

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?

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There is a lot of misunderstanding, fear, and pain about suicide. People have many questions, such as: “why does the Orthodox church usually not conduct funerals for those who have died by suicide?”, and “can we commemorate those who have died by suicide and if so why?”, and “how can a person pray for those who have died by suicide?” Another big question is: “what is the state of a person in the next life who committed suicide?”. Another question that people have is: “why does the Orthodox church not conduct funerals for those who are not Orthodox?”. We will try to answer all of these questions.

I currently pray for over 20 people that have committed suicide, and there is one main reason why this is absolutely the right thing to do. It is because of love. The Scripture tells us “God is love”, and the Christian life is to become like God. If we are to become like God then we must love. When someone dies we do not forget them nor do we stop loving them. Therefore, we pray for those who are reposed because of love.

There are some who would say that when a person commits suicide they have committed a sin from which they cannot repent and therefore they are condemned. Some even believe, falsely, that the sin of suicide is mentioned by Jesus Christ when he says that there is a sin of which a person cannot be forgiven¹. This is a very small and cruel view. It is not in accord with Christian tradition. Of course, it is true that a person cannot repent *in this life* for any sin after they leave it. It is also manifestly true that God

created us to know Him, and that He is all merciful, and that His mercy is *beyond anything* we can imagine. The true Christian view of God is not as a terrifying judge but as a Father who loves us.

There is much that we do not know about what happens after physical death of the body. We also know very little about what eternal life will be like. The Scripture tells us “eye hath not seen nor ear heard”² the wondrous things that God has in store for us. Therefore, it is foolish for us to make dogmatic pronouncements about anyone after they die. We cannot know how God judges them, and we cannot know whether they repented as they were dying, and we cannot know their virtues.

It is always good to let holy men and women, who understood truth and love much more than us poor sinners, speak, and enlighten us. Below is an incident that St. Sophronius describes about his mentor, St. Silouan of Mount Athos.



"It was particularly characteristic of Staretz Silouan to pray for the dead suffering in the hell of

separation from God... He could not bear to think that anyone would languish in 'outer darkness.' I remember a conversation between him and a certain hermit, who declared with evident satisfaction, 'God will punish all atheists. They will burn in everlasting fire.'

"Obviously upset, the Staretz said, 'Tell me, supposing you went to paradise, and there looked down and saw somebody burning in hell-fire -- would you feel happy?'

"'It can't be helped. It would be their own fault', said the hermit.

"The Staretz answered him with a sorrowful countenance. '*Love could not bear that*', he said. '*We must pray for all.*'"

Even after all the foregoing, there are people who will insist that we should not pray for those who have died by suicide or that somehow we know their state and it is useless to pray for them. I know from personal experience that one can pray for those who have died by suicide and not have any opinion about their state in the next life, nor even care. If God is all merciful, why should I be anxious about how he will deal with his wounded creatures whom he loves?

Friend of mine, Fr Cassian, commented on St. Silouan's words in this way, and since I cannot improve upon it I'm quoting him: "I don't know the solution to the conundrum of human freedom, divine mercy, and divine justice presented here. Nor, I think, did St. Silouan - conceptually - and he was wise enough not to try to solve it. He maintains the inconsistent triad, fearing God's judgement, and knowing that God was both merciful and just - and slashed through the Gordian knot pragmatically - by ceaselessly interceding for God's mercy for himself, for the just, and for the evil justly "separated from God." He doesn't know the solution to the metaphysical riddle, but he knows Who does - and returns the mystery to its Creator, with love."³

Most of a person's life is hidden from others, and perhaps even some of his life is hidden from himself.

God knows all things. All we need to "know" is that if we love someone we would want to pray for them. Since the Scripture says that all live to God⁴, this means that to God all are alive even though to us some are dead. Therefore, if we want to pray for a person before they die we should want to pray for them after they die.

It is impossible to emphasize enough how much love must guide everything a Christian does. No matter how much we love, we cannot love as much as God does. We also cannot understand the things of God. It is not important to understand things that we cannot understand. It is important to love and to act because of love, because God loves.

