

T E X A S

DIRECTOR

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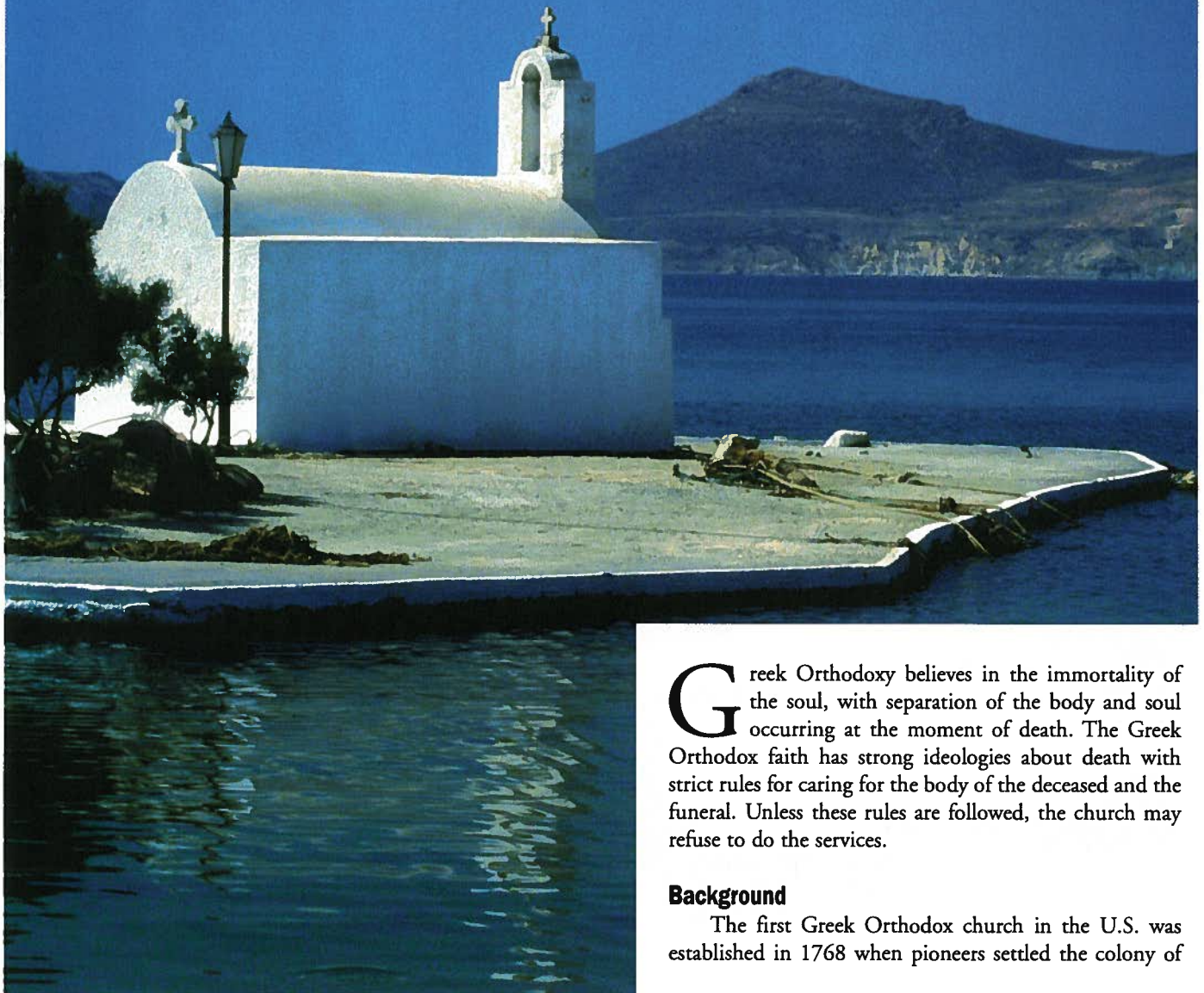


What Funeral Directors Need to Know
About Greek Orthodox Funeral Services



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By Alice Adams



Greek Orthodoxy believes in the immortality of the soul, with separation of the body and soul occurring at the moment of death. The Greek Orthodox faith has strong ideologies about death with strict rules for caring for the body of the deceased and the funeral. Unless these rules are followed, the church may refuse to do the services.

Background

The first Greek Orthodox church in the U.S. was established in 1768 when pioneers settled the colony of



New Smyrna, about 40 miles south of St. Augustine, Florida. A small group of New Orleans Greek merchants built the first church in 1864. The Greek Archdiocese of North and South America was officially incorporated by the state of New York in 1921.

