral part of his earthly existence. If man has the right to prepare himself for life, he also has a much greater right to prepare himself for a dignified death. At the time of approaching death, man needs, most of all, the assistance of his Holy Mother Church. Just as a child, after a disturbing dream, clings to his mother, so also, a dying person needs the consoling assurance of his Church who in her loving care hastens to assist him and guide him to "the promised land."

Generally speaking, the Church prepares her dying child with three distinct Holy Mysteries: Penance, Holy Eucharist [Viaticum], and Anointing of the Sick.

PENANCE: "The sting of death is sin" (1 Cor. 15:56), making our death unhappy and the judgment of God fearsome. Therefore, the Church considers her first duty to pluck out "the sting of death," — to remove sin from the soul of the dying — by the administration of Holy Penance. The absolution not only destroys sins of the penitent but also restores his sanctifying grace, that "robe of righteousness" or "wedding garment" without which no one can take part in the heavenly "banquet" (comp. Mt. 22: 1-13).

HOLY EUCHARIST: Setting out on his last journey to "the promised land," the Christian needs "heavenly manna" (Ex. 16:35), a true spiritual food, to strengthen him and sustain his spirit at his departure. Such food is provided by the Church through the administration of Holy Communion to the dying, known as "Viaticum."

Viaticum (Latin: *via* - the way or journey; *te-cum* - with you), as used in the classical language of antiquity, indicated all necessary provisions for one's journey, such as food, money, and clothing. Subsequently, in literature, the word *viaticum* was used figuratively, meaning the necessary provision for one's life or life's journey. The Council of Nicaea (325) applied this term to Holy Communion as administered to a dying Christian, ordering to provide him with "the last and most needed Viaticum" (Canon 13).

Holy Communion is given to a dying Christian also as a seed of immortality and as a token of his resurrection according to the solemn promise of Christ: "Who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life everlasting and I will raise him up on the last day" (Jn. 6:55).

HOLY ANOINTING: As soon as the faithful is in danger of death from sickness or old age, Holy Mother Church, according to the example of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 30-37), hastens to his succour with *Holy Unction*, renamed by the Second Vatican Council as *Anointing of the Sick* (Const. on Liturgy). The anointing is given in response to the instruction of St. James the Less:

"Is anyone among you sick? Let him bring in the presbyters of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven. Confess, therefore, your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be saved" (Jas. 5: 14-16).

Thus, in the prayer for *The Blessing of the Oil for the Sick*, the priest implores God: "O Lord, who in your mercy and goodness are healing the wounds of our souls and bodies, You — the same Master — sanctify this oil that it may become profitable for those who shall be anointed with it unto healing, and relief in their every affliction, every infirmity of flesh and spirit, and all other evils."

While anointing the main parts of the body of the sick, the priest continues to "*pray with faith*": "Our Holy Father and Heavenly Physician of souls and bodies, who did send your Only-begotten Son and our Lord Jesus Christ to heal every infirmity and to deliver us from our death, BY THIS ANOINTING CURE YOUR SERVANT (*name*) from all his spiritual and physical disease taking hold of him, and revive him by the grace of your Christ. Through the prayers of our most holy Lady, the Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, and of all the Saints."

From the testimony of St. James and from the liturgical prayers of Holy Unction we can clearly see how greatly the Church is concerned with the well-being of her children, earnestly praying for their speedy recovery. This, in many instances, she achieves. But, at the same time, the Church spiritually prepares the dying for his decisive battle "against the spiritual forces of wickedness," strengthening him with "the grace of Christ" in order that he "be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6: 10-13).

The anointing is ordinarily followed by *The Apostolic Blessing* to which is attached a plenary indulgence to be gained at the moment of death. The required conditions for gaining this plenary indulgence are: a) the invocation of the holy name of Jesus ("O my Jesus"), at least in our heart; b) a complete resignation to the will of God; and c) the offering of our sufferings in reparation for our sins.

4. A Vision of Dying

In *The Passion of St. Polycarp*, who was burned alive at the stake in Smyrna, Asia Minor, A.D. 155, we read the following testimony of local Christians: "We gathered up his bones which were more valuable to us than precious stones, more dear to us than pure gold, and we laid them to rest in a place worthy of them. There shall we meet, so far as we be able, to celebrate joyfully, with the Lord, the anniversary of that day on which Polycarp, through his martyrdom, was born in God."

For the first Christians, death was "*the day of birth*" to a happy life. The holy Martyrs faced their executioners with a hymn of thanks, while the Saints were "*in a hurry*" to die in order to be with the Lord. There were also great souls who cried out with admiration: "How lovely it is to die!" (Suarez). St. Ambrose (†397) remained completely silent after "seeing Christ smiling at him and calling him unto Himself." St. John Chrysostom (†407) praised the Lord, saying: "Glory to God for everything."

When the famous English convert, Cardinal Nicholas P. Wiseman (†1865) was told by his doctor of his approaching death, the Cardinal exclaimed: "What good news!" To the attending Sister, when she asked of his feeling now that he knew he was going to die, the Churchman answered: "I feel like a child returning home to my father!", re-echoing the words of our Lord: "Now I leave the world and go to my Father" (Jn. 16:28).

In the nineteen-fifties there was a very popular song entitled: "*How Far is Heaven?*" It was about a little girl whose daddy just died. When the little girl inquired why daddy didn't come home, the mother explained that daddy

would not come for a long, long time, since he went to heaven. Wishing to see her daddy, the little girl asked: "**How far is heaven?**" She really did not care how far it was; she only wanted to be with her father.

