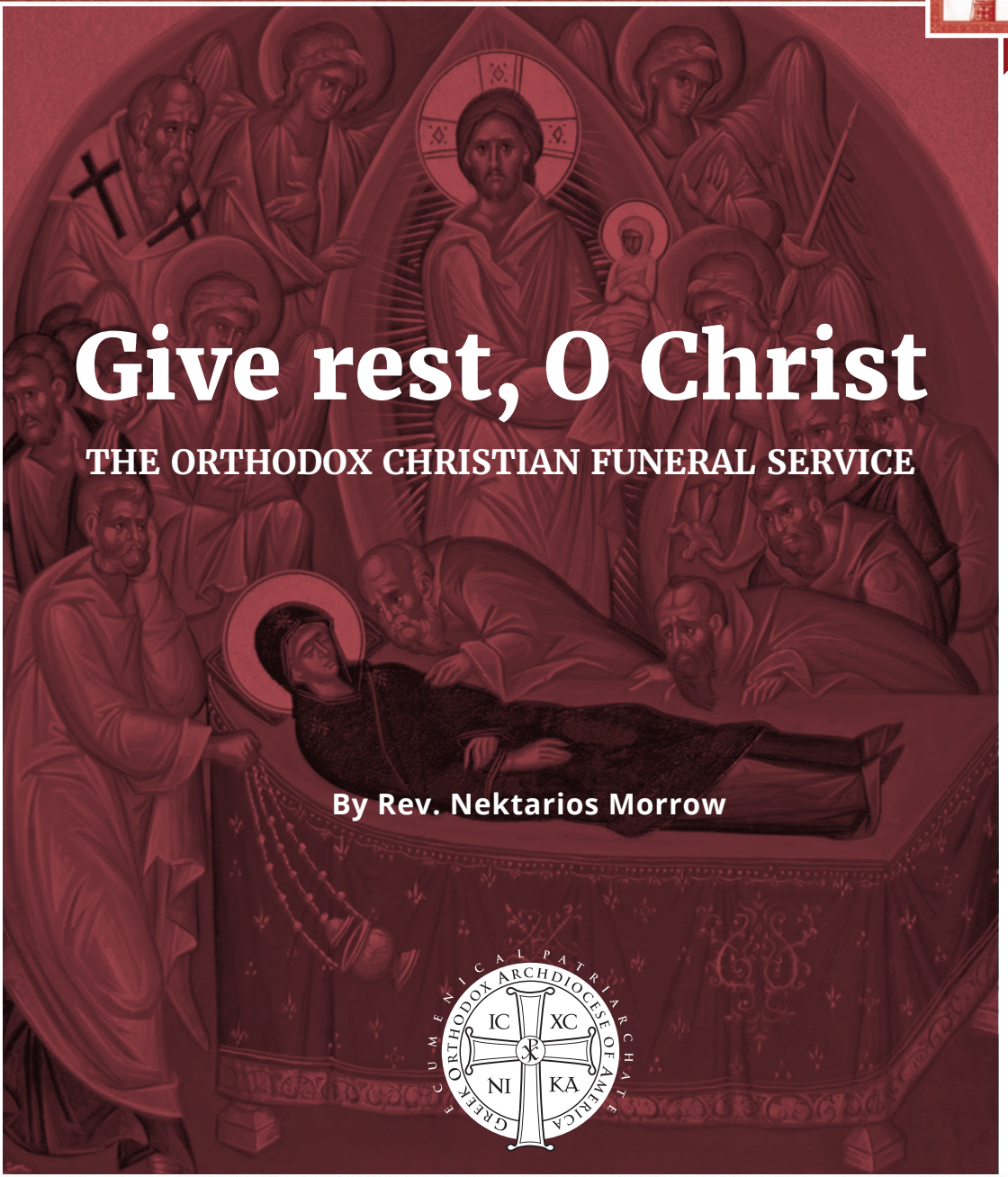
PRAYER & SPIRITUAL LIFE



Give rest, O Christ

THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN FUNERAL SERVICE

By Rev. Nektarios Morrow

Orthodox Christianity **Faith & Life** Series



God's mercy is infinite and His goodness beyond measure. This is what our Church maintains, and thus we believe and hope that the Lord will be merciful even to the deceased. For this reason the hymnographers of the Orthodox Church composed a most moving Funeral Service that is a treasure-house of profound spiritual thoughts.

From the earliest Christian times, psalms and hymns were sung to God when a believer died. The basic parts of the Funeral Service in use today can be traced mainly to the 5th century AD. Over time, the service has been enriched with psalms and hymns and has become one of the most versatile, dramatic, and impassioned services of our Church.

The Orthodox Funeral Service is an example of how our theology influences the formation of a healthy understanding of life and death. The Service (a) utilizes the occasion to help us develop a more profound understanding of the meaning and purpose of life; (b) helps us to deal with our emotions at the time of death and as time passes; (c) emphasizes that death for the Christian is not the end, affirming our hope in eternal life; and (d) recognizes the emotion of grief caused by separation from a loved one, encouraging its expression.

