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Hank Voss

Taylor University, hank_voss@taylor.edu

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The Use of Spiritual Classics as a Resource for the Ongoing Formation of Congregational Leaders with Special Reference to the Middle East

It has always therefore been one of my main endeavors as a teacher to persuade the young that firsthand knowledge is not only more worth acquiring than second-hand knowledge, but is usually much easier and more delightful to acquire. . . . It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones.

C. S. Lewis, 1944

You should read twenty-five percent of your books from the first 1,500 years of church history, twenty-five percent from the last 500 years, twenty-five percent from the last 100 years, and twenty-five percent from recent years.

Rick Warren, 2010

I. LEARNING FROM LEADERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Every pastor needs friends; friends who are similar, and perhaps even more importantly, friends who are different. Christians in the middle-east are well aware of this need—Christians in North-America less so. Middle Eastern believers are leading the world when it comes to making friends with those different. Consider the history of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS). When JETS was officially recognized by Jordan’s Ministry of Culture in 1995 its founding board of trustees included representatives from all five evangelical churches present in the Kingdom of Jordan.¹ One could also look at the Middle Eastern Council of Churches (MECC) which has brought together Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox churches,

¹ “JETS History,” *Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary* (blog), January 20, 2019, <http://www.jets.edu>.

and seven branches of the Roman Catholic Church in the most inclusive ecumenical body in the world.²

Middle Eastern believers have not only developed friendships within the larger community that confesses Jesus as Lord, but also with those who follow different faiths. For thousands of years they have listened and reasoned with members of other faiths (e.g. Jews and Druze, Samaritans and Muslims).³ Unlike the vast majority of believers in Europe and North America, Middle Eastern believers have existed outside of “Christendom” for some 1,700 of their 2,000 year history (see Figure 1).⁴ They have often suffered significantly for their faithfulness; indeed suffering is the rule rather than the exception for Christians in the Middle East.⁵

Table 1: Christendom and the Middle East

Period	Time
Pre-Christendom	c. 30 – 325 AD (approx. 300 years)
Christendom	c. 325–638 (approx. 300 years)
“Post-Christendom”	c.638- Present (approx. 1,400 years)

² Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 44.

³ John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Frederic Hathaway Chase, vol. 37, FC (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958); Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus, First Apologist to the Muslims: The Trinity and Christian Apologetics in the Early Islamic Period* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2016); Justin Martyr, *Saint Justin Martyr: The First Apology, The Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, The Monarchy; or the Rule of God*, FC, v. 6 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1948); Fouad Elias Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997).

⁴ The period of the Crusader kingdoms could be included in a “post-Christendom” category from the perspective of many Middle Eastern churches. For more on Christendom within the Western context, see Hank Voss, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic, and Contextual Perspective*, Princeton Theological Monographs (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

⁵ See for example the documentation collected by Bat Yeor, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude: Seventh-Twentieth Century* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson, 1996).

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin helped awaken many churches in North America and Europe to their increasingly post-Christendom setting.⁶ Yet this is a setting in which Middle Eastern believers have found themselves for well over a millennium. Perhaps the churches of the East have valuable lessons for the churches in the West? Perhaps believers who have lived for generations in a post-Christendom context can provide insights for those just entering into this experience? In addressing the needs of global theological education, Newbigin identified three types of questions that need to be asked.

1. Questions about structure—sociological questions.
2. Questions about method—pedagogical questions.
3. Questions about content—theological questions.⁷

This paper suggests that answers to the second and third kinds of questions—those of a pedagogical and theological nature—may be discovered through an exercise in “retrieval theology” especially focused on the churches of the Middle East. It explores how congregational leaders working among the poor in North America might appropriate insights from Middle Eastern believers in order to address new challenges arising in their ministry contexts.⁸ We may also discover that treasures from the ancient Middle Eastern church prove a boon to her 21st century heirs.

⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); George R. Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3–25; Voss, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei*, 181–207.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, “Theological Education in a World Perspective,” in *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*, ed. Harvie M. Conn and Samuel F. Rowen (Farmington, MI: Associates of Urbanus, 1984), 5.

⁸ Hank Voss, “The Holy Spirit, the Missio Dei, and the Mission of Every Believer in a North American Context” (Paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 14, 2018).