These sentiments should fill the heart of all dying Christians. We are God's children; God is *our Father*, and being children of God, we are also his "**heirs**" (cf. Rom. 8: 14-17). God, our Father, lives in heaven; heaven, then, is our real home. There we want to be forever with our Heavenly Father. Because heaven is our "**inheritance**," we die assured that our Heavenly Father will "**rescue our soul from the hold of death and will accept us**" (Ps. 48:16).

"**By dying in the Lord**" (Apoc. 14:13) we transform our death into a happy event. Death becomes for us our "**going to the Father**" (Jn. 14:12) to our heavenly home, since on this earth "**we have no permanent place, but we look for one in the life to come**" (Heb. 13:14). Trusting in God, we die assured that He will provide for us "**something better**" (Heb. 11:40).

When the youngest of the seven Maccabee brothers was tortured to death by the impious King Antiochus, the mother encouraged her son not to betray his faith, saying: "**My son, look upon heaven!**" (2 Macc. 7:28). This "*look upon heaven*" gave the young boy a courage to sustain excruciating tortures and death. This "*look upon heaven*" gave needed strength to the host of Christian Martyrs and Confessors who faced lions and violent death with a song in their hearts. Such a "*look upon heaven*," in expectation "**of good things, lasting joy, and mercy**" (Sir. 2:9) in the house of our Heavenly Father, will also give us the necessary courage and strength at the moment of our death — a moment which is inevitable.

How inspiring and how inviting are the words of the Psalmist:

**The Lord is my inheritance and my cup.
I will keep the Lord always before me,**

For with Him at my side, nothing can shake me.
Therefore, my heart is glad and my soul rejoices.
My body also shall rest in hope,
Because You will not abandon my soul in hell,
Nor will You suffer your faithful to undergo
corruption.

You will show me the ways of true life,
Fill me with limitless joy in your presence,
And everlasting delights at your right hand.

Psalm 15: 7, 10-13

The foundation of such unshakeable hope for each and every Christian is our Risen Savior who loved us "to the end" (Jn. 13:1) and "laid down His own life" for us (Jn. 15:13). He also promised us: "In my Father's house there are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again and I will take you to myself, that where I am, there you also may be. Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God and believe also in me... I will not leave you orphans!" (Jn. 14: 1-3, 18). Jesus not only gave us a promise, but also left us His solemn assurance: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, even if he dies, shall live" (Jn. 11:25).

In the light of this heavenly vision and Christ's assurance, Pope John XXIII, of blessed memory, consoled his friends crying at his death-bed: "It is not a day for weeping, but a day for rejoicing, since I am about to begin a new and happy life." St. Augustine says: "He who really loves God is not afraid to die."

Such a fearless soul at the hour of death is described by St. Gregory of Nyssa in *The Life of St. Macrina*:

"As she neared her end and saw the beauty of her Beloved [Jesus] more clearly, she rushed with greater zeal toward the One she desired, and nothing pertaining to this life diverted her attention, no longer speaking to those of us who were present, but to that very One toward whom she

looked with steadfast eyes. Turning to the East, she addressed herself to God in prayer, speaking in a soft voice:

'O Lord, You have delivered us from the fear of death (Heb. 2:15). You have made the end of our earthly life the beginning of a true life for us. For a time, You give rest to our bodies in sleep, but You will awaken us again with the last trumpet (1 Cor. 15:52). The dust from which You have fashioned us with your hands You will return back to the earth for safekeeping, but You will recall it again to life, after reshaping it with incorruptibility and grace.

'You redeemed us from the curse and sin, having taken both upon Yourself. Breaking down the gates of hell (Mt. 16:18) and overcoming the one who had the power of death (Heb. 2:14), You opened for us a way toward the resurrection. To those who fear You, as a token, You give them the sign of the holy cross for the destruction of the adversary [the evil one] and salvation of our life.

'O Eternal God, towards whom I have directed myself from my mother's womb, whom my soul has loved with all its strength, to whom I have dedicated my body and soul from my infancy, prepare for me a shining angel to lead me to the place of rest, near the bosom of the Holy Fathers, where there is water of refreshment. Remember me also in your kingdom, for I, too, have been crucified with You, having nailed my flesh through fear of You and having feared your judgment.

'Let the terrible abyss not separate me from your chosen ones, let not the slanderer [the devil] stand in my way, and let not my sins be discovered before You if I have sinned in word, deed, or thought on account of my weakness. You, who have the power on earth to forgive sins (Mt. 9:6) do forgive me my iniquities so that I may be refreshed and found before You blameless and spotless. May my soul, once I have put off my body, be taken into your hands as an offering before your face.'

5. March of Victory

*Precious in the eyes of the Lord
is the death of his faithful ones.*

Psalm 115:15

Describing the funeral of his friend, St. Basil the Great (†379), St. Gregory Nazianzen states that while "the angels carried his soul to heaven," his body "was carried aloft by the hands of consecrated men [the clergy]...The squares, porticoes, and the roofs were filled with the people escorting him, preceding, following, accompanying, and treading upon one another, many thousands of every race and age, a sight unknown before that day. The singing of psalms was drowned in lamentation... When finally his body had passed through those in procession, it was then committed to the tomb of his father" (cf. *The Fathers of the Church*, Wash. D.C., 1953, Vol 22, pages 96-97).

Considering death as the last great obstacle in reaching a happy life, the Christians buried their dead with great solemnity, reminding us of a triumphant entering of the capital by the commander-in-chief at the head of his victorious army. Preceded by the standards and his adjutants, the victor was usually followed by his army which sang songs of victory. Similarly, a deceased Christian, as a victor over death, is triumphantly escorted to the place of his final rest by his fellow Christians singing the Psalms.

