

# FROM FUNERALS TO PROPAGANDA: HOW RITUALS (RE)CREATE COMMUNITIES

## THE FUNERAL FEASTS – REMEMBERING OF THE DECEASED. SPECIAL REGARD ON OLTENIA<sup>♦</sup>

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**Abstract:** The funeral feast for the dead represents one of the practices most spread and observed by the believers, being part of the cult of the dead, so much rooted in the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church. Us, who wish to take care of the dead's souls, we can do that, praying for them and giving alms. Thus, the fallen asleep can be commemorated anytime, excepting the days forbidden by the church, the prayer and the deeds made according to the Christian compassion having an essential part in improving the situation of the deceased.

**Keywords:** the cult of the dead, soul, funeral feast, prayer.

The eternal life was and continues to be, a subject approached frequently in the religious and scientific spheres. Thus, we can talk about a vast specialized literature, according to which we are able to understand the “after life” experiences or, in another manner of speaking, the “out of the body” experiences.

According to the Christian tradition, once with the death of the body, the life doesn't end and the soul continues its existence in “the other world” too. Saint Avva Dorotei, the monk Priest from the sixth century Gaza, talking about the after life, preached that: “Actually, the soul loses nothing from the things done during this world and when it leaves the

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body, it remembers everything clearly and precisely, once it has been released from the earthly body”<sup>1</sup>.

For the orthodox-Christians, “the other world” is a reality in the same way in which God’s Resurrection is<sup>2</sup>. This is “a prelude of our own resurrection”<sup>3</sup>, as St. Apostle Paul said: “God, the One Who resurrected Jesus, will resurrect us, through His mighty power”. “If there is not a resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the ripen fruit (firstfruits) (of resurrection) of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.” (I Cor. 15, 13-14 and 20-21). But the guarantee of our future life is our Redeemer Jesus Christ Himself. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live (John, 11, 25).

The institution of the Church that takes care of those asleep because “the earthly life is mortal or transient, while death represents the passing into eternity”<sup>4</sup>.

In Oltenia, the funeral feast of the deceased constitutes one of the practices most observed by the believers, “being in connection with the dead people cult, deeply rooted in the liturgical ritual and in the tradition of the Orthodox Church”<sup>5</sup>. The remembering of the deceased is materialized in the eternal memory through prayer, alms and liturgical sacrifice<sup>6</sup>, taking the example of Judah Maccabees who “made atonement on behalf of those who have passed away” (II Mac, 12, 46). Through these funeral feasts we express our respect, gratitude and love for what those who died made for us and ask God to give them the eternal repose in “the company of His chosen people”<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, “The funeral feasts or the burial repasts represent the remembering that is for those who

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<sup>1</sup> Avva Dorotei, *Discourses*, translated by E. P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, 1977, p. 185-186.

<sup>2</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, *Predici la Duminici, la Praznicele împărătești și ale Maicii Domnului, la Sfinții mari și la Sfinți români; predici ocazionale și la înmormântări*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Bucharest, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2010, p. 571.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Nicolae D. Necula, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică*, vol. 3, Bucharest, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2004, p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Irineu Pop-Bistrițeanul, *Vestirea Evangheliei Mântuirii. Predici la duminicile de peste an*, Cluj-Napoca, p. 420.

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, *Predici*, p. 568.

passed away, in order to ease their sins and to save them from the torments of hell”<sup>8</sup>.

The Archbishop Ioan Maximovici, as regarding the question whether there is something that could help the souls after death, said: “Each one of us, who desire to show his/her love for those who died and to really help them, can do this by praying for them and especially by mentioning them during the Liturgy service, when the segments with the mentioning with the living and dead persons are put in the God’s Blood, using the words: “Wash, You, Lord, the sins of those mentioned here with Your Holly Blood, for the prayers of Your saints.” We can’t do anything better or grater for those who died, but to pray for hem, mentioning their names during the Liturgy service. They always need this, especially during the forty days when the soul of the deceased walks on the path towards the eternal place”<sup>9</sup>.

