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The Funeral Service

This is the fourth of a seven-lecture series entitled *A Christian Ending to our Lives* given by the Very Reverend Josiah Trenham in the St. John Chrysostom Catechetical School at St. Andrew Orthodox Church, Riverside, CA. This title is taken from the frequent litany petition often recited in the divine service in which we say “For a Christian ending to our lives, painless, blameless and peaceful, and for a good defense before the fearful judgment seat of Christ, let us ask of the Lord.”



Introduction

I welcome you all to the fourth lecture in our series *A Christian Ending to Our Lives*. In our last three lectures we have examined the origin and meaning of death, how the cultivation of the remembrance of death is a fundamental virtue in the Christian life, what a Christian perspective on aging is – a preparation for translation to the next life, what constitutes a good death, and we walked through the basic practical steps from death to burial. I am very pleased to present this lecture on the subject of the *Funeral Service*.

The Glory of the Divine Services of the Orthodox Church

There is nothing that cheers the heart of an Orthodox priest more than the praying of the divine services. It is the priest's greatest honor to conduct these holy mysteries, and it is the faithful's greatest honor to participate in them. This is the case for the Holy Liturgy, but also for all the sacraments and services of the Church. The services themselves are transformative. Their beauty, holiness, depth, and theology reveal and convey the Holy Trinity to us, and us to the Holy Trinity.

As the pastor of St. Andrew Church I regularly have the joy of interacting with first time visitors and neophytes who are literally overwhelmed by the services. I hear about these occasions on a regular basis following the

liturgy, but I also hear about them on the occasions when there are larger visitor populations, such as at baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

At baptism receptions I often hear from visitors about the deep effect that exorcisms, the trine immersion and emersion, and the sealing with holy chrism has upon the attendees. This sacred rite of initiation leaves a deep impression upon visitors, and they leave with a firm understanding that the Orthodox Church takes holy baptism extremely seriously and believes that it is truly the beginning of the Christian life, entrance into the holy Church, and a miracle of forgiveness, regeneration, and adoption into the family of God.

At wedding receptions I hear from visitors about the beauty of the crowning and I receive questions about the various movements of the service: the processional dance around the Holy Gospel; the drinking of the blessed wine; and more. I often hear comments like, “There is no question that they are *really married*.” These comments come from the content of the sacrament of crowning, the many blessings from and supplications to the Author of marriage, and the reading of the Holy Gospel about the wedding feast at Cana.

At the mercy meal following funerals I also hear from visitors. In fact, in my pastoral experience, there has been no divine service that has provoked greater response from non-Orthodox visitors than has the funeral service.

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Perhaps it is here in the funeral service that the other-worldly nature of the Orthodox Christian faith is revealed in such contrast to the materialistic world in which we live. The sobriety and truth-telling of the funeral service is so blatant, so articulate, and delivered with such a succinct power that it leaves visitors reeling, convinced that they have heard the truth about life and death, the earth and heaven, and the importance of the Kingdom of God in a way that they never do in any other place at all. I believe it is safe to say that the Orthodox funeral service is the most dramatic service of the Church.

The Purpose of the Funeral Service

Very few Americans today can tell you the purpose of a funeral service, and those who try will probably articulate a purpose that is, in fact, far from the traditional purpose of Christian funerals. I suspect that most would say today that the purpose of the funeral is to celebrate the life of the deceased and to remember them. There is a time and place for this, but it is certainly not the funeral service. The purpose of the funeral service, of the κηδεία, is two-fold: to assist by our prayers the transition of the soul of the departed to the next life; and to bid it farewell. We come to funerals to intercede for our departed loved one, and to say goodbye.

In most of the divine services we come to worship God, and to make supplication for our sins. In the funeral service we come to ask of the Lord for mercy for the departed. As such, attendance at the funeral of the departed is not something that ought be dreaded or resisted in any way. Rather, we ought go fervently to the funeral as an expression of our sincere love for the departed. We go to serve, to help, to intercede, to do a great act for someone we love, and in cases of the funerals of those who did not die well we go to help and express the mercy of God.

The Text of the Funeral Service

From the earliest times of the Church believers sung hymns and psalms and read prayers for the repose of the departed. The psalter has always been the main prayer book of the church, and provides the core of the material for all the divine services of the Church. Such is the case also with the Funeral Service. The fundamental form of the Church's funeral service took definitive shape in the 4th and 5th centuries, and the most beautiful portion of the funeral service, the Funeral Idiomela, were composed by St. John of Damascus in the early 8th century. Let me walk you through the component parts of the service starting from the opening, "Blessed is our God, always, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen."

In Repose on the Solea

The service begins with the departed lying in repose in his coffin on the solea. The celebrants stand in the holy gates facing the departed and congregation. This arrangement itself is of tremendous significance. For a believer to be on the solea is a very special thing, for it is here that we draw near to God and receive the holy sacraments. On the solea we are united to the Holy Trinity when we receive the holy Eucharist, are touched by God when we are united with holy unction, and are crowned into one flesh by God in the service of holy matrimony. When we are on the solea we should think "*nearness to God*," and such is the case also in the funeral service. The departed on the solea is our presenting him or her to God.

