

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JUNE 10, 2018

“WHY WE DON’T HAVE CREMATION”

Over the centuries of the history of our human race, there have been some unusual ways of how the bodies of the dead are dealt with. One of the most unusual happened not long ago in a very non-exotic place---Rhode Island. Do you remember Corvairs? Those rather plain, non-exciting cars that were made back in the 1960’s..... I’m pretty sure Chevrolet stopped manufacturing them decades ago. But in Rhode Island there was a woman named Rose Martin who bought a new Corvair in 1962 and absolutely loved it. She took such good care of that car---she kept in perfect running order and always perfectly clean inside and out. And it served her well. She drove it for 36 years. And at the end of the 36 years she didn’t quit driving it because there were problems with the car. She quit driving it in 1998 because she died. Before her death Rose Martin left very strict instructions for her family and her undertaker concerning her burial. She wished to be buried inside her Corvair. And her burial instructions were followed. A large hole was dug. Rose was placed in her Corvair and the Corvair was lowered into the ground and the hole filled in. (“Our Daily Bread”, 8/1/99)

There is another method of taking care of the bodies of the departed that used to be very uncommon in Christian lands, but now is increasingly common. That is cremation. And that is the topic of today’s sermon.

Yes, I know it’s a pretty unusual sermon topic. And it has nothing to do with the assigned scripture readings we just heard. It’s well off the beaten path of homily subjects and I’ve certainly never preached on it before. But it does come up often. It may seem a very small matter to spend a sermon on, almost a trivial thing. But when someone dies, it’s not a small matter at that time! And I think sometimes it’s necessary to set a sermon aside for such a topic, because the Sunday sermon is when the priest has access to the ears of more parishioners than any other time. So bear with me for a sermon that, as I mentioned, is well off the beaten path. So today I will speak about cremation and the position and practice of our Orthodox Faith concerning it.

Cremation used to be extremely uncommon in Christian countries. Not as rare as being buried inside your favorite car, as was Rose Martin of Rhode Island, but pretty rare. The statistics show this. In the United States in the early 1900s, the percentage of cremations was .03%. Not 30%, not 3%, but .03%. Very uncommon indeed. And a study done shortly after 2000 showed the rate was then up to 40%---a huge growth. And I have been told that, as of now, it’s about 50%.

But we Orthodox don’t go by what’s popular and what’s not. We don’t approve of cremation. In fact, we don’t allow it. I’ll explain why and talk a little about how that works out in practice.

Why are we against cremation? It has to do with the background of the practice and the meaning of the practice. It’s true that many who practice cremation may not know the background or the meaning, but here’s what it’s really essentially about---

Its background is in ancient paganism and in Far Eastern religions (farther east than Eastern Orthodoxy!). It does not come from the Bible or Christian traditions. Until the 20th century all Christian churches were opposed to it. Today, most Protestant denominations (not quite all) allow

it and seem to have no qualms about it anymore. The Roman Catholic Church still officially doesn't like it, but easily allows it with some restrictions. We Orthodox----well, you guessed it---we haven't changed our position on the subject, so we're still against it and still don't practice it.

The roots of cremation are caused by a big misunderstanding that many people, even very religious people have. It's easy to see how this misunderstanding could have arisen. Because perhaps all of us sometimes speak in a way that could lead to this misunderstanding----saying things at times of death that seem to imply that the body of the deceased is unimportant because the soul has gone on to the next life and that the soul is all that really matters, not the body.

But human bodies *are* important, very important. We Orthodox believe the body is very important and very good. The body is created by God. When Christ came, the Son of God took on a human body---as we read in the gospel of St. John---“the Word became flesh”. And our bodies are especially blessed by God in several ways. When we are baptized, we, both body and spirit, are united to Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within our bodies. When we receive Holy Communion, we take into our own bodies the very Body and Blood of Christ---that in itself makes our bodies very blessed. As Christians, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul said it in I Corinthians 3:16---“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”. So to burn the body shows a great misunderstanding. The body is God's creation, the body of a Christian is God's temple---it certainly should not be burnt.

We Orthodox Christians, even after someone dies, treat the body of the departed one with much respect. This shows up in several ways----the body is brought into the church in a solemn procession during the singing of “Holy God”. The body is censed to show veneration of a temple of God. Many will kiss the body of the deceased. The body is anointed with holy oil during the funeral, at the point of the final absolution. The place of burial is seen as a special place. Why? Because a temple of God rests there. So we visit the tombs of our loved ones. And we have the grave blessed by the priest each year afterwards.

The body, even after death, is worthy of veneration and respect. It is made by God. It is blessed and sanctified by God. And one day, when Christ returns to our world, He will raise the bodies from their graves in a glorified and exalted condition to live with Him forever in the New Heaven and New Earth.

Cremation, on the other hand, shows a lack of proper veneration for the God-created body. But it is important to note that cremation does *not* prevent salvation or resurrection---that is most definitely not the teaching of the Church. Cremation is unfortunate; it is a result of not understanding the importance of the body, but it does not cause damnation or cause someone to not be resurrected when Christ returns on the last day.

How does all this work out in the practice of the Orthodox Church? We say we are against cremation. So what does that mean? It means cremation is not allowed; it is not an option. If an Orthodox Christian (or a deceased person's family) insists on cremation, they can do that, of course. But then a funeral cannot be done.

All that can be done is a simple prayer service for the departed; similar, although not exactly the same, to what we can do for a non-Orthodox Christian who has died. This prayer service, which is all we can do in a cremation situation, cannot be done in the church and it is not a funeral. The body can not be present; no ashes can be present. There is no censing, no anointing, no prayer of absolution. It's plain and simple and not a funeral.

This matter of a funeral not being allowed when there is a cremation is a big reason for

today's sermon---so that we are all aware of what the Orthodox Church's practice concerning this is. And so there aren't last-minute surprises happening at a time of death. So if you weren't aware of this, and have been planning on being cremated, please change your plans--- it will make everything a lot better when that time comes!

To draw towards a conclusion here.....We don't cremate. We bury, we entomb. This is done to show proper veneration for a body created by God. Christian burial teaches us that the body which goes into the tomb will one day come out of the tomb when Jesus Christ comes back. St. Paul writes about that future day in I Corinthians 15: 52---"For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible." Our departed (and ourselves, God willing!) will be raised from out graves, changed and glorified---to live forever in the New Heaven and the New Earth. Jesus Christ was buried and then later was raised up. Same for us!

An 8-year old boy was learning about plants in school. What fascinated him most was germination: how a little seed is planted in the ground and then later germinates underground and springs up through the dirt. He considered it a very amazing thing. Right after he had learned about this in school, a relative of his died. At the funeral the priest's eulogy talked about how the person who had died would be buried that day and then in the future would be resurrected by God. Then he went to the cemetery for the burial service. As the service concluded and all sang "Memory Eternal" he said to his mother---"I've got it figured out now. This cemetery is where we plant dead people. Then some day Jesus will come and germinate them and they will come back out of the ground." (in "Our Daily Bread", 9/6/07)

That little fellow described it well! And that's why God's plan and desire is burial. Our loved ones fall asleep in Christ. Their soul goes to be with God. We "plant" their bodies. And then one day Christ will come and do an instantaneous mass "germination" all over the world---and they will arise from the grave.

Thanks be to God that He will raise us up!

