

The Little Hours:

An Analysis and Evaluation of the Restored Byzantine Rite

According to the Tradition of the New Skete Monastic Community

Based on the Text of *A Book of Prayers* from 1967, 1976, and 1988

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Eastern Liturgies

Spring Semester 2003

University of Notre Dame

In an effort to “select and choose the best from the vast storehouse of Byzantine liturgical prose and poetry,”¹ the monastic community of New Skete has created a reformed Byzantine rite. According to Brother Stavros of the community, contemporary conditions have “forced us to order and arrange our liturgical prayer to strengthen and nourish us as a *working* community.”² One may glean a great deal about the liturgical life of this community and thus their reformed Byzantine rite from their liturgical books published in 1967, 1976 and 1988. During these two decades it is clear that the community continued to reshape the liturgy for their “specific community in a particular situation – historical, canonical, and economic, and even geographical – all of which have some bearing on its formulation.”³ No doubt, the reformed liturgy has influenced the community as well, as they experience the daily prayer in different fashions than before.

Of particular import are the little hours – known in the Latin rite as prime, terce, sext and none. There is a great deal of similarity between these first, third, sixth and ninth hours. One can discern much about how they have been reformed, or rather restored, so as to lessen the burden of services while not in any way diminishing the spiritual effects of the prayer. These hours are traditionally celebrated every third hour between sunrise and mid-afternoon, coming between Orthros (Matins) and Vespers. For a working monastic community, such as that of New Skete, these prayers during the day, which have their historical origin in the unceasing prayers of the fifth century Byzantine *Akoimatoi*, the little hours are highly problematic. Thus they are a particularly apt locus for reform.

¹ Stavros. “The Restored Office at New Skete” in *Gleanings* 1. 1973. Pg. 34.

² Stavros, pg. 35.

³ Stavros, pg. 39.

The structure of the liturgical elements in the celebration of the little hours in 1967 and 1976 did not change substantially and reflect the traditional Byzantine liturgical praxis. For all of the four little hours, both the 1967 and 1976 versions consist of the following elements:

The customary beginning:

Blessed be God...

Glory be to you...

O heavenly king: Comforter...

Holy God, Holy mighty One... (with doxology)

Trisagion

3-fold Kyrie (with doxology)

Our Father

12-fold Kyrie (with doxology)

Invitation (Come, let us adore...)

Psalmody (with concluding doxology)

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia...

3-fold Kyrie (with doxology)

Troparion (bracketed by doxology)

Theotokion

Scripture canticle

Trisagion

Our Father

Kondakion

Prayer to Theotokos (O purest Theotokos...)

40-fold Kyrie

Prayer of the Hours

3-fold Kyrie (with doxology)

Prayer to Theotokos (You are more honorable...)

Conclusion:

Bless us, Father...

Collect

(In Lent, the Prayer of St. Ephrem)

12-fold Kyrie

Prayer to person of the Trinity (e.g., O, Christ, true light... or O God and Master!)

Some small changes were made to conclusion of the hours between 1967 and 1976.

While the little apolysis followed the prayer to a person of the Trinity, for the first, third and ninth hours in 1967, only the first hour has retained the recitation of the little apolysis

in the 1976 publication. The little apolysis consists of the priest reciting “Glory to you, Christ-God, our hope: glory to you,” followed by a doxology sung by the choir, a three-fold Kyrie and a fixed concluding prayer by the priest. At the sixth hour, the Typica are prescribed to be sung following the prayer to a person of the Trinity by the 1967 publication, when given by the typicon. If there are no Typica to be sung, the service concludes with same little apolysis.

The wording of several of the prayers provided for has been changed. For example, in 1967 St. Basil’s Prayer to God the Father states, “By his precious Cross, you tore up the handwriting of our sins and triumphed over the leaders of darkness and their allies. O Friend of mankind, though we are sinners, we offer you our prayers of gratitude and entreaty.” While in 1976 the same text reads, “By his holy cross, you cancelled the debt that our sins had written against us, and thus won your victory over the powers of darkness and all their allies. O Lord, friend of mankind! Though we have sinned, accept our prayers of gratitude and entreaty.” While the modifications are subtle, they show an attempt to render the prayers of the little hours into more intelligible English, suitable not only for those who will pray the prayer many times throughout their life, but for visitors who might be participating in the liturgy.

Lastly, some slight differences between 1967 and 1976 are to be found during the Lenten celebration of the little hours. The 1976 publication includes troparia and the proper tone for their incantation in place of the kondakion, both during Lent and when no special kondakion is prescribed. This may have been the case in 1967, however the text does not indicate it in the way in which it appears in the 1976 edition. Additionally, the 1976 edition prescribes for all of the little hours the Prayer of Saint Ephrem be recited

twice, followed by a Trisagion, Our Father and twelve-fold Kyrie. No reference to this prayer is made in the 1967 edition.

