

# WHY ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS ARE NOT CREMATED

By Fr. John Touloumes

Cremation (burning the bodies of those who have died to the point of ashes) is a practice which is being "sold" as a cost-effective, space-conservative alternative to traditional burial of the body. Throughout her history, however, the Orthodox Church has prohibited this practice. But, as in many areas of the Faith, we must take the time to learn why the Church takes such a position. In doing so, we not only grow in our own knowledge of the Lord and His Church, but we are better prepared to answer questions others ask us about our Orthodox Christian Faith.

The following passage is drawn from the Orthodox journal, "*Life Transfigured*" a publication of the Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Ellwood City, and from "*Contemporary Moral Issues*" by Father Stanley Harakas.

## **A Growing Practice & Problem**

In our country, cremation is increasingly being practiced. In part this is due to the influence of Oriental religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and to the rise of neo-paganism. But it is also a result of the eroding of traditional beliefs among non-Orthodox Christians. In many Christian denominations — or at least among their liberal preachers — it is no longer necessary to believe in the "empty tomb," in Christ's physical Resurrection. These teachers call the "empty tomb" a myth and reduce all the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus to merely spiritual experiences. The Orthodox conviction that the Son of God was also truly Man and was raised in His whole human nature — body and soul — explains the Church's traditional rejection of cremation, a practice which is diametrically opposed to the expectation of the resurrection of the dead in Christ. If the Resurrection is merely a legend or a beautiful metaphor, then as Saint Paul writes, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain" (1 Cor. 15.17)

## **The Church's Historical Foundations**

The Church throughout her entire history has stressed the importance of understanding that Jesus was born with an actual human body with the same attributes and needs of any other human body, which upon being crucified died the same death that every other body has died. Three days later, the Resurrection included His human body.

Through all this Jesus makes abundantly clear that the whole of our humanity — body as well as soul — has been called to salvation and eternal life. All of human nature has been raised by Christ's Ascension to the right hand of the Father. Jesus gave us many proofs of this, but it is seen most clearly in Christ's appearance to Thomas. In his "Commentary on Saint John," Saint Cyril of Alexandria writes:

"What need was there for the showing of His hands and side, if in accordance with the depravity of some, He did not rise with His own flesh? If He wanted His disciples to believe differently concerning Him, why did He not rather appear in a different and by putting the form of the flesh to shame, draw them towards a different understanding? But it was more important that He show Himself carefully at that time so that they should believe in the future resurrection of the flesh."

Saint Cyril adds that the Body of Christ had to be raised in order to vanquish death and destroy the power of corruption. Christ's body, which Saint Thomas proved through touching to be real, gives clear witness to the future resurrection of our own bodies.

## **In God's Image**

The human person is created in the image and likeness of God. When we are baptized it is not only

the soul which becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit, but also the Body. When we receive Holy Communion, we take the real Body and Blood of Christ into our bodies. In the mysteries of Chrismation and Holy Unction it is our bodies which are anointed with Holy Chrism. Particularly clear proof of the sanctity of the body is given by those saints such as Saints Spyridon, Parasceve, Sabbas, Gerasimus and Dionysius, whose bodies remain incorrupt centuries after their physical deaths. The Church knows innumerable accounts of healing occurring upon being blessed with the relics of a saint. These men and women lived the life in Christ so fully that not only were their souls taken to heaven but their bodies retain the sanctity and healing power of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Example of Holy Friday**

The future resurrection of the believer's soul and body, according to the truth which Christ revealed, dictates the nature of Orthodox traditions concerning the body at death. In an Orthodox funeral, "the mourners gather" as the "myrrh-bearers to provide the last ministry to the Christian body in preparation for the Resurrection." Anyone who has attended the Orthodox Great Friday services knows the sequence following Christ's death: Joseph of Arimathea goes at great personal risk to beg Pilate for the body of Jesus. As our icons show, the Theotokos, Nicodemus, John the Apostle and the Myrrh bearing Women helped Joseph, covering the Most Precious Body with tears.

### **How We Care for the Body**

The Church has unequivocally taught since Christ's Crucifixion that the proper way to treat the dead is a reverent burial of the body in the context of a proper Church funeral and prayers for those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. We sing hymns and psalms to escort the dead on their way and to express gratitude to God for their life and death. We wrap the body in a new shroud, symbolizing the new dress of incorruption the person is destined to receive. We pour myrrh and oil on the body as we do at baptism. We accompany this with incense and candles, showing our belief that the person has been liberated from darkness and is going to the true Light. We place the body in the grave towards the east, denoting the Resurrection to come. We weep in our grief, but not unrestrainedly, as we know what happiness is to come.

### **The Process of Death**

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15.55). Death is neither a finality nor it is merely an evolutionary step. The Church in her wisdom commemorates saints on the day they died in this life, calling it their day of birth into eternal life in heaven. A Christian death means eternal life with Christ, where at the Last Judgement body and soul will be reunited and glorified together.

### **The Bridal Chamber**

A radiantly beautiful verse from the Orthros of Pascha concerning Christ's bodily Resurrection from the grave encompasses the blessed hope He has given to each of us, saying:

*"Today, as from a Bridal Chamber Christ has shown forth from the Tomb and filled the women with joy, saying: Proclaim the glad tidings to the Apostles!"*

### **The Broad Picture**

Acceptance of cremation, therefore, would represent a radical departure from an established practice for which there seems to be no adequate reason to institute a change. The argument that cemeteries waste space does not stand in a nation as immense as our own, especially when the universality of modern transportation makes burial sites away from urban centres easily accessible. The sky-rocketing cost of burial is not seen at this time as a compelling reason to sanction cremation, for the

Church does not ask that funerals be extravagant and costly, but that a certain amount of respect be maintained for the human body that was once the temple of a human soul. Thus the Church, due to a pastoral concern for the preservation of right beliefs and right practice within the Tradition of the Fathers, and out of a sense of reverence for its departed, must continue its opposition to this practice. Each Orthodox Christian should know that since cremation is prohibited by the canons [rules of the Church], those who insist on their own cremation will not be permitted a funeral in the Church. Naturally, an exception occurs when the Church is confronted with the case of some accident or natural disaster where cremation is necessary to guard the health of the living. In these special situations, the Church allows cremation of Orthodox people with prior episcopal permission and only by "economia."

**Further Reading:**

- *Ethical and Social Issues in the Orthodox Church*
- *Pastoral Guidelines: Church Positions Regarding the Sanctity of Human Life*
- *The Stand of the Orthodox Church on Controversial Issues*