The Orthodox Church established special terms or days to remember the dead ones. It is for their individual or general remembering.

Thus, from the first category, we mention the feast three days after the death that coincides with the day of the burial, made in the honor of the Holly Trinity, but also to recollect the Resurrection from the third day of the Redeemer, Who, raising from the dead, became the first fruits or the first one offered in the harvest and pledge for the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep (comp. I. Cor. XV, 20).

The feast nine days after the death is done for the person asleep “to be worthy of joining the nine groups of angels, but also to remember the ninth hour, when the Redeemer, on the cross, promised the heaven to the thief, now being our turn to ask God to favor our deceased to get to heaven”<sup>10</sup>.

Next, is the forty days or six weeks feast that remembers us of the Ascension of the Redeemer to heaven, praying that the deceased’s soul to ascend to heaven too.

At six months is made the feast for the honoring of the Holly Trinity. The feasts continues annually, up until seven years, when it takes place the last feast of this kind, number seven being considered a holly number, recalling the seven days of creation<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Nicodim Măndița, *Priveghiul creștinesc*, Editura Bunavestire, 2003, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> Serafim Rose, *Sufletul după moarte. Experiențe contemporane “de după moarte” în lumina învățaturii ortodoxe* (translated in English by Dana Cocargeanu), Bucharest, Editura Sophia, 2007, p. 216.

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, *Predici*, p. 569.

<sup>11</sup> Gheorghe Safta, *Îndrumar liturgic*, Târgoviște, 1999, p. 176.

Beside the theological interpretations of the terms for the feasts of the dead persons, up to forty days, had been enounced some physiological or natural explanations, founded on the human body's stages of decomposition, until the effective rot. Thus, the feast from the third day after the death is made because, in this day, the dead person's face starts to disfigure; the ninth day feast corresponds to the moment when the deceased's body starts to rot, excepting the heart; at 40 days, because this is the moment when the heart is lost<sup>12</sup>. Considering these realities, the physical decomposition process follows the inverted process of conceiving and forming the human body inside the mother's womb<sup>13</sup>.

There are also some interpretations that belong to the popular belief, concretized in the passing of the soul after the death through the tribute places of heaven<sup>14</sup>. Regarding the state in which the souls are after the death, the metropolitan Macarie Moscovitul said: "We must perceive the tribute places not in a rough and sensorial way, but, as much as we can, in a pastoral way and we must try not to mingle with details that are presented in different lights by diverse authors and by diverse representations of the Church itself, although the starting point of the tribute places is the same in all the cases"<sup>15</sup>.

In the first two days after the death, the soul can go to any place on the earth that it loved and where it enjoyed itself, but, in the third day, it passes towards "other realms". Saint Ioan Damaschin talks about the soul separated from the body, but that is still on earth:

Oh, what a struggle for the soul to separate from the body! Oh, how many tears dropt and there is nobody to show compassion! It raises its eyes to the angels and prays but in vain; it reaches the hands to the people, but there is nobody to offer help. For that, my beloved brothers, knowing the narrowness of our life, we need to ask Christ rest for the departed and great mercy for our souls<sup>16</sup>.

In the third day, the Archbishop Ioan Maximovici says that the soul "passes among the legions of evil spirits that stand in its way, that blames it for the different sins, with which themselves had tempted it. The different discoveries tells us that there are twenty different obstacles, the

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<sup>12</sup> Ene Braniște, *Liturgica specială*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Bucharest, 2005, p. 403.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Regarding the phenomenon of the heaven's tribute places see more in: Serafim Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 81-106.

<sup>15</sup> Macarie Moscovitul, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 2, Sankt Petersburg, 1883, p. 538.

<sup>16</sup> *Molitfelnic*, Bucharest, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2006, p. 228.

so-called “tribute places”; at each one of them is analyzed a certain sin; after it passes of one it goes to another and only after it had successfully passed all of them, it could continue the road without being thrown immediately to hell... the third day it is really a terrible day for the soul of the departed and therefore this period asks for intensive prayer”<sup>17</sup>.

