

The Church's Prayer for the Dead

The Holy Orthodox Church, like a concerned mother, daily, at every divine service, offers up prayers for all her children who have departed for the land of eternity. Thus, at the midnight service troparia and prayers for the departed are read, and they are commemorated at its concluding ektenia. This is so also at compline. At matins and vespers the departed are remembered by name at the Augmented Ektenia, "Have mercy on us, O God..." They are commemorated three times during the Liturgy: at the Proskomedia, at the ektenia following the Gospel, and after the consecration of the Precious Gifts when "Meet it is in truth . . ." is sung. Furthermore, one day of the week is set aside for prayers for the dead -Saturday, on which it is customary to have a service for the dead, unless it coincides with a feast, if such is to be served on that day.

The Third Day

We commemorate the dead on the third day firstly, because those who have departed had been baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the One God in three Persons, and had kept the Orthodox faith they received at holy baptism; secondly, because they preserved the three virtues which form the foundation of our salvation, namely: faith, hope and love; thirdly, because man's being possesses three internal powers—reason, emotion and desire—by which we all have transgressed. And since man's actions manifest themselves in three ways—by deed, word, and thought—by our commemoration on the third day we entreat the Holy Trinity to forgive the departed all transgressions committed by the three above-mentioned powers and actions. When St. Macarius of Alexandria besought the angel who accompanied him in the desert to explain to him the meaning of the Church's commemoration on the third day, the angel replied to him: "When an offering is made in church on the third day, the soul of the departed receives from its guardian angel relief from the sorrow it feels as a result of the separation from the body. This it receives because glorification and offering is made in the Church of God which gives rise in it to blessed hope, for in the course of the two days the soul is permitted to roam the earth, wherever it wills, in the company of the angels that are with it. Therefore, the soul, loving the body, sometimes wanders about the house in which his body had been laid out, and thus spends two days like a bird seeking its nest. But the virtuous soul goes about those places in which it was wont to do good deeds. On the third day, He Who Himself rose from the dead on the third day commands the Christian soul, in imitation of His resurrection, to ascend to the Heavens to worship the God of all."

The Ninth Day

On the ninth day, the Holy Church offers prayers and the Bloodless Sacrifice for the departed, that his soul be accounted worthy to be numbered among the choirs of the saints through the prayers and intercession of the nine ranks of angels. St. Macarius of Alexandria, in accordance with the angel's revelation, says that after worshipping God on the third day, it is commanded to show the soul the various pleasant habitations of the saints and the beauty of Paradise. The soul considers all of this for six days, lost in wonder and glorifying the Creator of all. Contemplating all of this, it is transformed and forgets the sorrow it felt in the body. But if it is guilty of sins, at the sight of the delights of the saints it begins to grieve and reproach itself, saying: "Woe is me! How much I busied myself in vanity in that world! Enamored of the gratification of lust, I spent the greater portion of my life in carelessness and did not serve God as I should, that I too might

be accounted worthy of this grace and glory. Woe is me! Poor me!" After considering all the joys of the righteous in the course of six days, it again is borne aloft by the angels to worship God.

The Fortieth Day¹

From earliest antiquity the Holy Church has correctly and devoutly made it a rule to commemorate the departed in the course of forty days, and on the fortieth day in particular. As Christ was victorious over the devil, having spent forty days in fasting and prayer, so the Holy Church likewise, offering for the departed prayers, acts of charity and the Bloodless Sacrifice throughout the forty days, asks the Lord's grace for him to conquer the enemy, the dark prince of the air, and that he receive the Heavenly Kingdom as his inheritance. St. Macarius of Alexandria, discussing the state of man's soul after the death of the body, says: "After the second adoration, the Master of all commands that the soul be led to hell and that it be shown the places of torment there, the various parts of hell, and the diverse tortures of the wicked, in which the souls of sinners ceaselessly wail and gnash their teeth. The soul is borne about these various places of torment for thirty days, trembling lest it itself be imprisoned therein. On the fortieth day it is once again borne aloft to adore the Lord God, and it is at this time that the Judge determines the place of confinement proper to it in accordance with its deeds. This is a great day for the deceased, for it determines his portion until the Dread judgment of God, and therefore, the Holy Church correctly commands that fervent prayer be made for the dead on this day."

