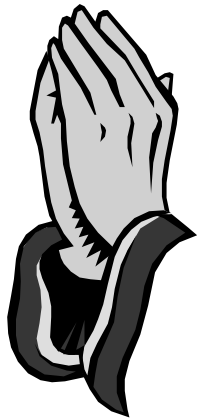


HEAVEN ON EARTH



The Agpeya *The Coptic Book of Hours*

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What is the Agpeya?

The word “Agpeya” derives from the Coptic word, ⲁⲓⲡⲉⲓⲁ (*ti agp*), which means “the hour.” Therefore, the Agpeya is the Book of Hours.

The Agpeya contains seven canonical hours of prayer, wherein we commemorate an event in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. Each hour contains psalms, a Gospel reading, and prayers relating to these events. In praying these seven hours, we remember David the Prophet who said, “Seven times a day I praise You because of your righteous judgments” (Ps. 119:164).

Every hour begins with the Lord’s Prayer, the Prayer of Thanksgiving, and Psalm 50. Then the psalms of each hour are chanted, followed by the Gospel reading and the Litanies (*Troparia*¹). These are followed by “Lord, have mercy,” chanted forty-one times representing the thirty-nine scourges of the Lord (2 Cor. 11:24), the spear in His side, and the crown of thorns on His head. “Holy, Holy, Holy”, the Lord’s Prayer, the Absolution, and the Conclusion of Every Hour end each hour of the Agpeya.

The Hours of the Agpeya

Following the practice common at the time of Christ, the day is computed from sunrise to sunset (John 11:9). The first hour corresponds to 7 a.m., the third hour to 9 a.m., the sixth hour to noon, the ninth hour to 3 p.m., the eleventh hour to 5 p.m. (sunset), and the twelfth hour to 6 p.m.

Each day spent in prayer with the Agpeya is a journey through the life of our Lord and His Church. Let us understand and contemplate on the theme of each hour:

1. **Prime** (1st hour): As the sun rises early in the morning, we are reminded of the coming of the True Light, Christ our God.

We are also reminded of the women who went to the Lord’s tomb very early Sunday morning. In praying the First Hour, we share with them in the good news, the joy, and the power of the Resurrection.

2. **Terce** (3rd hour): In this hour, we commemorate three significant events: a) Christ’s trial before Pontius Pilate, b) His ascension into the heavens, and c) the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. We pray that the grace of the Holy Spirit may cleanse our hearts and renew our lives.
3. **Sext** (6th hour): In this hour, we commemorate the passions and crucifixion of our Lord. We ask God to deliver our minds from the lusts of this world, to turn our thoughts to the remembrance of His commandments, and to make us the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13-14)
4. **None** (9th hour) – In this hour, we commemorate the life-giving death of Christ in the flesh upon the holy wood of the Cross. We ask the Lord to accept our repentance as he accepted the repentance of the thief, when we cry out saying, “Lord, remember us when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).
5. **Vespers** (11th hour) – At sunset, we remember the hour in which our Lord’s body was taken down from the cross. As the day comes to an end, we are also reminded of our own departure from this world and eternal life. Thus, the 11th hour is an hour of repentance, an hour of hope, and an hour of thanksgiving to God for “making us worthy to behold daylight until evening” (Absolution).

6. **Compline** (12th hour) – In the twelfth hour, we commemorate the burial of Christ. We remember the passing world and the final judgment. We become mindful of death and our imminent standing before God, asking forgiveness for our sins and His protection throughout the night.
7. **Midnight** – This hour commemorates the second coming of our Lord. This hour is divided into three watches corresponding to the three stages of Christ’s prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46). In this hour, we take heed of the Lord’s command to “watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming,” (Matt. 25:13).
8. **Veil** – In addition to the seven canonical hours, there is another prayer called the Office of the Veil. This hour is prayed by the monks, as well as read by bishops and priests as a means of examining the heart before they sleep in the evening.

Why use the Agpeya?

The question often arises, “Why should we use written prayers? Isn’t it enough to offer our own personal prayers?”

Written prayers and the Agpeya, especially, offer us completeness in our prayers. There are many types of prayers. There are prayers in which we give thanks, praise, and glory. There are prayers of repentance. There are prayers in which we ask for the intercession of the saints.

Left on our own without any guidance, we may only use some types of prayer and neglect others. For instance, in times of joy, we might only give thanks to God (or we may not give thanks at all), while forgetting to offer repentance. In times of distress, we might ask

God to help us, without giving Him thanks or praising His name.

The Agpeya, with its arrangement of psalms and prayers, allows us to express every type of prayer and emotion. Just choose any of the psalms of David and ask yourself, “Could I, even in my deepest and most sincere prayer, express myself as wonderfully as the psalmist?” We can only hope to match the beauty and intensity of the psalms.

Therefore, in order to benefit from using the Agpeya, we need to take the words off the page and put them into our hearts, making these prayers and psalms our own. This leads us to our next point.

How do we use the Agpeya?

- ❖ Prayer is not the goal, but a means to meet, unite, and develop a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❖ The Agpeya ought to be the first book opened and read in the morning. This will direct the whole day towards God and will encourage us to use the Agpeya in prayer several times a day.
- ❖ Praying the hours is a means of examining the heart and correcting its faults. Therefore, in following the order of the Agpeya, we need to purify our hearts constantly through repentance and in humility, to dwell in the truth, and to love all people. Thus, our order of prayer will be effective and fruitful.
- ❖ A few minutes spent preparing for prayer by examining the heart through contemplation, repentance, and prostration, helps us to enter into the spirit of prayer. Therefore, let us choose suitable times to pray and to prepare accordingly.

- ❖ The psalms are a rich food for and of the spirit. The words of the psalms are to be applied to our lives and made our own. They are to be prayed as our own words and not the sayings of others. Therefore, let us love them and enjoy reciting them frequently.
- ❖ When it comes to prayer, quality is more important than quantity. Let us try to understand the purpose of every word, letting each one touch our hearts, in order to experience the hidden and real meaning.
- ❖ We should each consult our spiritual father to guide us in the proper use of the Agpeya and give us our rule of prayer, according to what we can handle. Step by step, we can progress steadily in our life of prayer.
- ❖ With each word that proposes worship, it is good to kneel down or to at least bow our heads in reverence. Let us follow the words of the Agpeya with our physical movements, which will allow us to better ingest the words of prayer.
- ❖ We should assign a time for personal prayers, in which we can express in our own words our desire and burning love toward God.
- ❖ Upon completing our prayers, we can spend a few moments in silence and contemplation, absorbing the words of our dialogue with the Savior. Then, we can continue to live according to God’s will and commandments.

1 *Troparia*, the plural of *Troparion*, derives from *Tropus* in Latin or *Tropos* in Greek and means a phrase or verse added as an embellishment or interpolation to the sung parts of the liturgy.