

On the Question of Cremation

“Earth Thou Art And Unto Earth Shalt Thou Return”

The influence of the West-with its secular customs is becoming stronger in some Orthodox circles. This results in the aspiration "to be like everyone else." The temptation "to be like everyone else" is so great that even some children of the Russian Church Abroad give in to it. In these remarks we will examine one phenomenon- the practice of cremating the bodies of the deceased-to which some Orthodox in the USA have begun resorting.

The usual arguments advanced in favor of burning the bodies of the dead come down to the following: This is a good method for reducing the excessively high costs associated with burial; cemeteries occupy too much land, especially in geographically small countries; in the eternal fate of a man, the main thing is the soul and not the body, and that is why the manner of burial is unimportant.

The practice of cremation is not new and has been used in pagan cultures and among peoples confessing Buddhism and Hinduism. It is known that these religions (especially Buddhism) teach disdain for the body, since it is a kind of prison for the soul.

But Christians adopted the Old Testament custom of giving the deceased over to the earth. Burial expresses our faith that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and that we live in the hope of resurrection from the dead, according to the image of Christ, Who was buried (and not cremated). The honor accorded by Christians to the bodily temple springs from the truth of the psycho-physical union of body and soul and from the consciousness that man is the crown of God's creation. On the body of each man without exception lies the imprint of the image and likeness of God. In the divine incarnation, that is, in the advent into the world of the Son of God, Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus, our body was sanctified in a special way.

In Europe, they began to resort to cremation at the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, when Western civilization began to move away from God. In the 18th century, at the dawn of the Enlightenment, a change took place: faith in God was replaced by faith in the power of human reason. On the background of anticlericalism and religious doubt, cremation was a challenge to the Church and an expression of unbelief in the bodily resurrection from the dead at the last day. Burning the bodies of the dead began to be introduced by the ideologists of secular humanism in order to emphasize their faith in the complete dissolution of human existence, and the denial of life beyond the grave. The Church, like a loving mother, in order to safeguard Her children from the corrupting influence of the growing secularization of this world, forbids burning the bodies of the dead.

It is entirely possible that people who agree with the custom of burning the bodies of the dead do not think that by this they are denying life beyond the grave. But this does not change the fact of the matter, that at the root of the practice of cremation lies the denial of life beyond the grave. In other words, the practice is anti-Christian, and fundamentally flawed. The faithful children of the Orthodox Church must flee from it.

Burning the bodies of the dead—turning them into ashes—devalues the significance of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. One ought not forget that the incorruption of the remains of many saints testifies to God's particular good will toward these righteous ones and their flesh. Holy relics are the visible expression—of an existence transfigured and glorified. Holy relics are a reminder that the body of a Christian potentially can be incorrupt and can become relics. In the Church's Order of the Funeral Service, the body of the deceased is plainly called "relics": "And so, taking up the relics, we go forth to the grave, followed by all the faithful. The hierarch, or the priest, taking a shovelful of soil, streweth it crosswise over the relics saying: The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, the world, and all that dwell therein.... and then the grave is filled up in the usual manner."

The incorruption of the body of a saint reveals to us with particular clarity one of the central truths of Christian revelation: Death is not all-powerful, for it was not created by God and entered into the world only as a temporary shadow of sin. The extent of this deathly shadow increases in proportion as the creature moves away from God, and it disappears according to the extent of our return to the Source of life eternal and perfect. The incorruption of a saint's remains testifies to us that bodily death is a temporary condition—it will be overcome by the general resurrection of the dead, when the creature, who has his origin in God, will then find his completion in Him.

The holy relics of God's saints shine on us with the glory of the paschal victory, which Christ the New Adam gained over death. The Son of God became the Son of Man in order to renew mankind in Himself, and to lead it out of death's embrace. The voluntary descent unto death of Christ, the incarnate Life, broke the authority of death: the only thing that remained for it was to retreat in fear before Him, admitting its own defeat. To agree with the practice of burning the bodies of the dead would mean repudiating holy relics?

We are called to prayerfully remember the dead. The main and most important form of such commemoration is, of course, the commemoration during the Bloodless Sacrifice, the Holy Eucharist. Another form of commemoration is prayer at the place of burial, at the deceased's grave, which is adorned with the Life-Creating Cross—the sign of Christ's victory over death. With cremation, when the ashes are scattered to the wind, strewn over the earth, cast into the water, and so on, we are deprived of a place where we might come in order to express

our love to the deceased. Knowing that in the grave lie the bones of people beloved by us is a source of consolation. Hither it is possible to resort to pray, to take care of the grave and adorn it, and to think about the meaning of life and death and about one's own spiritual path.

Traditional funerals really do encompass many preparations and take up much time. It is necessary to make arrangements with the funeral bureau and the cemetery administration, to bring the deceased to the church and from the church to the cemetery. Someone who is acutely experiencing the separation from a loved one does not wish to be occupied with all these affairs, but prefers to focus his strength and attention on the "last kiss." Besides, in America the cost of funerals is steadily growing, and cremation requires significantly less expense and "bother". Some cite these circumstances in order to justify the decision to burn the bodies of the deceased. But it is quite impossible in this way to justify the un-Orthodox practice of cremation. Already in 1932, the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad resolved "as a matter of principle not to permit the burning of the bodies of Orthodox Christians in crematoria, seeing that this custom has been introduced by the godless and the enemies of the Church".

Friends of the family will always be found who willingly will help in the planning of the funeral and in accomplishing the necessary preparations. After all, friends always turn up in misfortune. Besides this, no one, and especially the Church, requires of us a luxurious coffin and an opulent burial, which will in no way help the deceased in the other world. If there is extra money, it is better to donate it for the needs of the church with a request for the commemoration of the reposed, or to give this sum over to the poor in memory of the deceased. Alms given in memory of the dead can bring special benefit to those departed to a better world. If the means for a funeral are lacking, the priest can arrange with the administration of the funeral bureau for a free burial. This is practiced everywhere in America because the funeral bureaus are interested in preserving good relations with the parishes that they service. In this connection, it would be good for each parish of the Russian Church Abroad (wherever this has not already been done) to establish a special charitable or cemetery fund for financing the burial of needy parishioners.

In conclusion, let us turn to the "Book of Needs" of the Orthodox Church in order to be convinced once more of how the Church desires to deal with the body of the deceased. In the Order of the Funeral Service for Laymen we read: "For earth thou art and unto earth shalt thou return" (from the Book of Genesis, 3:12). "Come ye, therefore, let us kiss him who was but lately with us; for he is committed to the grave; he is covered with a stone; he taketh up his abode in the gloom; he is interred among the dead..." "As we gaze upon the dead who lieth before us, let us all accept this example of our own last hour. For he vanisheth from earth like the smoke; like a flower he is faded; like the grass he is cut down. Swathed in a coarse garment he is concealed in the earth ."

The Church teaches us to bury the bodies of the dead in the earth. Everything that the Church has decreed is for our salvation. If we seriously strive for the blessed life of eternity, let us submit to the will of God and His Holy Church, for everything else is "truly vanity and corruption".