The more substantial changes in the little hours were made between 1976 and 1988 and thus appear in the latter publication. The Introduction to the *Book of Prayer* states, “The Lenten form of the traditional little hours, with certain simplifications, has been retained for that period of the year, though prime has been suppressed as a doublet of matins. On ordinary days, we have inaugurated a new midday office patterned on the Constantinopolitan office called *tritoektê* or *trithektê*, which we term *tersext*. We have instituted this single midday office for the ordinary course of the year because, once again, of our extensive and unavoidable involvement in the business world.”⁴ For the most part, the following changes may be observed in the structure of the elements:

- openings and closings of the hours have been simplified and an opening and closing collect has been introduced for each of the hours.
- psalmody is reduced from the three psalms previously prescribed, to one antiphon of the psalter which is chanted.
- removal of the 40-fold Kyrie.

There is a slight variation between *tersext* and the third, sixth, and ninth hours. *Tersext*, as cited above, is based on the Constantinopolitan office called *tritoektê* or *trithektê*. This midday office is based on one of the Cathedral offices of Hagia Sophia, rather than a monastic office, and thus demonstrates a reduction in the prolific hymnody characteristic of the monastic hours. It is worth noting that “the Cathedral Office had four services for the daily cycle: Vespers, Pannychis, Orthros and Trithekte. The

⁴ “Introduction” to *A Book of Prayers*, 1988. Pg. xxxvii.

structure, order and number of services differed from the Monastic Office. While elaborate and imposing, the Cathedral Office lacked the large body of hymnody contained in the revised Monastic Office. By comparison it had become the more staid of the two. For this and other reasons, it finally fell into disuse. However... various elements of the Cathedral Office had already passed into the monastic Typikon.”⁵ Despite coming from a different tradition, the elements of the three remaining little hours and tersext show a remarkable similarity. The following chart of the 1988 little hours (provided in the text under the title of the third hour) and tersext, will not only show where they differ from each other, but will also provide an outline for examining the reformed little hours.

Tersext	Third Hour
Opening collect (“By the prayers...”)	Opening collect (“By the prayers...”)
“Holy is God, holy and mighty...”	“Holy is God, holy and mighty...”
3-fold Kyrie	3-fold Kyrie
Our Father	Our Father
Invitation (“Come, let us worship...”)	Invitation (“Come, let us worship...”)
One antiphon of the psalter is chanted, concluded with a doxology	One antiphon of the psalter is chanted, concluded with a doxology
“Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia...”	“Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia...”
Troparion <i>of the day</i> with doxology	<i>Fixed</i> Troparion with doxology
Theotokion	Theotokion
	<i>Scriptural canticle</i> (Ps 68(67):7-8a,c)
“Holy God, holy mighty, holy immortal...”	“Holy God, holy mighty, holy immortal...” <i>with doxology</i>
Trisagion	Trisagion
3-fold Kyrie and doxology	3-fold Kyrie and doxology
Our Father	Our Father
<i>Kondakion of the day</i>	<i>Fixed Troparia</i>
<i>Intercessions</i>	
Prayer to Theotokos (“How truly right...”)	Prayer to Theotokos (“O purest Theotokos!”)
	<i>Prayer of Saint Ephrem</i>
Closing collect	Closing collect

⁵ Alkiviadis Calivas. “The Origins of Pascha and Great Week” at <http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article8123.asp>

As can be seen, the office of tersext is slightly shorter than the other little hours. As tersext is the only one of the hours regularly celebrated in community by all the members, it is to be expected that it be shorter than the other hours. There are, however, in addition to the standard tersext (in the chart above) prescribed for Sundays, Feasts, and Weekdays throughout the year, additional specific tersext settings given for Holy and Great Thursday, Holy and Great Friday, Pascha and the Week of Light, Christmas Eve, and Theophany Eve. These specific orders of tersext add a great deal more antiphonal psalmody, include prayers between each of the antiphons, several additional troparia, and a prater of inclination.

The third, sixth and ninth hours are celebrated only during Great Lent and Holy Week, and thus the troparia prescribed for them are the same as the troparia for the Lent in the 1976 edition. The third, sixth and ninth hours include fixed troparia as well as a scriptural canticle that are not found in the order of tersext. The fixed troparion is listed in the text, thus an additional book or thumbing through a large number of sections of the book of hours is not necessary. The intercessions from the order of tersext are not found in the orders of the third, sixth and ninth hours. This is to be expected, as tersext is done in community on a regular basis, where one would expect the intentions of the community of prayer to be voiced. During Lent, which is the only time when the third, sixth and ninth hours are prayed in the 1988 edition, the Prayer of Saint Ephrem is said. Recall that this prayer was likewise prescribed for Lent in the 1976 edition, but included multiple recitations of the prayer, as well as several flourishes appended to the prayer. In

the 1988 edition, it is only the prayer that is heard, emphasizing the penitential nature of the prayer commensurate with the penitential nature of Lent.

