

## BURIAL IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: GUIDELINES FOR ST NICHOLAS PARISH

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From the very beginning of the Church, one of the most distinctive markers of Christian identity has been the care with which Christian believers treat their departed loved one. Unlike many other groups in the ancient world, Christians did not destroy the bodies of their departed by burning them or otherwise disposing of them. Rather, because of their belief in the resurrection in the age to come, Christians treated the bodies of their departed with great care and love—even to the point, sometimes, of risking their own deaths to bury them properly. This way of treating the bodies of the departed also shaped Christian liturgy in important ways. For example, the practice of venerating relics and saints are both rooted in this early Christian piety for the departed. Furthermore, so high has the Church regarded its departed that many Christians understood the funeral service as sacramental (the view found, for example, already in St Dionysius).

For the sake of clarity in setting forth the practices of St Nicholas Orthodox Church when it comes to Burial, the following guidelines are offered. These reproduce the guidelines found in the 2023 version of the clergy guidelines of the Orthodox Church in America. They are thus normative for the entire Orthodox Church in America, to which our parish belongs.

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### BURIAL

1. While the traditional ideal is for burial to occur on the third day, the Church has no specific insistence on the length of time between death and burial. Interment varies according to the climate, civil ordinances, customs, and circumstances, and may be held immediately following death, or after a number of days.
2. The hour of interment is also not fixed; it may be at any time during the day to accord with cemetery regulations and parish needs.
3. It is assumed that, unless the death was an accidental or untimely one, the priest has been ministering to an aging person, or one suffering from some ailment or sickness, and has prepared the person for death through participation in the Mysteries of Penance, Unction, and Holy Eucharist.
4. The priest should read the Prayers at the Departing of a Soul and passages from Holy Scripture. Merely to be present at the bedside of one's spiritual child and not minister with audible prayer is unworthy of the priesthood.
5. The priest must make contact with the family of the deceased, offering to assist them through the time of grieving and mourning, especially if the priest was not able to be at the bedside of the dying parishioner at the time of death.
6. The Service for the Departed (*panikhida*) is sung on the eve of the burial whether the body is in the temple, funeral home, or elsewhere.

7. The body of the departed may be brought into the temple at any time prior to the time of the Funeral Service, whether days before or on the day thereof.
8. The body of the departed may not be in the temple on the Lord's Day during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.
9. Under normal conditions, the casket is open from the first Service for the Departed (*panikhida*) until the conclusion of the Funeral Service.
10. The casket is positioned so that the feet of the departed are toward the iconostasis (from our liturgical perspective, the person is thus "facing" the Holy Altar).
11. The Funeral Service is usually served in the temple on the day of the burial.
12. It is proper and befitting God to place the burial of the departed in the context of a cycle of services. Local customs and directives may shape the possibilities, but two possibilities of a fuller order are common:
  - a. Panikhida on the eve; Liturgy the next morning; Burial Service (vigil); burial
  - b. Burial service (vigil) on the eve; Liturgy the next morning; burial
13. The Funeral Service and burial is generally not officiated on Sunday or Pascha. If the burial is scheduled for Monday, the body may be brought into the temple only after Vespers on Sunday evening. There may be circumstances for which immediate burial may be necessary, and in this case pastoral discretion is to be used.
14. Between the day of Pascha and the Sunday of St. Thomas, the Funeral Service follows the prescribed order for funerals during Bright Week.
15. An Orthodox clergyman may not take part in a service for a non-Orthodox deceased person, even if that person is related to a parishioner. If invited, however, he may offer some words of consolation at the graveside or funeral meal.
16. Only the celebrating Orthodox clergy speak in the Funeral Service or offer any form of homily or public statement in the temple, or participate in the graveside service. The parish priest may invite family members or other appropriately vetted dignitaries to speak at the memorial meal.
17. Prayers for the dead are usually offered at the memorial meal, on the third, ninth and fortieth day after death, and every year thereafter.
18. Saturday is the usual day for a memorial service (e.g., after the Divine Liturgy, or prior to the Vigil or Vesper service). In rare circumstances, the Service for the Departed (*panikhida*) may be served with the bishop's blessing after the conclusion of the Sunday Divine Liturgy in the afternoon.
19. The Church has set aside definite days on which remembrance of the dead should especially take place. Among these are Meatfare Saturday, the second, third and fourth Saturdays of the Great Fast, the Saturday preceding Pentecost, and St. Demetrius Saturday.
20. In addition to these specific times, the faithful may have the names of the deceased remembered at the Proskomedia and during the Divine Liturgy.

21. Memorial services are not permitted on feast days or from the Nativity of our Lord to Theophany, and from Palm Sunday to the Sunday of St. Thomas.
22. The parish priest is responsible for entering into the metrical book the required information about burials.

### **NON-COMMUNICANTS**

Membership in the Body of Christ, His Holy Church, is defined by participation in the Holy Mysteries. The burial service for a person who has kept himself away from actual parish participation should take place in the funeral home or a place other than the church building. This presupposes that the person was baptized as an Orthodox Christian, has not joined another religious group, but has not fulfilled his or her membership in the life of the Orthodox Church.

### **NON-ORTHODOX PERSONS**

If a priest is asked to bury a non-Orthodox person, he must consult with his diocesan bishop, and with the bishop's blessing bury the person according to the order prescribed in the Book of Needs.

### **SUICIDE**

1. The act of suicide is a profound tragedy affecting a parish. It necessitates prayers for forgiveness for the sake of the departed and calls the parish community to repentance and mourning.
2. A person who has committed suicide is, strictly speaking, precluded from a Church burial. Given the pastoral delicacy involved in a suicide, the priest must share factors bearing on the particular case with the diocesan bishop, e.g., any history of mental illness; it is the prerogative of the bishop to consider the factors and make a decision concerning the order of burial.

### **MEMBERS OF MASONIC AND OTHER SECRET FRATERNAL SOCIETIES**

1. If a parish priest is aware that a member of his flock is a Freemason, he should make it a pastoral concern to speak privately with the person, showing the incompatibility of Orthodoxy with Freemasonry.
2. When a communing member of a parish falls asleep in the Lord and that person is also a member of one of these societies, the priest will show love and concern for the deceased. In his counseling of the bereaved family, he must not be hostile but must inform the family that only the Funeral Service for an Orthodox Christian will be served.
3. Patiently, tactfully, and discretely, he will inform the family that no words or symbols other than those of the Orthodox faith can be introduced into the church or the funeral home.

## CREMATION

1. The practice of cremation is not a Christian one and is to be discouraged. Cremated remains are not to be brought into the temple for a burial service or for any other reason.
2. Although cremation is not encouraged, and the Funeral Service over cremated remains is denied, the remains may be buried only with the hymn Holy God...
3. A memorial service may be celebrated (without any cremated remains present) on the 40th day or some other appropriate date.

## AUTOPSY AND ORGAN DONATION

1. Unless there is a specific legal reason, such as determining the cause of death, an autopsy ought to be avoided. The desire for scientific information through experimentation is not an appropriate reason to merit an autopsy. The family is not obliged to give approval for this procedure. The Church is concerned that respect for the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit be maintained.
2. Donation of body organ(s) after death may be allowed as long as respectful care is exercised toward the body before, during, and after the extraction operation. Care must be taken that the organ(s) are given as a gesture of altruism, free of any commercial overtones.
3. The Church does not consider the sharing of organs as a lessening of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the deceased, or as a transmigration of part of the donor to the recipient. A healthy person not in expectation of imminent death may donate non-vital organs as long as his/her quality and integrity of life is not diminished or endangered.