



SAINT NICHOLAS GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese America + Ecumenical Patriarchate

760 West Wattles Road | Troy, MI 48098-4500

Phone: (248) 362-9575 | Fax: (248) 362-9578 | E-mail: office@stnicholastroy.org

Informational Packet for Orthodox Funerals



Planning a Funeral in the Greek Orthodox Church

Beloved Parishioner,

If you are reading these words, it is very likely that you have experienced or are now experiencing the greatest sorrow of your life. Losing someone you love is a very hard thing to endure and we extend to you as your loving parish our deepest sympathies.

There may be no words that can ever suffice to soften your sorrow. Please know that the God whom you worship, the God who gave to us His very Son, to a life of suffering, rejection, pain and finally death on the ignoble cross, did all this so that you, in this hour, could know that your God knows of the pain which you are feeling.

He Himself tasted of death; He died, so that by His enduring, indefatigable love, He **could and would** turn death's power inside out and upside down, that by His Resurrection He would make known to us that **NOTHING IN THIS LIFE, NOT EVEN DEATH, IS STRONGER THAN THE LIFEGIVING LOVE OF GOD!** That very same love of the Crucified and Resurrected Savior is now coming to you dear brother, dear sister. Hold on to Him, He Himself will raise up your loved one who has died believing in Him.

We also realize that you are most likely reading this because you are now faced with the challenge of knowing what to do when your loved one has "fallen asleep in the Lord". We write these words to you, with every sensitivity for your loss, so that some of these basic questions can be answered.

Preparing for Death:

If your loved one has not yet died, but is nearing the end, these are some points to consider:

Call the priest. Your priest wants to visit your beloved family member or friend, to pray with that person, to give them once more the sacred and immaculate gifts of the Holy Communion, to perhaps hear your dear one's last confession, or to administer Holy Unction, to be near them and to pray with them as that final hour of life approaches. It is our privilege to serve you at this hour. Please do not hesitate to call on your priest.

Is Hospice Care a good option? Hospice Care has a long history in the life of the western church but was established as a modern institution by Cicely Saunders in 1967. It has become a highly respected worldwide movement, not specific to any particular religious denomination, that provides comfort to the dying both physically and spiritually while embracing the whole family through the final phase of life. Though they are a non-religious institution (in most cases), they are founded on the principle that faith is a very important component in the ministry to and support of the dying. Each individual Hospice Agency may have its own reputation, but we can say with confidence that Hospice Care is a very helpful aid to both the dying and to the family and friends who love them. As your priest, I highly recommend that Hospice Care be considered as part of the care that you offer to your dying family member.

Pre-Planning: It does sometimes happen that the dying person has already thought through whom they want their funeral director to be and perhaps even what they want their funeral to look like. In choosing a Funeral Director it is wise to ask your loved one whom they would want to manage their funeral. While this may seem like a difficult discussion, you may be surprised to learn that for the dying person, knowing who will be directing their funeral and even perhaps picking that person or Funeral Home can be very comforting and assuring to them when death is near.

It is wise to choose a funeral director BEFORE the death of your loved one as they will be extremely helpful to you once the death occurs. If you are reading this and thinking at all about yourself and how you would want to be buried please remember it is okay to pre-plan your funeral. We may think there is something morose or dark about it, but actually, if you take the time to make some of these difficult decisions yourself you will assist your family in the long run and make their pain less. Additionally, since funerals are often expensive, pre-planning and purchasing your funeral ahead of time keeps costs lower and relieves your family of that financial burden.

Without Pre-Planning: If your loved one did not pre-plan their funeral, try to pick a funeral director who will respect your faith and family traditions. Some death bed requests seem strange to us. “Please drive by my house before taking me to the cemetery,” might be one such unusual request. But finding a Funeral Home that can accommodate even such uncommon requests will give your departing loved one greater peace of mind.

A Church Funeral: As Orthodox Christians, it is always our preference to be buried from the Church. While the Funeral Service is not technically speaking a sacrament, in some *Euchologia** it IS treated as one of the Sacraments. Regardless, the funeral is our final opportunity to be in the Church and to “hear”, even from our coffin, the very last prayers that will be said over our body there. Additionally, the service itself is a powerful reminder to all gathered there about the temporal nature of our lives. The service, while not “cheery” by any means, speaks to the “elephant in the room”, the very real pain that we all feel at the death of someone whom we love and ministers to that real loss with the joyous promise of the Resurrection of the Dead.

