

# The Holy Memorial Services - Part I (Ioannis Foundoulis)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The subject of this paper is, “The Holy Memorial Services”, that is, the intercessions of the Church on behalf of our departed brothers and sisters. We shall attempt a review of the tradition regarding memorial services and the practice of the Church from the beginning until the liturgical practice became established. This reference to history, both in the present instance and in any other issue concerning worship, is made not simply for reasons of historical curiosity, but because there is a really important reason for it: it is in this way that we validate the legitimacy of our liturgical practice, in this case intercessions for the departed, which the Church conducts for the repose of their souls and the consolation of the living.

This is the way in which a traditional Church, as the Orthodox is, thinks, theologizes and acts. Tradition justifies and verifies our practice today. We don't innovate, but rather we follow the practice we've inherited from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church. We rest upon this with humility and confidence and in its name we continue our spiritual life of worship within the bosom of the Church, invoking the mercy of God and believing that His loving-kindness will overcome the multitude of our sins. We say as much at the kneeling prayers at Vespers on the Sunday of Pentecost, which, fundamentally, are prayers for the dead; “Measure our transgressions against your forgiveness; set the depth of your mercy against the multitude of our wrongdoings” (1<sup>st</sup>. kneeling prayer).



*Source; <http://ayioi-pantes.blogspot.gr>*

To the questions from believers and non-believers regarding the efficacy of and benefit that our intercessions on behalf of the departed might have, since “there is no repentance in Hell”, we reply by invoking the centuries-old practice of the Church. The apparently simplistic attitude that: “This is the way we’ve received it”, demonstrates our complete confidence and unwavering and vibrant hope in the mercy of God, as well as our certainty that the action of the Church, which expresses its faith and the truth of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus to the world, is, for all of us, the guarantee that our prayers are in accordance with the will of God and that they are beneficial for the souls of the departed. As to the manner in which this occurs, we leave it to the unsearchable depths of God’s sagacious love. That, roughly, would be our answer on the matter of memorial services, from a liturgical point of view.

Historically, the Christian Church, from the very beginning, instituted special prayers for the repose of the souls of our departed ancestors and relatives. This was a consequence of its faith and teaching that dead believers live in Christ beyond the grave and that the communion of faith and love among the living and the departed does not cease to exist, but rather that it is expressed through reciprocal prayer. The living pray for the departed, and the departed, especially the saints who have boldness of speech towards Christ, pray for the living. In this way, prayers and memorial services were established in memory of the departed. Thus, the Church continues a tradition and practice to be found among all peoples, in this

case the funeral customs which existed at the time of Christ's coming and of the establishment and expansion of the Church, and which, Christianized and purified of shibboleths and superstitions, took on new content and meaning.

There is evidence in the Old Testament concerning the Jewish practice before Christ. In *Tobit* (4, 17), there is the exhortation: "pour out your bread on the graves of the righteous", which implies the holding of funeral meals at the graves or the offering of alms to the poor, clearly in remembrance of the departed. In *Maccabees* (12, 43-5), there is mention of sacrifices conducted "for sins", on behalf of "those asleep in piety". Judas Maccabeus sent what was required to the temple in Jerusalem for a sacrifice on behalf of those who had fallen in the war. The relationship to the analogous, though, of course later, Christian practice is clear.

But pagans also performed sacrifices and offerings on behalf of the dead. Funeral feasts, at which the dead person was believed to be eating with those present, were known from the time of Homer. These memorial meals were held on specified days following that of death: the third, ninth, thirtieth and on the annual birthday-not date of death- of the dead person. The similarity here to the Christian practice is even more obvious.

As was to be expected, Christians continued the above, in two ways: alms on behalf of the departed as an expression of love towards them and towards those in need; and prayers. As early as the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the "Apostolic Constitutions" suggest that alms should be given to the poor "from the estate" of the departed "in remembrance of them". (VIII, 42). The same is proposed by Chrysostom, Ieronymous, Tertullian, pseudo-Athanasios and other Early Fathers and Church writers. At the same time, however, funeral feasts were held at the graves of the departed and these have survived to this day in a variety of local guises.

The funeral feasts were not unrelated to the practice of alms-giving, since it was not only family and friends who were invited, but also the clergy, the poor and strangers (Ap. Const. VIII, 44; Augustine *Confessions*, VI2; Valsamon and so forth). It is worth noting that the spiritual meaning attributed by the Apostolic Constitutions (VIII, 44) to these common meals is that they are an act of prayer and intercession on the part of the living on behalf of the departed ("and at these memorials eat in all propriety and fear of God, as being able to pray for the departed").

[To Be Continued]