The commemoration of the departed at the first opportunity after death is important and essential because it alleviates the passage of the soul of the departed through the so-called toll-booths.² St. Cyril of Alexandria says: "At Our soul's separation from the body, there will stand before us on one side warriors and powers of Heaven, and on the other side the powers of darkness, the princes of this world, the aerial publicans, the torturers, the prosecutors of our deeds. . . Seeing them, the soul is dismayed, it shudders, and in consternation and horror will seek protection from the angels of God; but being received by the holy angels and passing through the aerial space, lifted on high under their protection, it encounters the toll-booths, as it were, certain gates or toll houses in which taxes are exacted which will bar its way into the Kingdom, will halt and hold back its progress towards it. At each of these toll-booths an account is demanded for particular sins."

The Venerable Theodora, as she passed through the toll-booths, was greatly aided by the intercession of her elder St. Basil the New, which served to outweigh the torments for those sins not covered by repentance.³ Thus does commemoration benefit departed sinners.

A commemoration has been established by the Orthodox Church on the twentieth and fortieth days after death, and also on the halfyear and yearly anniversaries of the death. Grain (i.e., koliva or kutiya)⁴ is brought by the relatives for the commemoration, presenting an image of the Resurrection itself. In general, the custom of observing days for the commemoration of the dead has been continuously observed in the Orthodox Church from the beginning of its establishment until our own times, being handed down from generation to generation, from century to century. The Divine Liturgy has always been celebrated in memory of the dead, the great propitiatory sacrifice is offered up for them, psalms are read, and on these days many have increased and continue to increase their offerings in the church, assisting the poor and needy brethren out of love for their departed brethren.⁵

Aside from personal days set aside for commemorating our departed friends and relatives, the Orthodox Church, like a mother that loves her children, has set aside certain days on which all Orthodox Christians that have departed in hope of resurrection and eternal life must be commemorated in general. Such days are termed "universal," or simply "ancestral" days. They are as follows:

Meatfare Saturday

The first universal, ancestral Saturday is on Meatfare Saturday. It falls during Meatfare Week and before the last day on which one may eat meat before the Great Fast begins. The following day, Sunday, commemorates the Dread judgment of Christ, and the Church prays for all that have departed in faith and hope of resurrection, beseeching the righteous judge to show forth His mercy upon them on the very day of impartial retribution at the universal judgment. The establishment of this Saturday dates from the first years of Christianity. Among the prayers during the divine services on this Saturday, we hear one for all "that from Adam until today have reposed in piety and correct faith," of every calling and every age; "for all that have drowned, that battle hath mown down, that earthquake hath swallowed up, that have been slain by murderers, that fire hath consumed, that have been food for the wild beasts, birds and serpents, that have been struck by lightning and have perished in freezing cold, that have fallen by the sword, that the horse hath trampled, the rock struck or the earth covered up, that have been slain by deadly potion or poison, or have choked on bones ... ", i.e. all that have met untimely deaths and have been left without a proper funeral.

Thus does the Church care for all our fathers, brethren and relatives.

Trinity Saturday

This falls on the eve of Pentecost, hence the appellation "Trinity Saturday." On the day of Pentecost (or Trinity Day), the Holy Spirit descended upon the earth to teach, sanctify and lead all people to eternal salvation. Therefore, the holy Church calls upon us to make a commemoration on this Saturday, that the saving grace of the Holy Spirit wash away the sins from the souls of all our forefathers, fathers and brethren, that have reposed throughout the ages and, asking that they all be united in the Kingdom of Christ and praying for the redemption of the living and for the return of their souls from captivity, she begs the Lord to "give rest to the souls ... that have fallen asleep, in ... a place of refreshment; . . . for the dead shall not praise Thee, O Lord, neither shall they that are in hell make bold to offer unto Thee confession. But we that are living will bless Thee, and will pray, and offer unto Thee propitiatory prayers and sacrifices for their souls."⁶