In the ninth day, the soul comes before God in the sky for the second time, to bow before Him, after it had visited the heaven<sup>18</sup>. According to those said by Saint Macarius of Egypt, the feast for the deceased in the ninth day after the death, beside the fact that it is connected with the nine groups of angels, is officiated because in this moment the soul had been shown the beauties of Heaven and only after that, in the remaining days from the forty existent, it is shown the torments of Hell<sup>19</sup>.

In the fortieth day, it takes place the particular judgment of each soul, after the forty days wondering through the tribute places of the sky, through heaven and hell<sup>20</sup> “to see if the soul is worthy for living in the sky above”<sup>21</sup>.

Along these days of individual feasting of the deceased, the Church established that, as a rule, the general remembering feast of the departed takes place on a Saturday, “in the memory of the Saturday from the Passion Week, when the Redeemer had His body inside the grave and His soul descended in Hell to release all the asleep righteous people”<sup>22</sup>. These Saturdays are: the one before the Shrovetide or that of the Frightening Judgment and that before the Descending of the Holy Spirit or the Pentecost. It is added the general feast of the dead from August 6<sup>th</sup>, that from the Tuesday after St. Thomas Sunday, that from the Thursday of the Lord’s Ascension<sup>23</sup>. During the Lent, according to the tipiconal arrangements from the Triodyon, the feast for the deceased is made in the second, the third and the fourth Saturdays<sup>24</sup>.

The service made by the priest for the departed, the requiem, is officiated either at the deceased’s house or at the church, after the Liturgy or after the pulpit’s prayer, or near the grave. At the church, for the

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<sup>17</sup> Serafim Rose, *Sufletul*, p. 207-208.

<sup>18</sup> Ene Braniște, *Liturgica*, p. 403-404.

<sup>19</sup> Serafim Rose, *Sufletul*, p. 200.

<sup>20</sup> Ene Braniște, *Liturgica*, p. 403-404.

<sup>21</sup> Serafim Rose, *Sufletul*, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, *Predici*, p. 570.

<sup>23</sup> Nicolae D. Necula, *Tradiție*, p. 262.

<sup>24</sup> See, Nicolae D. Necula, *Sunt toate sâmbetele din perioada Postului Mare zile de pomenire a morților?* in “Vestitorul Ortodoxiei”, III(1991), no. 33-34, p. 7; Idem, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică*, vol. I, Galați, 1996, p. 281-283.

funeral feast service, the relatives or the closest people, bring diptychs to the altar, communion bread or round-shaped bread, *colivă* (boiled wheat mixed with sugar, essence and nuts and decorated with crosses) and wine. Also, are doled other gifts or offerings: eggs, meat, oil, sweets. At the grave, it is brought wine, communion bread (round-shaped bread) and *colivă*, where the priest blesses them in special prayers and sprinkles the grave with wine.

In Oltenia, it also met another kind of feast to remember the departed ones, commonly known as *sărintar* (mass for the dead). Thus, it is done the nominal feast for a deceased (or a diptych of deceased persons), for forty Liturgy services one after another<sup>25</sup>. This feast is based on the popular belief that, in the fortieth day after dying, it takes place the particular judgment, where it is decided the temporary fate until the final judgment of the deceased' soul, "faith that can be lessened, through the intercessions and the alms of the living for the dead"<sup>26</sup>. At the end of the 40 Liturgy services, it is made the dispensing or the absolving of the masses for the dead, "accompanied sometimes by the ordinary Holly Water and the usual meal of the feast"<sup>27</sup>.

During the Lent, at the Churches from Oltenia's towns, people usually bring Lent's diptyches, *păresimi*, lists in which are enumerated both the living and the dead, in order to be mentioned in each liturgical day, being considered that the preparation done for receiving the Resurrection's light it is necessary both for the living and for the dead. Therefore, in the prayers for redemption of the living are mentioned the dead close persons or relatives, too. At the Churches from the rural zone are received these Lent's diptyches for the dead and they will be referred to on Saturday, Sunday or on an important holyday during the Lent (The Saint's Day, St. Haralambos, Annunciation, St. George etc). "The absolving" of the Lent's diptyches is made usually on the Saturday before the Palm Sunday, when people bring offerings to the Church for the mass of the funeral feast.

