



August 16, 2002

Teleturgical Encyclical 10

The Priests and Deacons of
the Holy Metropolis of Denver

Beloved in the Lord,

Funeral services and memorial services are among the most emotionally sensitive events that take place in our parishes. The falling asleep of a loved one is certainly among life's most-traumatic milestones, and a great deal of pastoral sensitivity is required from clergy who minister to individuals and families at these times.

This is a particularly difficult challenge when we are asked to include observances and customs that are not of our Orthodox tradition as part of a funeral or memorial service. I am therefore writing to you with the following guidance, so that when questions arise from either Orthodox or non-Orthodox individuals you may be able to document for them what can and can not be sanctioned.

In regard to scheduling, funerals are permitted on any day of the year except Sundays, on Holy Friday, and on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14). Memorial services are most appropriately chanted on Saturdays, as this is the day of the week set aside to remember the deceased; they may not be chanted from the Saturday of Lazarus through the Sunday of Saint Thomas, on any Feast Day of the Lord, or on any Feast Day of the Theotokos. In most parishes today the memorial service is chanted at the end of the Sunday Divine Liturgy, following the singing of "Eii to onoma Kyriou evlogimenon..."

The Church considers cremation to be the deliberate desecration of what God has made, and instead insists that the body be buried so that the natural process of decomposition may take place. Burial affirms the fundamental goodness of creation, attests to our belief in the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and affirms our faith in the resurrection of the dead.

If a body will be, or has been, cremated there can be no funeral service in the church, at a funeral home, or in any other location. Moreover, there can be no memorial service (i.e., with kollyva) for those cremated, inasmuch as the similarity between the "kernel of wheat" and the "body" has been intentionally destroyed. The most that can be done is the simple Trisagion service, perhaps at a funeral home before the body is cremated, or in the home of the deceased at a later date. On the periodic memorial dates only the Trisagion service can be chanted, not the memorial (mnymosynon) service with kollyva.

On the other hand, if on the Saturdays of the Souls the names of persons who have been cremated are given to the priest to be commemorated, there is no way of discerning who was cremated or who died under extreme circumstances. It is therefore obvious that all names that are submitted to the priest will be read and memorialized.

Suicide is murder of self, and therefore a most grave sin separating one from the community of faith. It may also indicate a lack of faith in a loving, forgiving, and sustaining God. If an individual commits suicide, or allows another person to assist them in suicide, believing that such action is rationally or morally defensible there can be no funeral service. A simple Trisagion service at graveside is all that can be permitted in the case of a suicide, although a memorial service subsequently may be chanted if requested by family members.

If, however, a person commits suicide as a result of mental illness or severe emotional stress the Church may show compassion. In such cases the pastor must first obtain a medical statement from a physician stating that the individual was being treated for depression or mental illness, and then must request a blessing from the diocesan hierarch to conduct a funeral.

In the case of individuals who are married outside the church, there can be no funeral service in the church, but may be permitted in a funeral home. Memorial and Trisagion services may subsequently be chanted if requested by family members on the customary periodic occasions.

In the case of individuals who have avoided or neglected attending church services, the Divine Liturgy, and the other sacraments of the Church, great pastoral discretion and care must be exercised. Obviously every effort must be made as a matter of regular pastoral practice to visit our lapsed and fallen-away members. At the right time and in an appropriate manner it should be made known to them that if they do not participate in the life and services of the Church, it would not be logical to provide them with a funeral service at the end of their life. Often times such individuals can be reconciled with the Church through the Mysteries of Holy Unction, Holy Confession, and Holy Communion even if in their last days or hours. If lapsed individuals are not reconciled in some way to the Church, there can regrettably be no funeral service, except by specific episcopal permission; a simple Trisagion service, at a funeral home or at graveside may be appropriate, however, and memorial and Trisagion services may be chanted if requested by family members.

In regard to the funeral service, the following rubrics apply:

- 1 The Trisagion service on the evening before the funeral has customarily been held at the funeral home; it may be held at the parish church for pastoral reasons with prior episcopal permission, although due regard for precedent should be given. A Trisagion service prior to a funeral cannot normally be held in the local church; it is considered an exception to the rule
- 2 A layman is brought to the church on the day of the funeral, and the casket is carried into the church by the pall bearers, preceded by the priest who is vested in exorasson and epitachelion, carrying a censer, and chanting "Agios o Theos, agios Ischyros, ..." in the slow and somber cadence.
- 3 The casket is arranged on the soleas, with the head of the deceased toward the west (toward the congregation) and the feet toward the Holy of Holies; the casket is always opened for the funeral service unless the body is disfigured and not presentable (as in the case of severe accident victims or protracted decomposition of the body). As this is being done, the priest enters the Holy of Holies through the Beautiful Gate, puts on his felonion, and stands at the Beautiful Gate to begin the funeral service facing the congregation.
- 4 The priest chants the funeral service from the Beautiful Gate, facing the congregation. During the chanting of the kontakion, "Meta ton agion..." the priest censens the body, in much the same way as the Holy Altar is customarily censured: west side (head), south side (usually the opened side of a casket), east side (feet), and north side. Note that the iconostasion, etc. are not censured, but only the body.
- 5 If the melodies for the idiomela for the Deceased by Saint John of Damascus are known, they should be intoned; otherwise they should be read for the edification of the faithful.
- 6 After the Gospel the priest preaches a sermon, the theme of which is always the resurrection. No other person may preach during the funeral service, or at its end, in the church. No eulogy is given, either by the priest, or any other person. If eulogies are requested, they may be given following the Trisagion service at the funeral home, or at the Makaria after the funeral.
- 7 After the dismissal and triple singing of "Aionia i mnimi...", the congregation is invited to file past and pay their last respects to the deceased as the Troparia ("Devte televtaion aspasmon...", "Poios chorismos...", and "Presbeiais tis tekousis...") are intoned by the Chanter.
- 8 The priest reenters the Holy of Holies during this time, and removes his felonion.
- 9 After all have paid their last respects, the priest invites the family to come forward and give the final kiss to their loved one. Once they are finished, the priest pours a small portion of oil and earth

