RESPECTING THE IMAGE OF GOD
An Apology for Traditional Christian Burial

I weep and wail when I consider death,
and behold our beauty fashioned according to the Image of God,
lying in the graves disfigured, bereft of glory, not having form.
-Idiomela of the Departed, St. John of Damascus

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ETHICS 5301 – Archbishop Michael
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INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization, 56 million people die per year, which averages over 153,000 per day.¹ Death is a normal aspect of life in our fallen condition, yet most American citizens rarely think of it. In many cases, it is planned for only when we become quite advanced in years – in some cases, even for the elderly, there is no planning and the family must scramble to handle legal issues with much greater duress and cost than would have been incurred if some foresight had been practiced.

The average cost of a funeral in America is now $7,000-10,000, according to an article written in 2018.² These costs include the embalmment, the casket, transportation, burial, and a grave marker. With such exorbitant costs to bury the dead, many people are now opting for cremation. According to the Cremation Association of North America (CANA), the popularity of cremation is rising at an exceedingly rapid pace in our country. In 1960, the cremation rate was about 3.5%. By 2002, that number had risen to 28.2%, and in 2017, which is the latest statistic that CANA provides, 51.6% of people in the United States were cremated, which means the majority of people are now choosing this option. Within a few years, CANA expects the cremation rate to be near 60%.³

While in some predominantly pagan countries nearly everyone is cremated, it has not traditionally been that way in historically Christian cultures.⁴ In ancient times, the Egyptians and Semitic people were unusual in their refusal to practice it as a normal funeral rite. The early Christians inherited the tradition of respect for the body made in the image of God from the Jewish community. In addition to that Jewish tradition, the Christians now had an elevated reverence for the human body – it was the chosen vessel of God Himself when He became incarnate and dwelt among us. The human body had been divinized, resurrected, and seated at the right hand of God in glory. The dualistic Romans around the Christians had no qualms regarding the destruction of the body by fire – for them, the body was a prison for the spirit anyway. However, the early Christians would risk their lives during the times of persecution to recover the bodies of those slain in martyrdom, as we see in the Martyrdom of Polycarp and numerous other Lives of the Saints.⁵ By the

¹ Statistic from https://www.reference.com/world-view/many-people-die-day-world-b5a2258c374cba57
² https://www.parting.com/blog/funeral-costs-how-much-does-an-average-funeral-cost/
³ https://www.cremationassociation.org/page/IndustryStatistics
⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_cremation_rate
⁵ Trans. Fr. Jack Sparks, Chapter 17, pg. 148. Also see the life of Martyr Theodotus of Ancyra, May 18, for one of many examples: https://oca.org/saints/lives/2019/05/18/101413-martyr-theodotus-of-ancyra-who-suffered-under-decius
time of St. Justinian in the 6th century, laws were enacted across the Roman Empire forbidding cremation. In the West, Charlemagne also outlawed the pagan practice of cremation. Such laws remained largely intact in predominately Christian countries until recent centuries. For example, it was not until 1902 that cremation was legalized in England. A movement toward cremation that began in the late 18th century (by atheists who wanted to show their disdain toward Christianity’s doctrine of the bodily resurrection) has become the most popular way in many countries to dispose of a human body after death.

The purpose of this essay is to show that the burial of a deceased Christian, un-cremated and un-embalmed, is the most traditional and correct burial rite. As will be later discussed, a traditional burial can be completed by a local church community at lower costs than even cremation.

BURIAL - THE TRADITION OF GOD’S PEOPLE

In contrast to many ancient pagan beliefs, the book of Genesis records a startling revelation that man was made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). He was not an accidental byproduct of some cosmic war between gods nor a prison for spirits who had fallen from higher contemplation. Man had a soul, breathed into him by God (Gen. 2:7), that mysteriously united to his body to create one unified creature.

Burial in Old Testament Times

The first reference to burial in the Scriptures is God’s conversation with Abraham, in which He tells Abraham, “You shall be buried at a good old age” (Gen. 15:15). Several chapters later, in Abraham’s conversation with the sons of Heth, he negotiates with them for a burial plot for his wife Sarah. These men show their great respect for Abraham by offering him any one of their burial places, “You are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us will withhold from you his burial place, that you may bury your dead” (Gen. 23:5).

