

IV. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

CARE FOR THE DEPARTED FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE LIVING

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the care for the departed in the liturgical practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Divine Liturgy and the memorial services show how the Church prays for both the departed and the mourners, thus creating a cycle of ecclesiastical communion. We are reminded of the greatness of the benefit of praying for and to the departed and of the mode of our salvation.

Keywords: care, departed, Eastern Orthodox Church, Divine Liturgy, funeral.

Introduction

We rarely think of death. Almost never. Even our language tries to make death less visible and less frightening. We often turn to euphemistic phrases and linguistic cosmetics by saying “they departed from this life”, “they passed away”, “they are no longer with us”, or “they were taken to God” instead of “they died.” We have exiled death to the outskirts of our existence. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the truth about death so brutally into our everyday lives that our psychic landscape is now forever transformed. But our hopes are not forlorn. If we turn to the Bible and Christ’s teaching, we realize how our language has been whispering the truth: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (Jn 11:25-26).

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Death has a life-affirming function. In 1993, bishop Kallistos Ware, after concluding a public lecture on November 7, when asked what were his thoughts on the meaning of life, replied, “Yes, well, in order to understand the meaning of life, one must first understand the meaning of death”.²

It is on this reply which is both provocative and profound that we will try to explore the care for the departed in the liturgical practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church and show how “the attention is shifted from the deceased to the mourners, for whom comfort and consolation are asked”³ in order to obtain real healing of the spirit.

Tramping Down Death by Death

What does the Holy Scripture tell us about death?

In the Old Testament we find that death is not from God (“God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living.” Wis. 1:13), and human beings were created so that they should live, and not die (“Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?” Ezek. 33:11). The New Testament further explains that death enters the world through humanity’s sin (“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned” Rom. 5:12), and that the New Jerusalem is characterized by the absence of death (“he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” Rev. 21.4).

Death is understood in a very complex way in Orthodox Christianity. Florovsky describes it as “the enemy,” “a painful metaphysical catastrophe,” “a deep tragedy,” and “a failure of human destiny”⁴. Schmemmann understands it as something “foreign,” “unnatural,” “fearsome,” and “perverted”⁵. Death is “profoundly

² Perry T. Hamalis, “The Meaning and Place of Death in an Orthodox Ethical Framework.” In *Thinking Through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars*, edited by A. Papanikolaou and E. Prodromou (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2008), 183.

³ Elena Velkovska, “Funeral Rites According to the Byzantine Liturgical Sources,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 44.

⁴ Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption: Collected Works*, vol. 3. (MA: Norland, Belmont, 1976).

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *O Death Where Is Thy Sting?* trans. A. Vinogradov (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

abnormal,” “monstrous,” and “distorted,” according to Ware⁶. “Death is not a release,” writes Florovsky, “it is a catastrophe. [...] Death is hopeless.”⁷ Likewise, in *For the Life of the World*, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann observes that:

Christianity is not reconciliation with death. It is the revelation of death, and it reveals death because it is the revelation of Life. Christ is this Life. [...] The horror of death is, therefore, not in its being the “end” and not in physical destruction. By being separation from the world and life, it is *separation from God*. The dead cannot glorify God. It is, in other words, when Christ reveals Life to us that we can hear the Christian message about death as the enemy of God. It is when Life weeps at the grave of the friend, when it contemplates the horror of death, that the victory over death begins⁸.

For the Orthodox Christians, God’s saving action through Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection is, first and foremost, victory over death⁹ remains adamant that: “There can be no doubt, on the one hand, that the ‘problem of death’ is central and essential in its message, which announces Christ’s victory over death, and that Christianity has its source in that victory”.

In the death of Christ, death itself is given a new meaning and significance¹⁰. The gospel message that “by death He destroyed death” on Easter and throughout the paschal season is proclaimed joyously and repeatedly, “Christ is risen from the dead! And death by his death is trampled. And to those in the tombs he is granting life”¹¹.

“We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come” is read in the final verse of the Nicene Creed, expressing our common hope. Sergei Bulgakov suggests that:

⁶ Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom: Collected Works*, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000).

⁷ Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption: Collected Works*, vol. 3. (MA: Norland, Belmont, 1976).

⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 99-100.

⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, 95; Paul Jonathan Fedwick, “Death and Dying in Byzantine Liturgical Traditions.” *Eastern Christian Review* 8 (1976): 152–61; Perry T. Hamalis, “Death (and Funeral),” In *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Church*, edited by John Anthony McGuckin (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 180-82.

¹⁰ Perry T. Hamalis, “Death (and Funeral),” 180-82.

¹¹ Perry T. Hamalis, “Death (and Funeral),” 180-82.

Непосредственность ожидания конца с радостной его напряженностью в дальнейшей истории, естественно, утратились. Оно заменилось чувством конечности личной жизни в смерти [...] и особенно в православии, развилось особое почитание смерти [...] Мертвое тело здесь погребается с почтением, как семя будущего тела воскресения, и самый чин погребения у некоторых древних писателей почитается таинством¹².

[The immediate anticipation of the end, with its joyful tension, was naturally lost in the later history. It was replaced by a sense of the finiteness of personal life in death [which among Christians], especially among the Orthodox, developed into a special veneration of death. [...] The dead body is buried here with reverence, like the seed of the future body of the resurrection, and the very act of burial is revered by some ancient writers as a mystery (sacrament).] (*my translation)

In *Byzantine Theology*, John Meyendorff suggests that the funeral service was also considered a “sacrament” by some Byzantine writers. For instance, Theodore the Studite in the ninth century gives a list of six sacraments: the holy “illumination” (baptism), the “synaxis” (Eucharist), the holy chrism, ordination, monastic tonsure, and the service of burial¹³. Meyendorff also suggests that the burial had the same significance as the sacrament of holy unction:

Even in death the Christian remains a member of the living and resurrected Body of Christ, into which he has been incorporated through baptism and the Eucharist. Through the funeral service, the Church gathers to bear witness to this fact, visible only to the eyes of faith, but already experienced by every Christian who possesses the awesome privilege of living, by anticipation, in the future Kingdom¹⁴.