The funeral procession is usually headed by the holy cross, a standard of our redemption and a symbol of our victory over death, as St. Paul reminds us: "Death is swallowed in victory..., and thanks be to God, who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:54,57). The holy cross is also planted on the grave of the deceased, an-

nouncing to the whole world that, by the power of the cross, death was defeated and, by the power of the cross, the body of the departed will rise again into everlasting life.

According to the ancient custom, the victor was crowned with a *"laurel wreath"* for his distinguished service to the country. So also, a wreath or garland is carried in front of the funeral procession or placed on top of the coffin. It is fashioned from *evergreen branches* as a symbol of everlasting life — *"an unfading crown of glory"* (1 Pet. 5:4); it contains *flowers* — symbolizing virtues and good works (cf. Apoc. 14:13); it is tied with a bow of red ribbon — symbolizing *"love, the bond of perfection"* (Col. 3:14). It is not an ordinary bouquet of flowers, but a true wreath in accordance with the words of St. Paul: *"I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. For the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice [a wreath], which the Lord, the just Judge, will give to me on that day. And not to me only, but also to all those who love Him"* (2 Tim. 4:7-8). Also, St. John the Apostle reminds us: *"There was given to him a crown [a wreath] and he went forth as a conqueror"* (Apoc. 6:2).

In a funeral procession, the priest and all the clergy precede the casket just as adjutants preceded their victorious commander. The priest and the other clergy have assisted a departed in his victorious fight against the enemy of his salvation by their prayers, guidance, and administration of the Holy Mysteries. It is fitting then that they accompany the deceased to his final rest, preceding him in his triumphal march.

Until the fourth century the coffin was not used for the burial of Christians. Instead, the body was carried and placed into the grave on a stretcher [a litter] being covered with a large white cover, similar to the shroud of Jesus, symbolizing the brightness [glory] of the risen body. It was done in belief that death was only a temporary sleep [*usopši* — *"Those who are asleep"* (1 Thess. 4:13)] from which the deceased will be awakened by *"the trumpet of the angel"* (Mt. 24:31).

Then the deceased will hastily push aside his white cover and arise in **"a spiritual body"** (1 Cor. 15:44).

It is only in the fourth century that for the first time the coffin is mentioned in connection with the burial of Emperor Constantine the Great (†337): **"The body of the Emperor was placed in a coffin of gold by the proper persons and then conveyed to Constantinople,"** since the Emperor died in Nicomedia, Asia Minor. (Cf. Socrates, *The Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, chapter 40). The poor people continued to be buried on the stretcher or litter as was the case with St. Basil the Great, St. Macrina, and others. Nevertheless, already in the fifth century St. Jerome (†419) mentions that even the poor are using for their burial a wooden coffin (Gr. *kofinos* - a basket, coffer, trunk). From that time on, the use of a casket (Italian: *cassetta* - chest or a box for jewels) came into general use.

When a Christian dies, his body is washed clean as was that of Tobitha in Apostolic times: **"They washed her and laid her out in an upper room"** (Acts 9:37). St. John Chrysostom explains that this is done in order that the body of the deceased, sharing the purity and innocence of the soul, would rise on the Last Day undefiled and clean (cf. Ser. 84 on St. John).

Then the body is dressed in new, festive clothes, symbolizing **"a wedding garment"** [the state of grace] as referred to by Jesus in his parable of the Marriage Feast (Mt. 22: 11-12). St. Dionysius the Great (†265), describing the funeral of deceased Christians during the pestilence in Alexandria, writes: **"They [the pious Christians] took the bodies of the faithful in their own hands, closed their eyes and their mouths, and laid them out... They prepared them suitably with washings and garments"** (cf. Eusebius, *The Church History*, Book VII, chapter 22).

The hands of the deceased are folded in the shape of a cross as though he would continue to pray with the living who intercede for him before God. It is also proper to place into the hands of the deceased his prayerbook. Since the sixth century they usually placed into the hands of the de-

ceased the holy cross, later a holy icon, as an expression of the true faith of the departed. The body in the coffin should be covered with a white "holy cover," symbolizing a special "protection of the Lord" (Psalm 120:5).

After the casket is closed and placed on the shoulders of the pallbearers, the relatives and the faithful follow the casket with burning candles [lamps] in their hands singing various psalms with solemnity. The burning candles and funeral procession are mentioned in the fourth century, but in all probability they were customary already at the beginning of the second century in the catacomb burials (cf. Goar, *Euchologion*, page 435, n. 4). The burning candles symbolize "the light of life" (Jn. 8: 12) which the deceased supposedly reached, passing from "darkness" and "shadow of death" (Mt. 4:16).

The chanting of Psalms at the funeral is also of Apostolic origin, and it is an expression of gratitude to God for having granted to the departed Christian the final victory over death: "Burying the dead, we carry their bodies with the singing of psalms, because they remained faithful to God and 'precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful' " (*The Apostolic Constitutions*, Book VI, chapter 5).

St. John Chrysostom (†407) mentions the following Psalms which were sung at the funeral procession: 1) *The Lord is my Shepherd* - Psalm 22; 2) *Happy is he whose faults are forgiven* - Psalm 31; and 3) *I love the Lord* - Psalm 114. The mere titles of these Psalms prove to us how confident the Christians were about the victory and triumph of the deceased who is now entrusted to the mercy of God.

At the time of St. Procle, the Patriarch of Constantinople (434-446), the hymn of the Thrice-holy - "Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy Immortal One, have mercy on us" - was introduced into the Byzantine Liturgy and was also sung during various processions including the funeral procession.

