



**A CHRISTIAN ENDING
A HANDBOOK FOR BURIAL IN THE ANCIENT
CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

**By
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A Christian Ending is a hands-on, step by step manual for the preparation of a body for burial without the assistance of a licensed funeral director. Unapologetically Christian in content, this book fills a gap for millions of readers who confuse natural burial with New-age or the Green movement. The authors point out that natural burial is the manner used by Christians before the invention of chemical embalming in the mid-nineteenth century. They debunk many of the fallacies surrounding the funeral industry and point to a better, more natural form of ancient burial tradition. In a congenial and conversational tone, they discuss the evolution of funeral practice up to the development of today's funeral industry and the effects of current practice on the culture as a whole.

Though endorsed by several Orthodox hierarchs and containing a Foreword by noted theologian and bio-ethicist Fr. John Breck, the book is not a theological tome. It was designed specifically to be "a quick read with a friend." Quotes from old blues tunes on the first page of every chapter immediately tell the reader this book may not be quite what you thought. The content is immediately accessible and useful to anyone interested in natural burial, Christian or not.

The book quickly but carefully instructs the reader on how to deal with the local coroner, hospitals, nursing homes and how to organize a group to perform funerals. The step by step instructions for washing, anointing, dressing and transporting a dead body are clear and concise, leaving little for the reader to discover on their own. Several groups have used these instructions alone to successfully prepare bodies for burial and conduct an in-house funeral.

For the scholarly reader, the authors include an extensive bibliography to make up for the deliberate lack of footnotes. Appendices include legal forms needed for proper planning of one's own funeral. The short concise chapters culminate with a service of prayers and readings used during the preparation of a body for burial.



Mark and Elizabeth Barna live in Charleston, South Carolina where Mark serves as an ordained Deacon in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) at Holy Ascension Orthodox Church, Mt. Pleasant, SC and as a manager for the South Carolina State Ports Authority. Elizabeth is a business woman with many years working in the hospitality industry. She is a certified food safety instructor and operates Atlantic Food Safety LLC, instructing restaurant managers in proper safe food preparation. She also manages a successful recipe web site, www.recipedirect.net.

In their thirty-five years together they have rarely been alone, raising two sons and taking care of anyone else who came along. "Some people take in stray animals," they say, "We take in stray people." Caring for Elizabeth's mother, dying of breast cancer introduced them to hospice care. After Ella's death it was clear her father Frank could not care for himself for long. Within a short time they had their three remaining parents, two with Alzheimer's and one with Parkinson's, living with them in their home for nearly seven years, until Mark's mother's death in 2010.

"A Christian Ending" was born out of a long held belief that chemical embalming is not only unnatural but a violence that Christians should not tolerate and a pagan ritual of a cult of body preservation. Years of discomfort and unease began to gel when Mark viewed an instructional video regarding how to treat the remains of Jewish patients who die in the hospital. Information on Green burials added to their desire to find a better way to bury their dead. They have used the techniques described in the book many times for friends, family, and strangers, accepting no payment for their services. In 2011 they were asked to prepare their beloved Archbishop DMITRI of the Diocese of the South (OCA) for burial in Dallas, TX. They are available for speaking engagements and workshops.

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Author's Narrative

From "About Us" at www.achristianending.com

A Christian Ending is a handbook for preparing a body for burial in the ancient Christian tradition with or without the assistance of a licensed funeral director. Whether you are a Christian or not, this book provides details on how to legally prepare a body for burial, perform a vigil and funeral. The book grew out of a life-long aversion to the American funeral industry and the American cult of body preservation. From an early age the whole thing just seemed quite warped and very un-Christian. In short, "it gave me the willies." I always thought that it would be much better to be "planted" among the roots of an old oak tree than to have my remains pumped full of chemicals and sealed in a metal box. It turns out I was right.

As Christians we are constantly seeking to know the truth of things. Over the years we realized that the American funeral industry is built upon a mountain of lies. Working in a hospital many years ago, I learned that hospital personnel are trained to handle the death of Jews much differently than they do Christians. I learned that Jewish burial rituals are much closer to my idea of a proper burial than the funeral industry would have us believe.

Knowing that the first Christians considered themselves to be Jews, I surmised that early Christian burial was probably much the same. So what happened to those traditions? A trip to the library enlightened me. I learned that the American funeral industry is unique. In most of the world burial is still a quite organic, natural part of family and community life. Here we have turned it into a grotesque art form at best, or a macabre cult of greed and profit at the worst.

