

## Orthodox Liturgical Practices of Holy Friday & Saturday

With the eventual acceptance of Christianity in the ancient Roman Empire, the Orthodox Church expanded its practice of the Faith to include public forms and actions. This public expansion was done in accordance with the Church's theology of Icons, or sacred imagery, expressed primarily in architecture (building of churches) and liturgical rites (processions). Contemporary Orthodox liturgical practices of Holy Friday and Saturday are results of this expression. As such, these practices are uniquely Orthodox and further confessions of the Faith "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) and preserved in the lives of the faithful.

### 1. Veneration of Christ at the Tomb

During the Vespers service on Holy Friday, a large embroidered Icon of Christ taken down from the Cross is carried in procession from the Sanctuary and placed on a table in the center of the Church (see Fig. 1). Christ is surrounded by the women disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, and angels (see Matt. 27:55-61;

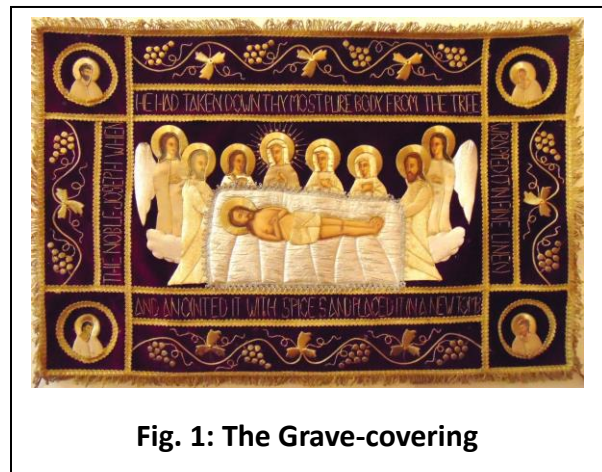


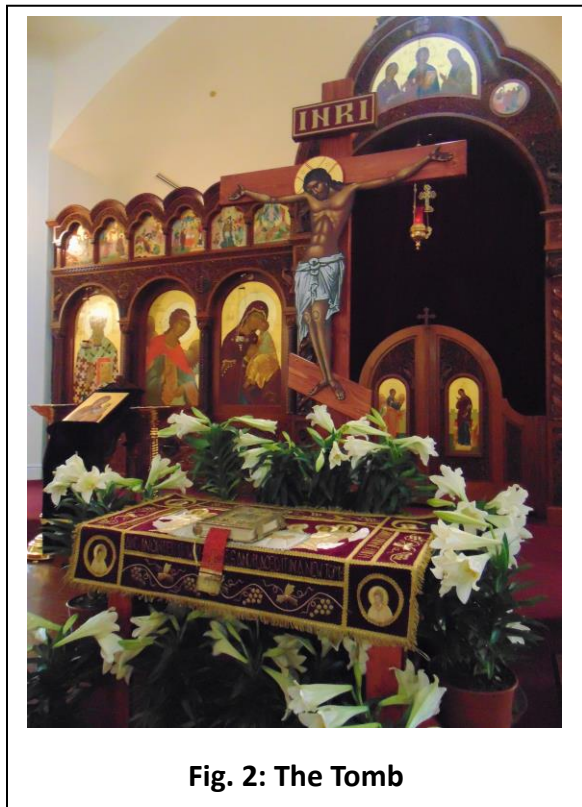
Fig. 1: The Grave-covering

Jn. 19:38-42). This large Icon is known as the Grave-covering (Gk., *epitaphios*; Slav., *plaschanitsa*). The table on which this Icon is placed is popularly known as the Tomb (Gk., *taphos*).

During this procession of the Grave-covering, the people sing a distinctive hymn: "The noble Joseph, when he had taken down Thy most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in fine linen, and anointed it with spices, and placed it in a new tomb." This verse is typically embroidered along the outer edge of the Grave-covering Icon.

The Tomb is adorned with flowers, and a Gospel book is placed on top of the Grave-covering when it is situated on the Tomb (see Fig. 2). As long as the Grave-

covering remains in the center of the Church, the faithful venerate the Icon approaching it by making three prostrations. For the next day, the Deacon or Priest stand before the Tomb and Grave-covering when serving the litanies and other parts of the services. At the Midnight Office to begin the Paschal Service, the Grave-covering is taken into the Sanctuary and placed on the Altar where it remains until the Feast of Ascension, 40 days after Pascha.