The Funeral Psalm: Psalm 90

Following the opening exclamation the chanter reads Psalm 90. This psalm has as its central theme the care and protection of God. It anticipates the words of St. Paul, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" (Rom. 8:31). It begins with these beautiful words which open the funeral service, "*Whosoever dwells under the defense of the Most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.*" Is this not what we seek for our departed brethren – that, as they move into the unseen realm, they find themselves "*under the defense of the Most High*" and "*abiding under the shadow of the Almighty?*"

The psalm continues in a dialectical manner with the author speaking and saying, "*I will say unto the Lord, Thou art my hope, and my stronghold, my God, in him will I trust.*" Here is the disposition of soul we pray that our departed loved one has. We hope that he reposes with this sense of trust, reliance and faith in the Lord, for it is this faith which will provide victory in death.

The psalm continues with beautiful affirmations about God's protection: "*He shall deliver thee from the snare of the hunter*" (in this case the "hunters" are the demons who seek to bring our souls into hell); "*He shall defend thee under His wings*"; "*His faithfulness and truth shall be thy shield*"; "*Thou shalt not be afraid of any terror*"; "*There shall no evil happen unto thee*"; "*He shall give his angels charge over thee..They shall bear thee in their hands*", "*Thou shalt go upon the lion...and the dragon shalt thou tread under thy feet.*" Is this not the very deliverance we all are seeking for the soul of the departed? Do we not gather to ask of God that the soul of the departed not fall into the hands of the hunter-demons? That the soul of the departed not be detained or consumed by satan the prowling lion and dragon? Are

we not gathered to beseech God to allow our beloved to trample these enemies underfoot? That the angels of God take charge of the soul of our beloved and escort it to paradise? Indeed we do, and this beautiful Psalm 90 is the funeral psalm par excellence.

The psalm ends with God speaking, *“Because he hath set his love upon me, I will deliver him; I will set him up, because he hath known my Name. He shall call upon me, and I will hear him; yes, I am with him in trouble (and “in trouble” is a good description of the soul after death); I will deliver him, and bring him to honor. With long life (actually eternal life) will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.”* These concluding verses of the funeral psalm in which we hear the voice of the Lord God are full of immense consolation, and reflect the very heart of God, God’s desire for all persons that they love Him, inherit eternal life, be brought to honor, and be satisfied in His salvation.

I should note as well that in some Orthodox funeral traditions Psalm 90 is omitted, and Psalm 118, the *“amomos,”* is read. This is the longest psalm in the psalter and praises the word of God and a blameless life (amomos) and has always been cherished by the faithful at the time of repose.

The Evlogetaria of the Departed

Following the funeral psalm the chanters chant the Evlogetaria of the Departed. We are used to hearing the Evlogetaria of the Resurrection chanted in every Sunday Orthros, *“Blessed art thou O Lord, teach me thy statutes...”* The Evlogetaria of the Departed are chanted using the same solemn tone, the plagal of tone 1, but the hymns are thematic for the funeral and not the resurrection.

Evlogetarion #1. *“The Choir of the Saints has found the Fountain of Life and the Door of Paradise. May I also find the right way, through repentance. I am a lost sheep. Call me, O Savior, and save me.”* In the first Evlogetarion the departed seeks for mercy from the Savior through the voice of the chanters.

Evlogetarion #2. *“O thou who of old didst create me from nothingness, and didst honor me with thine image divine, but because I transgressed thy commandments hast returned me again unto the earth from which I was taken. Bring me back to that likeness, to be reshaped in that pristine beauty.”* In the second Evlogetarion the departed, after recalling the true theology that God made man a partaker of His image and upright, and that sin, the transgression of the commandments, is the origin of

death and misery, asks that through death he be brought back to God’s likeness and be reshaped in pristine beauty. Death and Resurrection as re-shaping is a fundamental patristic dictum.

Evlogetarion #3. *“I am an image of thy glory ineffable, though I bear the brands of transgressions. Show thy compassions upon thy creature, O Master, and purify me by thy loving-kindness; and grant unto me the home-country of my heart’s desire, making me again a citizen of paradise.”* In this third Evlogetarion the departed reminds God that though he is a sinner, yet God’s image is not completely eradicated by our sins. The departed asks God to purify him so that he may be fit to inherit his true heart’s desire – paradise itself.

Evlogetarion #4. *“Ye holy Martyrs, who preached the Lamb of God, and like unto lambs were slain, and are translated into life eternal, which groweth not old; pray ye unto Him that he will grant us remission of sins.”* In this 4th Evlogetarion the departed asks God for the prayers of the holy martyrs. We remember the martyrs at death, since they show us the way to approach death and conquer it in Christ.

