

21. On Memorials and Praying for the Departed

One important aspect of Orthodox life and worship is what we call “the communion of Saints.” Because all members of the Church are united in Christ’s one Body, and because in Christ even death is overcome, death is not an insurmountable barrier separating the living and the departed. Thus, we pray for our departed loved ones, and we ask for the prayers of the departed Saints. Through prayer and the Liturgy, we remain in connection with Christ, and with all the members of His Body.

There are abundant passages in Scripture showing that those who depart from this life remain conscious. Examples include the appearance of Moses and Elijah at the time of the Lord’s Transfiguration (e.g. Matt 17:3), the Lord’s parable of Lazarus and the rich man, and the descriptions of the “elders” and martyrs in the heavenly visions of the Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation). In the Gospel, Christ speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as alive, saying God is the God “of the living, for all live to Him.” (Luke 20:38)

The Orthodox Church does not accept, therefore, the doctrine of “soul sleep” that is taught by some groups. According to this teaching, when someone dies, he becomes unconscious until the bodily resurrection. While we speak of our departed loved ones as “falling asleep” (as in John 11:11), what we mean is that the body “sleeps” while the soul remains aware. Death is the unnatural, temporary separation of soul and body. The body rests in the grave, but the soul goes to meet the Lord. Those made righteous by Christ before us join that “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds us. (Hebrews 12:1)

In the Old Testament, there were proscriptions against using “mediums and familiar spirits.” (Leviticus 20:6) What is forbidden here is sorcery, which is always seen throughout Scripture and Christian tradition as something demonic. In any case, these warnings have no bearing on whether or not human beings remain conscious after death, or whether or not it is possible, in Christ, to know and be known by the departed.

In fact, it is the universal experience of Christians through the ages that those who die in Christ are not dead and gone, but alive in Him. As the Apostle Paul says, “whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.” (Rom. 14:8) In other words, if Christ is alive and with us, and if departed Christians are in Christ, then they, too, are alive and with us. It is also the experience of the Church that “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16) even across the membrane of death. Therefore we both ask the departed Saints to pray for us, and we pray for our loved ones who have left this life.

Orthodox prayer for the departed has nothing to do with “earning salvation” for others. It has nothing to do with a doctrine of “purgatory.” Rather it has everything to do with Christian love — the love of God for us, and the love of Christians for one another. For Christians, love and communion are expressed especially through prayer, which is both joined to the common worship of the Divine Liturgy and offered by each individual believer. Through prayer, the powerful, Spirit-birthing love of Christians rises as sweet-smelling incense before God on behalf of all for whom the prayer is offered.

Of course, our prayer cannot override a person’s free will, or negate the entire shape of his life. Nevertheless there is a very real sense in which the Church, and her members, can claim a person as belonging to her. We say to Christ, in effect, “we forgive this person; do

Thou also forgive in Thy boundless mercy. We love this person; do Thou receive him into Thy heavenly mansions in Thine abundant love for mankind." According to our tradition, such prayer mysteriously transcends time and death itself to contribute to the salvation and sanctification of those for whom it is offered.

Such prayer for the departed benefits us, too, for it softens our hearts, awakens gratitude, and enlivens our consciences as we remember those who, going before, have blessed and taught us. Even those who have in some way caused us harm may benefit us through our prayer for them: as we forgive them and commend them to God with a wish for their salvation, we are practicing Christ-like love for our enemies, and again, our consciences are pricked if in some way we have also harmed or failed them.

We may pray for our departed loved ones at any time, in our own private prayers. Some Orthodox faithful pray a form of the Jesus Prayer on behalf of those who have died, such as, "O Lord Jesus Christ, grant rest to the soul of Thy departed servant." At the same time, there are specific, more formal ways to remember the departed within the liturgical life of the Church. First of all, we can light a candle when we come to services at the Church. We can give the names of our departed loved one to the priest for commemoration at the Liturgy or other services. We can also request that memorial services be done for Orthodox who have departed this life. Note that because a memorial service is a public declaration that a person belongs to the Church, it is done for Orthodox Christians only. However, there is a service called the "Akathist for the Repose of the Departed," which is intended for anyone who has died. You might request this service for your departed loved ones, or ask for a copy to pray it on your own.

When an Orthodox Christian dies, it is customary to pray the Trisagion Prayers of Mercy as soon after death as possible, and to repeat these several times: on the 3rd day, the 9th day, and the 40th day. Some offer Trisagion prayers at the six-month point, and it is usual to pray them at the one-year anniversary, and each anniversary after that. We sing "memory eternal," commending our loved ones to the eternal memory of God; for if God remembers them, they will never cease to exist.

Along with Trisagion prayers, someone (usually a family member, or a member of the parish) makes "Koliva." Koliva is boiled wheat, which is normally sweetened and decorated, and offered for the memorial service. The boiled wheat is a reminder of the Lord's words in the Gospel of St. John: "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) Christ, through offering Himself as a sacrifice for us, becomes the grain of wheat that dies and rises, raising us as well. In Him, we also become grains of wheat that fall into the ground, but are destined to rise. When we make and partake of the koliva, it is as a reminder of the hope of the Resurrection.

As Orthodox Christians, we "look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come," as it says in the Nicene Creed. Every memorial service and every prayer we offer on behalf of our departed loved ones is a way of joining our voice with the voices of all Christians throughout the centuries who have proclaimed, "Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!" It is an act of love for Christ, who died and rose for us, and for all those whom He loves and calls to His Heavenly Kingdom.