

A Christian Ending



DEATH: THE PARAMOUNT MYSTICAL moment for mortal man. In this moment, the Reaper's rapid swing reveals all. What our life was, who we are, who God is, what the afterlife brings—these, of a sudden, become

known. In death, our feeble attempts to distract or lie to ourselves vanish utterly and only the honest truth abides. Our entire life on this earth is but a waiting for our moment of departure; and whereto we depart hinges on how *here* we prepare for that journey.

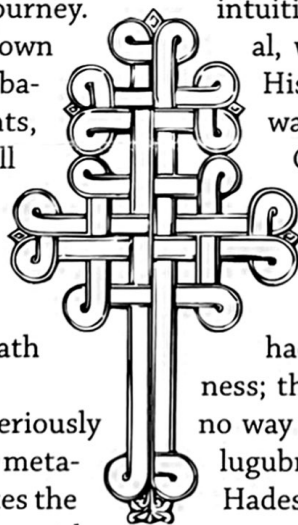
Through fear, the rattle of death draws down doves from the one thing needful to the banal. Puerile pleasures, asinine amusements, and a whole gamut of nonsensicalness—all compounded Internetically—glaze our gaze with a haze o'er the age to come, on which the sage e'er ruminates. And yet, as was once wisely written, *'tis better to die and be with Christ*. Christians yearn for death as a bridegroom for his bride.

The body: the place of encounter mysteriously manifesting mortal flesh as our means of metamorphosis. For, it is the body which mediates the encounter of two persons (hypostases), one with the other. And this holds true whether the breath of life abides bodily or now respire in broader spheres of being. Thus, our understanding of the human body is proven by the manner in which we deal with others in death. There exists an unspoken understanding

that during our common earthly sojourn respect and propriety ought surround our treatment of one another's bodies. And as Christians, we show the same care, concern, and reverence even to the body of our departed ones. This is one of the last corporeal acts of mercy shown toward those we love.

It is the duty of the living to bury the dead, to inter the body with dignity and honor. Sophocles' *Antigone* embodies this intuition as a seed sown even in the hearts of pagans. For Christians, this universal intuition found final fulfillment in Christ's burial, which is now become our paradigm. After His sacrifice on the Cross, those whose love was stronger than the fear of death wrapped Christ in a linen shroud, anointing Him with

spices, aloes and myrrh; they preserved the Body of Christ. For they knew that the corruption of this age is not greater than the Lord of all; they knew that He had come to break the bilboes of our brokenness; they knew that He who holds the keys is in no way subject to the ludicrous locks of luciferian lugubriousness. He freed us from the fetters of Hades by humility, subjecting Himself to His servants—in His birth, to the Virgin Mary, and in His death, to Joseph, Nicodemus and the myrrh-bearing women. Christ chose to be cared for in His death by those who loved Him, thus inscribing the aforementioned as icons for Christians in caring for the bodies of the faithful departed.