Evlogetarion #5. *“Give rest, O Lord, to the soul of thy servant, and establish him in Paradise; where the Choir of the Saints, and of the Just, shine like the stars of heaven; Give rest to thy servant who hath fallen asleep, regarding not all the charges against him.”* In this 5th Evlogetarion the congregation picks up the prayer and speaks, asking the Lord to give rest to the departed, and recalling that, contrary to the way we see the body of the departed in the coffin ravaged by death, the souls of the just shine like the stars of heaven. Such is the future of the faithful.

Evlogetarion #6. *“Ye who have trod the narrow way most sad; all ye who, in life have taken upon you the Cross as a yoke, and have followed Me through faith, draw near. Enjoy ye the honors and the crowns which I have prepared for you.”* In the 6th Evlogetarion Christ Himself speaks and promises that the reward of bearing the cross through this sad earthly life is honors and crowns prepared by Him for His disciples forever.

Evlogetarion #7. (following the Doxa...) *“Devoutly do we hymn the triple splendor of the one Godhead, crying aloud: Holy art thou, O Father, who art from everlasting; O Son, Co-Eternal; and Spirit divine! Illumine us who with faith do worship thee; and rescue us from fire eternal!”* In this 7th Evlogetarion we worship the Holy Trinity, and ask for deliverance from eternal fire.

Evlogetarion #8. (after the “both/now”) *“Hail, O Holy One, who for the salvation of all men didst bring forth God in the flesh; through whom the race of man hath found salvation; through Thee have we found Paradise, O Theotokos, O pure and blessed one.”* In this 8th and final Evlogetarion we hymn the Most Pure Virgin Theotokos as the one through whom our salvation has come.

The Small Litany for the Departed. Following the Evlogetaria for the Departed the celebrant chants the small litany for the departed. This litany is prayed several times throughout the funeral service, and in it the clergy and faithful ask for the pardon of the sins of the departed, for his soul to be established where the just repose, and for God’s mercies and kingdom to be granted to the reposed.

Lamentations and Hymns

Following the Litany for the Departed the chanters and readers sing a collection of ten or so solemn hymns, some of which are chanted and some of which are read. Perhaps the most moving is the *Kontakion*, “*With the saints give 11.5*

The Idiomela of St. John of Damascus

Now we arrive at the most beautiful hymnody and the most profound theology of the Funeral Service: Eight idiomela composed by the great theologian, St. John the Damascene. These idiomela are composed to be chanted, one in each of the eight tones.¹

Tone 1. “*What earthly sweetness remaineth unmixed with grief? What glory standeth immutable on earth? All things are but feeble shadows, all things are most deluding dreams: yet one moment only, and Death shall supplant them all. But in the light of thy countenance, O Christ, and in the sweetness of thy beauty, give rest unto him whom thou hast chosen: forasmuch as thou lovest mankind.*” This first idiomelon unmasks this earthly life and its pleasures for what they are – deluding dreams. It teaches us not to place our hope in earthly things.

Tone 2. “*Woe is me! What manner of ordeal doth the soul endure when it is parted from the body! Woe is me! How many then are its tears, and there is none to show compassion! Turning its eyes to the angels, it supplicates in vain; stretching out its hand to men, it findeth none to succor. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, meditating on the brevity of our life, let us beseech of Christ rest for him who hath departed hence; and for our souls great mercy.*” By the repetition of the words

“Woe!” this second idiomelon posits the great ordeal the soul goes through at death. Death is not easy! And it is this great trial of death and the movement of the soul out of the body and to paradise or hades that is the fundamental reason for the funeral service itself. We come to aid the soul by prayer.

Tone 3. “*All mortal things are vanity and exist not after death. Riches endure not, neither doth glory accompany on the way: for when death cometh, all these things vanish utterly. Wherefore let us cry unto Christ the Immortal King: Give rest, in the dwelling-place of all those who rejoice to him who is departed from among us.*” This third idiomelon takes its theme from King Solomon’s *Ecclesiastes* – because of death all earthly glory is vain.

Tone 4. “*Where is desire for the world? Where is the display of transient mortals? Where are the gold and the silver? Where is the multitude of household servants and their clamor? All are dust, all are ashes, all are shadows. But come, let us cry aloud unto the deathless King: O Lord, of thine eternal good things account him worthy who hath departed from among us, giving unto him rest in thy blessedness which groweth not old.*” This 4th idiomelon, which begins with four sober questions, posits that earthly desire and accomplishment are dust and ashes.

Tone 5. “*I called to mind the Prophet, as he cried: I am earth, and ashes; and I looked again into the graves and beheld the bones laid bare, and I said: Who then is the king or the warrior, the rich man or the needy, the upright or the sinner? Yet, O Lord, give rest to thy servant with the righteous.*” This 5th idiomelon paints death as the great leveler. Standing before death, at the graveside, and observing the bones all earthly distinctions vanish and we cannot tell who is who.