In the Funeral Service, a dramatic dialogue takes place between the faithful and God and between the deceased and God. The Service acknowledges the reality of human existence—the frailty of life and the vanity of worldly things—and directs our minds and hearts to contemplate the incomparable value of the eternal blessings of God's kingdom. At the same time with a contrite spirit, the priests and people invoke the infinite mercy of the Almighty God for the departed.

One who follows the hymns and prayers of the Funeral Service will be edified and consoled. The service is an opportunity to express our love for our loved one who has fallen asleep. It is also a sacred time, an opportunity for reflection on our own relationship with God and on the orientation of our lives. When we reflect on the Funeral Service, our hearts are softened, and we pray for the forgiveness and the repose of the departed. Also, we who remain are called to live our lives in repentance and in dedication to Christ.

Saint John Chrysostom observes:

"The Jews of the Old Testament wept for Jacob and for Moses for forty days. Today, however, during the funeral of the faithful, the Church raises hymns and prayers and psalms. We glorify and thank God, because "He crowned the departing," because "He relieved the pains," because "He expelled the fear," and has the deceased believer near Him. This is why the hymns and psalms reveal that in the event of death there is pleasure and joy following the glorious Resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ. For the psalms and hymns are symbols of joy, according to the Apostolic word: 'Is any cheerful? Let him sing praises' (James 5:13). This is why we sing psalms over the dead—psalms which move us to have courage and not to despair over the death of our brother."

Trisagion Service

Before the Funeral Service, the brief Trisagion or "Thrice-Holy" Service is served at the place where the deceased lies. After the initial prayers, four hymns are chanted asking the Lord to give rest to the deceased among those who have already been perfected in the faith. A litany follows, concluding with a prayer that again petitions the Lord to grant rest to the deceased and the forgiveness of sins. The faithful sing, *"May your memory be eternal."*

Psalm 119

The Funeral Service begins with the chanting in three stanzas of verses from Psalm 119 (118 in the Septuagint). In Greek this is referred to as the ***Ἄμωμοι*** (blameless) because the first words are, "Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord."

Evlogetaria (Εὐλογητάρια)

Following the chanting of Psalm 119 are the Funeral Praises, the ***Evlogetaria***, chanted in a solemn tone highlighting their deep theological content. They are called ***"Εὐλογητάρια"*** (meaning "hymns of praise") because each one is proceeded by Psalm 119:12, *"Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your commandments."*

Kontakion and Hymns of the Eight Tones

At the conclusion of the ***Evlogetaria***, the Kontakion of the Funeral Service is chanted: *"Give rest, O Christ, among the Saints to the soul of Your servant, where there is no pain, no sorrow, no grieving, but life everlasting."* During the chanting of this hymn, the priest censes the deceased and the faithful, the Holy Table, and the icons. Following this are the moving hymns known as the ***Idiomela***. Each hymn has its own melody and is sung in the order of the eight tones of Byzantine chant. These hymns and their changing tones express the mixed emotions of grief and consolation in the loss of a loved one and in the affirmation of our hope in God's promise of rest and eternal life.

Scripture Readings

The Funeral Service includes two Scripture lessons, one from the Apostolos (the liturgical book that contains the lections from the Book of Acts and the Epistles) and another from the Evangelion (the liturgical book of the four Gospels). The assigned readings for the service are I Thessalonians 4:13-17 and John 5:24-30. These passages reflect the Church's belief in Christ's death and Resurrection, and of the benefits that we derive from them; namely, the resurrection of our body on the last day and the promise of incorruption and immortality.

Prayers and Dismissal

Following the readings, the small litany is repeated, and the priest offers a prayer for the repose of the deceased. A special prayer is added if a hierarch (bishop) is officiating and/or the funeral is for a member of the clergy. The priest, addressing Christ who defeated death, asks the *"God of spirits and of all flesh"* to grant rest to the soul of the deceased, *"now asleep in a place of light, a place of renewed life, a joyous place...."* The Dismissal prayer of the Funeral Service once again introduces the hope of the resurrection as the priest calls upon the intercessions of the all-holy Theotokos, the holy Apostles, the holy Fathers, the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and of the holy and righteous Lazarus, the

friend of Christ who was raised from the dead by our Lord. After this prayer the faithful sing, *"May his/her memory be eternal."*

The Final Farewell and Anointing

Following the dismissal prayer comes the moment of final farewell to the deceased. As the people come forward, the choir or chanters sing hymns that invite them to offer a kiss to the one who has reposed, while they pray for the Lord to give the person rest. The kiss given to the deceased is an expression of love for the departed, but it is also an affirmation that the one who has fallen asleep is worthy of the fulfillment of God's promises, having lived a life of faith and known the grace of God. After all have come to offer their final greeting, the priest anoints the body in the sign of the Cross with oil and earth. As the priest anoints with the oil he says: *"Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow"* (Psalm 51:7). As the priest anoints the body with earth, he says: *"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all that dwell in it (Psalm 24:1). You are dust and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).*

At the Cemetery

Following the Funeral Service, the priest and people proceed to the cemetery. Here, the priest chants the Trisagion and the body is committed to the grave to await the return of our Lord and the resurrection of the dead.

Memorial Services

Memorial services are offered approximately forty days after the death of a person and after one year. It is also a custom of some to hold commemoration services at other intervals in the first year and annually on the anniversary of the repose in the faith of their loved one.

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