

When Someone You Love Dies

“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek that city which is to come.”

The Letter to the Hebrews 12:13

Death is something that awaits all of us and our loved ones. Yet we often wish to avoid thinking about it. As Orthodox Christians, we know that "Christ is risen from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:20) and understand earthly death both as an encounter with the Risen Christ and the door to what the Lord Jesus calls "eternal life" (John 3:16). In this sense, for believers, death is not the end but a new beginning. Christians, as St. Paul writes, "do not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

When a loved one dies, especially if this happens at home, please contact the church at 413-737-1496.

In preparation for the funeral: Choose the funeral home you will be using and contact them. We can also recommend one if needed.

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is to bury the dead. The body of the deceased is respectfully placed in a casket and set in a grave. The body of the deceased, which St. Paul describes as "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19), is returned to the earth from which it was taken (Genesis 2:7). For an Orthodox Funeral Service to be held, cremation is not an option.

Choose the cemetery where your loved one will be buried and contact them to make the necessary arrangements: the choosing and purchasing of a burial plot, headstone, etc. Oftentimes, the funeral home director will help coordinate this as well.

Bring a set of clothes (suit/dress) for your loved one to the funeral home to provide the necessary clothing for burial. Sometimes a recent photo of the deceased will be requested by the funeral home to be used in their preparation of the body.

Choose a casket.

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is that the casket normally is open during services at the funeral home and the Church. The casket is closed for the graveside Trisagion (Memorial Service).

Choose icon memorial cards and a guest book for those attending services. These are usually provided by the funeral home.

The funeral home will ask about obituary notices both in print and online.

The funeral home will ask about the number of death certificates that need to be ordered from the State for legal and financial purposes such as insurance policies, veterans and social security benefits, etc. Normally, 5-10 death certificates will be needed.

Choose pallbearers. (Six are needed.)

Choose a florist also.

For Consideration: In times past, thousands of dollars might be spent on flowers for a funeral. As Orthodox Christians, we believe it is far more consistent with our values to choose a charity for memorial donations to be made. The most recommended charity is, of course, your local church. We gratefully accept donations for specific causes within the Church but the most common beneficiary is the Church itself (St. George Cathedral) or the St. George Building Fund. If you would like the memorial donations used for some other specific purpose like youth, philanthropy or altar supplies, please speak to Fr. Chris or the church secretary.

In coordination with the church and funeral home set the date and times for:

The Trisagion Service the night before the funeral is usually held in the evening – about 4 p.m. The Trisagion is a brief service, no more than ten minutes in length. During this service – as at the Funeral Service the next day – we pray that the Lord will grant forgiveness of sins and rest to soul of the deceased "in the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:22-23) with Christ and the saints where "there is no pain no sorrow and no suffering" (Revelation 21:4).

The Orthodox Funeral Service is held at the Church and is normally about 50 minutes long including the eulogy. The Funeral Service consists primarily of the singing of verses from Psalm 119, a series of hymns on the meaning of life and death composed by St. John of Damascus (676-749AD), Scripture readings from St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians 4:13-18 and the Gospel of John 5:24-30 and a brief homily/eulogy by the priest. In the Scripture readings, prayers and hymns of the Funeral Service, a dramatic dialogue takes place between God, the deceased and everyone in attendance. The service acknowledges the painful realities of human existence and the frailty of life, yet reminds those present of God's infinite mercy and love. It asks that we "ponder how brief our life is" but also speaks of the power of the Risen Christ, the Kingdom of God, the resurrection of the dead and immortality. At the conclusion of the service, everyone present is invited to come forward to venerate an icon of the Resurrection and offer their final respects to the deceased. After the congregation and family have offered what the Funeral Service calls "the final kiss" to their loved one, the priest anoints the body of the deceased in the form of a cross with oil and earth reciting several verses from the Scriptures. During the anointing with oil, the priest says: "Wash me with hyssop and I shall be pure; cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7); and then, with the placing of earth, he says: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. The world and all who dwell on it belong to Him" (Psalm 24:1) and "You are dust and unto dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is that only the priest offers the homily/eulogy during services in Church. Family members and friends who wish to speak and share memories may do so at the Makaria or Meal of Blessing after the internment.

