

crematoria. Cremation is a ritual found only in pagan religions and is not practiced by the Holy Church. In accordance with the tradition of the Church the bodies of the reposed are interred in the earth to return to the dust from which we were created by God.

“...for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” Genesis 3:19

The Holy Church’s teaching regarding the burial of the earthly bodies of her children is quite specific. In fact, those who are cremated sadly cannot have a funeral service served for them, nor can any commemoration be made for them at the Divine Liturgy or any other Divine Service until 40 days after their repose. As for the donation of our bodies to medical science, certainly there is no specific prohibition against organ and tissue donation (with the caveat that the funeral service specifically includes the last kiss, and the body should not be marred to such an extent that the coffin could not be open during the funeral and to allow the last kiss of the living for the departed), but complete donation of one’s body as a cadaver would also not be allowed as a rule, again due to the Church’s teaching that the bodies of the reposed are to be buried and not otherwise disposed of.

Where, when, and how to be Buried

Given that burial is the only real choice for us as Orthodox Christians (of course we could find exceptions, but as a rule burial is the process followed), the next logical question is how to arrange for a proper Christian burial. Will just any place do for a burial, or is there guidance for the faithful here too?

On one level we may say that any place would do for a burial, and indeed we see this take place in war. Wherever great battles are fought cemeteries are created for those who died in those places of battle. However, there is a pious tradition in the Christian world to bury the dead together in a cemetery – a sanctified place created and maintained for this important purpose. As Orthodox Christians there are certain specifics that would matter to us here. For instance, Orthodox Christians are buried with a cross standing above their graves. Thus, those municipal cemeteries that do not allow grave stones would not be places where we would want to be buried. Often one finds clusters of Orthodox Christian graves in municipal cemeteries to facilitate the prayers for the dead of those who remain in this earthly life, especially on certain days appointed by the Holy Church for these prayers (such as the Soul Saturdays or Radonitsa). These are perfectly adequate places to be buried and sometimes parish churches even purchase tracts of graves in municipal cemeteries for this reason.

One may observe an even more pious practice than burial in municipal cemeteries in Russia, Greece, and other Orthodox lands, and in fact, on a very small scale in the West as well. That is, burial in a parish church or monastery cemetery. The advantages of this option are spiritual in nature. First, those who are buried in such cemeteries are commemorated at all Divine Liturgies served at the church/monastery. For us as Orthodox Christians this is very important. In fact, we include at the end of this pamphlet a short explanation of the efficacious prayer for the reposed at the

Divine Liturgy. Further, on those special days when the reposed are specifically commemorated (Soul Saturdays, Radonitsa, and others), Divine Services are conducted at these churches where the families of the reposed may gather together and pray, and then visit and care for the graves of their reposed loved ones. Also, the graves in church cemeteries are looked after in an especially caring way, and of course the requisite crosses are found over each grave.

In short, we may say that it is perfectly adequate to be buried in a municipal cemetery, but that the spiritual and pious ideal in this regard would be burial in a church cemetery. Those who have questions after reading this pamphlet are urged to contact Fr. Gregory to discuss these questions. No one likes to be told what he “must” or “must not” do – this is understandable. This pamphlet is intended to provide information that we might not otherwise be able to obtain, and to allow us to arrange for an appropriately Orthodox Christian burial for our parish family members. Questions in this regard are encouraged!

An Excerpt from The Soul after Death, by Fr. Seraphim Rose on the Efficacy of Prayer for the Dead

How important commemoration at the Liturgy is may be seen in the following occurrence: Before the uncovering of the relics of St. Theodosius of Chernigov (1896), the priest-monk (the renowned Starets Alexis of Goloseyevsky Hermitage, of the Kiev-Caves Lavra, who died in 1916) who was conducting the re-vesting of the relics, becoming weary while sitting by the relics, dozed off and saw before him the Saint, who told him: "I thank you for laboring me. I beg you also, when you will serve the Liturgy, to commemorate my parents" – and he gave

their names (Priest Nikita and Maria).* "How can you, O Saint, ask my prayers, when you yourself stand at the heavenly Throne and pray for the people for God's mercy?" the priest-monk asked. "Yes, that is true," replied St. Theodosius, "but the offering at the Liturgy is more powerful than my prayer."

Therefore, we see panikhidas and prayer a home for the dead are beneficial for them, as are good deeds done in their memory, such as alms or contributions to the Church. But especially beneficial for them is commemoration at the Divine Liturgy. There have been many appearances of the dead and other occurrences which confirm how beneficial is such commemoration of the dead. Many who died in repentance, but who were unable to manifest this while they were alive, have been freed from tortures and have obtained repose. In the Church, prayers are ever offered for the repose of the dead, and on the day of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, in the kneeling prayers at vespers, there is even a special petition "for those in hell."

St. Gregory the Great, in answering in his Dialogues the question, "Is there anything at all that can possibly benefit souls after death?" teaches: "The Holy Sacrifice of Christ, our saving Victim, brings great benefits to souls even after death, provided their sins (are such as) can be pardoned in the life to come. For this reason the souls of the dead sometimes beg to have Liturgies offered for them ... The safer course, naturally, is to do for ourselves during life what we hope others will do for us after death. It is better to make one's exit a free man than to seek liberty after one is in chains. We should, therefore, despise this world with all our hearts as though its glory were already spent, and offer our sacrifice of tears to God each day

as we immolate His sacred Flesh and Blood. This Sacrifice alone has the power of saving the soul from eternal death, for it presents to us mystically the death of the Only-begotten Son" (Dialogues IV: 57, 60, pp. 266, 272-3).

St. Gregory gives several examples of the dead appearing to the living and asking for or thanking them for the celebration of the Liturgy for their repose; once, also, a captive whom his wife believed dead and for whom she had the Liturgy celebrated on certain days, returned from captivity and told her how he had been released from his chains on some days—the very days when the Liturgy had been offered for him. (Dialogues IV: 57, 59, pp. 267, 270).

**These names had been unknown before this vision. Several years after the canonization, St. Theodosius' own Book of Commemoration was found in the monastery where he had once been abbot, which confirmed these names and corroborated the vision. See the Life of Elder Alexis in Pravoslavny Blagovestnik, San Francisco, 1967, No. 1 (in Russian).*

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Orthodox Christian Burial

The Holy Church's Care for Her Children who have Fallen Asleep in the Lord

The Holy Church's care for her children does not end with our earthly repose. Specific prayers and Divine Services are appointed for the time of the repose of the soul, as well as after one has passed into the next life. The Holy Church teaches us that death is nothing other than a passing over into an eternal life. We believe that our departed loved ones continue to pray for us, and we in turn pray for them and the repose of their souls. Details on the Church's prayerful intercession for the dead can be found in many books and pamphlets, and if you have questions in this regard you are urged to contact Fr. Gregory.

Burial, Cremation, or Other?

This short pamphlet is concerned specifically with the Church's teachings on proper care for the bodies of those who have reposed. We prayerfully care for the souls of the reposed, as noted above, but so too must we care for the earthly temple of the soul, the body, in an appropriate and pious way. In the history of God's Church, including both the Old and New Testament epochs, it was and is unheard of for the bodies of the reposed to be burned in