
COURSE SYLLABUS

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COURSE: THE PATRISTIC CHURCH *to* 800 AD,

From the Apostolic Age to the Rise of Charlemagne (CH 517)

SEMESTER: Spring, 2026

INSTRUCTOR: Rev. Luke Dysinger, OSB, MD, DPhil. Email: ldysinger@stjohnsem.edu

Course websites: : <http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu> [alt: <http://ldysinger.com>]

YEAR: Theology 1

CREDITS: 3

TIMES: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:10-11:00 am in Classroom 1.

1. COURSE FORMAT:

This course will combine lecture and class discussion. In order to maximize the effectiveness of lectures in our culturally diverse student population, representing a wide range of different linguistic experience and ability, all audio-visual materials presented in lectures will also be available through the course website or in the seminary library.

2. COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will introduce the history, theology, and spirituality of the Christian Church from the death of the apostles to 800 AD. This course will provide an overview of both the theological thought of the Fathers of the Church (“patristics” in the strict sense) and their life and writings (“patrology”). The rich ethnic and cultural diversity of Christian thought during this period will be highlighted through study of primary sources from the Jewish, Roman, Greek, Celtic, Anglo-European, Slavic, Middle-Eastern (Syriac), and Egyptian (Coptic) traditions. In order to profit from the cultural and ethnic diversity of the student body, students are encouraged to bring to classroom discussion the early and medieval origins of their cultural traditions: including, for example, the theological, liturgical, and spiritual emphases that distinguish Western Catholicism from Eastern traditions such as the Maronite, Chaldean, Melchite, Malabar, and Ruthenian churches.

3. COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES *and* BENCHMARK

- 3.1. During each class selected primary and secondary texts will be studied and discussed. A large proportion of the primary texts will be taken from the Office of Readings. In this way students’ ongoing prayerful study of these texts in the liturgy will provide a deepening re-acquaintance with late patristic and medieval sources of Christian spirituality and doctrine.
- 3.2. In written essays and oral presentations students will cite, explain, and pastorally apply biblical and Catholic magisterial texts and other relevant primary sources that illustrate the development of Catholic doctrine and practice in the following areas:
 - (1) saints and martyrs as intercessors and models; (2) Christian ministries and the sacrament of orders; (3) classical philosophy in the service of Christian theology; (4) controversies in trinitarian theology and christology; (5) ascetical communities and practices; (6) developing liturgy and personal piety; (7) papal authority and primacy; (8) the relationship between Christianity and early Islam; (9) the use of images in Christian piety and worship.
- 3.3. Benchmark for course learning objective: At least 80% of students will receive a grade of “B” or higher in written essays demonstrating their ability to provide appropriate, comprehensible responses to essay questions concerning the subjects listed in §3.2.

4. ASSESSMENT (Course Learning Objective Measures)

- 4.1. The midterm and final examinations will consist of three “take-home” essay questions illustrating the themes in §3.2. The questions will be made available on the day scheduled for the exam, and are due one week later. The exam must be typed, double-spaced, and submitted electronically in doc, docx, or pdf format as an email attachment. Active participation in class discussions is essential, and will figure into the final evaluation.
- 4.2. Research will be undertaken using primary sources studied in class or cited in the bibliography below. Possible topics for a paper or Powerpoint/Webpage-based presentation include: (1) any historical, spiritual or theological subject raised during the first eight hundred years of Christian history, or (2) a comparison of any theme in two or more Christian writers of this period. The goal of the research is to demonstrate familiarity with Christian primary sources. The paper or presentation will be due on or before Tuesday, April 21, 2026.
 - 4.2.1. The student will write a research paper at least eight pages in length (excluding bibliography and notes) double-spaced and including appropriate references.
 - 4.2.2. Students who prefer the medium of verbal presentation may submit the results of their research as a 20-30 minute PowerPoint or web-page presentation. In order for these presentations to have pedagogical value they may not simply duplicate material presented in class or taken from the course website. Citations must be accompanied by appropriate references. Students must submit a recorded embedded or attached narrative intended to accompany the presentation: both presentation and narrative are due on or before Tuesday, April 21, 2026.
- 4.3. Active participation in class discussions is essential, and will figure into the final evaluation.
- 4.4. In research and on exams students must clearly distinguish between their own words and sources they cite, especially including online and A.I.-generated content from resources such as ChatGPT. Failure to credit sources that are cited constitutes plagiarism and may result in a grade of “F”. See also “Plagiarism Policy,” §8 below.
- 4.5. Submission of the final examination and either the midterm examination or research project is required for successful completion of the course. The final course grade will be computed as follows (for details see “Rubrics for Assessment,” §9 below):