6. Development of Services

Instructed by the Holy Spirit not to withhold their "kindness from the dead" and to "mourn with those who mourn" (Sir. 7: 33-34), the first Christians considered it their sacred duty to take part in the burial of a departed member of their religious community. Attending the funeral services, they proved their spiritual "communion" with the deceased (comp. Acts 4:32), or if the case demanded, a complete reconciliation with him. Thus, from the very beginning, the Christian burial became a community affair.

The early Christians, considering death as a departure, began to celebrate the occasion of a death with all-night vigils as was the custom among the Jews. This departure (O.Sl. - *iskhod*) is reminiscent of the "exodus" from Egypt when the Jews were ordered by God to celebrate that historic departure: "This was the night vigil for the Lord, as He led them out of the land of Egypt. So on this same night all the Israelites must keep a vigil for the Lord through all their generations" (Ex. 12:42).

During persecutions, Christians were able to gather together only under the cover of night in the catacombs, their places of burial. There they spent all night reciting prayers in common and chanting Psalms over the bodies of their deceased. The dead were buried after the celebration of the Holy Eucharist [Divine Liturgy] at dawn. The rising sun reminded them that Jesus called their departed "out of darkness into His wondrous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

The symbolism of the rising sun (in our Liturgy, Jesus is often referred to as "Sun of Justice," "Orient from on High," etc.) suggested the burial services at dawn even later

when Christianity received complete freedom from persecution. Thus, at the end of the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nyssa tells us that in behalf of his sister, St. Macrina, there was an "all-night vigil with hymn singing as was the custom." Only when the "day dawned" the local Bishop, Araxius, "ordered the bier to be brought forward," and the funeral procession started (cf. *The Fathers of the Church*, Washington, D.C., 1967, Vol. 58, pp. 186-187).

As late as the eleventh century we still have some traces of all-night vigils for the deceased. One of the biographers of St. Nilus (†1005), the founder of the Basilian Abbey in Grotta-Ferrata, Italy, recorded: "We spent all of the preceding night chanting psalms and funeral hymns. Only at dawn did we carry out the body on a bier, accompanying it with candles, incense, and chant" (cf. Goar, *Euchologion*, p. 434, n. 2).

All-night vigils for the deceased developed according to the patterns of other festive vigils by which the early Christians celebrated the yearly commemoration of their Martyrs or other solemn occasions. An all-night vigil was called "Panikhida" (Gr. *pas* - all, entire; *nyx* - night; *ado* or *aeido* - to chant, to sing), literally translated "All-night Services." For such vigils, Vespers (O.Sl. *večernja*) were combined with Matins (O.Sl. *utrenja*). Between those two services were inserted supplications to the Saints, a procession to the Martyr's grave or some other church in the vicinity, and a little refreshment of food. Our Byzantine custom of blessing bread, wheat, wine, and oil during the Vespers of Feasts is derived from this ancient All-night Vigil. Later, such vigils received a specific name of *Litiya* (Gr. *lite* - a fervent prayer, a supplication; *litany* in the Roman Rite); but the original name of **Panikhida** was applied to the all-night services for the deceased. Oddly enough, today, the term **Panikhida** is applied only to a short commemoration of the deceased, the very last part of the original all-night services.

The genius of our Rite has combined the singing of psalms and hymns into the funeral service in such manner

as to lead our hearts into contemplation of eternal happiness, thus mitigating our sorrow for the departed. On the other hand, the Church also encourages us to fervent prayer for the deceased by taking us in spirit to the judgment-seat of God where sooner or later each of us will stand. These two aspects are the main theme of the funeral services to this day.

One of the oldest invitations to pray for the deceased is preserved for us from the fourth century in *The Apostolic Constitutions* (book VIII, ch. 41): "Let us pray for our brethren that are at rest in Christ, that God, who in His love for men has received the soul of the departed, may forgive him every fault, voluntary and involuntary, and, in His mercy and clemency, may receive him into the bosom of Abraham with those who have in this life pleased Him; whence all sorrow, grief, and lamentation are banished."

The oldest liturgical prayer for the deceased still being used in our Rite is the silent prayer "O God of spirits and of all flesh...." This prayer is said during the Ekteny for the Deceased, and is ascribed to St. John Chrysostom (†407).

The original funeral services [Panikhida] were considerably embellished and enriched by St. John Damascene (†ca. 749) and St. Theophanes (†845) surnamed Graptos [*Branded*-for defending the veneration of the holy icons]. To St. John Damascene we owe our beautiful stikheras for the deceased, especially those stikheras composed by him in eight tones for the consolation of one of his confreres who in his deep grief was unable to accept the loss of his younger brother. They are known to us as *Bulgarian Stikheras* since their melodies were borrowed by our ancestors from the Bulgarians. They have been preserved intact with their original beauty. Their moving melodies are surpassed only by the poetical beauty of their words in which the artistic genius of the Damascene tries to convince us in so many ways that, to a Christian, "only those things which remain after death are of real value. All the rest is vanity" (cf. *Stikhera*, Tone 3).

St. Theophanes Graptos composed, among other canons, two *Canons for the Deceased*. In them, he poured out his sorrow at the loss of his brother, St. Theodore († 840), who died for the defense of the veneration of the holy icons. Unfortunately, for the sake of brevity, now only theme-songs [eirmoses] of these beautiful Canons are taken. These theme-songs have little or nothing at all in common with the prayers for the deceased, since they supply only melody for the rest of the troparia.