Tone 6. “*Thy creating command was my origin and my foundation: for it was thy pleasure to fashion me out of nature visible and invisible, a living creature. From the earth thou didst shape my body, and didst give me a soul by thy divine and quickening breath. Wherefore, O Christ, give rest to thy servant in the land of the living, in the habitation of the Just.*” This hymn theologizes on the making of man from natures visible and invisible.

Tone 7. “*When in the beginning, thou didst create man after thine own image and likeness, thou didst set him in Paradise to reign over thy creatures. But when, beguiled by the malice of the Devil, he tasted of the food, he became a transgressor of thy commandment. For which cause, O Lord, thou didst condemn him to return again*

unto the earth whence he was taken, and to entreat repose.” In this 7th hymn the role of the envy of the devil is brought forth in the fall of man. The devil and human sin – here we find the beginning of everything awful, and how we should despise the devil and sin!

Tone 8. *“I weep and I wail when I think upon death, and behold our beauty, fashioned after the image of God, lying in the tomb disfigured, dishonored, bereft of form. O marvel! What is this mystery which doth befall us? Why have we been given over unto corruption, and why have we been wedded unto death? Truly, as it is written, by the command of God, who giveth the departed rest.”* This magnificent and final idiomelon is usually chanted very slowly, and it articulates the fundamental disposition of the believers at the funeral itself. The funeral is not a celebration of the life of the departed, nor is it even a meditation upon the Resurrection of Christ. It is rather a meditation upon death, with the proclamation of the Resurrection at the end. As such it is time for *“weeping and wailing”*, for sober and contrite prayer, and deadly seriousness. This is why we wear black to funerals.

The Beatitudes

Following the most significant idiomela of St. John of Damascus we chant the Beatitudes in tone 6. These words were spoken by our Lord in His famous Sermon on the Mount, and manifest the Christian way of life, the blessed life. In the funeral service the beatitudes are begun with these words, *“Remember us, O Lord, when thou comest into thy kingdom.”* These poignant words of supplication to the Lord Jesus Christ were originally uttered by St. Dimas, the thief on the cross, in the last moments of his life. We repeat these words on behalf of the departed in the funeral service because they are so apropos, and because the departed needs so sincerely to be remembered in God’s Kingdom. Following this we chant the first five beatitudes which pronounce blessings upon the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and the merciful. Then, following the fifth beatitude we interpose a selection of hymns to the Lord between the remaining beatitudes. These verses between the separate beatitudes summarize the prayer and wish of the faithful for the departed, *“May Christ give thee rest in the land of the living, and open unto thee the gates of Paradise, and make thee a citizen of his kingdom; and give thee remission of those things wherein thou in life hast sinned, O thou who lovest Christ.”*

The Epistle Lesson

Following the Beatitudes the prokeimenon is chanted, and the epistle lesson is taken from the 1st Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, chapter 4 in which St. Paul writes that he would not have us ignorant about those who have fallen asleep, lest we sorrow as those do who have no hope. He goes on to affirm in the clearest of terms that at the return of Jesus Christ to the earth He will bring with him the departed, and that together we shall forever be with the Lord.

The Gospel Lesson

The Gospel lection is taken from St. John 5:24-30 in which Jesus Himself promises that all who hear His word and believe in Him will not come into condemnation but into everlasting life. He foretells the day when all those in the tombs will hear His almighty voice and rise: those who have done good to a resurrection of life; and those who have done evil to a resurrection of damnation. These are extremely sobering yet comforting words.

The Homily

The homily following the Holy Gospel is an opportunity for the celebrant to apply the words of God’s truth to the hearers in a personal way. The funeral sermon is an extremely important word in that the preacher has a congregation more sober and receptive to the preaching of the word of God than at any other time. Tremendous comfort may be brought to the sorrowing through the funeral homily, and tremendous conviction to the uncommitted and wayward. The funeral preacher opens his mouth for both consolation and exhortation, and is to preach the Gospel of the Cross and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.²

A eulogy may be offered at this time as well, or may have already been made at the wake, or yet later offered at the mercy meal.

The Prayer of Absolution

Following the homily and another recitation of the Small Litany for the Departed, the Prayer of Absolution is made. This is properly reserved for the bishop, and may not always be done in the funeral service. If it is read by the priest-celebrant, it should only be read if the deceased is a spiritual child of the priest. The Prayer of Absolution is not technically a prayer at all, but a declaration of absolution and reads as follows:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, by his divine grace, as also by the gift and power vouchsafed unto his holy Disciples

and Apostles, that they should bind and loose the sins of men: (For he said unto them: Receive ye the Holy Spirit: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted; and whosoever sins ye retain are retained. And whatsoever ye shall bind or loose upon earth shall be bound or loosed also in heaven.) By that same power, also, transmitted unto us from them, this my spiritual child, N., is absolved, through me, unworthy though I be, from all things wherein, as mortal, *he* hath sinned against God, whether in word, or deed, or thought, and with all his senses, whether voluntary or involuntary; whether with knowledge or through ignorance. If *he* be under the ban or excommunication of a Bishop, or of a Priest; or hath sinned by any oath; or hath been bound, as man, by any sins whatsoever, but hath repented *him* thereof, with contrition of heart: *he* is now absolved from all those faults and bonds. May all those things which have proceeded from the weakness of *his* mortal nature be consigned to oblivion, and be remitted unto *him*: Through His loving-kindness; through the prayers of our most holy, and blessed, and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary; of the holy, glorious, and all-laudable Apostles, and of all the Saints. Amen.”