II. HOW DO CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS THRIVE IN CHALLENGING MINISTRY CONTEXTS?

In February of 2018 the Lilly Foundation (Indianapolis, IN) put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) addressing needs faced by pastors serving churches in challenging ministry contexts.⁹ In October of last year the foundation awarded close to 70 million dollars to seventy-eight organizations of which Taylor University was one.¹⁰ At Taylor the initiative is entitled the “Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry Project” (SRTM), and it will take place over the next five years (2019–2023).¹¹ The project will serve some 800 pastors and congregational leaders through some 80 cohorts between 2020 and 2023. The cohorts will consist of congregational leaders serving among the urban poor, the incarcerated, and the rural poor. Taylor is partnering with The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) and various other churches and ministries who serve congregations in these three contexts.

The SRTM project uses a two prong strategy to serve leaders. One might imagine an electrical plug with both a positive and negative prong. Both prongs are necessary for the power to flow through the initiative into the lives of leaders serving among the poor. Both prongs are actions aimed at strengthening congregational leaders. One prong consists of *developing locale based friendships*. The other of *discovering the rich resources in the church’s “Great Tradition.”* In short, the SRTM Project centers on two ideas: Friendship and Resourcement. Before discussing how these two ideas might be relevant for those engaged in theological

⁹ No Author, “Thriving in Ministry Initiative Request for Proposals 2018” (Lilly Foundation, 2018), <http://lillyendowment.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/lilly-endowment-thriving-in-ministry-initiative-2018-request-for-proposals.pdf>.

¹⁰ Judith Cebula, “Lilly Endowment Makes Grants to Help Pastors Thrive in Congregational Leadership,” Press Release (Indianapolis, IN: Lilly Foundation, October 1, 2018), <http://lillyendowment.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/thriving-release-posted-oct2018.pdf>.

¹¹ Hank Voss, “Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry Project 2018: A Proposal for the Lilly Foundation’s Thriving in Ministry Initiative,” Proposal (Upland, IN: Taylor University, June 1, 2018).

education in the Middle East, we will briefly explore the ideas of ministerial friendship and Resourcement.

III. DEVELOPING LOCALE BASED FRIENDSHIPS

Congregational leaders must develop friendships rooted in locale-based networks if they desire to flourish in long-term ministry.¹² This is not a new insight, Ambrose (d. 397) wrote what may be the first guide for pastors at the end of the fourth century (*On the Clergy*). He devotes his final chapter to the important topic of friendship, noting, “A faithful friend is the medicine of life and the grace of immortality” (*On the Clergy* 3.22). Amrbose’s mentee, the Middle Eastern theologian, Augustine, learned this lesson well and made friendship a central priority in his pastoral ministry.¹³ John Cassian (d. 435), who wrote one of the most significant spiritual classics in the history of the church, includes a chapter on friendship in his *Conferences*. Benedict required his communities of disciples to read through *Conferences* every year, which meant it became one of the most well-read spiritual classics for over 1,000 years.¹⁴

Besides teaching the importance of friendship, the church fathers also demonstrated it with the way they lived their lives. A practical example of this can be seen in the thousands of letters of personal friendship that survived into the present era. Of the 378 letters from Basil the Great (d. 379) extant today, over 75 are placed in the category of “Letters of Friendship” by

¹² Isaac Voss, “Tell Me Your Story: Evaluating and Comparing Group Agency in Two African American Congregations in South Los Angeles” (Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017); Penny Long Marler, “A Study of the Effects of Participation in SPE Pastoral Leader Peer Groups” (Austin Presbyterian Seminary, 2010), www.chalicepress.com/assets/pdfs/SPEFinalSurveyReport.pdf; Don L. Davis, *The SIAFU Network Guidebook: Standing Together for Christ in the City* (TUMI, 2013).

¹³ Gilbert Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics*, Updated Edition (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Klaus Issler and James Houston, *Wasting Time With God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship With God* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2001).

¹⁴ J. William Harmless, “Monasticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 496.

Hubertus Drobner.¹⁵ Letters from many other Church Fathers could be listed as well (Augustine, Jerome, etc.).

The SRTM project will encourage the development of friendship within two locales, those of geography and those of theology. Church planters working with the urban poor in North America have found significant help through “Urban Church Associations,” locale based networks of church plants in a given geographic area. These UCAs take responsibility for their region and work together sharing resources, fellowship, and kingdom mission.¹⁶ Secondly, SRTM encourages the development of friendship in concentric theological circles. Thus it encourages congregational leaders to invest time in building relationships with other leaders from their own family of churches, with those within the wider evangelical tradition,¹⁷ and from those within the great ecumenical Nicene faith (325/381).¹⁸

IV. DISCOVERING THE GREAT TRADITION WITH ANCIENT FRIENDS

Great leaders within the Christian tradition build and adapt the wisdom of previous generations. It is vital for gifted congregational leaders serving among the poor to have access to teachers from the universal (e.g. Nicene) church. Evangelicals have tended to emphasize both Scripture and missions, but this does not mean they need neglect the great teachers of the

¹⁵ Hubertus Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 274.