Second, Third and Fourth Saturdays of the Great Fast

Since throughout the Great Fast such commemorations as are performed at every other time during the year do not occur during the celebration of the Presanctified Liturgy, it is the accepted practice in our Orthodox Church to commemorate the departed on these three Saturdays, that the dead be not deprived of the Church's saving intercession. (The remaining Saturdays of the Great Fast are consecrated to special celebrations: Saturday of the first week to St. Theodore the Recruit; Saturday of the fifth week to the praise of the Theotokos; the sixth Saturday commemorates the resurrection of the Righteous Lazarus.)⁷

Tuesday of St. Thomas Week

On this day, in accordance with accepted custom, a commemoration of the dead is made by the faithful, with the pious intent that, having celebrated a radiant festival to the glory of Christ's Resurrection they share the great joy of this paschal feast with those that have departed in the hope of their own blessed resurrection, the joy of Which our Lord Himself announced to the dead when He descended into hell to proclaim His victory over death and to lead forth the souls of the righteous of the Old Testament. Because of this great spiritual joy, the day of this commemoration bears the name "day of rejoicing."⁸ There is indication of the commemoration of the dead on St. Thomas Monday or Tuesday in the writings of the Fathers of the Church.⁹

Day Commemorating Orthodox Soldiers

Aside from days designated for the general commemoration of all the departed, the Holy Orthodox Church has instituted two days for the commemoration of Orthodox soldiers and all that have laid down their lives in battle for faith and fatherland. These are:

August 29th

On this day, the Church remembers the Beheading of St. John the Forerunner. Those that lay down their lives for faith and fatherland and all that die on the field of battle are like unto this righteous man who suffered for the truth. Thus, the Holy Church considers it proper to pray on this day, August 29th, for all Orthodox soldiers. This commemoration was instituted in 1769, during the reign of Empress Catherine II, at the time of the war with the Turks and Poles.

The Saturday of St. Dimitry

(the Saturday before October 26th)

On this day, the Holy Church commemorates all Orthodox Christians killed in battle; it was established by Great Prince Dimitry Ivanovich Donskoi¹⁰ on his patron saint's day, in 1380. When he had gained his famous and glorious victory over the wicked Tartar prince Mamai on the field of Kulikovo (beyond the River Nepryadva in the present-day province of Tula), he made a pilgrimage to the Lavra of the Holy Trinity and St. Sergius from which he had gone forth to that battle at which two warrior monks of that monastery (the former boyars Oslyabya and Peresvyet) fell. Having commemorated all that fell in the war, he decided later to make this commemoration annually on the Saturday before October 26th, St. Demetrius' day. Subsequently, Orthodox Christians began to commemorate on this Saturday not only those Orthodox warriors that laid down their lives on the field of battle for faith and fatherland, but also all Orthodox Christians that have died in the faith.

Examples of the Efficacy of Prayers Offered for the Dead at the Liturgy and of the Church's Prayers for the Dead

St. Gregory the Dialogist, Pope of Rome¹¹, sets before us a remarkable example of the effectiveness of prayer and the bringing of offerings for the departed, which took place in his monastery.

"One brother," he says, "for breaking the vow of poverty, was deprived of a church funeral and prayers after his death for a period of thirty days, in order to strike fear in the hearts of the others. But later, out of compassion for his soul, the Bloodless Sacrifice and prayers were offered up for him for the space of thirty days. On the last of these days, the deceased appeared in a vision to

his brother, whom he had left among the living, and said: 'Until now it has gone badly for me, but now I am at peace, for today I received communion.'

This same holy Father, in his dialogues with the Deacon Peter, tells of the apparition of a dead man who begged a priest to help him by praying for him to God. "From this it is obvious," he concludes, "how profitable the Sacred Sacrifice is for souls; for the souls themselves ask it of the living, and indicate the means by which they are cleansed of sins."

