

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

A psychiatrist recently listed five of the most upsetting experiences people can have. They were as follows: death of a child, death of a spouse, a jail sentence, death of a relative, an unfaithful spouse. Three of the five were related to death.

Some time ago an intriguing story appeared in one of our magazines. It was the story of a man on his way home from the office on a rainy Friday evening to face a cluster of minor problems involving the various members of his family. As he made his way home through mid-Manhattan, he happened to see a man who had just been run down by a car, lying dead in the middle of the street. This was only his second or third contact with death and it really shocked him. The conscious realization that he too was going to die one day hit him like a sledge hammer. It made a difference when he got home that night. The problems that he thought were so great were not as big as he imagined. The thought of death had given him a new perspective.

REFUSING TO FACE REALITY

One of the striking characteristics of our time is the absurd lengths to which we go to keep death out of sight and out of mind. Dr. John Brantner, a University of Minnesota clinical psychologist, said recently that American society “deals very badly with death and the dying.... As a society we fear death and through our fear we foster it,” he said. Studies have shown that dying patients want very much to talk about death. It helps them accept it and relieves anxiety, but few people are comfortable about bringing up the subject.

Tolstoy, in his masterful tale, *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, describes the conspiracy of silence that we maintain in the presence of the dying. “Ivan Ilyitch’s chief torment was a lie—the lie somehow accepted by everyone that he was only sick, but not dying, and that he needed only to be calm.”

Simone de Beauvoir, in *A Very Easy Death*, writes of her mother dying of cancer, “At the time the truth was crushing her, and when she needed to escape it by talking, we were condemning her to silence, we forced her to say nothing about the anxieties and to suppress her doubts, she felt both guilty and misunderstood.”

In earlier days, along with the other basic facts of life like birth, marriage, bearing children, and raising a family, death was openly accepted as a fact of life. The burial ground surrounding the church stood in the very center of the community. The body was not viewed in a funeral parlor; it was brought right into the living room of one's home. One could not evade the fact of death. One had to accept it and learn to live with it.

THE CAUSE OF MORBIDITY

Please do not misunderstand. The intention is not to be morbid. It is quite the opposite. If there is anything morbid about death, it arises out of the refusal to face it and take it into account. Our Orthodox Christian faith is not morbid when it takes death frankly and openly into account. Our Church calendar provides many occasions when we are asked to face up to the fact of death. Easter is one such occasion. Sunday is another. Every Sunday is a "little Easter", celebrating Christ's victory over death. On our Church calendar every year, there are special Memorial Saturdays or "Saturdays of the Souls", which provide another opportunity for us to face up to death. On these Saturdays the Divine Liturgy is celebrated and special prayers are offered for our deceased loved ones. We pray for the dead especially on Saturdays since it was on the Sabbath Day that Christ lay dead in the tomb, "resting from all His works and trampling down death by death." Thus, in the New Testament, Saturday becomes the proper day for remembering the dead and offering prayers for them.

There are two questions often asked about the practice we have in the Orthodox Church of praying for the dead:

1. WHY do we pray for the dead?
2. WHAT can we expect of these prayers?

WHY DO WE PRAY FOR THE DEAD?

Christianity is a religion of love. Praying for the dead is an expression of love. We ask God to remember our departed because we love them. Love relationships survive death and even transcend it. There is an inner need for a relationship with a loved one to continue to be expressed even after a loved one has died. Often *even more so* after a loved one has

died since physical communication is no longer possible. The Church encourages us to express our love for our departed brethren through memorial services and prayers.

The anniversary of the death of a loved one is very painful. The Church helps us cope with this pain by encouraging us to have memorial prayers offered in Church for departed loved ones on the anniversaries of their deaths, i.e., forty days after the death, six months, a year, etc. This gives us the opportunity to *do* something for our loved one. It helps express and eventually resolve our grief.

Death may take loved ones out of sight but it does not take them out of mind or out of heart. We continue to love them and think of them as we believe they continue to love us and think of us. How can a mother forget a child who has passed over to the life beyond? The same love which led her to pray for that child when he lived will guide her to pray for him now. For in Christ all are living.

The same love makes her wish to communicate with him. Yet, all communication must take place in Christ and through Christ. No other communication with the dead is possible or lawful for the Christian. God is God of the living. Our dear ones live in Him. Only through Him is it possible for us to communicate with them. Every liturgy in the Orthodox Church contains prayers for the dead such as the following:

Be mindful of all those who slumber in the hope of a resurrection to everlasting life. Give them rest, O God, where the light of Thy countenance shineth.

The ancient Eucharistic prayers of both East and West intercede for the dead as well as for the living.

Just as we pray for the deceased, so we believe they continue to love us, remember us, and pray for us now that they are closer to God. We cannot forget the example of the rich man in Hades asking Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers lest they, too, go to that place of torment. Though he had left his life he did not cease to be concerned for his brothers still on earth.

The Orthodox Church prays for the dead to express her faith that all who have fallen asleep in the Lord, live in the Lord; their lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). Whether on earth or in heaven, the Church is a single family, one Body in Christ. Death changes the location

but it cannot sever the bond of love. “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:32). He is “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6). He is the God of persons who, though dead physically, are very much alive in His presence.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT OF OUR PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD?

Since a person’s eternal destiny is determined immediately after death (though one must wait for the General Judgment to receive the full measure of one’s reward), we must not expect our prayers to snatch an unbeliever from Hades to Paradise. It is our present life that determines our eternal destiny. Now is the time to repent and accept God’s grace. Death puts an end to that state and commits each person to his special judgment. This is why the Lord said that work must be done “while it is day” because “the night cometh when no man can work”. “Day” means the present life, “when it is still possible to believe”, writes St. Chrysostom, while “night” is the condition after death.

What happens beyond the grave belongs entirely to God. He has told us as much as we need to know; the rest is covered with a veil of mystery which man’s curiosity is incapable of piercing. The faithful have committed themselves to God for the duration of their earthly lives. Now, it is well and good for them to commit their departed loved ones to the mercy of God through prayer, for they have the assurance that God in the riches of His mercy has ways to help them beyond our knowing.

FOCUS ON OURSELVES

Whether our prayers for our departed loved ones bring any benefit to them is a question we must leave to the mercy of God. But of one thing we are certain: such prayers do benefit those who pray for the departed. They remind us that we too are going to die; they strengthen faith in the life beyond; they nourish reverence toward those who have died; they help build hope in divine mercy; they develop brotherly love among those who survive. They make us more cautious and diligent in getting ready for that ultimate journey which will unite us with our departed loved ones and usher us into the presence of God. They remind us that now is the time for moral development and improvement, for faith, repentance and love;

now is the time to strive for the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to those “who have fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith”. In other words, the Lord never told us that after we die, somebody else’s prayers will get us into heaven—no matter how many memorial prayers they offer in our behalf. Salvation is a personal matter between each person and his Lord to be achieved in this life.

LOVE NEVER FORGETS

Dr. Tillich believed that the anxiety of having to die is the anxiety that one will be forgotten both now and in eternity. Burial means a removal from the face of the earth. This is what men cannot endure. Memorial markers will not keep us from being forgotten. One day they will crumble to dust. The only thing that can keep us from being forgotten is our faith that God knew us before we were born and will remember us for all eternity.

In a lesser but still very real way, memorial prayers offered by loved ones serve to relieve the anxiety of being forgotten.

The first child of Dr. Martineau, an eminent minister, died in infancy and was buried in the French cemetery of Dublin. Before they left Ireland for Liverpool, the father and mother paid a farewell visit to the grave of their first-born son. The years went by. Mrs. Martineau died. At the age of 87, Dr. Martineau was a lonely old man. But when he was at the tercentenary of Dublin University, he stole away from the brilliant public function to stand once more by the tiny grave that held the dust of his first-born child. No other living soul recalled that little one’s smile or remembered where the child was sleeping. But the father knew and the little buried hands held his heart. A father’s heart never forgets. Love always remembers. That is why the Orthodox Church has always encouraged us to hold special memorial prayers and services for the departed. And that is why we sing the hymn *Memory Eternal* at funeral services.

A MEANINGFUL CUSTOM

It is customary among Orthodox Christians from Greece to bring a tray of boiled wheat kernels to church for the memorial service. The wheat kernels express belief in everlasting life. Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Just as new life rises from the buried kernel of wheat, so we believe the one buried in Christ will rise one day to a new life with God. The wheat kernels are covered with sugar to express the bliss of eternal life with God in heaven.

FOCUS ON CHRIST

When Orthodox Christians pray for loved ones, they focus not only on the departed, but especially on Christ who “by his death trampled upon death and to those in the tombs bestowed life eternal.”

Memorial prayer services which affirm the reality of physical death and also the reality of resurrection into life eternal play a vital role in the healing of grief.

On Memorial Saturdays the Church prays universally for all the departed. However, a special litany is included to pray personally for departed loved ones whose names are submitted to the priest by parishioners.

One of the great theologians of the Orthodox Church, Prof. Christos Androutsos, stated that memorial prayers should be offered only for those who have repented and not sinned deeply. It is not proper—he said—that they be offered for the impenitent sinner. Since, however, the exact moral state of those departing is unknown, in practice they are offered for all.*

SUMMARY

In summary, we pray for the dead:

1. Because they are still living in God’s kingdom. Our love for them still needs to be expressed. The bond of love does not cease. Through memorial services and prayers, love continues to be expressed.

* *The Great Hereafter*. By Christos Androutsos. Library of Idealism. Cleveland, OH.

2. Such prayers benefit those who offer them, strengthening their faith in eternal life.
3. Although we do not believe that someone else's prayers, offered after we die, will get us into heaven, we continue to pray for the deceased beseeching God's mercy in their behalf. Orthodox prayers for the dead invoke God's "mercy" to bestow "comfort" and "forgiveness" upon the deceased. The Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue held at Llandaff on July 18, 1980 agreed on the following statement regarding prayers for the departed: "After death and before the general resurrection, the souls of those who have fallen asleep in the faith are assisted by the prayers of the Church, through the crucified and risen Christ—through Him alone and nothing else."*
4. Memorial prayers help us focus on the Risen Christ Who is the Resurrection and the Life.