The first interlude - "God is wonderful in His Saints, the God of Israel" - introduces the *Troparion of the Martyrs* who are asked to intercede for the departed. Two following interludes - "Give rest, O Lord, to the soul of your departed servant" and "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit" - introduce the singing of two *troparia* in honor of our Savior from whom we implore mercy for the soul of the deceased. Finally, "Now and ever, and forever. Amen.", serves as an introduction to the *Theotokion* (O.Sl. - *Bohorodičen*) in which the Blessed Mother is beseeched to intercede with her Son and our Savior in behalf of the dead.

To achieve brevity, misguided clergy have eliminated the essential element of the Canon, the **intercession for the deceased**, and they retained only a skeleton without a real meaning of prayerful supplication for the dead. Would it not be far better to take one entire ode of the Canon, that is, an eirmos, three troparia, and the theotokion, and thus restore the proper meaning of the *Canon for the Deceased*? Then we would sing a moving prayer for the departed instead of singing just nine (or even less) theme songs which have no other connection with the burial than to supply the melody for the "real" prayer for the dead.

The Divine Liturgy was celebrated after the All-night Vigil for the Deceased. It is explicitly mentioned by the historian Eusebius († ca. 340) as he describes the burial of Emperor Constantine the Great (cf. *The Life of Constantine*, Book IV,

Chapter 71). Similarly, in the lives of St. Ambrose, written by St. Paulinus about the year 397, and of St. Augustine, written by St. Possidius about the year 430, we read that they were buried "after the completion of the Eucharist [Divine Liturgy]."

At the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy, all present, including the celebrant, took leave of the deceased while the appropriate stikheras were sung. Although the relatives usually kissed the deceased, the faithful were expected to touch the body or the coffin as a token of their brotherly love and peace. This ceremony is called *The Last Embrace* (Gr. *aspasmos* - embrace of greeting; O. Sl. *cilovaniye*- means "greeting" and not "a kiss [lobzaniye]").

The services were then concluded with another *Fervent Prayer for the Deceased* (the modern day *Panikhida*) and the recitation of the *Prayer of Absolution*. In some countries, the *Prayer of Absolution* was written on a parchment or a sheet of paper, rolled into a scroll, and placed into the hand of the deceased.

Originally, the *Prayer of Absolution* was administered only to public sinners who were ordered by the Church to make their penance until the time of their death. Thus, this prayer was a public absolution of the deceased from his censure. Later, they began to recite this prayer before the actual interment of all those who died without the comfort of the Holy Mysteries. Eventually, at the time of full development of the funeral services, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the *Prayer of Absolution* was inserted into the burial ceremony of every Christian as a token of his complete reconciliation with the Church.

Only then, the body of the deceased was carried out to its burial place and entrusted, according to the command of God (Gen. 3:19), to the earth for its safekeeping until "the resurrection of the dead" (cf. *Symbol of Faith*).

7. The Arrangement of Services

We purposely use the plural, *Services*, to indicate that there are several funeral services prescribed by our Typik (the Book of Liturgical Directives) for a burial of the faithful. Since all of these services developed from the pristine *All-night Vigil* (originally called *Panikhida*), in this present chapter we intend to indicate the reasons for its disintegration and subsequent formation of several funeral services which are used by the Byzantine Catholics at the present time.

The organic development of funeral rites in the Byzantine liturgy reached its completion during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when they disintegrated into several services, known today as a) *Parastas*, b) *The Reading of the Psalter*, c) *Panikhida*, and d) *Burial Service*.

We can advance the following reasons for this division:

1. The abbreviation of the *All-night Vigil* to a short pre-dawn service by reducing the profuse recitation of the Psalms and numerous readings from the Holy Scripture, and by limiting the number of troparia of the Canon to three or four.

2. Stressing the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on the third day after the death of the faithful, for which occasion a special *Divine Liturgy for the Deceased* was formed with its own proper troparia, ektenies, and scriptural readings. In many instances, the people were unable to bear the cost of embalming the body, and therefore, the civil law ordered the burial of the body within forty-eight hours. Consequently, the burial services, held within that forty-eight hours, had to be separated from the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on the third day.

3. Burial continued to be a community service in which the entire congregation participated, especially in the villages. The opportunity to attend the services had to be given to the faithful who were able to come only at a certain time of the day. So services at varying times of the day resulted.

For these reasons, burial in the Byzantine Rite became a complicated ritual, which we will try to describe in all its parts.

After the body was properly washed and dressed, it was laid out on a catafalque (O.Sl. *oslon* - covered bench or platform), and arrayed with white drapery. The catafalque represents a *bed* since in all our liturgical services, the departed is referred to as *fallen-asleep* (O.Sl. *usopšij*). Therefore, to cover the catafalque with black or purple drapery would be in violation of the beautiful liturgical symbolism, since nobody covers his bed with black or purple sheets. White drapery and white cover for the body are in anticipation of that brightness with which our body will be surrounded after the glorious resurrection.

Four candles were placed around the catafalque, arranged in the shape of a cross, rather than two on each side as some do today. They symbolize the power of the cross which dispels darkness and by which we have received "the light of life" (Jn. 8:12).

On the evening of the first day after death, *The Parastas* (Gr. *parastedzo* - to stand beside) was celebrated. It is called a "standing service" because in honor of the deceased we should remain standing during the whole service.

Our modern Parastas is nothing else than the first part of the original *All-night Vigil*, including the first Canon for the Deceased (tone 8). The second Canon for the Deceased (tone 6) today is almost always omitted instead of being taken at the Burial Service in church. So as not to stop abruptly after the Canon, we now chant the *Earnest Prayer for the Deceased* [modern *Panikhida*] by which all the funeral services are concluded.