St. John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria, ¹² often celebrated the Divine Liturgy for the dead, and stated that it is a great aid to their souls. To corroborate this, he cites the following:

"There was a certain prisoner whose parents, considering him dead, had the Liturgy served three times a year for him - on Theophany, Pascha and Pentecost. After he had been released from captivity, returning unexpectedly to his parents, he recalled that on those very days a certain man of glorious appearance came to him in prison carrying a torch. The fetters fell from his hands and he was freed; the rest of the days he was again in chains as a prisoner."

St. Gregory the Dialogist also relates that during the lifetime of St. Benedict of Nursia ¹³ there lived two women who had the unfortunate habit of judging their neighbors, speaking evil and reproaching others. Learning of this, the Venerable Benedict said to them: "Curb your tongues, or I will have to excommunicate you from the Holy Mysteries." But, all the same, they did not cease their evil habits and even said nothing in reply to the saint's paternal admonition. Several days later both women died in their virginity and were buried together in the church. When the Divine Liturgy was served and the deacon exclaimed: "Catechumens, depart!", many Christians beheld the two virgins leaving their tombs and the church, for they were unable to remain there during the Divine Liturgy. This occurred at each Divine Liturgy. When St. Benedict discovered this, he took pity on them and, taking a prosphora, he commanded them to take it to the church and to remove a particle from it for the repose of their souls. He also ordered them commemorated during the performance of the Mysteries of Christ. After that, none of the Christians saw them leaving the church. From this, all understood that, owing to the Holy Church's prayer for the departed and the offerings, the departed virgins had received forgiveness from God. ¹⁴

The Greek Emperor Theophilus ¹⁵ lived carelessly and did not concern himself with the salvation of his soul. Death found this sovereign in the midst of his sinful life. The Empress St. Theodora, Theophilus' consort, was horrified at the heavy lot that would befall her husband in eternity. At her behest, prayers were increased in the churches, alms were distributed, good works were performed. And what was the result? The prayers of the Church reached the Lord. Theophilus was forgiven, to the spiritual joy of his grieving spouse and to the consolation of the Church, which has so merciful and mighty a Lord, Who gives life to the dead and leads them forth from the abyss of hell, not only bodily, but spiritually. ¹⁶

"But who can number," asks St. John of Damascus, "all of the testimonies found in the biographies of holy men, in the accounts of the lives of the holy martyrs and the divine revelations, which clearly indicate that even after death tremendous benefit is rendered to the

departed by prayers, Liturgies and the distribution of alms for them. For nothing given to God perishes in return, but is rewarded by Him with the greatest interest."

Examples of the Efficacy of Prayers for the Dead

St. John of Damascus relates: "A certain holy man had a disciple who was living heedlessly. And what happened? Death found him in the midst of his carelessness. The merciful Heavenly Father, roused by the tears and cries of the elder, revealed to him the youth burning in flames up to his neck, like the merciless rich man mentioned in the parable of Lazarus. And when the saint subjected his flesh to strict mortification, fervently beseeching God for the forgiveness of his disciple, he beheld him enveloped in flame up to his waist. Finally, when the holy man had increased his ascetic labors yet more, God revealed him in a vision to the elder, removed from the flame and completely free."