This is especially important when a loved one commits suicide. This is a terrible thing and it provides great consolation to the soul to pray for their loved one. If you want to know exactly what happens when you pray or the exact state of a person who has committed suicide, or for that matter, any person after their death, then you will be disappointed. It is not possible to know these things unless God reveals them directly to us.

Something that we should always know is whether or not we love someone. Knowing that is *enough* to motivate us to pray for them.

Perhaps this explanation is too simple for some people. I find in my life that simpler is better.

There are foundational truths upon which we must base everything. One foundational truth is that God *is*. Another is that He made man in His image in order to share in His life. This is all we really need to know. Eternal life is to know God, to become like him to become united with Him. We can never have all of His knowledge, but we can struggle to love as He loves. If we love, God will enlighten us in everything. There is a lot of darkness in suicide, but love can conquer everything. This is why I pray for those who have died by suicide, calmly and with only one expectation - that God will judge everything according to who He is: a merciful Father.

As one more proof that we should pray for those who have died by suicide in our private prayers, and that the church blesses this endeavor, observe the selection from the “Akathist for the Reposed”, which is published in the “Book of Akathists”, Volume 1, by Jordanville monastery⁵:

“O Father of all consolation and comfort, Thou brightenest with the sun, delightest with fruits, and gladdenest with the beauty of the world both Thy friends and enemies.

“And we believe that even beyond the grave Thy loving kindness, which is merciful even to all rejected sinners, does not fail.

“We grieve for hardened and wicked blasphemers of Thy Holiness.

“May Thy saving and gracious will be over them.

“Forgive, O Lord, those who have died without repentance.

“Save those who have committed suicide in the darkness of their mind, that the flame of their sinfulness may be extinguished in the ocean of Thy grace.

“O Lord of unutterable Love, remember Thy servants who have fallen asleep”⁶

The question remains: “why does the church not conduct funerals for most of those who have died by suicide?”. This is a difficult question to answer to many people’s satisfaction. I think the main reason people are not satisfied is because they make assumptions according to their own personal understandings, but God is beyond our personal understanding. The church has been led to do things by the Holy Spirit. If we think that we are really smart, then we will invariably think that something the church does is wrong because of our particular ideas. That is a very dangerous way to think about things.

It is possible that the bishop will grant a blessing to pray for someone who as committed suicide if there is some reason to believe that he was not in

his right mind – for instance, if he was psychotic at the time. If the bishop doesn’t have any reason to believe this, that he will most likely not grant a blessing to conduct funeral services in the church. This does not mean that the Bishop forbids prayer for the deceased! What an idea! Prayer is not forbidden - it is always encouraged – but not public commemoration in the church.

I believe it is because we must recognize that suicide is a terrible thing and that it is something that is out of order. The church does things in good order, according to the commandment of the apostle⁷. The church does not want to encourage people to commit suicide nor to downplay the seriousness of such a terrible thing. Therefore, funeral services are not conducted.

Of course, anyone who thinks that a person cannot go to heaven because the church did not serve a funeral for them has a very small view of God. God can do anything He wishes. We try to do what is right, but often we don’t. Do we really think that God judges a person because of the failures of others around him?

In our age, I see people depending very much on the church to pray for them, but they are very lazy in their personal prayer lives. This is a terrible error. We are to pray *with* the church. If we asked the priest to pray for us we also must pray. If we bring a commemoration list to the church and ask the priest to pray for the people we love, we are sinning greatly if we don’t also pray for those people every day. I have a saying which I tell my parishioners, usually before I plan on traveling on a weekend: “the priest prays *for* the people and *with* the people but never *instead* of the people.” We don’t believe in magic. We don’t believe if a certain priest prays a certain prayer everything’s going to be okay. We believe that the priest and the people should pray.

If you know someone who has committed suicide and you love them and you are Christian then you should be naturally inclined to pray for them.



The Elder Leonid⁸ told of one of his disciples whose father committed suicide. In his overwhelming grief the son turned to the Elder for consolation. The elder replied,

“Entrust yourself and the fate of your father to the will of the Lord, which is all-wise and omnipotent. Take care through humble-mindedness to strengthen yourself within the bounds of moderate grief.