Today, the Archdiocese maintains numerous day schools, a home for the aged, and an academy for deprived and orphan children. Candidates for the priesthood are trained at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston or St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary.

Greek Orthodoxy believes that it possesses both the unity and the faith, which alone will produce the reunion all Christians seek. It is also painfully aware of the scandal of Christian division. These are two major reasons for its active role in the ecumenical movement and in the later World Council of Churches, founded at Amsterdam in 1948. The late church leader Georges Florovsky never ceased stressing that the search for Christian unity should be a "noble and blessed endeavor."

Who is eligible?

Whenever a member of the Greek Orthodox faith dies, the priest should be present. According to Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, the body is considered the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this, cremation is prohibited. Anyone who has been cremated or is going to be cremated will be denied a church funeral. Burial is required.

Continued on page 7



Continued from page 5

Church services are not permitted for someone who committed suicide unless a letter from the family doctor is provided saying that the deceased was psychotic or being treated for an emotional disorder. Stillborn or unbaptized children are not given a church burial, but a Trisagion Prayer—a prayer for the deceased child's soul—may be read at the graveside. Finally, a member of the Greek Orthodox faith must be in good standing with the church in order to have a church burial.

Autopsies are allowed to determine the cause of death. Donation of any organs can also be made to further medical science or for transplant. It is still very important to remember to have the utmost respect for the dead body. A parish priest can provide more information.

The Funeral

The funeral usually takes place within three days of death. A funeral can take place on any day of the week except Sunday and some major holidays. Some churches do not allow for services to be performed in the church unless prior approval is made. Morning hours are preferred and most services take place at the funeral home.

It is traditional for those greeting the bereaved family to say, "May you have an abundant life," and, "May their memory be eternal." Many bereaved families also prefer donations to flowers and many churches prefer flowers to be limited to a casket piece and, perhaps, a few family sprays. For more information, talk with the priest for special envelopes or procedures for these donations.

Either the evening before or the morning before the funeral, the priest will read Trisagion Prayers. During the funeral service, many choose an open casket. A cross or other religious symbols can be placed on the decedent's chest and mourners are expected to bow in front of the casket and kiss the object. The service usually lasts between 30 minutes and an hour and consists of hymns, prayers, and readings from the Bible.

At the beginning of the service, the priest precedes the procession into the church. The casket enters the church, feet first, and is placed open during the service before the altar in the special open area—called the solea—with the decedent's feet nearest the altar. The family follows the casket into the church. Bowing, rather than genuflecting, is usually practiced. A cantor and the priest often provide the music.

After the service, the final kissing occurs with family and friends filing past the casket and placing a farewell kiss on the icon of the resurrection. The kiss is performed in thanksgiving for eternal life. In preparation for the kissing ceremony, the casket may be turned parallel to the Iconostasis.

In some churches, the priest will pour earth and oil onto the deceased before the casket is closed for the final time. At the end of the service, the priest will lead the procession out of the church and to the funeral coach. It is always a good idea to check with the local priest to determine his protocols for each funeral service.

Committal and Memorial

At the graveside, there is usually another short time of prayer. Each person then puts one flower on the casket. After the committal, family, friends, and mourners meet at a restaurant, church hall or

Greek Orthodox Terminology

Cantor - a person who accompanies the Priest in chanting hymns of the funeral service.

Icon - a holy picture, displayed in a prominent place during services.

Trisagion - short services, prior to church services, usually held the evening prior to funeral services.

Iconostasis - a partition extending across the front of the church behind which the altar is located.

Solea - open area before the altar where the casket is placed for the service.

private home for a memorial gathering (makaria). The bereaved gather to accept sympathy and express thanks to those who attended the funeral or helped the family in anyway.

Although it varies by area, most of the Greek Orthodox churches have special memorial services (Mnymosyno) that are held nine days, 40 days, three months, six months, nine months, 12 months, and then each year after the death. These services consist of prayers at the church, the graveside or both.

On the fortieth day of the memorial service, a special cake of boiled wheat—called kolyva—is made. There are also some days during the year in which these memorials cannot be held, so contact the local church for more information.

The Greek Orthodox Church is steeped in historic ritual and it is important for the funeral director to have the utmost understanding of and respect for these practices. Because of all of the very specific details, it is important to talk with the local Greek Orthodox churches in your area. When in doubt, ask.