The holy martyr Perpetua¹⁷ relates: "One day, at the time of general prayer in prison, I unexpectedly uttered the name of my dead brother Dinocrates. Struck by this unusual occurrence, I began to pray and sigh for him before God. On the following night I received a vision: I saw Dinocrates come forth, as though from a dark place. He was in intense heat, tormented by thirst, filthy in appearance and pallid. On his face was the wound from which he had died. Between us yawned a deep crevasse, and we were unable to approach each other. Beside the place where Dinocrates stood there was a full cistern, the lip of which stood much higher than my brother's stature, and Dinocrates stretched, trying to reach the water. I was filled with pity, for the height of the rim prevented my brother from drinking. Immediately after this I awoke and realized that my brother was in torment. But believing that my prayer could help him in his suffering, I prayed all day and night in the prison, with cries and lamentations, that Dinocrates be treated mercifully. And on the day on which we were kept in chains, I received a new vision: the place which before I had seen had been made bright, and Dinocrates, with a clean face and beautiful apparel, was enjoying its coolness. Where he had had a wound, I saw only a trace of it. The rim of the cistern was no higher than the waist of the young man, and he was able to draw water from it without effort. On the rim of the cistern stood a golden cup full of water. Dinocrates approached it and began to drink from it, but the water in it did not decrease. Satisfied, he stepped away from it and began to rejoice. With this the vision ended. I then understood that he had been released from punishment.

One day the Venerable Macarius of Egypt was walking about the desert and found a dried-out human skull lying on the ground. Turning it over with his staff, the saint heard a sound, as though from a distance. Then Macarius asked the skull: "What manner of man wast thou?"

"I was the chief of the pagan priests that dwelt in this place," it replied. "When thou, O Abba Macarius, who art full of the Spirit of God, pray for us, taking pity on them that are in the torments of hell, we then receive a certain relief."

"And what manner of relief do ye receive?" asked Macarius. "And tell me, what torments are ye subjected to?"

"As far as heaven is above the earth," replied the skull with a groan, "so great is the fire in the midst of which we find ourselves, wrapped in flame from head to toe. At this time we cannot see

each others' faces, but when thou prayest for us, we can see each other a little, and this affords us some consolation."

On hearing this reply, the venerable one wept and said: "Cursed is that day when man broke the divine ordinance!" And once again he asked the skull: "Are there any other tortures worse than yours?"

"Beneath us, much farther down, there are many others," it replied.

"And who are found in such unbearable torments?" asked Macarius.

"We who did not know God, yet experience the mercy of God a little," answered the skull. "But they that knew the name of God, yet rejected Him and did not keep His commandments, undergo much heavier and worse torments below."

After this St. Macarius took the skull, buried it in the ground and departed thence.¹⁸

Examples of the Efficacy of Alms Distributed in Memory of the Dead

The Blessed Luke relates that he had a brother who, having, become a monk, concerned himself little with his soul and died, not having prepared himself for death. The holy elder wished to discover what his brother had been accounted worthy of, and he began to entreat God to reveal his lot. One day, during his prayers, the elder beheld the soul of his brother in the hands of demons. Meanwhile, money and costly things had been found in the cell of the deceased, from which the elder understood that the soul of his brother was suffering, among other reasons, for breaking the vow of poverty. All the money that had been found the elder gave to the poor. After that, he again began to pray, and beheld the judgment seat of God and the radiant angels contending with the demons for the soul of his brother. The demons cried out to God: "Thou art just! Judge Thou! This soul belongs to us, for it hath done our deeds!" But the angels said that the soul of the dead man had been freed by the alms which had been distributed for it. To this the evil spirits objected, saying: "Did the deceased distribute the alms, or did this elder distribute them?", indicating the Blessed Luke.

The elder was terrified by this vision, but nonetheless summoned up the courage to say: "It is true that I distributed the alms, but not for myself, but for this soul." The outraged spirits, hearing the elder's reply, straightway vanished, and the elder, consoled by this vision, ceased to doubt and grieve over the fate of his brother.

The holy Abbess Athanasia of Aegina¹⁹ stipulated in her testament that the sisters of her convent prepare meals for the poor in her memory throughout the forty days following her demise. But the nuns carried out this command only until the ninth day, and afterwards ceased. Then the saint appeared to them with two angels and said: "Why have ye forgotten my bequest? Know ye not that alms given for the soul until the fortieth day and the feeding of the poor move God to mercy as well as the prayers of the priests? If the souls of the departed were sinful, God granteth them remission of sins; and if they were righteous, the charity performed on their behalf serves for the salvation of them that perform the charitable works." Having said this, the Venerable Athanasia

drove her staff into the ground and vanished. The next day the sisters saw that her staff had sprouted. Then they gave glory to God, the Creator of all things.²⁰