on the body of the deceased, usually on the place over the heart, with due consideration for the feelings of the family members.

10 Following this, the casket is closed, and the pall bearers carry it out of the church, preceded by the priest who is vested in exorasson and epitachelion, carrying a censer, and again chanting "Agios o Theos, agios Ischyros, ..."

11 At the cemetery, the priest stands at the head of the casket, recites the Trisagion service, and at its conclusion offers his condolences to the family.

There are to be no other ceremonies, speakers, eulogies, speeches, songs, singers, services, etc. from the time the body arrives at the church until the priest completes the graveside Trisagion at its committal to the earth.

Any other services by fraternal or similar organizations are to take place after the graveside Trisagion. Moreover, the priest (and any other Orthodox clergy) is not to be present, or to take part, in any activity or service. The only exception to this are the military honors (playing of taps, firing of volleys, and folding the flag) which are accorded to honorably discharged members of the armed forces. I ask that the priest stand reverently and observe such military honors, inasmuch as we offer intercessions in all of our services for our "civil authorities, and for our armed forces everywhere."

Following the funeral service and internment at the cemetery, it is customary for the faithful to gather at the church for the "Makaria" (the meal offered by the family on behalf of, and in the name of, the deceased). This meal is offered in remembrance of the Lord's admonition that we "feed the hungry," especially those who have traveled and otherwise come to attend the funeral services. Fish is traditionally served at the Makaria because flesh meats are considered celebratory food.

A eulogy or other speeches, and other such activities meaningful to the family, may be held in the church hall, during or after the Makaria.

In regard to Memorial and Trisagion Services, please note the following:

1 The "Memorial Service" is said when kollyva (boiled wheat) is present. It begins with the Evlogitaria (a total of four, see paragraph h., below) for the Deceased and the Hymn "Meta ton agion anapavson ...," followed by the Troparia commencing with "Meta pnevmaton dikaion ..."

2 The "Trisagion Service" is said if no kollyva is prepared. It begins with the Troparion, "Meta pnevmaton dikaion ..." since the Evlogitaria and Hymn are not chanted

3 Also note that bread alone is not acceptable at either a Memorial or a Trisagion Service; kollyva is used to commemorate the departed, whereas bread (artos) is used at the Artoklasia to commemorate the living. Obviously, in regions where wheat for boiling is not available, bread has been used as a substitute.

4 Second, although the Memorial and Trisagion Services can be served on their own, they may also be celebrated in conjunction with Vespers, Matins, or the Divine Liturgy.

5 The proper place for a Memorial or Trisagion Service (incidentally, as well as for the Artoklasia) is (a) before the Aposticha at Vespers, (b) after the Doxology of Matins, or (c) after the Prayer before the Amvon during the Divine Liturgy. When not served as a separate service, the Memorial Service begins with the Evlogitaria, and the Trisagion Service begins with the Troparion: "Meta pnevmaton dikaion ..."

6 Third, when served in the temple, the Memorial and Trisagion Services are always served in front of the Icon of Christ. The kollyva is accordingly placed on a table set in front of the Icon of Christ when the Memorial Service is chanted. It is also acceptable for the table with the kollyva to be placed

in the middle of the soleas, if the table can be moved easily to that position at the appropriate time. The proper place, however, is before the Icon of Christ at the iconostasion.

7 Obviously if the body of the deceased is present, the Trisagion is said before the casket; e.g., the night before the funeral.

8 Fourth, at a Memorial Service, only four of the six Evlogitaria are sung, specifically: Ton agion o choros ..., Anapavson o Theos ..., To trilampes ..., and Chaire semni. Only at a funeral are all six Evlogitaria sung; the second and third Evlogitaria are never sung at a Memorial because they presuppose the presence of the deceased in his casket.

9 Fifth, the triple Kyrie elehson is sung very simply and solemnly. It is not sung in the celebratory fashion, which is reserved for other occasions such as at the Artoklasia that is for the living. The clergy should instruct the chanters to learn the simple, triple Kyrie eleison.

10 Sixth, the expression at the end of the service, "Aionia sou i mnimi, axiomakaristos kai aeimnistos adelfe / axiomakaristos kai aeimnistos adelfh imon" is said only if a body is present (e.g., during the Trisagion Service at the funeral home the night before the funeral). This phrase is never said at Memorial or Trisagion Services when no body is present (such as on a typical Sunday).

11 Seventh, the hymn, Aionia i mnimi..., is never sung in the second person addressed to the deceased; rather, it is always sung in the third person addressed to God, the only One Who can make anything eternal. In other words do not sing "...eternal be your memory..." but rather "...eternal be his/her/their memory..."

With Paternal Blessings,



✠ Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver