

Praying for the Dead

by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.

Why Pray for the Dead?

Prayer for the dead is an important part of the life as Orthodox Christians. When we remember our deceased family members and friends in prayer, we act on our belief in God's promise of resurrection and eternal life for them and for us. In **James 5:16** we read: "Pray for one another... The prayer of a righteous man has great power." Is this prayer only for the living? Given that death does not disrupt the unity of Christ's body, that is, those of us still struggling in this world and those who have already received their reward in the next, the answer is "No." Do we not believe that during the Divine Liturgy the entire Body of Christ participates? Orthodox Christians who are dead can be remembered during the preparation of the Gifts for the Divine Liturgy. As the priest reads their names he places small particles of the bread on the paten below the large square that represents our Lord. Confer with your parish priest regarding how to remember non-Orthodox Christians. There is a wide variance on how this is done among the different Orthodox traditions.

The prayer of the righteous can help to obtain forgiveness for a sinner, even if he is already dead. By praying for the dead we hope that God will be merciful and grant them pardon of their sins. In **II Maccabees 12:44-45** we read about a sin offering made by Judas Maccabeus on behalf of his dead soldiers: "For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin."

Praying for the dead instructs us, the living, reminding us of our own mortality and need to prepare for our own passage from this life to the next. It reminds us of our connection with our deceased family members. In addition those fallen asleep in the Lord continue to pray for us. We pray for one another! It can be very comforting for our children to remember their beloved grandparents in prayer, and to know that their grandparents continue to pray for them. When my mother-in-law was still living and our daughters visited her, they knew that Baba Mary would pray on her knees twice a day, for an hour each time. She had her "list" of people to pray for tucked into her worn prayer book that was held together with duct tape. It was an image that the girls will always remember.

How Do We Do This?

One way is to include the names of the dead on our list of prayer intentions, either in our icon corner or prayer book. This way we can remember them by name often.

Another way is to offer Memorial Services in the Church. These are traditionally done on the

third, ninth, and fortieth days after their repose, then on the year's anniversary. Some people keep the year's anniversary annually; others on the five-year multiples.

According to St. Simeon of Thessalonika, *"the **Third Day** service is celebrated for the reason that the reposed one received his being through the Trinity."* It also reminds us that Jesus was resurrected on the third day. Often, the burial takes place on the third day. The **Ninth Day** says St. Simeon, is kept in remembrance of the nine choirs of angels: *"...that the spirits of the deceased dwell together with the holy spirits, the angels, being unmaterial (sic) and naturally similar to them."* The **Fortieth Day** service dates back to the Old Testament. Joseph mourned his father Jacob for forty days, as did the Israelites for Moses. Jesus remained on earth for forty days after His resurrection before ascending to heaven. The **Year Anniversary**, according to St. Simeon, *"is celebrated because it is the consummation, and our God, the Trinity, is the life of all and the cause of being and shall be the restoration of all the renewal of human nature."* On these occasions we contact the priest to serve the Memorial Service which can also become a special family gathering. If the family member is buried nearby, the priest can be asked to conduct the Memorial Service at the cemetery.

Although Saturday is the day traditionally set apart for prayers for the dead, some Orthodox Churches offer the Memorial Service at the end of Liturgy on the Sunday closest to the anniversary of the person's death. Even though this may be considered a "matter of convenience," it does afford the entire parish, including the children, the opportunity to participate and be reminded of this responsibility. Among those churches that maintain Sunday as strictly the day of the Lord's Resurrection, memorials are held either on Saturday or a weekday.

When can we pray for the dead?

The Church sets aside certain days as "Saturday of the Souls." In the Greek tradition: the two Saturdays before and the first Saturday of the Great Fast. In the Slav tradition: the Saturday of Meatfare, the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Saturdays of the Great Fast, and the Saturday before St. Demetrios (October 26/November 8). In both traditions: the Saturday before Pentecost. The Slavic tradition also includes prayers for the dead on the Tuesday after St. Thomas Sunday, and for those fallen in battle, on the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (August 29/September 11).

On the first Saturday of the Great Fast we remember the miracle of **St. Theodore of Tyre** in 362 AD with koliva. The Emperor, Julian the Apostate, had the food in the market sprinkled with the blood of animals sacrificed to pagan gods in order to defile the first week of the Great Fast. Patriarch Aphdioxios of Constantinople appeared to the saint in a dream warning him of the emperor's scheme. St. Theodore told the people to cook the wheat they had at home rather than grinding all of it into flour. Thus, they did not buy anything in the market and avoided the tainted food.

There are certain days when Memorial Services are not permitted. They include Feast Days, between Christmas and Theophany, and between Palm Sunday and St. Thomas Sunday (the Sunday after Pascha/Easter).

In many places it is the custom to visit the cemetery during Bright Week to place flowers, newly dyed Pascha eggs, and burning candles by the graves. If it is a parish cemetery, as is the case in my parish, the priest and the faithful, adults and children, visit on St. Thomas Sunday to pray and to sing "Christ is Risen!" to all those departed this life.

Food at Memorial Services

Among some Orthodox Christians, koliva (kolyva) or boiled wheat is prepared for the Memorial Service. Among others the custom is to prepare a sweetened bread or cake, or sweetened rice. The important idea in most cases seems to be that the memorial food is some sort of grain, sweetened, and distributed to all in attendance. The grain recalls Jesus' reference to His own death and resurrection: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit." **John 12:24**

In some parishes there are people who regularly make the required food for these services, so check with your parish priest. If you plan to make it yourself, include your children. It provides them the opportunity to learn how it's done, plus gives you an occasion to reflect on its spiritual meaning. If a parishioner is employed to make the food item, ask if you can bring your children to watch.

Koliva appears in a variety of forms, from a bowl of glutinous, purposely overboiled, unsweetened, unidentifiable grain, to a fantasy of royal icing, paper lace, and dragee. The only constant is that the grain is boiled for a bowl of traditional Greek style koliva that would be offered at the Liturgy on a "Saturday of the Souls."

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