This ancient evidence also shows that, at least among the Semitic people, burial was normal. Such evidence aligns with ancient Jewish mythology in which we find a story of the Archangel Michael teaching Seth how to bury his mother Eve when she passes away. The touching story relates that God had buried Adam Himself, and as the end of Eve’s life approached, she beseeched God with many tears to be buried with Adam. She had always been with Adam, in the paradise of Eden they lived together, they disobeyed God’s law together, and they lived in exile together, never

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6 Barna, pg. 37.
7 Jones, pg. 339.
to be separated from one another. After her heartfelt lament, she entrusts her spirit to God and quietly passes away. The story then relates, “The archangel Michael came and taught Seth how to prepare Eve for burial, and three angels descended and interred her body in the grave with Adam and Abel. Then Michael spoke to Seth, “Thus shalt thou bury all men that die until the resurrection day.””

While the ancient Jewish legend need not be taken literally, it should be read as most ancient mythology is understood – societal values and truths are being preserved and passed along in a narrative form. The Jews truly believed that a respectful burial should be normal for “all men,” and that this tradition was given to them by God.

Burial is mentioned over one hundred times throughout the Old Testament. Even those who died while sinning against God were often given a burial as we see in Numbers, “So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattaavah ['Graves of Craving'], because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving” (Num. 11:34). In another place, referenced in the New Testament, those who are hung upon a tree are buried as well, “If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God” (Deut. 21:22-23). Only in two places are divine commands made to burn a human body, and that is in Leviticus: “If a man marries a woman and her mother, it is wickedness. They shall be burned with fire, both he and they, that there may be no wickedness among you” (20:14) and “The daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, she profanes her father. She shall be burned with fire” (21:9). Yet the text nowhere implies that this is similar to the modern practice of cremation. Before lethal injections, there were various ways to kill criminals. Stoning was common in the Jewish Torah, but here we see that death by fire was also practiced. The burned bodies would have still been buried after the capital punishment was completed.

There are other instances in the Old Testament where people’s bodies are burned, but these are exceptions and not normal. One such occurrence is the foolish vow that Jephthah made to offer a burnt offering unto God of the first thing that exited the doors of his home upon his successful return from his military conquest. His daughter joyously greets him, unaware of his vow, and he is grieved at his rashness but follows through with sacrificing her. For many years, perhaps centuries

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8 Ginzberg, pg. 102.
afterward, the Hebrews lamented this event as the Scripture states, “And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite” (Judges 11:39-40). Additionally, King Saul’s body was burned, but as Fr. John Breck indicates, it was likely because quite some time had passed between Saul’s death and the retrieval of his body - the decay process would have begun. Additionally, his body was recovered from the Philistines and the scripture implies that they may have mutilated it (cf. 1 Sam. 31:9-10). What was left of Saul’s body was burned to facilitate the reverential burial of his bones.

**Burial in the New Testament**

Throughout the New Testament, this tradition of burying the departed was maintained. Numerous examples can be found in the Scriptures, such as the burial of John the Forerunner (Matt. 14:12), the burial of Lazarus (Jn. 11), the purchase of the potter’s field with Judas’ blood money for the respectful burial of strangers (Matt. 27:7), the burial of Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:9), and the burial of the Protmartyr Stephen (Acts 8:2). Most importantly of all, our Lord Jesus was anointed for burial even before his trial (Matt. 26:6f, Jn. 12:1f), buried in a new tomb by Joseph of Arimathea, and then arose on the third day, revealing to us what will become of our bodies.

The gravesites, at least of beloved kings, were preserved even until the New Testament times. In his sermon on Pentecost, St. Peter relates, “Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulcher is with us unto this day” (Acts 2:29).

Most burials in Judea took place in either natural caves or manmade ones due to the hardness of the ground making subterranean burial quite difficult. Due to the limited number of caves, most tombs were “recycled” after several years had been given to the body to decompose. When a tomb was reused, the bones of the prior deceased person were placed in an ossuary (ceramic or stone jar) kept within the cave, and the next person’s body was respectfully laid out upon the shelf or surface prepared for such use. The stone used to cover the mouths of these caves was always painted white as a warning that a corpse was within, and entrance into the cave would render a man ceremonially unclean. Our Lord referenced this practice when calling the Pharisees white-washed tombs (Matt. 23:27).

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9 Breck, 277.
10 Gower and Wight, pp. 72-73.
Our Lord was laid in a new tomb, which “indicates symbolically that something utterly new in human history would take place there: deliverance from the power of death and corruption, and the renewal of all mankind.”\(^\text{11}\) This “something utterly new” is the hope of all Christians, and it is the reason we treat the bodies of the deceased with such reverence and love.