This last and great Prayer of Absolution is the bishop or priest using his priestly authority and power to its great extent. It is the apostolic power of the Church in action unto the salvation of souls, and has opened the kingdom of God to innumerable persons at the time of their departures from this life. I should also note, lest anyone misunderstand and think that he can sin and not worry about it because the priest will grant him this great absolution at his funeral, that there is one very important phrase in this absolution that reads, “...*but hath repented him thereof, with contrition of heart.*” Repentance is the door to forgiveness, and it is the condition for the bishop or priest’s absolution.

The Benediction and Dismissal

The final benediction and dismissal has several unique phrases in it including a reference to the resurrection of Christ as on Sundays and the days of Holy Pascha, and instead of a simple wish that God “*have mercy on us and save us*” the priest says, “*establish in the mansions of the righteous the soul of His servant N., who hath been taken from us, and number him with the Just...*”

Memory Eternal

At the conclusion of the Funeral Service, and indeed often from the time of repose until the Funeral, the chanting of Memory Eternal takes place. This is a universal Orthodox custom of great significance.

According to St. Symeon of Thessaloniki, that great commentator upon the divine services, the Memory Eternal is the official recognition of the deceased. By singing this we place the deceased into the everlasting arms of the Almighty God. By this sacred chant we pray that the Lord God would uphold the departed in blessed existence, and keep *him* in His mind in Paradise forever. This would be then the fulfillment of the petition of the thief on the cross, “*Remember me, O Lord, when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom.*” We join our voices to the thief’s and ask God to remember the departed forever – Memory Eternal.

The Last Kiss

After the dismissal the faithful are invited by the celebrants to approach the departed on the solea and give a last kiss, a sacred farewell “*until we meet again.*” The Last Kiss is a tremendously human act, and full of emotion and pain and faith. This act at the conclusion of the funeral is a very ancient funeral custom descending from the earliest days of persecution. This Last Kiss given by all present to the deceased is also a mighty expression of the unity and community of the faithful, both living and departed.

The Benefit of the Funeral Service for All

The funeral service has exercised a tremendous influence upon civilization. It utilizes the opportunity of death to help man develop a more profound understanding of the meaning and purpose of life. It helps man to mourn and grieve in a therapeutic, prayerful and regenerative way. It helps Christian persons to understand the importance of their faith, and how they are set apart from the unbelieving world which faces death without hope. It greatly enables the participants to live without masks, and to face reality as it is. All the holy mysteries transform believing participants, and the funeral, numbered amongst the divine mysteries by St. Dionysios the Areopagite, does not just alter the state of the departed, but alters the living at the funeral itself. We leave funerals different, changed, and molded by the hands of God.

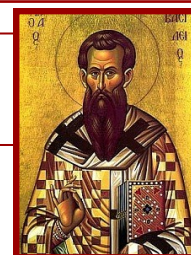
The sober and sublime prayers and chants of the Funeral Service fashions contrition within us, encourages our repentance, and softens our hearts.

¹ Often the first seven are simply read, and the eighth and final idiomelon is chanted in a slow melismatic way, while the deceased is censed on 4 sides.

²With the blessing from his bishop and the use of a special and brief burial form, the priest may preside at the burial of non-Orthodox. These Circumstances provide the priest with a unique opportunity to present the beauty and splendor of the Gospel to those who would not normally hear it.

The Tradition of the Vasilopeta...

From the DOWAMA St. Raphael Clergy Brotherhood



The tradition of baking and cutting a special "peta" (which can mean a loaf of bread, a cake, or even a pie) each year on January 1st is observed in honor of our holy father Basil the Great, archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia-- hence its name "Vasilopeta" meaning "St. Basil's Bread." This tradition is observed in both parish churches and in the homes of the faithful. What is the meaning of this tradition and how did it begin?