Endnotes

1. Throughout the forty days it is essential for each Orthodox Christian to commemorate his departed (newly-reposed) relatives. This consists of commemorating the departed during forty daily liturgies at Proskomedie and in the ektenias of offering to the Church proskophoras, wine, incense and candles, and of distribution of alms for the repose of the newly-departed.
2. Toll-booths (Gr. *telonion*)—a term borrowed from the history of the Hebrew nation and used metaphorically to describe the barriers souls encounter in the ascent to Heaven. In Roman Palestine, the publicans stood at special tax-collection booths at which they extorted money from the populace. The Fathers of the Church, notably St. Cyril of Alexandria in his "Homily on the Departure of the Soul" (PG 77.981), applied this term to the aerial places of torment the soul meets after death. Further evidence of the toll-booths, or aerial customs, may be found implied in Homily XXII of St. Macarius of Egypt (Spiritual Homilies, p. 171), the *Ladder of St. John Climachus* (Step VII:50, p. 120), and in many of the divine services and the lives of the saints.
3. Cf. the Life of St. Basil the New, March 26.
4. *Koliva* or *kutiya* is grain or rice cooked with honey or sugar and sometimes mixed with plums, raisins and other sweets. The grain and fruit brought to the commemoration of the dead signifies that the dead will truly rise again from the grave, for both grain which is sown in the earth and the fruit which is laid on the earth, decays first, and afterwards brings forth abundant ripe, whole fruit. The honey or sugar used in the *kutiya* signifies that after the resurrection of the Orthodox and the righteous, there awaits a joyous and blessed life in the Heavenly Kingdom, not a bitter or sorrowful one. The *koliva* or *kutiya* prepared from grain expresses the faith of the living in the resurrection of the dead to a better life, just as that seed, having fallen upon the ground, although undergoing corruption, yet grows to attain a better ap- [Note: the original text breaks off here unexpectedly.]
5. They also remember the departed on the days of their birth and of their patron saint.
6. "Prayer at Pentecost Vespers," *Service Book of the Holy Catholic-Apostolic Church*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood (3rd ed. rev.; Brooklyn, N.Y.: Syrian Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese, 1956), p. 256.
7. The origin of the commemoration of the dead on the second, third and fourth Saturdays of the Great Fast dates back to the compilation of the Church's typicon, but when and by whom it was instituted is unknown.
8. "Radunitsa" or "radonitsa".
9. St. John Chrysostom very clearly mentions the commemoration of the dead performed on Tuesday of St. Thomas week in his "Homily on the Cemetery and the Cross": "For what cause," asks the hierarch, "did our fathers, leaving their houses of prayer in the city, establish the practice of assembling outside the city on this day and in this very place? In as much," answers Chrysostom, "as here rests a multitude of the departed; today Jesus Christ went down to the dead; thus we also gather here. Why, this very place is called a place of sleep (cemetery), that you might know that they [who] have died and lie here have not died, but rest and sleep" ("Sermon on the Cemetery and the Cross," *Works of our Holy Father John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, in Russian Translation*, Vol. II, Book I, p. 431. St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg theological Academy, 1896).
10. Reigned 1363-1399.
11. Commemorated March 12.
12. Commemorated November 12.
13. Commemorated March 14.
14. St. Gregory the Dialogist, *The Life and Miracles of St. Benedict*, ch. 28 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, n.d.), pp. 52-54.
15. Reigned 829-842.
16. Cf. Synaxarion, Meatfare Saturday, *Lenten Triodion*, p. 21 (Moscow, 1897).
17. Commemorated February 1.
18. Cf. the "Life of St. Macarius the Great" in the *Lives of the Saints*, compiled by St. Dimitry of Rostov, January volume, pp. 610-611.
19. Commemorated April 12.
20. *Ibid.*, St. Dimitry of Rostov, April volume, pp. 175-176.

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