A great many changes in the texts used in the 1988 edition have been made from the 1976 edition. In the Introduction to the Book of Prayers, it is noted that “we believe literal translations are not appropriate for liturgical celebrations, we have re-examined all our previous works and revised them, once again, in accord with the original, but the emphasis always on the thought content rather than on the word itself.”⁶ Thus one expects to find a large number of freer translations, rendering the stylistic beauty that no doubt was present the original Greek, in modern American English. For example, the prayer following the theotokion of the sixth hour in the 1976 edition reads, “Let your mercy quickly overtake us, Lord, for poverty of spirit has brought us to our knees. Glorify you name by helping us, O Saviour; rescue us and cleanse us of our sins, for your name’s sake.” For comparison, the 1988 edition reads, “May your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need! Help us, O God of our salvation! For the glory of your name, rescue us! Forgive us our sins, for your name’s sake!”

These stylistic changes, trimming of the liturgical flourishes, and reduction in the overall quantity of material prayed in the little hours of the New Skete restored divine office is consonant with advances in the historical study of Byzantine liturgy as well as developments in our liturgical understanding. The historical work of Mateos, Taft, Arranz, Parenti and others has made a wealth of manuscript evidence available that was not known more than half a century ago. This has allowed those of the New Skete community and others to have fresh looks at older redactions of the Byzantine rite. This has further been responsible for a historicized perspective; namely, these studies are

⁶ “Introduction” to *A Book of Prayers*, 1988. Pg. xxvii.

helpful not only for the understanding of how Byzantine liturgy developed, but that Byzantine liturgy has developed at all. The monks of New Skete have had recourse to this excellent scholarship and have made use of it in their restored divine office.

Historical evidence is not the only criteria by which the New Skete community judged and reformed their liturgical practices. They have been careful to not simply use historical practices, but to judge them in light of their contemporary pastoral needs. Therefore, they pay attention to the usefulness of the liturgical practices in achieving their desired ends of unifying and renewing the community. As a working community, New Skete is not able to pray the hours ceaselessly, as had been done in the past, but must pray the hours that sustain their community. These practical pastoral concerns balanced the historical data to which they had access.

Additionally, the reformation of the Byzantine liturgy by the New Skete community was conditioned by criteria of aesthetics; Byzantine liturgy is indeed beautiful, but too many flourishes can not only obscure the meanings of the central elements of the hours, but rob the liturgy of noble simplicity. The New Skete community has been keenly aware of the need to make the liturgy, both in its texts and its rituals aesthetically pleasing. This has resulted in translations of the Greek that are eloquent when rendered in English, rites that are simple and effective at communicating the message, and appealing to those who both participate in and witness the celebration of the divine office.

Last, but certainly of no less importance in the criteria the community of New Skete developed for judging their reform of the Byzantine rite has been their experience as a community practicing these rites. As a community that daily lives in and are steeped in

the divine office, the monks of New Skete are aware of what elements of the liturgy provide the spiritual nourishment they seek from the liturgy. This reflects an understanding of liturgy that is not individually focused, but nonetheless sees the assembly as a crucial element of the liturgical celebration. While the liturgy is to bring the community in touch with the transcendent, it cannot do so the denigration of bringing the community in touch with the imminent: themselves.

In their own words, the community of New Skete says of their restored office in the Introduction to *A Book of Prayers*:

The result of all this study and experience, therefore, is a schema of the canonical hours which is both a *reform* and a *restoration* and, precisely because it is such, it is also a *renewal*. It is a restoration because it resurrects certain concepts, ideas, and ideals, certain characteristics and practices, certain usages of the parent traditions of Constantinople and Jerusalem. It is a reform in that it attempts to eliminate certain present usages of baroque character, to remove or adjust certain elements or uses obscuring the themes and purposes of each hour, to eliminate excesses in texts and ceremonies, and to rearrange other elements in favor of a more pastorally simple, integrated, and manageable form. It is a renewal because it endeavors to bring back what has been lost—the power to give life—by realizing the offices in the way that they were originally intended to be: suitable, appropriate, and relevant to the celebration at hand. Such offices give us new life; they *renew* us.

The little hours of the 1988 edition from the community of New Skete exemplify these characteristics. The community has relied on historical evidence to restore the Cathedral office of Trithekte, they have cut-away extraneous material that clouded the meanings of the central texts, and they have reduced the celebration of the little hours in accordance with their pastoral needs. The little hours have been reformed, restored and allowed to renew the community of New Skete as a Byzantine, Orthodox monastic community in a contemporary American milieu.