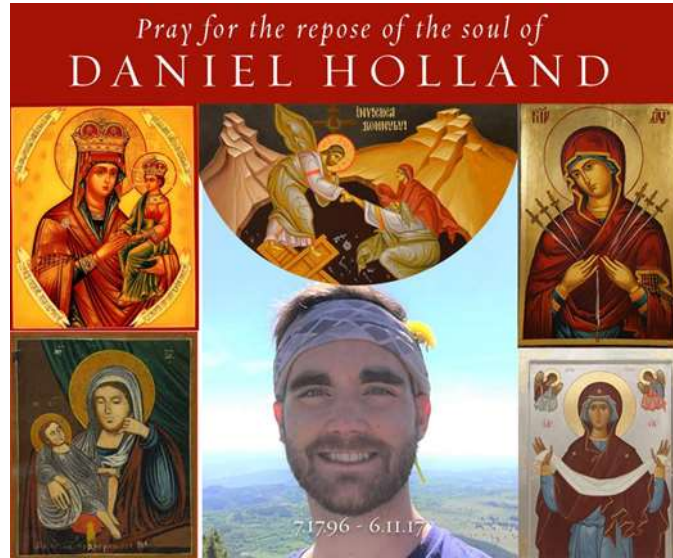


Daniel Holland +6/11/2017 (ns)

A letter on the First Anniversary of the Repose of +Daniel Holland - Son, Brother, Friend –  
to those who pray for him, love him, or may benefit by knowing about him.



**Saturday, June 9 (ns). A week after Sunday of All Saints, 2018.**

This year, June 11 (2018) will be the first-year anniversary of my son +Daniel’s death. It is not the anniversary of us learning of his death – that happened 36 hours later. He was in Berlin, on a college trip, and was in between classes that he was taking in the summer semester. A cool thing to do among the students was to at least talk about swimming across the Spree River in downtown Berlin. It is basically a canal there, and perhaps not even 40 yards wide. It is very cold, since it is a mountain river. On the last day that Daniel was in Berlin, he and a friend decided that they would actually go ahead and perform the feat that people talked about but rarely did. His friend told us that, after taking selfies standing by the shore, just before jumping in they looked at each other and said: “Here’s to being young!”.

Daniel died young, at the age of 20. I’ve heard the tradition that everyone in paradise is young – not like a child but like a young man or woman in the prime of life – just like Daniel. Eye witness accounts told us that shortly after Daniel jumped in the water he began to have trouble and drowned. I actually have a picture of Daniel and his friend in the water. It is clear that one is swimming, and one has his hands up and appears to be struggling. It was taken by two people from Norway who were vacationing and saw Daniel and his friend jump in the water. They commented at the time to each other that it was a crazy thing to do because the water was dirty. They took a picture, and then noticed Daniel struggling. They were both lifeguards, and they ran to closest shore, jumped in and swam to where Daniel had been. By the time they arrived, he was underwater. The water was not clear. It is possible he was only a few inches under the water. Only God knows what exactly happened. He had been up all night: perhaps the cold water shocked his system and his muscles didn’t work right, or perhaps, God just chose to take him from this life at that time.

The day the Daniel died was the Sunday of All Saints. That is the Sunday after Pentecost. For us in Texas, it was still the Eve of the Sunday of All Saints, after vigil, at 10 PM. This is also the day that multiple icons of the Mother of God are commemorated (“Surety of Sinners”, “Unbreakable Wall”, “Softener of Evil Hearts” or “Seven arrows”, “Non-slumbering eye”). We have the “Surety of Sinners” icon in our icon corner now.

Of course, we who are Christian know that nothing happens by accident or by happenstance. There is no kismet, there is no serendipity. A month before Daniel died, I stayed at one of my favorite places in the universe, the Hermitage of the Holy Cross in Wayne, West Virginia. I stayed in the infirmary, and right before you enter the infirmary is an icon of the Mother of God – “Surety of Sinners”. I wrote a letter to Daniel during my time there, and I told him that I was having life-changing experiences just as I always did when I came to the monastery. I told him that I pray that he would have a life-changing experience when he went to Europe. He wrote back a friendly letter and thanked me for my sentiments. My son definitely had a life-changing experience in Europe. He passed from one life to another. I also know that my experiences at the monastery and the protection of the Mother of God prepared me for Daniel’s death.

