

Funerals, Memorials & Trisagia
ReCatechism 4
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Death. Someone said once that there are two things in our lives that we are sure off: Paying taxes and dying. Even so, a lot of people are not prepared for either one. And when the time comes, and it will, we are not ready. I remember, a few years ago some one called my wife and asked her if she was interested to buy a plot. The answer: I am not ready to die as yet.

What is death, and why we are all afraid to die?

According to Wikipedia, death is **the termination of the biological functions that sustain a living organism.** This is a secular answer.

In ecclesiastical language, **death is the separation of the soul from the body.** Actually this is the first death. In case you didn't know, there are two; the one I just describe, the separation of the soul from the body, and the second death, which **is the separation of the soul from God.**

We all go through the first one. Even Christ died as a human. The second death will come at the judgment day and only for those that left this life un-repented.

Today we will spend some time on the first death.

Death can come any time in our lives. One visit to the cemetery will be enough to know that we have dead people anywhere from the infant stage to the old, like me, and older.

That is why we have to be ready to go on a moment notice.

The question is how can one prepares for it?

A lot depends of whether we believe in life after death or not. If I don't believe that there is life after death, then leaving this life will be devastated for me. If, however, I believe there is life after death, then I should not be afraid or at least not devastated. We, as Orthodox Christians, believe strongly in life after death. That is why Paul wrote:

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1st Thessalonians 4:13-18), which by the way is the apostolic reading at the funeral services.

If you noticed, in these five verses Paul refers to death as **“fallen asleep”**, meaning, for us Christians, death is not the end. It is simply a transfer from one life to another. We just fall asleep in this life and wake up in the other life. That is why the proper name of the place we bury our dead it is not what we call in Greek **“νεκροταφείο”** but **“κοιμητήριο”**. The English language has correctly translated the second word and they call it **“cemetery”**.

Having said that, it is not an easy thing to be separated from our relatives and friends in this life. Let’s face it, it was not easy to leave our relatives in Greece and immigrate here to Canada, but we did it because we believed there was a better life, a better future here.

We did cry then, and we do cry when a friend or relative leaves this world the **military church “στρατευομένη εκκλησία”** and join the **triumphant “θριαμβεύουσα”** in heaven.

It is not easy for the soul to separate from the body either. One of the hymns we chant during the funeral services says:

Alas! What an agony the soul endures when from the body it is parting; how many are her tears for weeping, but there is none that will show compassion: unto the angels she turns with downcast eyes; useless are her supplications; and unto men she extends her imploring hands, but finds none to bring her rescue.

Yes, it is difficult for everyone, particular the soul who has no experience outside the body.

Man was not made by God to die. We were to live for ever with God, the same life that Adam and Eve had before they disobey God and got kicked out of Paradise. The result was this physical death that separates the soul from the body and sends the body back to earth and the soul to wait for the resurrection day to join again the body and appear in front of Christ on the judgment day to find out whether he/she will live with God in the Heavenly Kingdom, or in Hell away from God for ever.

Besides the letter to Thessalonians we read at the funeral services, Paul devoted a chapter (chapter fifteen) in the First epistle to Corinthians talking about the resurrection. I would strongly recommend reading it when you have time. It will give you a new perspective of life and death. But let’s get back to death.

When some one dies, when the soul departs from the body, there are no longer called men, human (άνθρωπος). Man is someone with both body and soul, the spirit. Some one with only the spirit will be either an angel or a demon. Some one with only the body will be an animal. That is why when some one dies, we call the body remains or corps, for the simple reason that they are what is left from a man.

If the person is sick and about to die, it is strongly recommended to call a priest and offer the individual Holy Communion. Unfortunately, a lot of people do not call the priest because they feel that the individual will be scared knowing from past experience that if the priest is coming to offer Holy Communion, usually means that the individual is about to die. First of all it is wrong to deprive the individual of Holly communion particularly the last few moments that they are still

alive, and second, usually the one who is about to die senses the death and they do not get scared by seeing the priest. One note, the individual must be fully alert in order to receive Holy Communion. The priest will not offer Holy Communion to some one that is in a comma.