¹⁶ Hank Voss, “World Impact and the Urban Church Association: Transforming Communities Together” (March 7, 2015).

¹⁷ W. David Buschart, *Exploring Protestant Traditions: An Invitation to Theological Hospitality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

¹⁸ Bradley Nassif et al., *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, ed. James J. Stamoolis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Charles W Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word Pub., 1995).

church.¹⁹ Consider Taylor University’s history which is deeply connected to a group of itinerant Methodist pastors serving poor rural congregations. Many of these pastors were ordained after reading a collection of thirty “spiritual classics” abridged and edited by John Wesley.²⁰ Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker evangelist and English prison reformer, placed libraries of spiritual classics in prisons all across England as an important part of her strategy to bring transformation to England’s broken prison system.²¹ More recently, evangelical pastors like A.W. Tozer (Christian Missionary Alliance), whose origins in poverty only allowed him to complete 5th grade, have discovered that their best teachers were “spiritual classics.”²²

North American evangelicals need another Fry, another Wesley, another Tozer. How can congregational leaders produce such leaders, especially from those serving congregations in urban and rural poor evangelical churches? Resources to answer this question can be found via a “renewal through retrieval,” a *resourcement* of pastoral leaders along the lines championed by Yves Congar in the Roman Catholic tradition nearly a century ago²³ (Allen 15; D’Ambrosio). The SRTM Project contributes to this *resourcement* by providing spiritual classics which have proven faithful and fruitful over centuries directly to pastors serving among the poor.

¹⁹ Uche Anizor, Rob Price, and Hank Voss, *Evangelical Theology*, Doing Theology Series (London: T&T Clark, 2019); Mark Noll, “What Is ‘Evangelical,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 19–32.

²⁰ James M. Houston, “Engaging Classic Literature: Genre, Use, Value,” in *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics: A Guide for Evangelicals*, ed. Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 109.

²¹ Elizabeth Gurney Fry, Katharine Fry, and Rachel Elizabeth Cresswell, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry, with Extracts from Her Journal and Letters*. (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1848).

²² Don L. Davis and Hank Voss, eds., *The Evangelical Handbook: A Guide to the A, B, C’s of Equipping Urban Church Planters* (Wichita, KS: TUMI Press, 2015), 239–42.

²³ Michael Allen, *Sanctification*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 15; Marcellino D’Ambrosio, “Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition,” *Communio* 18 (1991); W. David Buschart and Kend D. Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Recieving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

A. Making Ancient Friends with Spiritual Classics

Many congregational leaders, whether serving in a North American or a Middle Eastern context, articulate feelings of isolation and loneliness. A gift to those who believe in the “communion of saints,” that “great cloud of witnesses” described by the author of Hebrews, is that believers can begin friendships with those who have already passed through the veil and entered the presence of Christ. A. W. Tozer provides this type of example for us with his thirty-five “teachers.” I am not promoting occultist communication with the dead, but rather the listening and “friendship” that can grow from reading, reflecting, and imagining the stories, teachings, and prayers of those saints who have gone before us. An excellent way to begin these kinds of friendships is with a reading of some of the spiritual classics.

1. What is a “Spiritual Classic”?

Spiritual classics are those works which have proven fruitful throughout many generations and across dozens of diverse cultures.²⁴ By “spiritual classic,” I mean a writing that (1) is clearly attributable to a follower of the Lord, (2) focuses on a biblical understanding of sanctification, and (3) a multitude of voices across Church history attest to its value for Christian living.²⁵

²⁴ Cynthia Jarvis, “The Role of Theological Masters in The Formation of the Pastor Theologian,” in *The Power to Comprehend with All the Saints: The Formation and Practice of a Pastor Theologian*, ed. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Cynthia A. Jarvis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 82–98; Cynthia Jarvis, “Reading as Habitus: On the Formative Practice of Reading Theology Today,” in *The Power to Comprehend with All the Saints: The Formation and Practice of a Pastor Theologian*, ed. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Cynthia A. Jarvis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 82–98; Paul Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 32–47; Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

²⁵ Adapted from Steve Porter, “Why Should We Read Spiritual Classics?,” in *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics: A Guide for Evangelicals*, ed. Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 15–30.

The SRTM project aims to equip some eight hundred congregational leaders serving among the poor with the opportunity to explore some sixteen spiritual classics from within a local community of ministerial friendships. This library of spiritual classics will be accompanied by training in how to read, discuss and digest these works. Ministerial friendships will be developed through intentional conversations at national conferences combined with locale-based, mentor-led cohorts (peer groups).