“Pray to the all-good Creator, thereby fulfilling the debt of love and filial duty-in the spirit of the virtuous and wise, thus: 'O Lord, watch over the perished soul of my father, and if it be possible, have mercy upon him. Thy judgments are unfathomable. Do not consider this my prayer to be a sin, but may Thy holy will be done.'

“Pray simply, without testing [God], placing your heart in the right hand of the Most High. It was not, of course, the will of God that your father come to such a bitter end, but now he is totally under the will of the Mighty One, and, soul and body, he is cast into the fiery furnace, which humbles and exalts, kills and gives life, brings down into hades and raises up [therefrom]. Furthermore, He is so kind, omnipotent and overflowing with love, that the good qualities of all mortals are nothing compared to His most exalted goodness.

“For this reason, you must not grieve beyond measure. You say: 'I love my father, which is why I am sorrowing inconsolably.' But God, incomparably more than you do, loved and loves him. It is therefore necessary for you to leave the eternal fate of your father to the goodness and loving-kindness

of God. And if He deigns to have mercy, who will gainsay Him?” Optina Elder Leonid (Leo, in the schema), consoling disciple, P. T., whose father had ended his own life by suicide.

The Elder’s advice should give you confidence to pray for suicides, but also teach you that you should pray with humility, without making assumptions. This is why, when I pray for those who have died by suicide I will generally say: “*according to thy great mercy*” in the prayer. The only assumption we can make with confidence about God is that He is all merciful and that He knows all things and that He wants our hearts to burn with love for Him and for all those whom He loves. Therefore, we can pray for anyone, but we must pray with humility. That is why we pray for those who have died by suicide in our private prayers but not in the church.

All the foregoing is also related to why we pray for non-Orthodox in our *private prayers* but not in the *public prayers* of the church. My Bishop, Archbishop Peter⁹ explained to me once that the church respects the free will of everyone. Therefore, if someone dies outside of the Orthodox Church we do not presume to perform prayers in the church that they may not have approved of. We make no assumptions about their spiritual state of those who died outside of the Orthodox Church.

Perhaps some are confused about how we would pray for someone has committed suicide. It is really quite easy to do this; it is very similar to praying for anyone who has died.

We can say something like the Jesus prayer: “*Lord Jesus Christ, according to Thy great mercy, have mercy upon thy servant (N)*”, or “*Lord Jesus Christ, according to Thy great mercy, grant rest to the soul of thy servant (N)*”.

Of course, one can shorten this prayer, but we must have an attitude of giving ourselves over to the unfathomable mercy of God when we pray. Can it ever be wrong, or a sin to ask God for mercy (with humility)? Those who are Christian and to pray regularly know the answer to this question; it is self-evident.



If there is someone you love who committed suicide and the burden is very great on your heart, that I recommend that you pray the Jesus prayer for them many times each day. Take a prayer rope and decide how many prayers you going to say and for each knot in the prayer rope say the Jesus prayer for the loved one. It is also very good to do a prostration with each prayer.

There is also beautiful prayer of St. Varus, which we Orthodox Christians, according to our received tradition, pray for those who are not buried in the church. This certainly includes those who died were not Orthodox, but many also include those who have died by suicide in this prayer, as they pray it *with humility*. The Story of St. Varus is very beautiful, and very consoling for those of us who know those who have died by suicide or loved ones who died who were unbaptized. A Short life is below:

The Holy Martyr Varus.

Commemorated October 19 in the Orthodox Church

The Holy Martyr Varus was a Roman officer in Egypt and a secret Christian. When seven Christian teachers were thrown into prison, Varus kept visiting them there, supplying their needs and serving them

with great devotion. He marveled at the martyrs and grieved that fear would not let him stand up as a martyr for Christ. These men of God gave him courage, and Varus made up his mind to go and be tortured with them. One of these godly men died in prison, and, when the wicked governor had the martyrs brought before him and saw that there were only six of them, he asked where the seventh was. 'I am the seventh!', cried Varus. The furious governor had him tortured first. He ordered that he be flogged with dry thongs, then that he be tied to a tree and hacked to pieces bit by bit with knives until he gave his holy soul to God. His body was then thrown onto a dung-heap.

