

Reading the Psalter over the deceased

In the Orthodox Church of Christ there is a pious **custom of reading the Psalter** over the dead body of a monk and layman¹ (see Novaia Skrizhalj [New Stone Tablets]) continuously (except the time when memorial services or a Litiya is done at the coffin) up to the time of his burial and in his memory after the burial.

Reading the psalms over the dead is one of those pious institutions of the Church of Christ, which results from the maternal care of her children, carefully orders their salvation, from the birth to death, and not leaving them after death. As an essential expression of her spirit and necessary need of Christians, this reading of the Psalter over the dead has its beginning in the most remote antiquity and, serving as a prayer to the Lord for the deceased and at the same time giving consolation and edification for the living.

It is itself clear that **psalms have to be read** "with affection and warm compunction, reasonably, with attention, but not struggling like trying to understand the word with the mind". Therefore it is necessary to be circumspect in a choice of persons with whom to charge the sacred reading. Of course, everyone who is capable of this and understands this matter can assume this reading; but in any case **to invite** to execute this sacred ceremony over the dead **those persons** more appropriately, who are placed by rank and by rich consecration are approved for the service at all sacred ceremonies and the sacraments of the Church of Christ; except appropriateness, in them both the ability and knowledge appropriate for service to the sacred matter is assumed².

The position of reading the Psalter over the departed is the position of prayer and therefore one needs to stand during this reading, if some special need does not force to replace this position with sitting.

It is clear that the debt of attention to God's word and prayers for the soul of the departed depends not only on one reader of the Psalter, but also on listening to the reading. If it is impossible and not always **convenient with the close family and relatives** to continuously participate in the prayer of reading the Psalter over the departed, then, in an extreme measure, from time to time they need to join their prayer with the reader's prayer, and more properly to do this in all those intervals when the reader interrupts the reading of the psalms and makes a special address to

God, reading the church prayer, with saying the name of the departed. And so it is done in our Orthodox Church with many fervently devout Christians who come to the coffin of the departed not from idle curiosity but only with the purpose to pray for soul of the departed. According to tradition in this they observe the custom of ancient Christians who came to the house of the departed and sang over the departed all the Psalms of David (Sunday (Resurrection Day) Reading 1853-1854, 51).

Reading the Psalter in temples is postponed during all the **weeks of Pascha**: but as the Psalter was used since the beginning of Christianity not only in mournful but also joyful cases; as, further, even the Apostolic Regulations, specifying how to lead Christians, upon the death of the departed, the 3rd, 9th, 40th and annual days, by the way, they say that the 3rd day after the death of the departed must be spent in psalm singing, readings and prayers for the sake of the One Who on the 3rd day rose from the dead; then it should be concluded from this that there is no need to postpone the reading of the Psalter over the dead even during the bright days of Holy Pascha. For an expression of greater solemnity of the feast, it is possible to do some additional paschal hymns, after the reading of each kathisma and even the "Glory" (Svod. Uk. i Zam. [Code of Ukases and Remarks]).

In the Poltava diocese there was almost no custom to read the Psalter over the dead but on the contrary there existed the wrong **custom to read the Gospel** over honorable laymen, which reading is done only over bishops and priests. In correcting this abnormality the diocesan administration took the following measures:

- 1) it is forbidden for deacons to read the Gospel over the dead;
- 2) priests are obligated to inspire parishioners that they **invite competent people** who are now able to read the Psalter over the dead, and to explain what consolation the reading of the holy psalms deliver to the grieving family, but coming visitors will want to pray for the deceased;
- 3) young **women** observe greater awesome propriety when reading, therefore the fathers for the religious teachers of various schools are offered to acquaint them with the **order of reading the Psalters**, namely - that under each article of the kathisma at "Glory" is read the prayer: "Remember, O Lord our

God...", placed at the end of the office after the soul exits (see at the end of the Augmented Psalters and Small Psalters), remembering where follows the name of the departed, but after the end of the kathisma - "Trisagion", "Our Father", troparia and the prayer placed in every kathisma (see them in the Psalter after kathismas), beginning behind that new kathisma with the words: "O come let us worship" and so forth (Poltavskiiia Eparkhial'niia Vedomosti [Poltava Diocesan News] 1891, 17-18).

Possible cases of **prayers of an unknown origin** acquired by readers when reading Psalters over the dead, according to hearsay in the distorted view, and generally not found in divine service Books (see Rukovodstvo dlia Sel'skikh Pastyrei [Manual for Village Pastors] 1866, 30); an understandable matter, the priest is obligated to forbid the use of this sort of prayers.

¹ Over the dead Bishop and priest **the Gospel is read**, especially as appropriate before the coffin by servers and preachers of the Gospel (see Posobiye k Izucheniyu Usatava Bogosluzhenia Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi [Manual for the Study of the Ustav of the Divine Services of the Orthodox Church], p. 717).

² According to an explanation of the "Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger]", the **reading of the Psalter** is not forbidden to any Orthodox Christian, and therefore one cannot be prosecuted by the court which through self-will choose by its own profession the reading of the Psalter over the departed for 6 weeks after the burial of the departed; as for the abolition of reading the Psalter at the church commemoration of the departed, then this already is entirely the duty of the priest to explain to his parishioners the difference of the one and the other (Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger] 1892, 52; see also the Kishinevskiiia Eparkhial'niia Vedomosti [Kishinev Diocesan News] 1893, 4).

At the present time the custom of reading the Psalter over the dead with black berries takes root, which in consequence of this brings to them the arrival of the authority of women grown wise in the word of God, from the Psalter passes to various kinds with reprimands during various diseases and thus are the main sources of various superstitions, signs and even sectarian views. Sometimes, by personal aversion for relatives of the departed, refuse to read the Psalter and in such cases the pious custom of reading the Psalter over the dead is gradually destroyed. These regrettable phenomena would not exist if psalm readers did not take great pains to evade reading the Psalter over the dead. In former years the duty of this reading lay on sextons, but sometimes even deacons and all of them willingly executed it, without shunning it (Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger] 1891, 16; refer to Poltavskiiia Eparkhial'niia Vedomosti [Poltava Diocesan News] 1891, 17-18). And now, of course, it would be better if the psalm readers read the Psalter over the dead, but the canons making this reading obligatory for psalm readers are not available (see the Tserkovnyi Viestnik [Church Messenger] 1897, 44).

In the case of reading the Psalter over the dead by the psalm reader, the payment for this reading is the personal income of the psalm reader (Tserkovniia Vedomosti [Church News] 1898, 38).

*S. V. Bulgakov, "Handbook for Church Servers", 2nd ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp. 1201-1202.
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