For centuries upon centuries, parents, grandparents and godparents have related the following to Orthodox children about St. Basil and the Vasilopeta. One year, during a time of terrible famine, the emperor levied a sinfully excessive tax upon the people of Caesarea. The tax was such a heavy burden upon the already impoverished people that to avoid debtors' prison each family had to relinquish its few remaining coins and pieces of jewelry, including precious family heirlooms. Learning of this injustice upon his flock, St. Basil the Great, the archbishop of Caesarea, took up his bishop's staff and the book of the holy Gospels and came to his people's defense by fearlessly calling the emperor to repentance. By God's grace, the emperor did repent! He canceled the tax and instructed his tax collectors to turn over to St. Basil all of the chests containing the coins and jewelry which had been paid as taxes by the people of Caesarea. But now St. Basil was faced with the daunting and impossible task of returning these thousands of coins and pieces of jewelry to their rightful owners. After praying



for a long time before the icons of our Master Christ and His All-Holy Mother, St. Basil had all the treasures baked into one huge pita. He then called all the townspeople to prayer at the cathedral, and, after Divine Liturgy, he blessed and cut the pita, giving a piece to each person. Miraculously, each owner received in his piece of Vasilopeta his own valuables. They all joyfully returned home, giving thanks to God who had delivered them from abject poverty and to their good and holy bishop St. Basil the Great! In remembrance of that miracle wrought by God as a result of St. Basil's love and defense of his people, Orthodox Christians have observed the tradition of the Vasilopeta each year on January 1st-- the date on which St. Basil reposed in the Lord in the year 379.

In some places the Vasilopeta is prepared as a loaf of rich bread (like that used for Artoklasia), while in other places it takes the form of a spicy sheet cake (without frosting). But no matter what form a Vasilopeta may take, they all have one thing in common-- each contains a single coin. After placing the bread dough or cake batter in the proper baking pan, the baker makes with the foil-wrapped coin the sign of the Cross over it, closes his/her eyes, and then secretly places it into the unbaked Vasilopeta. After the Vasilopeta is baked and cooled, it is blessed and cut following Divine Liturgy for the feast of St. Basil on January 1st.

Vasilopeta Recipe (Save for next year)

Ingredients:

- * 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter
- * 1 cup sugar
- * 2 extra large eggs
- * Grated rind of 2 oranges
- * Grated rind of 2 lemons
- * 1/2 tsp. Powdered sour cherry pits (Arabic mahleb, Greek makhlepi)
- * 2 tsp. Powdered gum mastic (Arabic miski, Greek mastikha)
- * 4 cups flour
- * 2 tsp. Baking powder
- * 1/2 tsp. Salt
- * 1/2 cup milk
- * 1 egg yolk blended with 1 tbsp. milk
- * Sesame seeds
- * Blanched almonds
- * A clean coin, wrapped in foil

Preparation:

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Thickly butter a 10-inch round spring form pan.
2. In a large bowl of an electric mixer, cream the butter until it is light and fluffy. Beat in the sugar until the mixture is light. Beat in the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in the orange and lemon rinds, the powdered sour cherry pits and gum mastic.
3. In a separate bowl, sift together 3 cups of the flour, the baking powder & salt.
4. With the mixer on low speed, gradually beat in the dry mixture alternately with the milk. The batter will be very thick. Using a wooden spoon, gradually blend in the remaining flour, beating well until completely smooth.
5. Spread the batter into the pan, press the coin into the dough until it is completely covered (don't let anyone see where you place it!), and then smooth the top. Brush the top evenly with the egg and milk mixture and sprinkle with sesame seeds. Gently press the blanched almonds into the top to make a Cross and spell out the date of the new year.
6. Bake for 45 min. until golden brown (if it browns too quickly, cover the top with aluminum foil). Cool in the pan for 15 min. before removing from spring form then cool completely before slicing.

ST. ANDREW COMMUNITY NEWS...

Children's Christmas Pageant...



The story of the Nativity of Christ as portrayed by our little lambs, angels, shepherds and wise men...



... as narrated by the Teens.

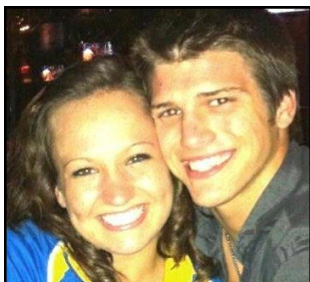
...and directed by our very talented choir directors.



...as sung by the Teen and Children's Choirs accompanied by our young musicians...



Many Years to two more engaged couples from our parish...



Congratulations to Aaron Joseph Thornberg and Marina Sammons on their engagement. Wedding date to be announced.

Congratulations also to two of our young Catechumens, Zach Porcu and Jannica Ahmu who announced their engagement as well. (Sorry, no photo was available)

Fr. Josiah and the St. Andrew Community rejoice with you and wish you a future married life full of happiness and love in Christ our Lord.



Congratulations to Matthew and Azure Cawthon on the birth of their second child.

Azure writes: "We are blessed with our new precious Madeleine Anne Cawthon, born November 27th 7.1 oz. 20.5 inches The best Christmas present ever!!"

Congratulations also to the proud grandparents, Dn. Elie and Dnsa. Cindy and big sister Sophia.



Each week after Liturgy our congregation meets in the fellowship hall for coffee, refreshment and friendship. This month the Agape Meal Spotlight is on Joshwa Bowman..

by Martha Metroka



Joshua lives in Riverside and works for the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department as a Custody Assistant.