In summary, a review of the Old and New Testaments, as well as extra-biblical resources, reveals an unfailing tradition of respect for the departed through the burial of their bodies, either in caves or in the earth. This tradition has continued among the Jews and most conservative Christians through today. It remained largely unchallenged in Christian cultures until the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

**CREMATION – AN UNNECESSARY VIOLENCE AGAINST THE BODY**

While there are exceptional references to bodies being burned in the Scriptures – as mentioned above – and there is no commandment forbidding cremation in the Scriptures, burial has been the normative practice among the most ancient of the Semitic people down to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims of today. However, in the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century, cremation has become more popular in formerly Christian nations than burial.

What exactly is cremation? The practice of cremation has varied from one society to another. In the Far East, bodies were placed on elevated funeral pyres and burned. The bones were then buried. In the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century, industrial crematoriums and incinerators are used. These machines are rarely located in the funeral homes themselves; instead, this service is contracted out to local crematoriums. In these facilities, the body is burned for a few hours at temperatures between 1,400-2,100 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on the crematorium’s practices, equipment, and the local legal regulations. In this hellish state, the body swells from the heat and steam inside before cracking and splitting on the outside as it is violently torched into a dehydrated condition. Because bones do not burn, the remains are scraped into what is essentially a giant blender with large metal blades. These blades crush and pulverize the person’s skeleton, leaving a gritty, cement-like powder that is mixed with the other ash from the person’s cremains (cremated remains).

*Environmental Impact*

One popular argument in favor of cremation is that it is more environmentally friendly than what most funeral homes call a “traditional funeral,” the latter of which includes embalming the

body and burying it in a steel casket enclosed in a concrete vault in the ground. There is some validity to this argument. OSHA lists 260 chemicals used by embalmers to preserve a body.\textsuperscript{12} Steel caskets, which are commonly used and take a long time to biodegrade, are placed in the concrete vault. This entire setup is expensive and completely unnecessary for a traditional Christian funeral. The last section of this essay will discuss, in brief, how a traditional Christian funeral can be completed with less cost than most funeral homes charge for direct cremation.

Cremation is not environmentally friendly. A high quantity of fuel is needed to keep the interior of the cremating chamber (called a retort) at the peak operating temperature. Additionally, many pollutants and toxins are released into the outside air via a chimney. Arguments for cremation state that filters are used and a secondary burner helps to re-burn the exhaust to break down contaminants more efficiently. However, filters may not be as effective as claimed, and regulation of crematoriums in America is surprisingly lax. While the Federal Trade Commission regulates the funeral industry, crematoriums are left up to individual states to regulate. Only twenty-three of our fifty states require licensing. So it may be naïve to assume that most crematoriums will spend tens of thousands of dollars on extra equipment and fuel each year to be more eco-friendly if the local government does not require it. If being “green” is a concern for someone, there are significantly better options.

A rise in unethical behavior among some crematorium owners has caused state governments to tighten up their legislature involving this industry. Georgia began periodic inspections of facilities after a severe abuse case was discovered in which a crematorium, for years, was disposing of the bodies in the woods and returning a bucket of wood ash and cement to the funeral homes. Another crematorium in California was caught selling the bodies of the deceased to researchers in the donated body parts market – the latter of which is a highly lucrative market and is mostly unregulated by the government despite the abuses that occur.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{A Growing Trend}

The rise in cremation’s popularity is mostly due to the high cost of the average funeral. In 2015, the NFDA General Price List Survey placed the cost at $8,560 for an average “full-service” funeral.\textsuperscript{14} Most families and churches do not have that kind of money at their disposal so quite a

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} Barna, pg. 42.
\textsuperscript{13} https://science.howstuffworks.com/cremation3.htm
\textsuperscript{14} https://kearneyfuneralhome.com/general-information/ I called Kearney Funeral Home in Scranton, PA to discuss their pricing. Their prices vary significantly depending on what sort of “package” is purchased. They seemed willing to work with low-income families of limited means and reduce their prices when necessary. For the Orthodox-friendly
\end{footnotesize}
few people opt for cremation. “Why burden the living with disposal of the dead?” is their sentiment. Caskets, which range in cost from $2,000-10,000, are one of the largest variables in pricing. Concrete vaults add to the cost but may not be necessary to protect the environment if no embalming chemicals are involved.\footnote{Many cemeteries, however, require a concrete vault with every burial to prevent the ground from sinking after the casket decomposes. This is an example of why it is good for a church to work toward purchasing a small parcel of land to serve the needs of their community.}