Liturgical practice

During the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church the clergy pray both for and to the departed¹⁵. Through the mediation of the Eucharistic *anaphora*, the *epiclesis*, and the transformation of the Eucharistic elements, i.e., the holy Gifts, the priest also prays for those who have departed in the faith:

¹² Булгаков, *Православие. Очерки учения Православной Церкви* (Orthodoxy. Essays on the teachings of the Orthodox Church), (Paris : YMCA-Press, 1989), 380-391.

¹³ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (Fordham University Press, 1987), 191.

¹⁴ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 199.

¹⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom: Collected Works*, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

And again we offer unto thee this our reasonable service, for all thy servants departed this life before us in the faith; for our ancestors, fathers, the Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Preachers, Evangelists, Martyrs, Confessors, Ascetics; and for every righteous soul who hath died in the faith.¹⁶

In line with the liturgical rites, the priest takes care of the believer on deathbed to confess and receive communion before his or her death, and after the onset of death. The hymnographic material speaks mainly about the transience of this world, that the Lord God puts to rest the deceased in a place “where there is no pain, no sorrow, no grieving, but life everlasting”, ending with the “farewell prayer” for resolving sins. The body is then escorted to the grave with a solemn procession. Memorial services are also held for the departed Orthodox, most frequently seven days from the first morning, then forty days and one year after death, as well as during occasional “Saturday of Souls” liturgies.¹⁷

In the Trisagion Service we pray: “Give rest to the souls of Thy departed servants, *NN.*, in a place of brightness, a place of verdure, a place of repose, whence all sickness, sorrow and sighing have fled away”.¹⁸ The Trisagion Prayers of Mercy for the Departed are prayed by the priest as soon as possible after one of the faithful has died. They may also be said as a memorial service at the end of the Divine Liturgy, after “Blessed be the name of the Lord...” or at the end of any daily services, before the Dismissal. In this case the service begins immediately with the Troparia for the Departed. After the Prayer for the Departed the Dismissal of this service is omitted and the priest immediately says, “Eternal be thy memory, O our brother [sister], who art worthy to be deemed happy and ever-memorable”, and the people sing “Memory eternal”¹⁹. The clergy then enter the sanctuary and conclude the Divine Liturgy as usual.

These prayers “complement each other, creating a perfect cycle of ecclesiastical communion: the mourners and the church both pray for the dead, while the church prays for both the mourners and the deceased. In this context [...] the funeral [is seen] more as a celebration of life for the benefit of the living than a celebration for the departed”²⁰.

¹⁶ Isabel Florence Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Syrian Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese, 1922), 107.

¹⁷ Perry T. Hamalis, “The Meaning and Place of Death in an Orthodox Ethical Framework,” 183.

¹⁸ Isabel Florence Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, 91.

¹⁹ Isabel Florence Hapgood, *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, 391.

²⁰ Elena Velkovska, “Funeral Rites According to the Byzantine Liturgical Sources,” 44.

Individual care

If you go to your local cemeteries, you will notice a woman at the grave, and if there is a group of mourners, the majority would again be women. In a way this reminds us of the myrrh-bearing women from the Gospel, who arrived first at the tomb after the resurrection of Christ, bearing the myrrh-oils they had prepared to anoint His body (Matt 27:55–61, Matt 28:1–10, Mk 15:40–16:11, Lk 23:50–24:10, Jn 19:38–20:18). You usually see men only when the crosses and monuments for the departed are to be ordered and made. Oftentimes it is the women who are wearing dark clothes of mourning out of respect for the departed for a week, a month, a year, and sometimes until the day of their own departure. One might think this is so because women are usually more expressive in their emotions. And it's part of the tradition. It's fascinating how within the diversity of the Balkan countries, within the rural communities, there is a common tread still prevailing when it comes to the traditional funeral service – the engaging of professional female mourners. Dressed in black, from tip to toe, they weep and wail at the thought of death beholding the body lying in the tomb.

Conclusion

St John of Chrysostom in his homily on First Corinthians²¹ reminds us that:

it is possible from every source to gather pardon for them [the departed], from our prayers, from our gifts in their behalf, from those whose names are named with theirs. Why therefore do you grieve? Why mourn, when it is in your power to gather so much pardon for the departed? (1 Cor. Hom. 41, par. 8)

In his homily *On the Cemetery and the Cross* during a Good Friday service Chrysostom consoled his hearers by likening death to sleep and reflecting on the cemetery as a “sleeping place”. And, again, in his homily on the First Corinthians he adds:

²¹ Chrysostom, St. John. *The Homilies on the First Corinthians*.
http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0345-0407,_Iohannes_Chrysostomus,_Homilies_on_First_Corinthians,_EN.pdf

Not in vain was this rule ordained by the Apostles, that in the dread Mysteries²² remembrance should be made of the departed: for they knew that it is a great gain to them, and a great benefit. (1 Cor. Hom. 41, p. 457 A)

Chrysostom recommended praying for the dead to celebrate their memory and bring some consolation to both the mourners and the departed since God is willing to grant petitions to those who ask for others (1 Cor. Hom. 42 par. 8). Let us remember that if we remember the end of our life, we will never sin (Wis. Sir. 7:36).

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²² Vassiliades, Nikolaos P. *The Mystery of Death*, trans. Peter A. Chamberas (Athens: Orthodox Brotherhood of Theologians, 1993).