During the chanting of the ektenies for the dead, incense is used profusely which is characteristic of all services for the deceased. The rising sweet-smelling smoke from the burning incense symbolizes our earnest prayer ascending to God (cf. Goar, *Euchologion*, p. 434, n.2). Incensing is in imitation of St. John's vision: "An Angel came and stood before the altar, having a golden censer. And there was given to him much incense, that he might offer it with the prayers of the saints. And with the prayers of the saints there went up before God, from the angel's hand, the smoke of the incense." (Apoc. 8:3-4).

After the conclusion of the *Parastas* there was a brief pause and the reading of the *Book of Psalms* [*Psalter*] began. The Psalter, chanted by a Reader [Lector], is in substitution for the recitation of certain Psalms which the faithful knew by memory. St. Basil the Great (†379) calls Psalm-recitation: "heavenly institution" - "spiritual incense" - "author of peace and serenity of soul" (cf. *Homily on Psalm 1*). The old rubrics of the liturgical books indicate that the reading of the Psalms was instituted "for the consolation of the family" (cf. Goar *Euchologion*, p. 435, n. 6). Usually, the recitation of Psalms is divided into sections called *Antiphons* which are separated by the singing of *Alleluia* (Hebrew: *praise God*), and the recitation of the *Prayer for the Deceased*.

Customarily, burial took place on the second day after death, especially when the body was not embalmed. The services began at the home of the deceased. The body was removed from the catafalque and placed into the coffin while *The Earnest Prayer for the Deceased* was recited. By this prayer, the pristine All-night Vigil for the deceased was concluded. Consequently, this short service retained the original name of the whole vigil and is called to this day: *Panikhida*. Modern day *Panikhida* is composed of Thrice-holy Hymn, Troparia, and Ekteny for the Deceased with the accompanying prayer. During the chanting of *Everlasting Mem-*

ory - *Vičnaja Pamjat'*, the casket was carried to the church for the Burial Service.

Seeing the casket being closed, the relatives and friends usually burst into tears and lamentation. To encourage the family, and to restore Christian serenity, the priest then read a passage from the Holy Gospel, reminding those present about resurrection and everlasting life. As the funeral procession began to move, the people chanted Psalms or the Thrice-holy Hymn. In some places, the Burial Service was held right in the courtyard of the deceased. In that case, the body was taken to the church only for the concluding Panikhida and Prayer of Absolution.

The Burial Service in its present form developed from the second half of the original All-night Vigil. Scripture readings were added to the Burial Service only after it became separated from the Divine Liturgy which, in earliest times, immediately followed the All-night Vigil. As already pointed out in this chapter, burial frequently took place within forty-eight hours and, therefore, it became separated from the Divine Liturgy which was usually celebrated only on the third day. It is only in more recent times that the Burial Service has again been joined to the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy. A more complete analysis of the Burial Service will be given in the following chapter.

The body was interred at the cemetery, usually adjacent to the church, where the deceased could better remain under the protection and motherly care of the Church. Before leaving the grave-site, all in attendance threw a handful of earth into the grave of the departed, wishing him "*peaceful rest.*" Interment is in fulfillment of God's command: "**You shall return into the earth out of which you were taken**" (Gen. 3:19).

After the burial, the people were invited to the home of the bereaved family for refreshments, known to our people as *komašņa* (Gr. *komidzo* - to come back, return). There are

8. Unfolding Drama of Burial

Our Burial Service is a moving drama consisting of two main scenes, the first of which unfolds before the judgment-seat of God, and the second unfolds before our eyes, in the presence of the deceased.

In the first scene, under the direction of the Church, the main part is played by the soul of the deceased, while the faithful are primarily bystanders before the awesome tribunal of God. This is done for two reasons: a) to make us value honest Christian living as our only assurance of everlasting happiness; b) to move us to compassion and earnest prayer for the deceased.

The second scene unfolds in the presence of the deceased and is played mostly by us, the faithful. Here again, the Church intends: a) to give us an opportunity to release our grief; b) to expose the vanity of all temporal things, including our own body which we pamper to a degree as to forget friendship with the deceased has only strengthened our spiritual ties with him since he now needs our prayers and good works.

SCENE ONE

The curtain rises as we begin to implore *mercy* for the departed by solemnly singing the Thrice-holy Hymn, *Holy God*. As soon as we finish our preparatory prayers to make us worthy to stand before God (comp. Romans 8:26-27), the voice of the departed is heard in *Psalms 90*, describing for us the dangers of his journey. While his soul is carried by the Angels to the judgment-seat of God, the devil makes the last attempt to snatch the soul away from the angels. But the deceased, placing all his trust in God, is convinced that He, according to His promise, will “**deliver him and glorify him**” and show him “**His salvation**” (*Psalms 90: 15-16*).

Having learned about the various dangers and snares of the devil which lie in wait for the departed soul, we begin to beseech God in behalf of the departed by chanting the *Great Ekteny*. In this inspiring chain of prayers, we ask God to grant to the deceased everything that we could possibly think of: forgiveness of sins, peaceful rest, enrollment among the Saints, a bright dwelling-place, acquittal at the judgment, and inheritance of the heavenly kingdom, where he will enjoy everlasting happiness in "the company of the Saints."

As we finish our suppliant prayer with the glorification of the Triune God who alone is able to guarantee "resurrection, life, and eternal rest" to the deceased, at once we are overtaken by the singing of the *Alleluia*. Thus the scene moves to the heavenly throne where the hosts of Angels praise the Almighty by their unceasingly chanted *Alleluia* (comp. Apoc. 19: 6-7).