Probably a majority of people choose cremation simply because they believe it will be significantly cheaper. However, if they plan to have a funeral service with a showing of the body before it is cremated, the costs can easily hit $5,000-8,000, which is not necessarily any more economical than a typical burial since a viewing of the body requires its preparation. If the family opts out of a funeral with a viewing and decides upon “direct cremation,” it is still necessary for the body to be retrieved from the hospital or home of the deceased, to be taken to the funeral home, sent to the crematorium, and then returned to the funeral home for the customer to pick up. All of these factors result in a surprisingly high cost. Most people I’ve spoken to believe direct cremation would cost about $500 because they do not factor the funeral director’s costs, refrigeration of the body while paperwork is being completed, and transportation of the body. The local funeral home that I contacted gave me a quote of about $2,500 for this service, which is more costly than a traditional Christian burial that a church can provide (more on that later).

The second reason for the popularity of cremation is, in my personal opinion, due to the consumer society that we live in. Our death is something that we are discouraged from pondering in post-Christian America. After several years of hosting an open-spirituality forum in Asheville, North Carolina that involved hundreds of people, I found that most people do not believe in a resurrection of the body. Rather, they have a vague idea about some spiritual afterlife that seems to be a leftover of dualistic tendencies in Protestantism mixed with bits of Eastern religious sentiment. Consequently, today’s funerals are focused on being “celebrations of life” rather than reminders that all of us will one day die.

People are generally not profitable consumers if they have their minds set on eternal things rather than the collection of material goods. Keeping our personal experience with death out of our minds ensures that we keep our thoughts focused on this life. When the inconvenience of death strikes nearby, it may seem best to “dispose” of the body in the easiest manner. As flippant as this
may sound, I think it is engrained in us consumers to buy, use, and throw things away so frequently that we consequently treat the human body similarly – especially if we have lost our Christian understanding of the radical doctrine of the Incarnation.

*Ancient Christian Voices*

While many thousands of references to burial can be found in the writings of the Church Fathers, there is hardly any mention of cremation simply because it was not something that Christians ever practiced. The belief in the deification and resurrection of Christ’s human body was more than enough to convince Christians of the inherent value of the body and why it should not be burned. Of the few references I could find, most were from the centuries in which the Christian Church was persecuted.

We Orthodox Christians may be approaching a situation similar to what the early Church found themselves: a world in which everyone except those in the Church cremated the deceased. One fiery early Christian named Tertullian opposed cremation, writing, “The resurrection of the dead is the Christian’s trust. By it we are believers…that truth which God reveals, but the crowd derides, which supposes that nothing will survive after death…But let the crowd deride: I on my side must deride it still more, especially when it burns up its dead with harshest inhumanity.”

In another place, he writes regarding some pagans who do not want their bodies burned because they believe that a part (or “relic”) of their soul is trapped within the body. He respects this treatment of the body, and explains there is a better “way of accounting for this pious treatment, not as if it is meant to favor the relics of the soul, but as it would avert a cruel custom in the interest even of the body; since, being human, it is itself underserving of an end which is also inflicted upon murderers.” Here he teaches cremation as “underserving” for any human. In the same work, he relates two well-known stories from the early Church. In the first one, the body of a pious Christian lady folded her hands in prayer during her funeral, showing how God can animate the body of a deceased person with His grace even after death. In another instance, a body in a grave moved aside to make room for one of its Christian brethren who had just passed away and was being buried in the same grave.

During the first several centuries of church history, Christians were often captured and burned – both while alive or after their death. Since cremation was the standard practice of the

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pagan Roman Empire, Christians often risked their lives to recover the bodies of their martyred brethren before those bodies were burned. Innumerable accounts in the Lives of the Saints of the early Church attest to this fact. Such a practice was not new to Christianity but is even recorded in the Book of Tobit, “If I saw anyone of my people dead, cast outside the wall of Nineveh, I would bury him. If King Sennacherib put someone to death when he came trying to escape from Judea, I buried them secretly. For in his anger, he put many to death, and the bodies were sought by the king; but they were not found. But one of the men of Nineveh went and made known to the king concerning my burying them. So I hid, and when I knew I was being sought to be put to death I was frightened and ran away” (Tb. 1:17-19). Later, the angel Raphael states that he accompanied Tobit in this God-pleasing work (12:12).