Made of boiled wheat, sweetened with honey or sugar, *coliva* represents the body of the fallen asleep and the wheat is the symbol of resurrection (John, 12,24). It is decorated with candies arranged in the shape of the Holly Cross, signifying the fact that all the Christians who leave off themselves and take the cross, following their Redeemer, will pass from a troubled life into an eternal and a happy one, where they will

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<sup>25</sup> Ene Braniște, *Liturgica*, p. 405.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 406.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

sweeten themselves, “spending their time in the Godly kingdom with the angels and all the Saints, praising and rejoicing in the light of God’s Face” (Apocalypse, ch. 21). In the same time, *coliva* is “a material expression of our belief in immortality and resurrection, being made of wheat seeds that God Himself presented them as symbols of bodies’ resurrection: the same way the wheat seed, to sprout and bear fruit, must first be buried in the ground, to rot, just as the human body first is buried and rots, for later to rise from the dead into an undeteriorated state”<sup>28</sup>.

In the past, *coliva* brought at the funeral services, was blessed through the pronounciation of some special prayers and ceremonials<sup>29</sup>. All the ingredients that make the composition of the *coliva* symbolize “the virtues of the saints and of the deceased or the sweetness of the eternal life that we hope for the departed one”<sup>30</sup>. “The swinging of the *coliva* by the priest and by the deceased’s relatives, while they sing “memory eternal”, symbolizes the spiritual connection, the love and the respect for the departed”<sup>31</sup>.

The bread (the round-shaped bread or the communion bread), braided and embellished with different decorative models, in which it is placed a candle, gains the same virtues as the *coliva*.

The wine brought for the funeral feast is poured by the priest over the grave, at the cemetery, and symbolizes the spices and the balsam with which God’s body was smeared. Also, the wine “that is the grape’s blood, it is the symbol of the blood too, such is the sap of life that flows through the members of the human body and brings it life. Pouring it over the body or over the grave of the deceased represents, through analogy with the Holly Blood from the Sacraments, the image of immortality or resurrection for the eternal life that we all hope for”<sup>32</sup>.

In Oltenia are seldom organized meals for the poor and at the six weeks funeral feast are offered as alms different things and objects that are first blessed by the priest through certain prayers: “Our Lord, Jesus Christ, You Who rule over the dead and the living, Who feed the hungry and dress the bare-bodied, bless these clothes for those who shall wear them and as for Your asleep humble servant (name), dress him in the undeteriorated/undamaged vestment and in the clothing embellished with

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 399.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Gheorghe Safta, *Îndrumar*, p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Ene Braniște, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

light and put him in Your place for him to rejoice for ever at the delight of Your wonders and thereupon his peaceful resting”<sup>33</sup>.

Through death we must understand the end of the earthly life and also the beginning of the eternal one. Nicolae Velimirovici, talking about the departed, said: “It is better to think that them, as good pupils, finished earlier the school of life and us, as weaker pupils, were let to study more, until we would have learned our lesson”<sup>34</sup>.

We can’t talk about the fear of the death if we have lived our life according to God’s calling. Considering St. Apostle Paul’s words: “As for me life represents Christ and death is a gain” (Philippians 1, 21), death can be “desired” if we understand through this the wish of being, as quickly as possible, along with Christ.

So, the prayer and the alms for the departed are ways of helping them or of easing their condition of sinners. The alms must be done anytime to anyone. Having as a guide mark the periods that the Orthodox Church established for the deceased people and continuing with their general remembering and also with that during each Saint Liturgy, we can be sure that we make the most serviceable and natural deed for the souls of the dead.

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<sup>33</sup> *Molitfelnic*, p. 346.

<sup>34</sup> Nicolae Velimirovici, *Învățăături despre bine și rău* (translated from Serbian by father Teofil Petrescu), Bucharest, 2001, p. 186.