One day in 2005, in a discussion with my parish priest I said, "I have all this information on ancient Christian burial. Surely you can find a seminarian who is looking for a thesis. Have him write a book." His response was, "No, you write it." The first version was simply a step by step description of how to prepare a body for burial with an explanation of "why" written only with Orthodox Christians in mind. This early version was circulated among friends and fellow Orthodox Christians via photo copy.

While writing this first draft and working out details of the process in our heads, tragedy struck. A good friend and parishioner died suddenly and unexpectedly. He left three teenaged orphans. Our church family quickly pulled together, donated a coffin, dug his grave on a friends farm and prepared his body at the hospital morgue. During this tragic time everything went "by the book". This was also the first time I signed for receipt of a body as "funeral director". Since then we have prepared numerous bodies of family, friends, parishioners and perfect strangers.

The favorable reactions and suggestions led us to rewrite the book to broaden the scope to include other Christians who might not be familiar with Orthodox Christian tradition and eschatology. This version also got favorable reviews and we were encouraged to seek a publisher. We then embarked on a third version to include anyone interested in "natural", "green" or "new age" burial in the potential audience.

Still, we knew the subject matter is not a popular subject and that the book would probably never see the light of day. We continued sending bound photocopies free upon request. Finally, after numerous rejections from publishers of this "unprofitable" book, a copy found its way to the Monastery of Saint John of San Francisco where Abbot Jonah (now Metropolitan JONAH of all America and Canada, Orthodox Church in America) agreed to publish it through Divine Ascent Press, the monastery imprint. We are very much indebted to His Beatitude and the monks for all the work that went into editing and printing this book.

We hope our website will grow to be more than just an introduction to the book. We plan to include resources for natural burial, links, a blog and a memorial page. We would like to provide a place where anyone can design and place a memorial page to their loved ones.

Obviously, as Orthodox Christians we approach our death as we do our entire life, as Christians. However, if you are not a Christian, you will still find lots of valuable step by step information in the book.

Thank you for your interest in A Christian Ending.

Mark Barna

"A dog is better than I am for he has love and does not judge." – St. Xanthias

An Interview with the Authors of A Christian Ending

Hear another interview with the authors at Ancient Faith Radio.com

http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/frederica/a_christian_ending

1. *When we pray for "a Christian ending" in the liturgy, some of us might not know just what that entails. What does the Church mean by this phrase?*

In the Introduction of "A Christian Ending" we describe the night Elizabeth's mother died. At the time we thought, "That's about as good as it gets, except perhaps for dying in a monastery." My understanding is that a Christian ending to our lives would be simply a continuation and a culmination of our Christian life. We pray for a death that is "painless, blameless and peaceful," just as we hope and pray our lives will be.

We know that in many lives there is much pain and suffering, sin and often violence. Yet we rely on our loving God's boundless love and mercy to forgive our sins and to heal our lives. Far too many people die a violent death by accident, murder or soldiers at war. We learn from the lives of the Saints and the martyrs that, even in the face of great violence, there is the possibility for interior peace.

Many more people die from natural causes of disease or old age. For those of us who live in a community of Christians it is, I believe, our duty and obligation to provide each of our members the most peaceful and Christian ending we can muster. Death is an awesome and terrible, indeed terrifying, thing for any of us to contemplate. Anyone who has spent time with a dying person knows how hard and desperately we cling to life. We are hard-wired by God to fight for life to the end. It is our obligation, not to hasten but, to ease that passing as best we can. We do this in the same way we support each other in our lives, through prayer and fellowship.

The Church has many prayers for the sick, suffering and terminally ill. Our care for our dying brethren begins with simply visiting them, listening to them, praying with them or reading the Psalter and other scriptures. To have time to actually prepare for death is a great blessing. I don't believe in withholding vital information from a dying patient. It is important for one to have time to prepare if the time is available. As death approaches we can be with them, praying, singing hymns helping to bolster their faith in God's boundless mercy and to ease their way.

2. *In 2012 America, how do we view death, and how does this perspective contrast with Orthodox teaching?*

I think most people spend their time in total denial of death. We simply don't think about it. I know I don't most of the time. As I said, it is a terrifying concept. Particularly in our post-Christian age and our anti-Christian culture, we are encouraged to spend our time in the "pursuit of happiness," which for most people means the acquisition of stuff and participation in many sinful pursuits. Our popular culture is filled with violent movies and games or soft-core pornography. Hardcore pornography is the number one most viewed item on the internet. The days are filled with pursuit of money, power and influence and the nights with sex, drugs and rock and roll. You may have seen the bumper sticker that reads, "The one who dies with the most toys wins." I'd like to change that to read "The one who dies with the most toys is still dead." Then what?

The “traditional” American funeral is simply a reflection of our materialistic culture. The process of chemical embalming and creating a lifelike mannequin of the deceased is antiquated and actually quite pagan. The very idea of a display of wealth, an expensive funeral or grave monument was repugnant to the early church Fathers.