Joshua was originally an Evangelical Protestant. At the time he discovered Orthodoxy, he was searching for the first century Christian Church. He had spent about a year looking into the religion of Messianic Jews.

Walter Henke and Joshua worked in the same place, and they often discussed their faith together. About four years ago Walter invited Joshua to visit St. Andrew and brought him for his first visit during Holy Week on the night of the Passions Gospel readings. The service was in the Fellowship Hall as the Temple had not yet been built. Joshua looked around and saw many things that baffled him. There were pictures all over the place, and people kept going up to them and kissing them. The service was long, and his feet were beginning to hurt. People would often cross themselves and prostrate themselves on the floor. Eventually people came in holding up a big book. Other people were again crossing themselves and bowing. Suddenly something clicked. Joshua realized they were holding up the Holy Gospel – the Word become flesh. The sense of the sacred and the worship was palpable. He became more receptive to what was happening in the service after this realization.

Eventually a procession started. People once again

were prostrating themselves on the floor. Jason's feet were very tired by now. He decided, "I can do this. And it will give my feet a rest." He prostrated himself on the floor. The man at the head of the procession was walking backwards. He backed right into Jason. The man looked back and nudged Jason's head with his foot. As Jason laughingly put it, "Polycarp kicked me in the head and told me to move." Polycarp was sitting at the table with us during this interview. He shook his head and said, "They will never let me live this down." Chris Kassaseya was at the table as well, and said "You have to put this in the newsletter with quotes and everything." So here it is.

Of course the next interview question had to be, "So Jason, why did you return to the Orthodox Church, considering that you were kicked in the head and all." Jason laughed, and then seriously replied "I realized it was the true first century church. There was no place else to go. Once you realize it is the true Church you can't go anywhere else." From that time forward he pursued Orthodoxy.

Two years ago Jason became Orthodox. One of his friends soon thereafter asked him, "How's the Orthodox Church treating you?" Jason told his friend that it was hard. He then explained, "I treat it very seriously. It's hard but it's worth it."



ST. ANDREW MINISTRIES

Burial Society Ministry
By Maximus Diaz

I have often watched competition reality shows. Top Chef, Next Iron Chef, singing competitions, and I have been bothered with all of them and for the same reason. I would watch every moment of one of these competitions and perhaps even cheer a particular contestant on. In the end a winner was shown, but then there was only about 60 seconds of the aftermath. It always has left me wondering, what happens to them now? Where do they go from here? What is the celebration like? How did their lives change?

The producers of these shows never let us in on this. I never understood why. I have always noticed it is very much like this in America for Christians except on a much larger scale. Here we are in fact running the race ourselves, and as we run the race, we also watch others run the race, lifting each other up, cheering each other on. Sadly, we also like these reality shows, and when the race is just about finished, and our brother or sister is ready to leave this life and cross the finish line, the show is over.

Here again I felt myself wondering, what now? Is there no Joyful Lamentations? No help for them? Prayer? So little is done in fact that after 33 years of living, for only two have I had any idea on what actually happened next. How could we possibly run this Marathon, fighting to stay in the race, blood sweat and tears only to get to the end and never even break the ribbon? It seemed as if we were getting to the finish line and stopping and merely walking off the track. People I saw cheer one another on seemed to want to just leave at the end rather than being there for the Grand Finale. It never made sense to me but I figured this just must have been how it was done, since I never saw it done any other way.

Over a year ago during coffee hour right after the blessing of the food Father Josiah stood and made a quick announcement, "By the way, there is not one of you here that should not be involved in a ministry." I did not like hearing this, because understanding that I would in fact be obedient to what I was being told, there wasn't anything on the table that I felt I could really sink my teeth into. However, I took his words seriously and began my search to find something that would spark my interest. Again and again I came up short.

If I had to explain to someone how I found something I was looking for in the past, I would probably respond with.....the same way you find anything, YOU STOP LOOKING! That is exactly what I did. It wasn't until many

nights later that I was listening to a homily by Father Josiah and heard him talking about a cemetery he liked to visit.

He said it was a peaceful place where he used to go and pray, and there he noticed an Orthodox woman with her scrubs on, going from Orthodox grave to Orthodox grave, lighting a candle, washing the grave, sprinkling a little holy water and saying a prayer. This quick little story sparked a feeling in me that took over my entire being for the moment and immediately I called Father and asked if I would be able to carry this out for St Andrew Parishioners. His response was excitement, but he also said "Brother I can think of 5 other ideas to incorporate into this ministry!" I was excited about them all, and the St Andrew Burial Society was born. Believe me when I say it happened right on time!

Not long after the birth of this ministry I met with Father Josiah so that I could learn from him and what he had in mind for this Burial Society. Coinciding with this, one of our beloved, Andrew Nova, had been suffering from cancer and in fact was getting ready for the finish line. Father Josiah explained to me how such issues are handled in an Orthodox community. He also told me that whatever we were going to do as a Burial Society, we should carry it out in full for Andrew Nova so long as they were willing, and they were.