However, early Christians did not harbor superstitious fears that resurrection would be impossible if the body was burned, as some of the Romans suspected. Minucius Felix, an ancient Christian, wrote, “Nor, as you believe, do we fear any loss by burning, but we adopt the ancient and better custom of burying in the earth.”

A scholar of the early Church notes, “From an early date, burial of the dead was seen as an important work of Christian charity...It was later regarded as one of the ‘corporal works of mercy,’ alongside feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, [etc.]...The practice of cremation was strongly rejected as being at odds with Christian belief in the resurrection of the body, and its general demise in later Roman society was due to Christian influence.”

Additionally, the ancient funeral service of the Orthodox Church includes a part where the faithful give the departed the “last kiss.” This kiss is even mentioned in the hymnography, “Come, brethren, let us give the last kiss unto the dead...Come, therefore, let us kiss him who was with us but a little while.” This last kiss would not be the same if the Orthodox ever practiced cremation as a means of disposing of the dead.

Modern Voices of the Church

Today’s Church authorities have continued to oppose cremation. A council of bishops in 1932 decreed, “As a matter of principle, the incineration of the bodies of Orthodox Christians in

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19 Davidson, pg. 384.
20 Stichera for the Last Kiss, Panikhida & Funeral, pp. 113-115.
crematoria is not permitted, because this custom has been introduced by atheists and enemies of the Church. In all individual, extenuating circumstances, the decision is left to the diocesan bishop.21

Met. Nicholas (†2011) of the American Carpatho-Russian Archdiocese took a strong stance against cremation. Though he has passed away, to this day the ACROD website states, “Cremation is contrary to the faith and tradition of our Church and is expressly forbidden to Orthodox believers. A church funeral is denied a person who has been or will be cremated. Requiem services afterwards are also forbidden because the person in question has already abandoned all hope in the Lord and prayers are therefore useless for such a soul.”22

From Tertullian in the ancient Church to St. Justinian’s legal code in Byzantium to synods of bishops in modern times, Christianity has consistently taught against cremation. This chorus of voices should be strongly considered by every Christian who is contemplating cremation for themselves or a family member. There are better alternatives.

Is Cremation Ever Acceptable?

As the Russian synod noted above, there may be times of “extenuating circumstances” when cremation can be considered. Examples include a violent death that dismembers the body, late discovery of a body (when several days or more have passed and the body is already decomposing), when required by civil authority (such as in Japan), and in cases of an epidemic.

Regardless of the reason, an Orthodox Christian should always consult their bishop to determine whether or not the particular case at hand would require cremation. Except in the rarest of cases, cremation can be avoided. If it is ever necessary, I would recommend that the family or local church insist that the bones of the deceased not be pulverized. I contacted a local funeral home and confirmed that such a request can easily be honored. A small casket can be sent with the body to the crematorium and be used to house the bones and ashes after the process is completed. In this way, the cremains and bones can be buried with some semblance of dignity.

THE BETTER WAY – A CHRISTIAN BURIAL

The insightful Sirach wrote, “My son, let your tears fall for the dead, and as one suffering grievously, begin the lament. With the honor due him, wrap his body and take care of his burial” (WSir. 38:16). In this comforting passage, we are encouraged to go through the healing process of grieving over the loss of a loved one. Part of this healthy process includes preparing the body and

21 http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/cremation.aspx
22 https://www.acrod.org/readingroom/ethics/moralissues
burying it – if one is capable of doing so. Ideally, every church would have a team of volunteers who are available for this noble and divine ministry to the Body of Christ. In *A Christian Ending*, Dcn. Mark Barna and his wife Elizabeth write detailed chapters on how to organize a team of volunteers, how to prepare the body for burial, and how to handle the legal aspect of death. If a church has the means to purchase a small parcel of land to build a cemetery, they can save thousands of dollars and quite a few headaches by avoiding the commercial cemetery industry.

**Legal Paperwork**

Every state - and many local municipalities - have particular laws about what paperwork must be filed and how to set up a private cemetery. If these laws are explored ahead of time, then when a death occurs, the church will be able to handle things quickly and efficiently, putting the minds of family and friends of the deceased at ease. I have read over some of the laws for my home state of North Carolina and they are not difficult to follow. It is reasonable for many churches to have a representative member of the community investigate these matters.