Digressing for a moment, we would like to comment on some critical remarks of "experts" who ridicule our triumphant melody of *Alleluia* at the Burial Service. With their "enlightened remarks" they only prove how little they know of the spirit and meaning of their own ritual. This particular *Alleluia* should sound triumphant and animated since it reflects the thunderous singing of the Angels, as described by the Holy Scripture: "Alleluia! - for the Lord, our Almighty God, now reigns!" (Apoc. 19: 6).

Since God has "chosen and taken" to Himself the soul of the departed (Ps. 64:5), we join the triumphal singing of the heavenly hosts and extol God's "profound wisdom" in shaping the destiny of man. This we do by singing the *Troparion*. Then in the *Theotokion*, knowing that the departed has yet to face "the judgment-seat of God" (Rom. 14:10), we remind the deceased to take for his advocate the Blessed Virgin Mary, "the salvation of the faithful."

As the judgment-seat of the Lord is unveiled, the departed is given a chance to defend himself since "his works follow

him" (Apoc. 14:13). For his defense, the deceased recalls the inspired words of *Psalm 118* which in our liturgical books is called "*Neporočny* [undefiled]" from the subject of the first verse: "**Blessed are the undefiled....**"

The Undefiled verses are divided by a small ekteny into two stanzas which honor the two natures of our Judge, Jesus Christ, to whom God the Father has given "**all judgment**" (Jn. 5: 22). Originally there were three stanzas since Psalm 118 liturgically was divided into three antiphons. For the sake of clarity we will omit the explanation of the change into two stanzas.

In the first stanza, the deceased, hopeful of attaining everlasting life, is extolling God's ordinances — His laws, commandments, statutes, instructions and the like, which he tried to make as his guideposts and supports during his life. To help insure our own defense when the time of our judgment comes, we timidly interject our prayer: "**Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me your justification**" (Psalm 118:12).

Having presented in his own defense the first argument, the observance of the commandments of God, the deceased pauses for a while. We take advantage of this pause by singing a small Ekteny in support of his plea.

Because we have reminded him of his transgressions against God's commandments, the deceased, in the second stanza, resumes his defense with an appeal to the mercy of his Judge: "**I am Yours, save me!**" (Ps. 118: 94). Touched deeply by this humble supplication, we join the deceased in imploring mercy: "**Save, O Savior, the soul of your servant.**" Frightened concerning his own destiny, the departed almost tearfully admits: "**I have gone astray like a lost sheep, but seek Your servant because I have not forgotten Your commandments,**" meaning: as the Good Shepherd, try to find some excuse for my transgressions and make me safe.

Seeing his whole life in the light of God's justice (comp. I Cor. 4:4), the deceased hesitates to rest his case, but contin-

ues to plead for the mercy of God **“through his repentance”** and the intercession of the Holy Martyrs and Confessors. This plea is beautifully described by St. John Damascene in the *Stikheras* at the end of the second stanza. Unfortunately, at the funerals these stikheras are often omitted, although they have much to say!

Moved by these heartbreaking entreaties of the deceased, we are unable to wait in silence for the final verdict, so we join him with our supplication: **“Give rest, O God, to your servant...overlooking all his transgressions!”** Finally, the deceased rests his case and awaits the final sentence from the Judge.

As the scene of the Lord's judgment begins so vividly to unfold before the eyes of our souls, a salutary fear creeps into our heart. We begin to plead on our own behalf, asking God for illumination in order that we be **“rescued from eternal fire”** (comp. *Stikheras at the Glory be*). Then we turn to the Blessed Mother and implore her to assist us in **“finding Paradise.”**

After this short interlude, the heavenly hosts sing out a majestic *Alleluia* in praise of God's justice. The definitive sentence has been passed, the justice of God vindicated, God's glory untouched. The first scene reaches its climax.

Admitting the possibility of a purgatorial sentence, Holy Mother the Church, in the anti-climax, softly invites us **“again and again”** to pray for the deceased. As the curtain slowly descends, we sing: **“O God our Savior, graciously forgive him his voluntary and involuntary transgressions, since You love mankind.”**

As we spiritually witness God's judgment of the deceased, we become aware of a great need of prayer for him, although our soul is troubled by our grief and sorrow. To help us to restore our spiritual balance, in the second scene, the Church presents to us the great value of spiritual goods, the promise of resurrection, and the happiness of eternal life which await the deceased.

SCENE TWO

The second part begins with the singing of the Sixth Canon of St. Theophanes Graptos (†845) which today, for some reason, is entirely omitted. In order to appreciate the melodrama of the second scene, we have to have a better understanding of this Sixth Canon. In the first scene we joined the praises of the Choirs of the Angels and the Saints in heaven. Now, in this Canon, we invite them to join us here on earth as we are ready to intercede for the deceased, prior to committing his body to the earth (Eccles. 12:7).

While we stand in the presence of the deceased, our sorrow steadily increases, weakening our spirit of prayer. To strengthen our spirit we begin to sing eight beautiful *Bulgarian Stikheras* (Gr. *Stikhos* - a verse; *aireo* - to choose; *stikheras* are hymns adapted to chosen verses from the Scriptures). The ancient melodies of these stikheras came to us from Bulgaria and, therefore, we call them *Bulgarian Stikheras*. These moving poems were composed by St. John Damascene, one for each of our eight liturgical tones. The Saint composed the words in expression of his condolence to one of his fellow-monks who lost his own brother. By contrasting short-lived enjoyments of the earthly life with everlasting joys in heaven, St. John Damascene intended to bring him, and us, some spiritual comfort.