Each volume of the *Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics Series* will include a brand new introduction, an updated and contemporary English version of the original with explanatory notes, and an appendix with recommendations on further resources for exploration. Each volume will also include illustrations commissioned for that particular text as suggested by the volume’s editor. A model for the proposed illustrations can be found in the illustrations provided by Ron Hill in the Westminster John Knox “Armchair Theologian” series.²⁶

In conclusion it may be helpful to provide a few examples of how spiritual classics have been used to develop congregational leaders during the last 2,000 years. Table 2 below lists the spiritual classic, the person influenced and a brief comment on the role the spiritual classic played in the pastor’s life.

#	Active	Traditional Title	Author	Influenced	Notes
1	373	<i>Life of Antony</i>	Athanasius	Augustine	Confessions (6.6.15)
2	407	<i>Works</i>	Chrysostom	John Calvin	Cites 107 times, prepares a "spiritual classic" edition
3	435	<i>Conferences</i>	Cassian	St. Benedict.	Read annually by Benedictines
4	649	<i>The Ladder of Divine Ascent</i>	John Climacus	Orthodox Monks	All Orthodox Monks required to read annually

²⁶ John R. Franke, *Barth for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox, 2006). Tim Ladwig, Artist in Residence at TUMI (Wichita, KS), has tentatively agreed to serve as series artist and Dr. Fred Sanders (Biola University) as artistic theological consultant.

5	1688	Pilgrim's Progress	John Bunyan	Charles Spurgeon	Read 100 times.
6	1691	Life of God in the Soul of Man	Henry Scougal	John Whitfield	Led to his conversion
7	1791	John Wesley's Library of Spiritual Classics	Luther, Edwards, Etc.	Methodist Movement	Transformed England and North America
8	1807	Letters of John Newton	John Newton	Tim Keller	Most gifted pastoral insight I have ever seen.
9	1845	Elizabeth Fry's Library of Spiritual Classics	Bunyan, etc.	All England	Transformed England's Prison System
10	1963	Tozer's Spiritual Classics	Brother Lawrence, etc.	A. W. Tozer	Tozer's 35 Teachers

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR JETS

- A. Questions? Comments? Concerns?

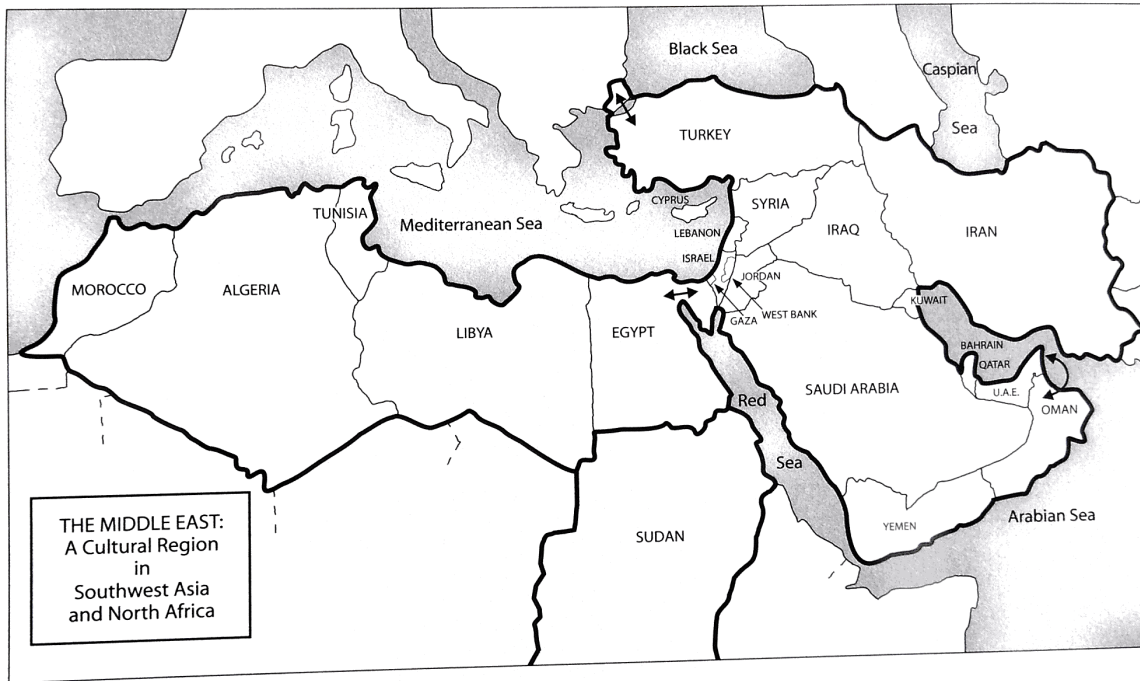
- B. What Spiritual Classics have shaped your walk with God?