Additionally, every member of every church should consider reviewing their paperwork, which will greatly facilitate the ease of handling legal matters after their passing. Two packets of information called *A Gift for My Loved Ones* and *Another Gift for My Loved Ones* are available on the OCA’s website by going directly to this URL [https://oca.org/news/headline-news/orthodox-christian-end-of-life-resources-now-available](https://oca.org/news/headline-news/orthodox-christian-end-of-life-resources-now-available) or by entering “gift for my loved ones” in the search box on [www.oca.org](http://www.oca.org).

**Preparation and Burial**

As the Barna’s book indicates, the preparation of a body for burial is not as complicated as one may think. With a little bit of research and preparation, the process can go quite smoothly and quickly while costing little to either the church or family. It’s a wonderful opportunity to care for the members of a church from cradle to grave.

I would direct the reader to the book hitherto mentioned by the Barnas for detailed instructions on the preparation of the deceased person’s body. One of the greatest fears that people have in dealing with a body is the contraction of a disease. Generally, however, a body is no more dangerous in the first days after death than it is while the person was alive. Of course, some basic precautions should be followed such as wearing sanitary gloves.

Preparation will include cleaning the body, filling orifices with cotton, placing a diaper on the deceased, anointing him with a blend of olive oil and essential oil, dressing him in a burial linen,
placing him in the casket, and then bringing him to the church. Dry ice should be discreetly hidden under the body and in the burial clothing to help preserve the body until it can be buried – a body can be preserved in this way for several days. The church in which the body rests should be kept cool. If too few volunteers are available in a church community to form this kind of ministry, the pastor should establish a relationship with one or more local funeral homes to ensure that they can provide the services needed for an Orthodox Christian burial at a reasonable price.

Embalmment is not necessary since the invention of refrigeration. Most funeral homes will want to utilize this service since it is a normal part of their procedures – but if you need to use a funeral home to help, you can probably refuse this service. All state legislature that I’ve read requires that a body be embalmed or refrigerated, but I know of no states that require both. Modern-day Jews refuse both embalmment and cremation all of the time. Funeral homes, hospitals, and medical centers are more than happy to comply with the religious requirements of Jews, and they are both capable and willing in most cases to help Orthodox Christians as well.

It is not only unnecessary to embalm the dead, but it is also strongly discouraged. Embalmment involves draining the body and organs of blood and fluid and then pumping numerous toxic chemicals into the body. The fluids drained from the body are then unceremoniously dumped down a sink drain - and in cases where the funeral home is hooked up to local water and sewer - they end up in the municipal water supply, which raises several ethical and moral concerns.

Caskets

Traditional Christian funerals have few expenses – the greatest two are usually hiring someone to dig the grave (which may cost around $500 or so) and purchasing the casket (about $800 to $2,500). Regarding the latter, there are numerous Orthodox Christians who make caskets and provide speedy shipping when they are needed. They range from a simple pine box to more elaborately finished coffins. A friend of mine makes some of the most affordable caskets around - his website www.cluxtoncaskets.com contains photos and prices of his work. Alternatively, someone who has some experience with woodworking in the church may be capable of producing a simple but beautiful casket. There are also some Orthodox Christians who would prefer to be buried wrapped in their funeral shroud and lying on a plank. Regardless, a beautiful and dignified burial is possible without paying a funeral home thousands of dollars – especially for one of their steel caskets which are expensive, unnecessary, and environmentally harmful.
Environmental Concerns

Most of the propaganda that supports cremation over a traditional burial states that cremation, even with all of its fuel burning and pollution, is still more environmentally friendly. However, their comparison is always with an embalmed body that is buried in a steel casket in a concrete vault. However, there is nothing more environmentally friendly than the traditional Christian burial that I have outlined above. Yes, the body will decompose in the ground – but that is natural. God made the earth to handle the breakdown of all creatures in an ecologically friendly way - we were made from dust and to dust we shall return (cf. Gen. 3:19).

FINAL THOUGHTS

With some forethought and careful planning, many parishes can form a volunteer team that offers the invaluable ministry of giving their Christian brethren a traditional and dignified burial. Death is part of the reality of living in a fallen world – no one gets out of this alive. But we have the promise of the glorious resurrection, and our Lord to lead us there. For “He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1:18).

The dead shall rise up;  
And those in the tombs shall arise  
Those in the earth shall be glad  
For your dew is healing for them,  
But the land of the ungodly shall come to an end.  

- Isaiah 26:19 (LXX) -
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