I think when we have major, life-changing events – the death of the son certainly counts as one of these – we change our routine, sometimes drastically. My routine is drastically different. I’m trying to collaborate with my son and pray for him, but also, with thanksgiving, confusion and wonder, trying to understand – if it is even possible – reported visions of him and from those who feel that they have even received his help. I cannot comment on these things very easily because I am a sinner, and I don’t know much. But I do know that when something (or someone) matters to us, we do something about it or them.

Since it has been a year since my son’s death, I don’t think of him literally every moment like I did in the beginning. I do have him with me at every moment, and I collaborate with him and pray for him. Because of the collaboration and prayer, I’ve embarked upon a lifelong commitment to pray for those who pray for Daniel, and also to seek out or be available to be told about those who have died suddenly and to pray for them daily and in the liturgy, of course. Before Daniel died I knew two that had died by their own hand that I prayed for (but only in the liturgy). Now I pray for 21 daily (I learned of another today while was writing this letter, from someone I know only because of Daniel) and the number increases often. I also pray every day in general for those who died by their own hand and all those who have died suddenly. This is what I mean by changing our routine. A minor change in my routine is that when I cense the church I pause at the Mother of God “Surety of Sinners” and cense it nine times - every time. Deacon Nicholas has gotten accustomed to me doing this and doesn’t race ahead of me (when the priest and deacon cense the entire church, the deacon leads with the candle, and has to be on his toes because sometimes the priest, if he is an eccentric dude, stops and takes his time with certain icons).

Since Daniel’s death, we have learned many things – all of my family, but especially my wife and me. It has been a time of difficulty and fatigue, but especially of great blessing. Like any other human beings, we wish to commemorate him and make sure nobody forgets him, and so we have written many things<sup>1</sup>. The greatest blessing for us is, perhaps, that because of Daniel’s death my wife and I especially have become very much in tune to the losses of others. We seem to have radar for them, and, in some small way despite us being sinners, I can say confidently that our experience of grief and how we have dealt with it has helped others.

I’m an Orthodox priest, so I’m well aware that there is much grief in the world. The greatest grief is in people who don’t know their purpose and live aimless lives, or unhappy lives. There is also, of course, grief because people have lost loved ones, many times in sudden and inexplicable ways, and also when their loved ones died by their own hands. God has given us a great blessing and privilege and ministry in that we have become aware of people who had great losses almost every week, and we pray for them and correspond with them and commiserate with them and comfort them, and also sometimes they comfort us.

I want to tell you about two of these people which God prepared me to help because my son died. I baptized Ignatius in prison. I saw him twice a month, and then life changed. At the funeral, just as we were getting ready to leave the church and bring Daniel to his resting place at the “Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ Monastery” in Kemp, Texas<sup>2</sup>, I received a call from Ignatius’ fiancée. Ten days after my son Daniel died, Ignatius’ son David died, but in a much more horrible way. David was only 13, and he died by his own hand. On the way down to the monastery, I had intended to pray the Jesus prayer for Daniel the

entire way. Instead I did something that was higher than prayer – obedience. I made a zillion phone calls to get permission to go to the prison on Saturday (this is not an allowed visitation day for anybody except family), in order to tell Ignatius in person about the death of his son. I can't begin to tell you how difficult that was and also how blessed it was. I think that is the way spiritually profitable things often are. They are hard and they are good. When Ignatius came into the room and saw me and his fiancée and his sister he knew something was wrong, because I was there. I was the canary in the coal mine. We just embraced and cried together for 40 minutes. I don't think we spoke for the first five of those minutes. I was grateful because I didn't have to think about what to say or how to act, because I knew.

There are not too many things I'm sure about in my daily life, that is, the things I do or say - whether they are the right things or the wrong things to do or say. That's because I mix everything with sin. I am positive that I've been able to help Ignatius precisely because my son Daniel died, and God gave me some tools to deal with his death in a positive way. I am positive also, that if we allow God to act within us, anything that is bad becomes good. I'm also positive that I would not have met a friend of Ignatius - Scotty - who had also lost a son, at the end of 2016. This young man was only 16, and there was an accident, and then criminal neglect. The young man had a head injury and should have been taken to the hospital right away. The hospital would have done tests and seen that there was a slow bleed in his brain and their interventions would have relieved the pressure in his brain. I'm an RN and have cared for many head injury cases, and I'm quite sure that this young man would have lived if he had been taken to the hospital, because he was left to lie in pain on a couch for over six hours until his brain herniated. Scotty told me that one doctor who attended him was emphatic about this.