Clearly, the popular view of life and death is quite different than the Christian view. The Christian life is, or should be, primarily occupied with the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. We believe that human beings are created by God to be his companions. We were originally created for and are called to an intimate relationship, a communion with God that is higher even than the angels and all the heavenly hosts. We enter this relationship by faith and the acquisition of virtues through the rudiments of the faith; prayer (both personal and corporate), fasting, alms giving and study of the scriptures. In this way we acquire the Holy Spirit and conform ourselves to the Image and Likeness of Christ. For the Christian who has spent a lifetime in this manner of living, death is not a terrifying specter but truly a glorious homecoming. The challenge, in every age, is how to do this and still live within the time and society in which we find ourselves.

3. *How did you and Elizabeth become involved with end-of-life ministry?*

It came about quite naturally and also quite by accident. I have always been very uncomfortable with the American funeral industry and the cult of body preservation. It is very unnatural. We have been together thirty-five years and we’ve always had people with us. Some people take in stray dogs or cats, we take in stray people.

At one point we were involved in a Home Share program with the Department of Mental Health. We took in schizophrenics coming out of the hospital to try to help them reintegrate into society. Yet, all the time we knew that it would fall to us to take care of our parents when the time came. As we grew in the faith, we both knew we did not want to put our parents into assisted living or a nursing home if we could avoid it. Caring for Elizabeth’s mother, Ella, was our real introduction to hospice care. Almost from that moment we began looking for a house where we could care for our remaining parents. Under the heading of “Be careful what you wish for,” we ended up with our three remaining parents, two with Alzheimer’s and one with Parkinson’s, in our home for nearly seven years.

4. *On your blog, you state an obvious fact: "No one gets out of this life alive." While this is self-evident, we often spend our days pushing thoughts of mortality away, burying our fears (so to speak) in activity and distractions. How can we Orthodox Christians properly prepare for our Christian endings without being obsessed with, or fearful of, death?*

There are two aspects to preparation for death, the spiritual and the temporal. I think the most important first step is to take care of your end of life paperwork. Whenever I’m asked to give a talk about the subject the first and last thing I emphasize is to get your papers in order. As Christians we spend our lives in service to others. Why would you want to leave a mess for your family to clean up should you die unexpectedly? In “A Christian Ending,” Chapter Eleven deals with personal pre-planning and the forms you should have. Appendix B contains a form that we created to inform family and friends of your final wishes. This is particularly important for converts whose family may not be familiar with natural burial.

I’ve found this to be a good way to get in touch with your own mortality. There is something about creating a will and filling out a Healthcare Power of Attorney that is quite sobering. Amazingly,

we have very good friends who have actually helped prepare other friends for burial and still haven't created a will. It's a mystery to me.

Spiritually our entire life is in preparation for our death and judgment. One cannot emphasize enough the rudiments of the faith; prayer, fasting, alms giving and attendance at church services. They are so rudimentary that sometimes we forget their importance. Beyond that, the awareness of our impending death is paramount. The Saints, teach us to keep the remembrance of our own death on the very tip of our nose, always right in front of our face. Imagine how different the world would be if everyone was able to do that. The constant remembrance of death is a very sobering and important practice according to the Saints.

The fact is that, except for suicide, I am completely powerless regarding my own death. I am not guaranteed another breath. No matter how hard I try I cannot force my heart to beat one more time. It is all a gift. It is a gift I may be called to account for at any time. If we could be conscious of that every moment of the day, how differently would we treat our neighbors? If everyone could do this, would the world be full of despots and petty tyrants, wars and starving and abused people?

The Saints universally teach that the antidote for the fear of death is the fear of sin. If we were even half as afraid of sinning as we are of dying, we would not sin and therefore would have no fear of death and judgment.

5. *What are people's most common misperceptions about the end of the life, and what is the question you get the most often?*

End of life care, palliative care and hospice is really a different subject than what we deal with in our book. "A Christian Ending" is specifically about the step by step process that takes place after a person dies all the way through to the beginning of the funeral service. This is where we find a gap in the Church's care for our members.

There are probably many more misconceptions about after death care than there are about end of life care. Most of what people know about care of the dead comes from the funeral industry. Often people think it is illegal to bury your own dead without the services of a licensed funeral director. In most places that simply is not true. The laws and licensing provisions were originally designed to protect consumers from unscrupulous undertakers. Natural burial is so natural that there is very little reason to regulate it. Our state, for example, specifically exempts family and church burials on private property from the state funeral regulations. There are no federal regulations regarding funerals or transporting a body across state lines. You can also ship a body via air freight without a funeral home. One of the most common misperceptions is that an unembalmed body must be buried within twenty-four hours. It's simply not true.

