



Homily for the 40th Day Commemoration

Beloved in the Lord, we are gathered here in the House of God this morning to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and commemorate the 40th Day after the departure of Mr. Fathi Boctor. At the outset, I extend the heartfelt condolences of our entire St. Gregory community to our beloved Julia, Isaac, Jacob, Elaine, and all the members of this blessed family.

The Holy Church, She Who is our mother and teacher in every good thing, established an ancient custom of commemorating our beloved family and friends who departed this temporary life and passed over into eternal life.

From the beginning, the Holy Church, She Who is our mother and teacher in every good thing, established special prayers and commemorations for the souls of our departed brothers and sisters. This is the result of the faith of the Church that those who have died continue to live in Christ and that the bond of love between the living and dead does not cease to exist, but rather, continues through reciprocal prayers: we pray for them and they pray for us. Thus, the Holy Church established a Third Day Commemoration, a Forty Day, Commemoration, an annual commemoration, and even a weekly commemoration of the departed.

The Third Day Commemoration

In the universal Orthodox Tradition, there is a special prayer service for the soul of one who has departed on the third day after his death. In the Coptic Orthodox Church, we call this service the “Third Day Memorial” or “Third Day Commemoration.” In the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is oftentimes called panikhida. We can trace this tradition back to some of the earliest writings of the Church. In the Apostolic Constitutions, for example, we read the following in Book VIII: Let the third day of the departed be celebrated with psalms, and lessons, and prayers, on account of Him who arose within the space of three days; and let the ninth day be celebrated in remembrance of the living, and of the departed; and the fortieth day according to the ancient pattern: for so did the people lament Moses, and the anniversary day in memory of him.¹ And let alms be given to the poor out of his goods for a memorial of him.²

¹ Deut. 34:8

² Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and* 2

So, for example, if the person departed on Friday, we count Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and hold the prayer service on Sunday. The theological significance of the Third Day Memorial comes from its obvious

connection to the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which occurred three days after His death on the Tree of the Cross. His pure soul, which was united with His Divinity, separated from His flesh and descended into Hades in order to destroy death and the power of death over us. It was there in Hades that He released all of the captives of death who believed in Him. Thus, the Third Day Memorial connects us with the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, who by his death and resurrection, began our very own resurrection and the resurrection of our loved one. In addition to this theological significance, the Third Day Memorial also has a physical significance. In the ancient world, it was believed that a soul, which had separated from the body, could potentially be reunited with the body within three



days. In fact, within three days of the moment of death, people were oftentimes not sure if the person was really dead. Of course, modern medicine has now defined the moment of death more precisely, but remember that, in those days, they did not have the benefit of modern medical instruments. We have a letter attributed to St. Athanasius that gives us a glimpse into this understanding: “How is it that certain people...die, have visions, and come back to life after two or three days to relate them? This is because their soul has not altogether left the body.” Notice how there was a belief that, within three days, a person could come back to life because the soul had not fully left the body. What St. Athanasius described is very similar to what we might call a “near death experience” in which a person partially goes through the experience of the separation of the soul from the body, but ultimately comes back to life. Related to this was the ancient understanding that the body did not begin the process of corruption (i.e., returning to dust) until the third day. So long as there was this possibility for the soul to fully reunite with the body within three days, they believed the body would not decompose until it was clear that the person had really died. Everything I have mentioned thus far helps us better understand the greatness of our Lord’s miracle in raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11. You recall the timeline and how our Lord purposefully delayed returning to Bethany until Lazarus was already dead for four days and laid in the tomb. Was that timeframe significant? Definitely. Our Lord waited until after that three-day period had elapsed. He also waited until it was clear to everyone that the process of corruption and decomposition had begun; this is why Martha told Him, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days” (Jn 11:39). Our Lord manifested the power of Divinity and raised Lazarus from the dead even though he had been dead four days and despite

Liturgies, trans. James Donaldson, vol. 7, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 498.

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the fact that his body was partially decomposed. Nonetheless, this understanding about the first three days after death remained for some time afterwards. For this reason, a rule developed among the early Christians that funerals should not be prayed until at least three days have passed.

The Fortieth Day Commemoration

Similarly, from earliest antiquity the Holy Church has correctly and devoutly made it a rule to commemorate the departed in the course of forty days, and on the fortieth day in particular. As Christ was victorious over the devil, having spent forty days in fasting and prayer, so the Holy Church likewise, offering for the departed prayers, acts of charity and the Bloodless Sacrifice throughout the forty days, asks the Lord's grace for him to conquer the enemy, the dark prince of the air, and that he receive the Heavenly Kingdom as his inheritance. For this reason, the Holy Church offers a prayer service entitled the Fortieth Day Memorial.