How does one make sense out of these things? I don't really try to. I just react to the people that feel pain. I know something about the pain of losing a son, so now, my wife and I are very useful to those who have great losses. Because Scotty was not Orthodox, he had no interest in coming to our services, but because he and Ignatius were friends and he heard about the things I was telling him about the loss of his son David, and he was looking for some comfort, he came. Since that time Scotty has received much comfort, and now he is studying to become an Orthodox Christian. I wish you could meet these men and see how beautiful it is when grief turns into positive energy for good<sup>3</sup>. I have been given permission by both of these men to speak about their stories, since they want good to come out of the death of their sons.

Of course, I'm writing a letter because I want Daniel's name to be known to everybody, because I'm proud of him, and also because I want people to pray for him and remember him, and also, of course, to have as much good come out of his death as possible. Within hours of my learning of his death, I promised him that I would always pray for him every day and that I would ask others to pray for him and as an act of alms, I would pray for all those who pray for him. Out of that promise has come "**Daniel's list**"<sup>4</sup>. This is a list mostly of those who pray for him. I pray for them every day as well as commemorate the Orthodox in every liturgy. I personally don't take any stock in my private prayers for people because I am a sinner, although paradoxically, I believe that God must sometimes hear those prayers, not because of my personal sanctity but because of *their needs*, solely because He is merciful. I do believe very much that my prayers as a priest are, as the saying goes: "from my mouth to God's ears". We who are Orthodox believe that the prayers of a priest are heard by God not because of the holiness of the priest but because of the holiness of the priesthood.

There are other lists of names in Daniel's list. The very first part of the list is those who have died suddenly. Anybody that I become aware of that has died suddenly I put on Daniel's list. There are Orthodox and non-Orthodox. Some have died because of disease or some sudden medical problem, some by accident, and some by their own hand. I feel it is especially important to pray for those who have died by their own hand. In our church, we do not usually commemorate publicly those of died of their own hand, but, of course, we pray for them in our private prayers<sup>5</sup>. This is the kind of thing that Daniel would have done. He was a kind person, and we have learned literally hundreds of stories about his kindness. It is a kindness to pray for those who

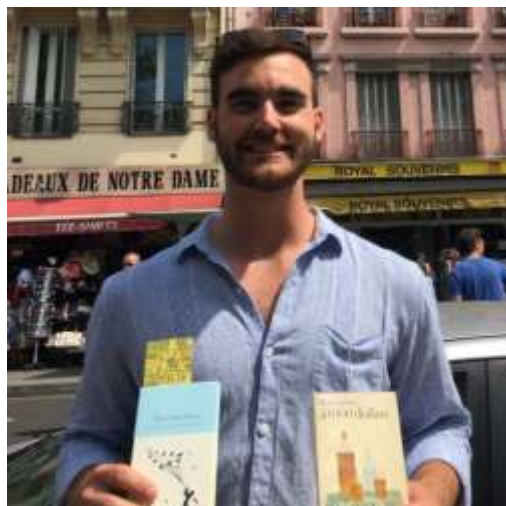
cannot help us anymore - the dead (but, perhaps do some help us? God knows). It is especially a kindness to pray for those who for reasons that only God knows came to such a crisis in their life that they died at their own hand.

This has been a very long year, and I went there to be some closure to it on Daniel's anniversary. We humans are so funny, being so bound by time. My head tells me that there is some sort of change that occurs after the anniversary, some sort of closure. My heart tells me that that is a nonsensical idea. I will remain a priest, people will continue to have great losses, I will learn of those losses, in some way beyond my strength, I will comfort those who have lost or have grief for any reason, and I will continue to pray for and collaborate with my son, whose early death I only partially understand.

There will be no closure to our obligation to be aware of and reach out to those who are hurting for any reason including losses of a loved one. I think the time that I feel most alive is when I am trying, as best I can, to help a person who has deep grief. The first thing that must be done is to pray for them daily; everything else that happens is dependent on that. My wife and I have learned that it is really very easy to comfort someone who has deep grief. One does not need to figure out what to say; one needs just to be.

This year has been full of activity. Of course, after Daniel's death we went to Berlin, and were there for seven days making arrangements for Daniel to come home. It was a time of little sleep, daily prayer for Daniel, meeting with the police, going through Daniel's things, and one very difficult day, going to the river and praying within steps of where he had jumped in without understanding that he was keeping his date with eternity.