Probably, the question we are asked the most is, "How long can you keep a body without embalming?" The answer is, "Indefinitely." The invention of refrigeration made chemical embalming obsolete. However, since chemical embalming is the one thing that only licensed funeral directors can provide and is the foundation of the industry, they keep perpetuating the myth. It is very easy to keep a body for three days with dry ice.

I was honored to be asked to come to Dallas to prepare the body of Archbishop DMITRI for burial. Using our book, the people there did a beautiful job with the initial preparations. Vladika lay in repose in the cathedral there for five days with no problems at all. We were very vigilant about keeping his body cool with dry ice between services. We removed the ice for services and returned it when they ended. He looked so good and so natural; I don't think the casual observer would have ever known all that we were doing behind the scenes.

6. *Tell us a little about your book, and why you wrote it.*

It's all our priest's fault. It's always the priest's fault, right?

"A Christian Ending" started out as a simple instruction manual for preparing a body for burial. Over the years my discomfort with the American funeral industry led me to explore burial in an Orthodox Christian context. Clearly, it is an important part of life and we should do it right. To my own surprise I had accumulated a good amount of information. One day I mentioned this to Fr. John Parker and half joking, told him to find a seminarian in need of a thesis and I'd turn my files over to him to write a book. He said, "No, you do it."

The first draft was simply a step by step, hands-on description of how to prepare a body for burial. We wrote it specifically for Orthodox Christians and therefore took a lot of basic Christian knowledge for granted. Our later experiences led us to include information on legal matters, dealing with the coroner, hospitals and nursing homes and mobilizing parishioners to help. Later we included some short chapters on the evolution of funerals. Realizing that natural burial is becoming popular with the New-age and Green folks, we added a chapter of some basic theology for the non-Orthodox or non-Christian reader as a form of outreach.

The first opportunity we had to use our own instruction manual was for a dear friend and parishioner who died unexpectedly. It was a great shock to us all. We went to the morgue to prepare his body and everything went "by the book." Everyone involved with that first "in-house" funeral was so touched by it that we knew we would continue.

Another thing really struck me. The director of the Medical University morgue told me as we were leaving, "We've had Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in here. You're the first Christians." That struck me as very sad. "You're the first Christians." We of all people, the people of the Cross and the martyrs, have not been taking care of our own departed brethren. What kind of witness is that?

We had been reading selections from the psalms during the preparation procedure so we developed a small service of prayers and readings to use specifically during the preparation of the body for burial. The readings are programmed to last about as long as the preparation and we included them in the book for ease of use.

We didn't write the book for profit or notoriety, but simply to make what we have learned available to the Church. To us it just makes sense that we should render this final service to our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. We have done this for friends, family and perfect strangers. We have trained many people. People we would never expect, have insisted on preparing their loved ones themselves. Everyone who has been involved has been touched and greatly moved by the power and simplicity of what we do.

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<http://oca.org/news/oca-news/mark-and-elizabeth-barna-write-about-a-christian-ending-in-their-book-and-w>.

Reviews and Comments

“This book provides a detailed description of the many facets involved in this great act of love. May it be a blessing to all who heed the advice it offers, and may it help all our communities to enter more deeply into the awesome mystery we must all face: death and the preparation for our resurrection!” – Metropolitan Jonah, Primate of the Orthodox Church in America

“...many people will find it a useful guide to help them through the natural Christian burial process.”
– Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco, Greek Orthodox Metropolis of San Francisco

“You have done your community a service by sharing with them the ancient teachings and practices of Orthodox Christians concerning death.” – Bishop Peter, Russian Orthodox Church Abroad

“I love this book.” – Frederica Mathewes-Green on Ancient Faith Radio.com

“We owe the Barna’s a great measure of thanks for the work they have done in compiling the valuable information contained in this book. One can only hope that it will guide many Christians who suffer the loss of someone close to them, in family or community, to understand better the true meaning of death as a passage from this world to eternal life in Christ. At the very least, it will provide them with practical advice and insight as to how best to confront the reality of death and the often difficult responsibility to care appropriately for the deceased. - Fr. John Breck

“We can’t thank you enough for all of your help and guidance with our mother’s preparation for burial. It was so much more personal and beautiful than we ever could have imagined.” – Suzanne, Daria and Dee

“I received your book late last week and read it through in a single sitting with great interest. It's an impressive and above all very useful book and I hope you have wide interest in it.” - Adam A.J. DeVille, Ph.D. (Th.), Assistant Professor of Theology, University of Saint Francis, Fort Wayne, IN.

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