A woman of Palestinian birth, Cleopatra, the widow of an officer, was there with her son John. She secretly took the relics of the holy martyr off the dung-heap and buried them in her house. She then asked the governor's permission to take the body of her dead husband back from Egypt to Palestine. As she was an officer's widow, the governor at once gave her permission. This blessed Christian woman, Cleopatra, however, took the body, not of her husband but of the holy martyr Varus, taking it to her village of Edra, near Tabor, and burying it there. She then built a church dedicated to St Varus, and he appeared to her often from the other world, resplendent as an angel of God.¹⁰

A Prayer to Martyr Varus

O Holy, wondrous Martyr Varus, who, burning with zeal for the Heavenly King, didst confess Him before thy torturers and didst greatly suffer for Him!

Now the Church doth venerate thee, as one glorified with the glory of heaven by Christ the Lord, Who granted thee the abundant grace to approach Him boldly.

And now, standing before Him together with the Angels, rejoicing on high, beholding the Most Holy Trinity clearly, and enjoying the Uncreated Light, remember the suffering of our relatives who have died outside the Faith, and accept our pleas, and as thou didst intercede for the unbelieving ancestors of Cleopatra and didst free them from eternal suffering, remember those who have died unbaptized *or* have been buried in an ungodly manner, *or died suddenly*

N.N.

.... and pray earnestly that they may be delivered from eternal darkness, that we may all, with one mouth and one heart, praise the Most Merciful Creator unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Troparion of St Varus the Martyr tone 5

Thou didst follow in the steps of the martyrs/ and contend for the glory of Christ. / Thou wast tied to a beam and restored by the Tree of Life, / and thine intercessions gladden our souls.

Kontakion of St Varus tone 4

Thou hast followed Christ and drunk His chalice;/ thou didst receive the crown of martyrdom, O holy Varus. / Thou art rejoicing with the Angels: pray unceasingly for our souls.



Source: <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>

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

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¹ Matthew 12:31-32 “Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. (32) And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.”

² 1 Corinthians 2:9 But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/frcassian/posts/10156244344871897>

⁴ The following is a very important passage for our understanding of people's condition after the physical death of the body. It is one of the reasons why we confidently pray for those who have died in the body. God sees all things at once. He sees the past and the present in the future as one. Therefore, to God, since all men were created to have eternal life, when the body dies they still are alive, because their soul lives on, and we know that at the second coming all will be reunited with perfected bodies. Therefore, to God, whether a man is alive in the body, or his body is dead and even has become dust, he is alive. If we pray for people in their life in the body, it is natural that we would also pray for them when their body is no longer alive.

Luke 20:34-38 And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: (35) But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: (36) Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection. (37) Now that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. (38) For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him.

⁵ An “Akathist” is a beloved liturgical hymn that is used by many Orthodox Christians. It is meant to be sung and is in 12 stanzas. It is worthwhile to learn how to sing this hymn. The original Akathist was about the “Theotokos”, that is, the “mother of God”, that is, Mary. It is in most Orthodox prayer books. Since this form of poetry is so beautiful, there are literally hundreds of Akathists available now. This particular Akathist is also available online: <http://www.orthodox.net/akathists/akathist-for-those-who-have-fallen-asleep.pdf>
<http://www.orthodox.net/akathists/akathist-for-those-who-have-fallen-asleep.doc>

⁶ This selection is from Ikos 5 of the Akathist for the Reposed.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 14:40 Let all things be done decently and in order.

⁸ St Leonid, one of the Optina Elders (Optina is an area in Russian, with a famous Monastery)

⁹ Archbishop Peter, of Chicago and Mid-America.

¹⁰ The Prologue From Ochrid by Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich ©1985 Lazarica Press, Birmingham UK is in the “Desert Island” list of books a person should have. It is also available on line – for instance: here: http://www.rocor.org.au/?page_id=925