

Message from Fr. George for May 26, 2023

This Monday we will observe Memorial Day. I would like to offer the following Orthodox reflection from Fr. Gregory Patsis that appeared in <https://www.pravmir.com> about this national commemoration.



As Orthodox Christians living in a non-Orthodox society, we are constantly confronted with situations and circumstances that challenge our notions of our faith and tradition. And as with many of our American holidays, the commemoration of Memorial Day is cause to take pause and reflect upon what our Holy Tradition informs us of such celebrations of the dead and what to make of the American cultural expression that we [will] observe.

Consistent with our Orthodox understanding of life and our human adaptation to this worldly existence, we as Orthodox Christians do not need to set aside one day to be reminded of the importance of acknowledging all aspects of life, whether it be birth, growth and maturity or, finally, death. Specifically with respect to Memorial Day, as an Orthodox Christian, we naturally raise the question: “Why would Americans set aside only one day a

year to celebrate our departed loved ones?” Now, this question compels us to understand the history of Memorial Day, which was originally set aside to remember the sacrifices of those who died in the armed conflict in the service of our country. So, from the onset, Memorial Day, (originally referred to as “Decoration Day” based on the efforts of Southern women to decorate the graves of both Confederate and Union soldiers who died during the Civil War), was a special, one-day commemoration.

So, it is not that Memorial Day is at all like our Orthodox “Psychosavvato” or Saturday of the Souls. It was always intended to be a one-day commemoration of a particular group of individuals; our fallen brethren in armed conflict. Yet, with the ever-increasing commercialization of all that is sacred, accelerated perhaps by the U.S. Government to create a three-day, Federal holiday, Memorial Day has been reduced to the “official start of summer” and another three-day shopping opportunity. But another phenomenon has emerged with the commemoration of Memorial Day; what originally was intended to commemorate a select group of individuals is now an opportunity to remember all who have departed from this life. It has, in other words, become personalized; a most particular Orthodox trait.

When exactly did this special, unique one-day celebration of our fallen brothers and sisters in the armed forces transform itself into a day in which all departed loved ones are honored? The answer to this I could not determine; however, and this is the important part, the fact that it has been transformed into a more inclusive commemoration reflects a natural tendency in human beings. It is only natural that when one particular segment of our society is honored, that eventually all members of our society are so honored. In other words, it seems that in the case of death it is only natural for human beings to commemorate all the dead if we are going to commemorate any of our dead.

As Orthodox Christians, this natural progression should not be construed as somehow demeaning the meaning and significance of the sacrifice of our fallen brothers and sisters in the armed forces; but, rather, it should be construed as a noble and beautiful gesture of humanity that yearns to unite

themselves, in body and spirit, with our loved ones departed this life. What originally was understood as a day to identify with those who gave up their lives for the noble cause of God and Country, is now more naturally understood as desiring to reunite ourselves, through prayer, to those who we continue to love regardless of the separation of time and space.

Given that the transformation of Memorial Day has taken root; from a holiday to commemorate a select group of individuals, our war dead, to one commemorating a broad group of individuals, all our departed brothers and sisters, it seems then that it is only a matter of time that this basic human need, to unite ourselves through prayer to those who have passed on from this life, will be done more frequently; let's say, on Saturday's throughout the year. Well, low and behold, such is the practice in our Holy Tradition of Orthodoxy. When our society, through the prayers and outreach of Orthodox Christians, comes to understand that the bonds of love, established by our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, whether by blood or spirit, can never be destroyed, then naturally, Saturday of the Souls will be a much sought after church service.

Jesus Christ, "by death, trampling down upon death," destroyed the chains of Hades and thus released "those held in prison" (from the prayers of the Trisagion Service). Christ is Risen! So Death no longer has dominion over humanity hence our brothers and sisters merely repose awaiting the return of the Lord. Yet, even in their state of repose, they mysteriously are present with us, hearing our prayers to them and interceding with the Holy Ones of the Lord on our behalf. We, also, by natural inclination, yearn to ensure that our departed loved ones receive all the care and comfort in their state of repose that our Lord, as Immortal King, can provide them, so we offer our prayers on behalf of those we love.

The mark of an advanced and civilized society is one that does the same; for this we continue to pray.

**Let us always remember the sacrifices of those who died in armed conflict
in the service of our country. We thank our heroes for their service.**

May their memory be eternal.