II

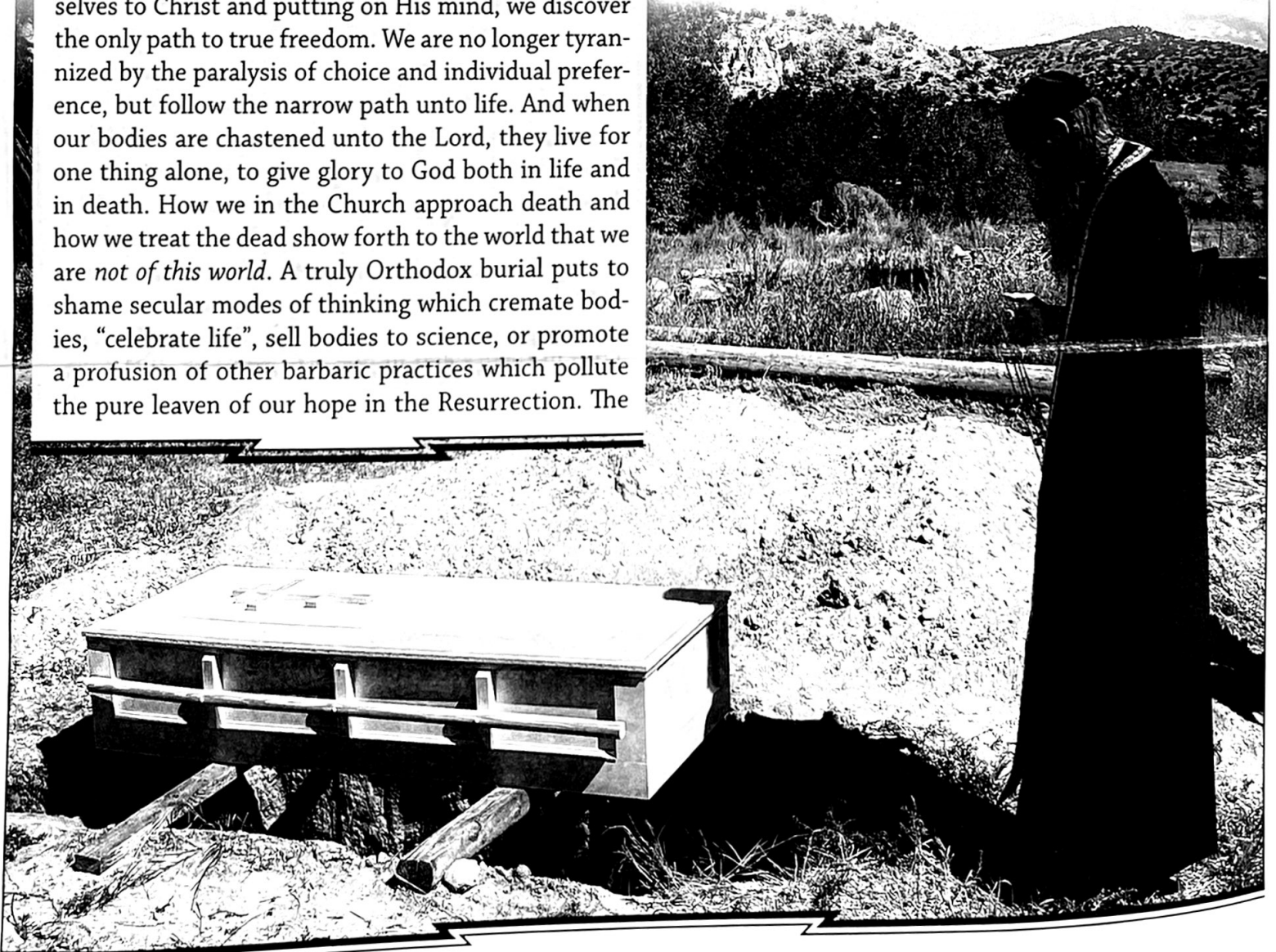
Christian anthropology understands the person as *both* soul and body. God has united the two, and death puts them asunder. Thus the tragedy of death. However, our faith has our minds already in the eschaton, where death has been rent asunder and the integrity of the person has been restored. And so, death proves a wondrous paradox—an antinomy of adamic *anastasis*. We witness this mysterious antinomy in the lives of the early martyrs. St. Ignatios of Antioch begged the Roman Christians to hinder not the crushing of his body in the lions' jaws, the more speedily to be united to Christ. Nevertheless, the faithful wept for the death of the saint, preserving and revering the very bones the saint had given up for the grinding, for they knew that Grace continues to abide in the bodies of those who give everything for Christ.

The Apostle Paul tells us that we are to glorify God in our bodies, which are not our own but belong to Him. We who were baptized into the Body of Christ became not simply due-paying enrollees in the parish register, but literally *belong* to the Church. By enslaving ourselves to Christ and putting on His mind, we discover the only path to true freedom. We are no longer tyrannized by the paralysis of choice and individual preference, but follow the narrow path unto life. And when our bodies are chastened unto the Lord, they live for one thing alone, to give glory to God both in life and in death. How we in the Church approach death and how we treat the dead show forth to the world that we are *not of this world*. A truly Orthodox burial puts to shame secular modes of thinking which cremate bodies, "celebrate life", sell bodies to science, or promote a profusion of other barbaric practices which pollute the pure leaven of our hope in the Resurrection. The

Church has always preserved a profound perspicacity concerning our passing into the next world, and we must be watchful that modern thought surrounding death does not deprive us of the depths of our dogma.

III

Sadly, we have lost the once-universal Christian tradition of keeping our beloved departed close to us, praying over them, washing them, clothing them in resurrectional hope, serving the funeral for them and burying them in Christian simplicity. Instead, we hire strangers and entrepreneurs who scuttle away the bodies of our dearly departed, to be delivered into the maggoty maws of modern mortuaries. Thus is manifested the sickness which afflicts us—namely, convenience. And it is in the name of convenience that we deprive ourselves of grace, the grace present in tending to our departed ones. Rather than opening the familiar feel of home and church for final farewells, in the name of convenience we put our loved ones in stuffy morgues mad with maquillages which mar the misfortune of mankind's mortality. When the mystery of death is taken away from the impersonal funeral industry and put back into our own hands, we



shall enter into an entirely new dimension of relationship with our departed loved ones.

Today, one might hear the objection: "Isn't it, like, illegal or something to, like, bury dead people yourself?" Such statements betray a culture of ignorance founded on a widespread erroneous assumption that the responsibility for burying the departed lies with 'someone else.' As a result, we rob ourselves of participation in the sacred rites of the burial process. *Things can be different.* Contrary to the aforesaid assumption, we can actively partake in the burial of loved ones, and this can be a powerful source of unity for family and parish. Many parishes have founded burial guilds, enabling the parishioners themselves to prepare the bodies of their fellows for final resting. And thereby the community itself becomes more closely knit together. Every burial performed further affirms the fact that each member of the community will be loved unto the end and buried in dignity, thus freeing minds from the worries of this age so as to focus on the age to come without distraction.