Funeral Home Funeral Service: Generally speaking, such funerals are discouraged. Your priest will need to receive special dispensation from the Metropolitan to allow for a Funeral Home Funeral. And in the end, what exactly is to be gained by bypassing the Church? The Church is the Ever-present icon to us on earth of the Kingdom of Heaven! It is where we first received the Life of the Spirit at our baptism and where our souls will be prayed for for the decades, and even centuries, to come. It is our “Home away from Home.” Our Paradise until we are together in Paradise!

Open Casket or Closed Casket: While it cannot be said that there is an Orthodox requirement that the casket be open, we can say unequivocally that it is the long-standing tradition of the Church that the casket remain open. We know this even through the words of the hymns of the Funeral Service itself, we are called upon by one of those hymns specifically to: “Come and give a farewell kiss to the one so newly parted from us...” But such decisions, when they are difficult for whatever reason, are best left to be discussed with the priest. Thanatological studies of mourning have shown that it is healthier for the family, when it comes to mourning and coming to terms with death, that the casket remains open so that people have the opportunity to say goodbye to the one whom they have so loved and who has so loved them. An open casket also affords us the opportunity to anoint the body one final time (in this case, with oil and earth). Again, as your priest I would highly recommend this option. But ultimately, yours and your loved ones wishes will be respected. It is not a matter of dogma.

Cremation: Here the Orthodox Church has traditionally been more conservative than other prevailing denominations and religions (with the notable exceptions of both the Jews and the Moslems); Cremation is forbidden in Orthodox Christianity. If you are reading these words and contemplating your own funeral PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE do not ask this of your family. It is unnatural for a family member to be forced by your dying decision to do violence against your corpse. It seems inhuman to be asked to consign to fire the body of the one whom, but a short while ago, you embraced with love. Please do not ask this of your children or of your parents, or of your spouse.

Cremation is a pagan practice that has entered into the life of the common man again, after so many millennia, for various reasons (perhaps the primary one being economic). For the pagans, the body was burned because they believed it to be evil, a prison for the soul, created by some evil Demiurge, and it was only through its complete and utter destruction that the person's soul could be set free to "reincarnate" into some other body thus to begin again the endless cycle of lives. We are not pagans! We are Orthodox Christians who believe in the resurrection of both the soul AND the body! Further, as Orthodox Christians, we do not believe in reincarnation. Rather we believe as Saint Paul preached: "It is appointed for man, once to die and then the Judgment" Hebrews 9:27. Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ died on the Cross and was buried. (Nicene Creed). We should imitate our Savior.

We do not say, for instance, as is heard in the frequently **misquoted** of the words of the Book of Genesis: "Ashes to Ashes and Dust to Dust." The words in Genesis to which that quote refers **do not mention ashes at all** but rather they simply say: "Thou art earth [O Man] and to the earth shall you return" (γῆ εἶ καὶ εἰς γῆν ἀπελεύσῃ) Genesis 3:19. In other words, we are **commanded** by God to return to earth from which we were taken. The act of burial plants our body into the earth where it awaits its resurrection (as we see imaged in every seed which sprouts after being planted seemingly lifeless into the earth!).

What Type of Coffin? Coffins are a very practical tool built to help us to carry the deceased person's body to the grave. While they have no theological significance (in monasteries even today a person might be carried to the grave in a sheet), I would not recommend having a funeral without one. There is an extremely wide range of coffins, from the very expensive and admittedly beautiful to the very plain and humble. Which coffin you choose for your beloved family member is entirely YOUR choice. One should not be shamed into purchasing a more expensive coffin any more than one should be shamed into buying an overly simple coffin. Let your own heart guide you and be at peace with whatever decision you make.

Mausoleum Burial: While we cannot call a mausoleum burial a "planting" into the earth, the Church has never forbidden such burials and at times it has even preferred them as in the case of the Unknown Soldier who is vigilantly guarded in Athens by the Evzones.

Tragic Deaths: Deaths that involve devastating trauma to the body are often closed casket funerals. This is also accepted by the Church and is offered as a mercy to those who have endured such a tragic loss of someone whom they love.

Donating One's Body to Science: There are those who make the decision to donate their bodies to science for research and for the training of future doctors. The Church has not spoken against this practice and, certainly, we all benefit from doctors who have been so trained. Nonetheless, as a Church we still must offer a Trisagion, Memorial and Funeral Service for that person. If you make this decision, please communicate with your priest beforehand so that he can be certain your body receives a Christian Funeral.

Death by Suicide: Traditionally, the Orthodox Church has not provided funerals to those who die by their own hand. However, it is now common practice to offer a burial for such persons in the hopes that perhaps even in the last second or millisecond before their deaths they may have repented of what they were doing. Also, there is another school of thought that says only someone who is mentally ill could think to take their own life, and since what they did, they did out of illness, not out of sound thinking, the Church extends to them the mercy of a Church Funeral. If your family member has died in this way, your Church will do all that it can to support you through this terrible trauma. Our loving God asks that of us.