This is what the Burial Society carried out for Andrew Nova and established as the ministry practice:

1. Visited him and stayed with him before he fell asleep.
2. Prayed for him.
3. Prepared his body after he fell asleep
4. Ushered him into the hands of his Guardian Angel through prayer and vigil and continued in prayer for him through the 40 days and beyond.
5. The beyond is that every year, close to the day of repose, he will be visited and prayed for.

Knowing that his time was coming, but not knowing when, there was little time to spare. I began studying body preparation under Father Josiah, as well as California Law so as to understand protocol as it varies from state to state. I was able to find some very helpful people that were willing to donate generous portions of their time to help out the Burial Society and we were able to make a lot of solid contacts that God willing will stay with us for the long haul.

Coming to a place where I felt comfortable mentally just happened when I got the call from Father Josiah who told me that the time for Andrew Nova was now very near.



Since our goal is to be with a person as they take their last breath, I believe that in total Aidan Trenham, Terry Baxter and I were with him nearly 72 hours and carried out the first task of the Burial Society. This laid the foundation of what was to come in our ministry with Andrew Nova – Praying for him, bathing him, clipping his nails, shaving him, anointing his body with oils, dressing him in his baptismal garment and finally burying him. This is indeed a big part of what the Burial Society does, but it is a partial explanation.

The Burial Society is also in charge of putting Andrew into the Necrology which is the Book that has a record of every parishioner who has fallen asleep in the Lord and whose memory we keep in the St Andrew Family. Christopher Gonzales-Aden has joined me in this ministry and has been a huge part of this journey with me. He is in the process of creating a new Hard Book of the Necrology and we will keep it updated. It will include name of the reposed, date they fell asleep, date of birth and where they are buried including plot number so that we may be able to find them easily to carry out the third aspect of the Burial Society which is caring for and praying for the dead.

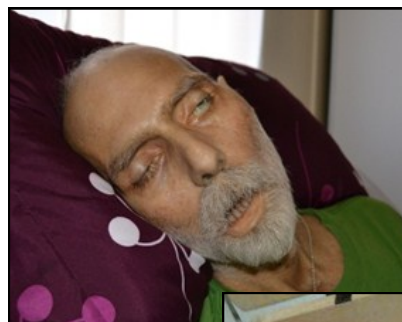
Going back to what sparked my interest in the first place, we find the last but definitely not least task of the Burial Society. Our goal is to meet everyone who is in the Necrology at the place where they are buried. Clean their grave, pour holy water in the shape of the Cross, light a candle and offer them a prayer closest to the day they fell

asleep. This is the core of the Burial Society.

We have many needs as a Burial Society and we have many goals that we would like to carry out in the very near future such as forming a team who can carry out body preparation when a woman falls asleep. Christine Gonzales-Aden has also decided to join us and will be helping with this. We need help when a person is lying in repose in the Burial Guild which is the Saint John Chrysostom Chapel, to help us hold vigil in prayer with them as we want to have constant prayer and reading of the Psalter until it is time for them to be buried. The list goes on.

During the demonstration of what we do to prepare our beloved for burial (presented in the fellowship hall some weeks ago), I promised to make a way for anyone to contact me if they would like to help, have any questions or need assistance of any kind whatsoever. Please feel free to contact me at 3maximos@gmail.com phone 929-777-1799. I would love to hear from you.

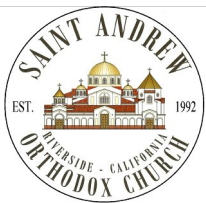
In closing let me say that I'm very grateful to be a part of this. The way Andrew Nova was transfigured through the Ancient Paths of Christian Burial was something I am forever grateful that I was able to be a part of. This is such a beautiful ministry to be involved in because it keeps us focused on the Grave. In this life today this is exactly where I need to be so I thank you all for the opportunity to serve you. I thank you for your time in reading this article.



Andrew Nova before and after preparation by the Burial Society.

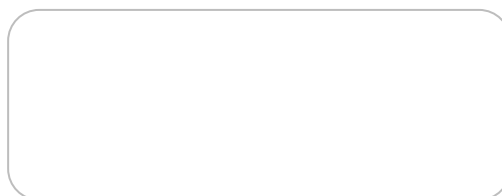


Maximus Diaz demonstrating how the body is prepared and handled for washing and dressing (above) and how the hands are placed (right).



St. Andrew Orthodox Church

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I always feel happy, you know why?
Because I don't expect anything from anyone
Expectations always hurt ...
Life is short ...
So love your life ...
Be happy and keep smiling
Before you speak, Listen
Before you write, Think
Before you spend, Earn
Before you pray, Forgive
Before you hurt, Feel
Before you hate, Love
That's Life ...
Feel it, Live it and Enjoy it

William Shakespeare