Following the Funeral Service held at the Church the deceased is taken to the cemetery where another Trisagion is prayed at the graveside. The deceased is then lowered into his/her grave to await the Second Coming of Christ and, as we confess in the Creed at every celebration of the Liturgy, "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come."

The Makaria or Meal of Blessing: Following the graveside service, it is customary to invite everyone to a meal called, in Greek, the Makaria. Questions to be asked about the Makaria: Where will it be held? Will it be held at the parish hall, a restaurant, or someone's home? Will a caterer be used? The church office staff can recommend caterers if needed.

Point of information: our tradition as Orthodox Christians is for the main dish at the Makaria to be some type of broiled fish. This is because the first meal that the Lord Jesus ate with His disciples following His resurrection from the dead consisted of broiled fish and bread, as recorded in the Gospel of John 21:12-13. This meal is a reminder of Christ's resurrection and His closeness to those who believe in Him. It is not appropriate to serve meat at a Makaria.

A Christian funeral places a person's entire life and even death in the context of our faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ. It also enables family and friends to gather together to begin the process of accepting the painful reality of death and express their love, grief and support for one another.

***Remember your last days and set enmity aside. Remember death and decay and cease from sin!
- The Wisdom of Sirach 28:6***

Memorial Services

Set me as a seal upon your heart; for love is as strong as death.

The Song of Songs 8:6

Prayer for the dead is seen by Orthodox Christians as an essential component of our faith in Jesus Christ. Praying for those who have died is not merely an expression of mourning, it is a proclamation that Christ has risen from the dead and that, in His love, even death cannot separate us from one another! Forty days after the death of a loved one (or on the Sunday nearest to the 40 days), it is the custom of our Church to celebrate a prayer service in remembrance of the deceased known in English as a Memorial Service. In this service we ask God to “grant rest” to the deceased “in the bosom of Abraham” (Luke 16:22-23) and to place him/her “in a place of light, a place of happiness, a place of refreshment, where there is no pain, no sorrow and no suffering” (Revelation 21:4) as we did during the funeral service.

A tray of boiled wheat, raisins and powdered sugar called “kolyva” in Greek is prepared for the service and is later, at the parish coffee hour, distributed to the community. This practice is based on the words of the Lord Jesus used to describe His own death and resurrection, “Amen, I say to you: unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain of wheat. But if it dies, it brings forth a good harvest” (John 12:24). The tray of kolyva is a symbol of our faith in the life giving death and resurrection of Christ.

Point of information: If you do not know how to prepare a tray of kolyva, arrangements can be made for its preparation by calling the parish office 413-737-1496.

In addition to the 40 day Memorial Service, Memorial Services are normally held annually on or near the anniversary of the loved one’s death. There is no need for special services at other times since Fr. Chris commemorates all of the deceased at every liturgy. Also, the parish office must be informed of the family’s intention to offer a Memorial Service at least two weeks prior to the desired date. Please note that, in keeping with the ancient way in which we conduct our worship, Memorial Services may not be prayed from Lazarus Saturday through Holy Week, Pascha and the Sunday of St. Thomas; nor on the major feast days of our Church (December 25th - Christmas; January 6th - Epiphany; February 2nd - the Presentation of the Lord to the Temple; August 6th - the Transfiguration of our Lord; August 15th - the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos; September 14th - the Exaltation of the Cross; etc.).

At St. George, we also have a policy of combining all of our Memorial Services for the month on the last Sunday so as not to have Memorial Services every single week. The only exception to this is for 40-day and one year memorials. We ask everyone to please respect this policy.

Everyone is also encouraged to remember their departed loved ones annually by submitting their names to be commemorated on the Saturdays of Souls associated with Great Lent and the celebration of Pentecost.

“For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

Romans 14:8