When death is confirmed, a relative will call the priest and make arrangements for the funeral services. The deceased, will be delivered at a funeral home and they will prepare the body before they put it for display. The orthodox faith strictly forbids cremation. The body will have to be returned to the earth according to the Biblical: “... for dust you *are*, and to dust you shall return.” “Ότι γη ει και εις γην απελεύση” (Genesis 3:19).

The funeral service is the one of the very few that the church visits the individual instead of the other way around.

It is customary for the priest to visit the funeral home the day before the burial and give a “trisagio” for the brother or the sister that has fallen asleep. It is called “trisagio” “**Thrice-Holy**”, because it begins with the familiar prayer, “**Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us,**” and it is repeated three times.

In this prayer we are asking God to give rest to the deceased among those who have already been perfected in the faith.

The next day they will bring the deceased to the church where we also chant prayers to God, mostly from psalm 119. The prayers are for both the deceased and the attendees. For the deceased, to place him with the righteous who have already departed from this life, and the attendees, to remind every one how short life is and most important to prepare ourselves because sooner or later we will join him on the journey to eternal life.

It is time to evaluate our perspective of life. It is time to realize that, regardless how we live our lives here, there will be time to return to our creator and give account of how we lived here on earth. We realize that most of the things we evaluate as important in this life, have no meaning in the next life. One of the hymns

says:

Where is the pleasure of life which is unmixed with sorrow? Where is the glory which on earth has stood firm and unchanged? All things are weaker than shadow, all are more illusive than dreams; comes one fell stroke, and Death in turn, prevails over all these vanities.

Makes no difference if you lived a luxury life, if you were poor, if you were famous, if people bow before you when you passed by, or if you were begging for food. All these are forgotten at time of death. Job says: **We came necked in this life and we will leave necked.**

Solomon lived such a luxury life, that he became a symbol of a spoiled life. Yet at the end of his life he wrote:

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasures. For my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done. And on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity

and grasping for the wind, there was no profit under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

The church continues with more prayers for both the deceased and the faithful. It wouldn't be fair though to leave the faithful without hope.

We already spoke about the apostolic reading which encourages everyone to be hopeful that this is not the end. There is another life which we hope to live with Christ. The Gospel reading is also encouraging the faithful.

Most assuredly, I say to you that he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but passed from death to life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live (John 5:24-25).

Yes it is hard to see your friends and relatives leaving this world, but it is not the end. We all will be resurrected. Our soul will join the resurrected body to appear in front of Christ on the judgment day.

At the end the church calls upon the faithful to give the final farewell greeting to the deceased while we chant the special hymn of the last kiss (**Δεύτε τελευταίον ασπασμόν δώτε αδελφοί τω θανόντι**).

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.

I would like to point out a few thoughts when it comes to death. First of all, death is not a punishment. If that was the case we are all punished since we all die. We should not look at it as something bad is happening to us or to our loved ones. We should not **“knock on wood”** or avoid the conversation as being bad luck. Whether we want to accept it or not is part of our lives here on earth. Some people break the plate with koliva at the grave side, so death will not come back to the house. This is a myth. Regardless whether you bring back the plate or not, if some one is going to die, they will regardless if you break it at the grave side or bring it back home.

It is customary to send flowers. Again, they don't help the dead and for that matter the living. Personally I would prefer if we use the money for donation to the needy. They might even say a prayer for the deceased. Some people include a cement volt over and above the casket. It is neither good nor bad. Personally, I think it is waist of money. Volt or no volt our body will go through decay process.

Some people buy the plot and/or the cross while they are still alive. Although it is not recommended by the church, it is not forbidden either. For that matter I believe it is not a bad idea. It takes away a heavy burden from the loved ones left behind. It is tough enough that they have to deal with the death itself. Anything that will make their lives easier on these tough times will help. For the record, I already bought mine.