**Fig. 2: The Tomb**

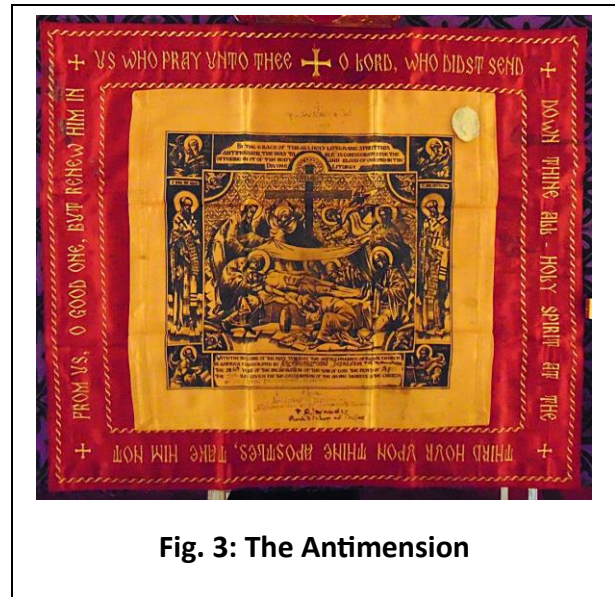
As a historical practice, the veneration of Christ with the Grave-covering at the Tomb originated sometime in the 1600's, quickly gaining popularity. Indeed today, this practice is one of the most moving elements in the services of Holy Week. Yet while the practice might appear new, or novel, it is in fact an extension of something very old in the Church.

The embroidered Icon of the Grave-covering is identical with the cloth on every Orthodox Altar, which is unfolded and on which is celebrated Holy Communion every

Divine Liturgy. This cloth on the Altar is known as the *Antimension* (Gk., "instead of the Table"; see Fig. 3). It too is an Icon of Christ taken down from the Cross; importantly, the Antimension is signed by the Bishop (Head Pastor) of the Church. Under the spiritual supervision of the Bishop, the Divine Liturgy cannot be served in good order in the local Church without the Antimension.

The veneration of the Grave-covering at the Tomb on Holy Friday is, in fact, an extension of the meaning of Holy Communion itself, as the Holy Communion enacted each week in the Divine Liturgy is a participation in the Body and Blood of Christ

crucified and risen. In its Holy Week and Paschal practices in the Spring, when historically Christ was crucified and raised at the time of the Jewish Passover, the Church expounds in a special way that which it observes every week throughout the year. Throughout the year as the Priest unfolds the Antimension and serves the Liturgy, the Altar is remembered as the Tomb in which our Lord was buried and from which He rose to give Himself as the Food of immortality to the faithful.



**Fig. 3: The Antimension**

## **2. The Burial Procession around the Church**

During the Matins of Holy Saturday, usually served on Holy Friday evening after the Vespers service, the Grave-covering is taken in a procession around the outside of the Church building (see Fig. 4). The Priest carrying the Gospel book walks under the Grave-covering while the people sing “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us,” the same hymn sung during funeral processions. After returning inside the Church, the Grave-covering is placed back on the Tomb until the Midnight Office to begin the Paschal service, during which it is taken into the Sanctuary to remain on the Altar beginning with the Paschal Liturgy until the Feast of Ascension, 40 days after Pascha.

Aside from being a dramatic action involving the entire congregation gathered for worship, the Burial Procession recalls a fundamental fact of the Orthodox Faith. Christ was crucified at a certain place called Golgotha (“the Skull”), He was taken down from the Cross and His body prepared and buried in a tomb, and He rose from the dead to then meet with His disciples. The procession includes the faithful to follow Christ in and with His saving work.



**Fig. 4: The Burial Procession**

The Burial Procession we repeat every year has its origin in the *actual places* where Christ was crucified, buried, and raised, namely, in the city of Jerusalem. Once Christianity was sanctioned in the fourth century Roman Empire under the Emperor Constantine, the city of Jerusalem was reclaimed for Christian practice, and

churches were built at the locations where Christ lived. The Christians conducted worship services at these places, and especially during Holy Week, would literally process from one church and service to the next in the order of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. Though not physically in the city of Jerusalem, today the Church retains these same practices throughout the world.

The Church in its worship is the Icon (image) of human activity redeemed in the Person of Jesus Christ who came to save all peoples of the world. The practices of Holy Friday and Saturday show the fulfillment of human life to be primarily *liturgical* in nature: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). As Jesus Christ is the great High Priest, He is the Liturgist, and His ministry is the Liturgy (Heb. 8:1-6); thus our observances of Holy Week extend from the Divine Liturgy to encompass these holy days in the truth who is Christ our Lord (see Jn. 14:6).