- C. What Spiritual Classics might be helpful for students at JETS?

- D. What Spiritual Classics from the Middle East might be especially helpful for students serving among the urban/rural poor? For those serving among the incarcerated?

Rev. Dr. Hank Voss serves as Assistant Professor of Christian Ministry, Taylor University (www.taylor.edu) and as Senior National Staff with The Urban Ministry Institute (www.tumi.org). He previously served as the National Director of Church Planting for World Impact and as Dean of The Urban Ministry Institute of Los Angeles. He is married with four children ages 16, 15, 13, and 11).

VI. APPENDIX 1: THE “MIDDLE EAST” (BAILEY AND BAILEY, 2003, PG. X111)



VII. APPENDIX 2: SELECT SPIRITUAL CLASSICS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

#	Active	Traditional Title	Author	Cultural Setting	Notes
1	0	<i>Apocrypha as a Spiritual Classic</i>	Many	ME	
2	100	<i>Didache</i>	Anonymous	ME	See Holmes
3	100	<i>Odes of Solomon</i>	Anonymous	ME	See Drobner
4	100	<i>Apostolic Fathers</i>	ed, Holmes	ME	See Holmes
5	110	<i>Letters of Ignatius of Antioch</i>	Ignatius of Antioch	ME	See Holmes
6	135	<i>Letters of Polcarp of Smyrna</i>	Polycarp of Smyrna	ME	See Holmes
7	140	<i>Shepherd of Hermas</i>	Anonymous	ME	See Holmes
8	165	<i>Apology and Dialogue</i>	Justin Martyr	ME	See Drobner
9	180	<i>Passover Sermon</i>	Melito of Sardis	ME	See Drobner
10	200	<i>On the Apostolic Preaching</i>	Irenaeus of Lyons	ME	See Drobner

11	215	<i>Christ the Teacher</i>	Clement of Alexandria	ME	See Drobner
12	254	<i>Spiritual Theology (Scripture and Prayer)</i>	Origen	ME	See Drobner
13	300	<i>The Desert Fathers</i>	ed. Waddell	ME	See Drobner
14	339	<i>Church History</i>	Eusebius	ME	See Drobner
15	345	<i>Instructions for Disciples</i>	Aphraates	ME	See Drobner
16	347	<i>Life Together (Rule of Life)</i>	Pachomius	ME	See Drobner
17	373	<i>Ephrem the Syrian--Hymns</i>	Ephrem the Syrian	ME	See Drobner
18	373	<i>On the Incarnation</i>	Athanasius	ME	See Drobner
19	379	<i>The Holy Spirit</i>	Basil the Great	ME	See Drobner
20	379	<i>Life Together (Rule of Life)</i>	Basil the Great	ME	See Drobner
21	381	<i>Instruction for New Believers</i>	Cyril of Jerusalem	ME	See Drobner
22	390	<i>Letters, Poems, and Sermons</i>	Gregory of Nazianzus	ME	See Drobner
23	394	<i>Life of Moses</i>	Gregory of Nyssa	ME	See Drobner
24	394	<i>Life of Macrina</i>	Gregory of Nyssa	ME	See Drobner
25	394	<i>Basic Christianity</i>	Gregory of Nyssa	ME	See Drobner
26	399	<i>A Practical Guide for Prayer</i>	Evagrius Ponticus	ME	See Drobner
27	399	<i>Spiritual Warfare</i>	Evagrius Ponticus	ME	See Drobner
28	407	<i>Sermons on Social Justice</i>	Chrysostom	ME	See Drobner
29	407	<i>On Marriage and Family Life</i>	Chrysostom	ME	See Drobner
30	419	<i>Letters and Lessons</i>	Jerome	ME	See Drobner
31	430	<i>On Christian Instruction</i>	Augustine	ME/Afr	See Drobner
32	430	<i>Confessions</i>	Augustine	ME/Afr	See Drobner
33	435	<i>Conferences</i>	Cassian	ME	See Drobner
34	466	<i>Sermons and Letters</i>	Shenoute of Atripe	ME	See Drobner
35	649	<i>The Ladder of Divine Ascent</i>	John Climacus	ME	See Drobner
36	662	<i>Maximus the Confessor</i>	Maximus the Confessor	ME	See Drobner
37	750	<i>Spiritual Theology</i>	John of Damascus	ME	See Drobner