Memorials and Trisagia.

Memorials are special services in the Orthodox faith where upon the church is praying for the forgiveness of the sins of the deceased and to help the souls while they are waiting for the judgment day. We bring to the church boiled wheat (κόληβα) which is based on the biblical: **Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it produces much grain. (John 12:24).** As the wheat dies when it is planted in the ground and comes back alive, the same way the body which is buried like the wheat, will come back alive in the general resurrection. We should also bring a “prosforo” with the name of the deceased which will be used for Holy Communion. We have memorials on the 3rd day, the 9th the 40th and one year from the day some one passed away. After a year, the church has two yearly memorials for all the dead, one the day before the Meat feast day (αποκριά), this coming Saturday, and the day before the day of Pentecost.

We must stress out that although the souls are comforted, what we called deadly sins, are not forgiven. **Matthew 12:32. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come.**

Here Christ is telling us that although there is no forgiveness for the sin against the Holy Spirit (the deadly sin) not even on the age to come, there is forgiveness for not deadly sins. Since the dead cannot ask forgiveness after death, the church is doing it for them. **A John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother sinning as sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death** Since we believe that our brothers and sisters have not perish but their soul lives for ever, and since they cannot ask for forgiveness on their own, again, the church is asking for them. One note here: If I die un-repent a thousand memorials will not get me out of hell and into Paradise. Trisagia are prayers for the deceased either at the church or at the cemetery but without the boiled wheat (κόληβα).

We could be talking for ever in the subject of death and memorials but we are running out of time. I would like to close with a question that was posed the last time we had questions and answers. And that is, how can some one prepares himself for death and how we can comfort our friends and relatives who had a relative passed away.

First how can we prepare ourselves for death. The fathers of the church are talking about remembering on a daily basis our death (ν'άχουμε μνήμη θανάτου), but without be despaired.

We do that by knowing that death is not a punishment but a way to move to the next life. A life which according to Paul is so good that: **“Eye has not seen, nor ear has heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who loved Him (1st Corinthians 2:9).** I knew a bishop who started every day by visiting the cemetery. That reminded him that this life is temporary. The real life is in heaven. **Socrates, the greatest philosopher ever lived, right before he died said that they should not cry for his death, for that matter they should not even care where he was going to be buried, because what they will burry is not Socrates but his body. The soul, the real Socrates, will never die.** Death is nothing but a sleep. We fall asleep here and we wake up in the next life. This is our believe. The Crete finishes with: **“I expect the resurrection of the dead and the life to come”** that alone should be enough not to fear death.

As to how to comfort friends or relatives on the time of death, it all depends on their believes. If they don't believe on another life, makes no difference what you say, they will not believe you. For them this is the end and they will never see their relative again. You will make it worse if you try to tell them about life after death and the fact they we will meet them again. Only time will heal their pain. So, what do you say to them? Last week I received an email and I believe this is the best answer to the question.

The email said:
When the wife of the next door neighbor past away and her husband was crying on the veranda, little Johnny stopped playing and went over, climbed on his lap and sat there. When Johnny came home his mom asked him what he was saying to the neighbor to comfort him. Nothing, said little Johnny. I just helped him to cry.

Now you probably say, how we know that there is another life. After all, nobody came back to confirm it. Again for the believers, the bible mentions it in so many places, but even if it didn't, look around and ask yourself: Why we have so many faithful, living their lives according the God's will and yet suffer in this life. Yet, we know so many people living in sin, they steal and they cheat and yet they look like the live happily ever after. Not fair you say, and you are right. It is not fair. That is why we believe that there is another life where the good ones will be rewarded and the bad ones will be punished. For us Orthodox there is no doubt in our mind. We **do expect the resurrection of the death and the life to come.**
Amen