Here at the monastery, our own understanding continues to grow in regard to funeral practices. Most recently, we had our first 'shroud burial,' in which the remains were placed in the ground without a casket. The people present palpably perceived the power of returning *Thine own of Thine own* to the dust whence we all were once wrought. The grace of the mystery of Christian burial was keenly manifest. By interring the body in the most natural way possible, without the least trace of artificiality, we live the intensity of our human condition while hailing the hope held high in our hearts. We discover a dignified simplicity in a true Christian burial—the opportunity to look death in the face without fear, to keep the body in close kinship with the earth, and to know that love is stronger than death. The last line of life's tale is yet to be penned.

IV

You might be saying to yourself, "I would like to practice the mystery of Orthodox burial in its fullness, but is this realistic nowadays?" Deacon John and Madrecita Barna have provided a

wonderful starting point: the book *A Christian Ending*—a book we consider essential for every pastor and for everyone who thinks they might die. Therein, the authors instruct and inspire us how to capture once again the beauty of the final moments of life and the first moments of death. The Barnas present an expose of modern death practices and a critique of the corruption creeping into the funeral industry, while also offering a veritable post-mortem practicum. How the undertaker's role is understood has undergone a drastic undermining, and this, he writes, is due to the commercializing of death. Having manipulated mortality into a money-making machine, corporate funeral industries prey on people at their weakest moment, selling them over-priced caskets, vaults and 'services' which are unnecessary and only serve to sap the sacredness from the human body. In contrast

to the embalming, cosmetics, casket, cadaver storage, cremation (God forbid!), funeral parlor, hearse, etc., Christians can bring back dignity to burial with great simplicity and frugality. Vans and pickup trucks have brought most of the dead to our monastery for burial, and the few times a hearse was employed, it seemed so out-of-place and impersonal that we simply wondered, "Why the waste?" A parish burial guild (which need be only two people—no army required) can help cut the cold commercialism out of death and restore the warmth of home to the whole rite of burial.

Ignorance has profaned the mystery of death in our society. Knowledge can return the sacredness to how we treat the departed, dispelling clouds of confusion. *A Christian Ending* seeks to resurrect our tradition, both in theory and in practice. All we need is a little education in order to recapture the ancient ambiance surrounding the mystery wherein we sow the seed of our bodies, full of hope. When Christian burial is returned to the hands of kith and kin, then come healing, warmth, and beauty beyond our ken. And we dare to declare: death is truly the passage from life to life.

A Christian Ending is available from our friends at Eighth Day Books: (316) 683-9446 and the Monastery of St. John: (530) 474-5964 (the Publisher). ✠

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Recently, a priest pointed out to me a passage from Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* describing the response of third-century Christians to a pandemic. It reads as follows:

"Pestilence assailed us; to the heathen more dreadful than any dread, and more intolerable than any other calamity; and, as one of their own writers has said, the only thing which prevails over all hope. To us Christians, however, this was not so, but it was a school for exercise and probation. For it did not keep aloof even from us, but the heathen it assailed more severely.

"The most of our brethren did not spare themselves in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness. They held fast to each other and visited the sick fearlessly, and ministered to them continually, serving them in Christ. And they died with them most joyfully, and though filled with the disease from others, they took the sickness from their neighbors unto themselves, voluntarily receiving their pains. And many who cared for the sick and gave strength to others, themselves died, having transferred this death to themselves. In fact, the popular saying which seemed before to be a mere expression of politeness, they then made real in action, in their death becoming "the offscouring of all."

"Truly, the best of our brethren departed from life in this manner, including some presbyters and deacons and those of the people who had the highest reputation; so that this form of death, through the great piety and strong faith which attended it, seemed to be but little inferior to martyrdom itself.

"They took up the bodies of the saints with open hands, drawing them to their bosoms, and they closed their eyes and their mouths, bore them away on their shoulders and laid them out; and they clung to them and embraced them; and they prepared them suitably with washings and garments. And, after a little, they themselves received like treatment, for the survivors were always following those who had gone on before them.

"But with the heathen everything was quite otherwise. They repelled those who began to be sick and avoided their dearest friends. And they cast



them out into the streets half dead, and left the dead like refuse, unburied. They shunned any participation or fellowship with death, which it was impossible to avoid by every precaution and care."

— St. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (†266 AD)
Ecclesiastical History, Book VII, Ch. XXII

No commentary is needed to point out how seldom we lived up to this ideal.

You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted? (St. Matthew 5:13)

This passage reminds me of how the early monks in fourth-century Egypt spoke about what monks would be like in the last times. They will scarcely pray, have little virtue, do no mighty works, but if they keep even a grain of faith, it will be credited to them as a miracle.

Have Christians lost their savor? Have monastics lost the power of repentance?

Brethren, all we can do is weep. Only this will save our souls. Let us use the grace-filled season of Great Lent to learn the mystery of tears. ✠

—ABBOT SILOUAN