One of the most disheartening things I hear among friends, family and parishioners is something like this- “Oh, I don’t want a funeral. Nobody needs to make a fuss over me! Just stick me in the ground and move on.” An alternative second sentence would end with, “That’s why I want to be cremated.”

I even had a Greek Orthodox lady tell me she didn’t want to be buried because she was claustrophobic.

I asked her, “So, do you know how cremation works? You realize there is still a box involved?”

This attitude is even found with life-long Orthodox sometimes. I must confess, I find this to be quite self-centered. Here is a tip--the funeral is not about you!

People are uncomfortable with death and therefore say the strangest things. Let’s work at getting over this. Death is un-natural (it was not created by God) but it is a huge part of life, let’s not let fear make us un-Orthodox.

We don’t do something called a Celebration of Life. We do a funeral. We celebrate that Death has been overthrown, that sins can be forgiven, we rejoice in the Resurrection, despite our sins. We recognize that we need prayer, mercy. We want to be a sheep, not a goat. (Matthew 25:32)

Why should you want a funeral? What are people missing?

1. People are missing a proper view of The Church- Our culture has become increasingly individualistic, it’s all me about me! But the Church is an eternal, living and life-giving body in the Holy Trinity, a fellowship of those in Christ. The entire body of Christ responds to a person entering or leaving the earthly expression of this body; holy baptism and the Orthodox Funeral Services are two significant avenues of recognizing the reality of life in Christ on earth.

Let me be blunt:

Just as there should be no “private” baptisms, no one in the Church should be deprived of attending your funeral. Nor should you deprive yourself of the prayers of The Church. Do you reject your fellow believers prayers for you? Do you think the prayers are not needed or of no effect? Are you are so confident in the life you lived that have you don’t need The Church to pray- Lord, have mercy? Grant rest eternal?

We, the living, need a funeral. You, the departed, need the prayers of the Church, living and departed. Why reject this? We like to make a fuss.

Believers have been having funerals for thousands of years; literally. Monks, bishops, priests, prophets, kings, soldiers, murderers, nuns, poor, rich, saintly, unsaintly. But you “don’t want to make a fuss?” Get over yourself and become Orthodox.

1. What is our Tradition? Why should I want that?

It’s a long story.

1. Begin by studying the Holy Scriptures-the word translated “buried” is used over 100 times in the Holy Scriptures. Here are a few to look up. Gen. 15:15; 23:19, 25:10, 35:29, 48:7, Joshua 24:32, 1 Samuel 31:13
2. Look at the Services of The Church for Death, Dying and Funerals-examine what is being prayed, sung, done. Prayerfully read and think about the wisdom of The Church that is reflected in the Services. With all the references to burial in the O.T., do you not think that there was a funeral? A ceremony, that people mourned? That “a fuss was made?”
3. Reflect on the ages old way of showing love to the dying and the departed. Why should it change? What makes the ways of our culture appealing to you, as opposed to what has always been done by those who faithfully follow God?
4. If you are planning on cremation-do some research into the whole process, what really happens in cremation?
5. How do the Orthodox regard the body of a departed Orthodox Christian? What is a relic? What does it mean to desecrate a body? Why have Orthodox always prohibited cremation?
6. Attend an Orthodox Funeral and observe what happens.
7. The Funeral and the way that Orthodox go through death, dying and burial is much healthier and therapeutic than we realize.

I was at the bedside of a Russian Orthodox woman who was on a ventilator, at the end of her life. Her husband would not stay with me to say the prayers, did not say good-bye, there was no service. She was cremated, not a memorial, nothing. The old pagans knew better than this. It was so sad to me. And it stirred something within me. Anger at what The Evil One is doing to The Church. This must be addressed and stopped.

At Holy Spirit Orthodox Church we are committed to helping you retain what we received from our Holy Fathers. A funeral need not be a huge expense. We can help with this. We have less expensive plans, low cost coffins, an Orthodox Cemetery.

Examine our webpage, click on the link “End of Life Issues” and read more.