

PLANNING A FUNERAL WITH THE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

This information is provided for those who are seeking to make plans for their own funeral, for the family members of those who have recently passed away ('fallen asleep'), and for individuals, families and Funeral Directors who seek information about what goes on during an Orthodox funeral.

In the Orthodox Church, funerals and the mystery of death with which they are entwined, touch people many times in one way or another throughout their lives. The funeral is not just a memorial service to elicit comfortable memories about a person who has passed away. A funeral is very much a statement of faith in the Person of Jesus Christ, His Power and His Resurrection. Death is painfully real to those who have lost someone they love, but eternal life and the Christian understanding of the presence of God in life, in death and beyond death are equally as real.

Death and the Funeral Service speak not only of sorrow, pain and loss, but of hope, faith and love. As such, the language, actions, symbols and the environment at a Funeral Service are intended to convey not only the fact of death, but the victory over death – the Resurrection. The focus is not of ending and separation, but, of continuing life (even for those who have died) and of being together in the 'communion of saints' - both the living and the departed.

At an Orthodox Funeral Service, it is important that the congregation is confronted with the spiritual reality of death; death has occurred and we should not try to pretend that it hasn't; we should not deny what has taken place. Death is real and painful! However, the Resurrection of Christ is the basis of the service and it is to this that our attention is to be directed. The open coffin that is usually prominent at an Orthodox Funeral Service can be both a stark reminder of death and a sign of hope in eternal life.

The Funeral Service in the Orthodox Church is an ancient service. Its form is exactly the same for monarchs and community leaders, as it is for the poor and the homeless. The service itself is fixed; there is no place for choosing favourite hymns, poems or readings. There is no opportunity to construct a form of service tailored to fit the particular likes or lifestyle of the person who has died. In death we are all the same and we stand before God naked and without the covering of our wealth, power or influence - the order of service is there to express this fact. We do not mould the service to fit the person. Rather, the service is a stable foothold amidst the stormy seas that can come with death. Death brings all of us – the living and the dead – to the same position, standing before God who loves us and yet also judges us!

Certain practical points need to be made concerning the Orthodox Funeral Service.

- The Funeral Service should be conducted in a Christian Orthodox Church. If no Orthodox Church is available in the place or city where the service is to take

place, then another Christian Church building should be used (a Roman Catholic or Anglican Church is preferable). A funeral parlour service or a graveside service without a Church service before it should not be organised without first checking with the Orthodox Priest who is to conduct the service.

- The Priest at the service must be a canonical Priest of the Christian Orthodox Church (i.e. a Priest who is recognised as a valid Priest by the independent Churches that make up the ‘family’ of Orthodox Churches). Priests, Ministers and Pastors of other Christian groups cannot concelebrate at funerals (or any other Orthodox Services). Faith leaders of other religions are also not able to take part. Before acting on any request for other persons to participate in a Funeral, please discuss the matter with the Orthodox Priest who will conduct the service.
- The coffin should be in a central position during the service, not pushed to the side or behind the celebrant. The position of the coffin should reflect that the deceased is in a position before the God of heaven. In an Orthodox Church, the coffin is placed centrally near the Altar end of the Church with the feet of the deceased closest to the Altar Table.
- The graveside committal is also a part of the Funeral Service and is conducted with the same care and conditions that are used in the Church service. It is usual that the car carrying the Priest to the cemetery follows directly behind the hearse and before the vehicle(s) transporting the family of the deceased.
- Cremation is not permitted in the Christian Orthodox faith. If the deceased or his or her family have requested this, then the matter needs to be discussed with the Priest before any arrangements are made.
- It is the usual practice of the Orthodox Church to have the coffin open in the Church for the entire Funeral Service. It is also usual that a short prayer service is conducted over the body of the deceased (either with the coffin open or closed) before the Funeral Service begins. This is more often held the night before at the place where the body is kept (this would normally be at the funeral parlour).
- Changes to the traditional Funeral Service are not permitted. There are no additions or alterations to the order and words of the service. Recorded music, performances, video presentations and the like are not allowed. If a family member or friend has asked to make a eulogy, this must be discussed with the Priest long before the service begins. Musical instruments are not used during the services of our Church. The funeral hymns are sung unaccompanied by the Priest, the Chanters and the congregation.
- It is usual for incense to be used during the service as a symbol of blessing and prayer. Candles are also prominent during the service. Some Orthodox traditions have each member of the congregation holding lighted candles at the Church service and, sometimes, at the graveside service.
- After the coffin has been lowered into the grave, oil and soil are sprinkled over it.

- On entering a Church (for a funeral and at other times) an Orthodox Christian will make the sign of the Cross, kiss the icons (sacred images) near the door of the Church and light a candle in a place near the icons.
- The Church part of the Funeral Service ends with the congregation filing past the coffin and paying their respects to the deceased and to the immediate family members before the coffin is taken out of the Church. This paying of respect may include kissing an icon (usually of the Resurrection) that has been prominently placed on or near the coffin. As part of this 'saying goodbye,' Orthodox Christians may also kiss the coffin or, if the coffin is open, the forehead of the deceased.
- During the Church service, a request may be made for some objects to be placed on the coffin. Nothing should prevent the icon from being in the prominent position and clearly seen by the congregation. Before deciding to put any object on the coffin, please check with the Priest who is to conduct the service.
- The Priest is to walk before the coffin when it is carried into the Church, when it is being taken out after the Church service and again when it is carried to the gravesite.
- The Priest will require personal details of the deceased for entering into the Church's Funeral Register.
- A 'Death & Funeral Service Certificate' will be completed by the Priest and given to the family of the deceased.
- A fee for all aspects of the funeral service has been standardised across our Archdiocese.

The 'Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia' has a website that provides guidance and information on aspects of death and funerals, and generally on the Orthodox Christian faith. There are also useful leaflets and other material available from the Priest that can outline aspects of the Orthodox faith, its beliefs and practices.

The Orthodox Funeral Service is there to remind us, to teach us, to comfort us, to lead us, to elicit faith in us, to provide hope for us, to express love to and from us, and to be a means to lift a person up to God after he or she has *'fallen asleep in the Lord.'* As such, the service must be clearly and carefully done. Your cooperation in this can contribute to a fitting service for the deceased and a powerful liturgical commemoration of the link that the living continue to have with the departed, even after death has struck at the very heart of life.