The Use of a Burial Shroud: Some people, especially those who may have travelled to the Holy Lands, may have purchased a shroud/Savano (Σάβανο) for their own death. Such shrouds are welcome in the service of the Funeral and generally speaking are made of white linen and are imprinted with an iconic depiction of the Crucifixion of Christ.

Are we required to be embalmed? Embalming is not a traditional practice of the Orthodox Church and as such it is not required for an Orthodox Funeral. However, the laws of the State of Michigan require embalment of the dead UNLESS the funeral can be held within 48 hours of the death, and only if the casket remains closed. These restrictions are in place to protect the health of the living and are not open for negotiation. If one desires to not have the body of the deceased embalmed then all haste must be given to making funeral arrangements both with the priest, the funeral directors and with family members. Here, pre-planning is essential if one truly intends to NOT be embalmed.

Exhumation of the Dead: If the dying person hopes to be exhumed one day so that their bones can be returned to the country or place of their birth, it is recommended that the person NOT BE EMBALMED. In such instances, and only if the body has not been embalmed, a period of ten years is recommended before any such exhumation should be considered.

Church Related Funeral Fees:

Below you will find a table indicating the fees related to having a funeral at St. Nicholas Church.

Church Fee	Cantor	Cleaning/Sanitizing	Live Stream (optional)
**See below	\$125	\$150	\$50

** Church fee is \$500 but is waived if you are a member in good standing of St. Nicholas for a minimum of 1 year with a \$500 minimum pledge/stewardship. Exceptions can be made for those who are suffering from economic hardship, but such exceptions are only possible at the discretion of the priest. Family members should please discuss this with him.

Makaria/Meal of Blessing/Internment Meal: As Orthodox Christians, it is our tradition to offer an internment meal or Makaria following the burial of our beloved family member. The main entrée of the Makaria should include fish as fish symbolizes the Resurrection of Christ. The Holy Gospels reveal to us that after Christ's own Resurrection He shared a meal consisting of fish with His disciples (Luke 24:41-43; John 21:1-14.)

When planning your Makaria meal, please consider our Event Center which is operated by our caterer Ernie's Mediterranean Restaurant. Our Church website has a form you may complete electronically or you may directly contact Sam at (586) 286-8435 or via email at sales2@erniesmi.com.

Funerals of Non-Orthodox Parishioners: It does occasionally happen that a person who has attended our Church for many years is not actually a baptized or chrismated member of the Church. In such situations, if it is the wish of the deceased person to be buried from St. Nicholas Church, we will do everything we can to respect and to carry out that wish. Certainly, the priest will have to receive the blessing and guidance of the Metropolitan on such a funeral, and on a case by case basis.

Funerals of Non-Orthodox Christians: There does exist some leeway in the tradition of the Church for the possibility of burying non-Orthodox Christians from the Church. Generally, exceptions can be made in times of war or extreme national crisis, and especially when the deceased own priest or pastor is not available due to serious illness or death. The *Great Euchologion* provides us with an alternative service for such situations. As always, such exceptions must be referred to the Metropolitan.

Trisagion, 40 Day Memorial and 3-Months, 6-Months, and One Year Memorials: When your loved one dies please call on your priest to do a Trisagion at the place of their death (if it is possible) and once the burial is completed at the grave site. Memorials are traditionally offered on the 40th day after death, and at the 3, 6, and one-year anniversary. After that, we can pray again at your request.

Memorial Services are also offered during each Saturday of the Souls (*Psychosavvato*) which is four times per year. These general memorial services are observed the two Saturdays preceding the start of Great Lent, the Saturday following the First Sunday of Great Lent (Sunday of Orthodoxy) and the final one is the Saturday before the Sunday of Holy Pentecost. It is good to prepare a koliva (tray of boiled wheat) for such solemn days of prayer.

Memorial services may **not** be chanted from the Saturday of Lazarus through the Sunday of Thomas, on any Feastday of the Lord or any Feastday of the Theotokos. Your priest will guide you with scheduling the date. Please call the church office to make arrangements.

Eulogy: Only the priest is permitted to offer the funeral service for the deceased in the Church and only the priest is permitted to offer a eulogy during the funeral service. Family members who wish to give a eulogy may do so at the Trisagion Service the night preceding the funeral or at the *Makaria* meal.

Setting the Date and Time of the Funeral: All funeral arrangements should be made with the parish priest in coordination with the funeral home prior to their confirmation and publication in the newspaper. No funerals are permitted on Sunday, the day of the Resurrection of our Lord or Great and Holy Friday.