Daniel had many friends at OU (University of Oklahoma), and their stories about Daniel have given us great comfort. We heard some of those stories at a memorial for Daniel shortly after the fall term began<sup>6</sup>. We have developed deep friendships with people we didn't know until Daniel's death. Daniel was a very good student. I'm not writing a letter to brag about him – this is just the fact that he was an exemplary student and involved in just about everything. He was so loved by the Dean of International studies, Dr. Suzette Grillot, that she, with boundless energy, created a Memorial lecture that will be given every year, (or perhaps it's every other year - I do not remember). It is called the "Daniel Holland Memorial lecture". We went to the inaugural one this year. The speaker was Dr. Timothy Snyder, a scholar and critical thinker of some renown. His specialty is history, and he also writes about modern politics. We thought that his lecture was going to be along those lines, but Dr. Snyder is a man with a good heart, and when he learned that Daniel's favorite book was "The Little Prince", he made his entire lecture about that book.



Daniel bought "The Little Prince" when he was in France, and he commented about it in his journal and said that it was one of his favorite books ever. I can see why. It's a book that appears to be something but is actually something else. It pretends to

be a children's book, but actually it is a Christian parable about what is important in life. I recommend that everyone read "The Little Prince", and then change their lives because of its contents. Many of us in our family have read that book multiple times. Dr. Snyder's lecture was recorded and is online here: (<https://youtu.be/nUi0AOP5Rhk>). I recommend that you would first read the book, and then reread it, and then listen to his lecture.

I will close with something that Daniel wrote in his journals, which we recovered from his phone. It was about "The Little Prince", and I think that it applies pretty well to just about everything.

"We went by "Shakespeare and Company", a wonderful bookstore where I bought "The Little Prince" by Antoine de Saint Expeury. I read it as we drove through Paris. I want to get the image of him flying off his planet as a tattoo. **The most important things are invisible. Once you tame a rose you are forever responsible for it. It's the work we put into something that makes it worthwhile, but taming means sadness can come.** One of my favorite books of all time."

Thank you for your prayers for Daniel, and please contact me if you think Marina or I have anything we can give you.

<http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/letter-on-the-first-anniversary-of-daniels-repose.pdf>

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<sup>1</sup> Lots of stuff about Daniel here, including essays from some of his family, especially, his mother: <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel>

<sup>2</sup> <https://nativitymonastery.com/>

<sup>3</sup> See also a talk I gave to an Orthodox Youth Group, "Using the Energy is Grief", in audio or text forms: [http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/misc\\_2017+using-the-energy-in-grief+st-herman-youth-conference.doc](http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/misc_2017+using-the-energy-in-grief+st-herman-youth-conference.doc), [http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/misc\\_2017+using-the-energy-in-grief+st-herman-youth-conference.pdf](http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/misc_2017+using-the-energy-in-grief+st-herman-youth-conference.pdf),

[http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/misc\\_2017+using-the-energy-in-grief+st-herman-youth-conference.mp3](http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/misc_2017+using-the-energy-in-grief+st-herman-youth-conference.mp3)

<sup>4</sup> **+Daniel's List** In memory of +Daniel, our son/brother/uncle/friend: <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/dyptichs-daniels-list.html>, <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/dyptichs-daniels-list.doc> & <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel/dyptichs-daniels-list.pdf> (the most up to date will always be [doc](#) and [pdf](#)) This list is part of the Memorial page for +Daniel: <http://www.orthodox.net/daniel>. Contact Daniel's mother: Marina: [mmarinaholland@yahoo.com](mailto:mmarinaholland@yahoo.com), father: Priest Seraphim: [seraphim@orthodox.net](mailto:seraphim@orthodox.net)

<sup>5</sup> See also: *Can we commemorate those who have died by suicide? WHY? Why does the church not conduct a funeral for those who have died by suicide? Why does the church not conduct funerals for non-Orthodox? How can a person pray for those who have died by suicide?* - <http://www.orthodox.net/articles/prayer-for-those-who-have-died-by-suicide.doc> <http://www.orthodox.net/articles/prayer-for-those-who-have-died-by-suicide.pdf>

The Prayer of the Martyr Varus is wonderful for this: <http://www.orthodox.net/trebnic/to-martyr-varus-for-the-reposed-outside-the-church.doc>

<http://www.orthodox.net/trebnic/to-martyr-varus-for-the-reposed-outside-the-church.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.oudaily.com/news/ou-community-gathers-to-remember-daniel-holland/article\\_d8fcb068-8de5-11e7-9686-ebd73ace448c.html](http://www.oudaily.com/news/ou-community-gathers-to-remember-daniel-holland/article_d8fcb068-8de5-11e7-9686-ebd73ace448c.html)