That we may savor some of the rich spiritual and poetical beauty of these stikheras, as a sample, we will quote the fourth one:

**“Where is the predilection for the world?
Where are the allurements of the temporary things?
Where is gold and silver?
Where is the multitude of servants and their
solicitudes?
All became dust, ashes, and vanishing shadows!
But let us come and entreat the Immortal King:
Grant, O Lord, to our departed, eternal goods,
Allowing him rest in your unceasing happiness.”**

As the Church is trying to direct our attention to "the unceasing happiness" of the heavenly kingdom, suddenly, the mysterious voice of the departed is heard, pleading somewhere from beyond the grave: "Remember me, O Lord, when You come into your kingdom!" (Lk. 23:42). All of us join him in supplication, repeating: "Remember us, O Lord, when You come into your kingdom!" – while the heavenly King reminds us of His *Beatitudes* to which He attached the promise of His kingdom (Mt. 5: 3-12).

In answer to the first four Beatitudes we reiterate the same refrain, imploring Jesus to remember us in His kingdom. After the fifth Beatitude, the deceased, as if reminding us to intercede for him, joins in with a *stikhera*, hoping to be admitted into Paradise as was the crucified thief: "O Christ, You made the repentant thief a citizen of paradise when he cried out to You from his cross: Remember me! Although I am unworthy, enable me to gain the same reward, too."

Now we continue to implore Jesus on behalf of the departed, beseeching Him to "open to him the gates of Paradise" and make him also one of "the inhabitants of His kingdom." Unfortunately, these *Stikheras of the Beatitudes* are another "omission for brevity." By omitting all these hymns we destroy the original dialogue and place the emphasis on our own salvation instead of the salvation of the deceased. This is only one of several portions of the Burial Services which cannot be omitted without interrupting the liturgical dialogue of the unfolding drama.

At this point, the Church reminds us that the time for departure has arrived and that the deceased should begin his "blessed journey toward the place of his rest" (cf. *Prokimenon*). But knowing well how difficult and how sorrowful such a departure can be, the Church, with scriptural readings, encourages us by the message of resurrection, hoping to make us spiritually strong enough to face the moment of departure.

First, in an Epistle reading, St. Paul assures us of the resurrection of all the "fallen-asleep" on the authority of

"the word [the promise] of the Lord." Therefore, he says, we should not "grieve as those, who have no hope," since we all shall meet again and "be with the Lord forever" (I Thess. 4: 13-17). Finally, the Apostle gives us advice: "Comfort one another with these words" (I Thess. 4: 18).

To confirm the teaching of St. Paul about the resurrection by the "word [the power] of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15), the Gospel of St. John is read (John 5: 24-30). In it, our Divine Savior assures us: "Amen, amen, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now it is here, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live."

Consoled by these evangelical promises, St. Ambrose (†397), as he was bidding farewell to his deceased brother, Satyrus, said: "What comfort have I left save realization of the hope that I shall come to you very soon, my Brother, and that the separation between us, caused by your departure, will not be a long one?" (cf. *The Fathers of the Church*, New York, N.Y., 1953, Vol. 22, page 259).

To secure the above-mentioned promises for the deceased, after the Gospel, the *Ekteny for the Dead* is taken as an expression of our ardent prayer for him. After the *Ekteny*, the Church invites us to take final leave from the deceased, "being thankful to God" since He has given victory to the deceased over death "through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 15:57). In expression of our gratitude to God we *kiss the cross*, as we do it at Easter time, while the *Stikheras of Farewell* are sung. The priests who disregard this venerable custom of kissing the cross show their ignorance of its beautiful significance.

The *Stikheras of Farewell*, nine altogether as symbolic of nine angelic choirs, masterfully play upon our emotions, trying to change them into a tearful prayer for the deceased. Almost all of them end with the invitation to continue to pray on behalf of the deceased: "Let us beseech the Lord to give him everlasting rest!" Finally, the deceased himself bids us farewell:

"All you who love me, come and bid me the last farewell with your embrace. I will not be able to walk and to talk to you anymore, since I am going to my Judge, who has no respect as for the person. Before Him, servant and master stand together. By Him, king and warrior, rich and poor are equally honored, since He extols or puts to shame everyone according to his deeds. Therefore, I beg and entreat all of you pray for me unceasingly to Christ our God, that, on account of my sins, I may not be doomed into a place of affliction, but that I be granted a place where the light of life is shining."

In answer to this last appeal of the deceased, the Eulogion prescribes singing a *Panikhida* (in the modern sense). Near the end of the *Panikhida*, the *Prayer of Absolution* is said for the deceased. By this prayer, as was pointed out in Chapter Six, the rights of the departed to public prayers of the Church are now officially established since all is forgiven.

As the somber chant of *Vičnaja Pamjat'* - *Everlasting Memory*, coupled with the rhythmic toll of the bell, tries to drown out the sobbing of bereaved relatives and friends, the final curtain of the funeral drama descends. *The Burial Service* comes to its sobering end, leaving the departed on the other side of life while we still remain on this side. But we return home with a conviction in our heart that there is not much distance between them and us. The same faith and same charity unite us. By remembering our departed, we remain in holy and prayerful communion with them, as St. Gregory of Nazianz explains:

"Substituting our sorrow with piety, our tears with Christian faith, and quieting down our wailing by singing Psalms..., we have paid some of the debt; but we will also pay the remainder — surely as long as we live — by offering honor and remembrance of the deceased every year" (cf. *Funeral Oration on Caesarius*, n. 17).