Class participation	10%
Research Project	30%
Midterm Examination	30%
Final Examination	30%

5. DIVERSITY and INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY

- 5.1. (*General*) The rich ethnic and cultural diversity of Christian thought during this period will be highlighted through study of primary sources from the Jewish, Roman, Greek, Celtic, Anglo-European, Slavic, Middle-Eastern (Syriac), and Egyptian (Coptic) traditions. In order to profit from the cultural and ethnic diversity of the student body, students are encouraged to bring to classroom discussion the early and medieval origins of their cultural traditions: including, for example, the theological, liturgical, and spiritual emphases that distinguish Western Catholicism from Eastern traditions such as the Maronite, Chaldean, Melchite, Malabar, and Ruthenian churches.
- 5.2. (*Pedagogy*) The seminary student body represents a diverse spectrum of multicultural traditions, with a concomitantly wide range of preference for either verbal or written presentations. In recognition of this, students will be offered the opportunity of choosing either an oral presentation or a research paper (see §4.2.2. above).

6. TEXTS

6.a. REQUIRED TEXTS [All required readings may be accessed through Canvas]

1. CH 517 TEXTBOOK: contains selection from Chadwick, Walker, and Logan, available in both *doc* and *pdf* formats.
2. Chadwick, Henry *The Early Church*, (Viking Penguin, June 1990), ISBN: 0140231994
3. Louth, Andrew, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Pseudo-Dionysius*, (Clarendon, Oxford University Press, 1981), ISBN: 0198266685.
4. Pope Benedict XVI, *Patristic and Medieval Christian Authors* (text of weekly audiences).
5. Required primary sources are available on the course website and in two downloadable texts: (1) *Patristic and Early Medieval Primary Sources*; (2) *Ecumenical Councils 1-7*. Assigned texts should be reviewed before the class at which they will be discussed.

6.b. RECOMMENDED TEXTS and RESOURCES (Some Available through Canvas):

- Bell, David N., *A Cloud of Witnesses*, (Cistercian Publications, Cistercian Studies Series, No 109).
- Brown, *The Body and Society*.
- Chadwick, Henry *The Early Church, Revised Edition* (Viking Penguin, June 1993).
- Comby, J. *How to Read Church History: From the Beginnings to the Fifteenth Century*, (Crossroad, 1990).
- Cross, F. L., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Oxford University Press).
- Danielou, J. and Marrou, H., *The Christian Centuries*, vol. 1: *The First Six Hundred Years*, (Darton Longman, and Todd, 1964).
- Davis, Leo Donald, S.J. *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils, (325-787), Their History And Theology* (Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987)
- Deansly, Margaret, *A History of the Medieval Church, 590-1500*. (Routledge. London. 1989)
- Freund, W.H.C., *The Rise of Christianity*, (Fortress: 1984)
- Hitchcock, James, *History of the Catholic Church from the Apostolic Age to the Third Millennium*, (Ignatius, 2012).
- Hughes, Philip, *The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils, 325-1870*, (NY: Hanover House, 1961)
- Kelly, J.N.D., *Early Christian Doctrine*, (Harper, San Francisco, March 1991)
- Logan, F. Donald, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, (Routledge, London. 2002)
- Louth, Andrew, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Pseudo-Dionysius*, (Clarendon, Oxford University Press, 1981).
- MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *Christianity, the First Three Thousand Years* (Viking, Penguin, 2009)
- McGinn, Bernard, *The Foundations of Mysticism, Origins to the Fifth Century: The Presence of God, A History of Western Christian Mysticism, vol. 1* (Crossroad, 1991).
- Quasten, Johannes, *Patrology* (4 vol.).
- Southern, R.W., *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, (Penguin, 1983).
- Vauchez, Andre, *The Spirituality of the Medieval West from the Eighth to the Twelfth Century*, (Cistercian, 1993).
- Walker, Williston, *A History of the Christian Church*, (General Books LLC, 2009)
- The Church Fathers in Translation: *Fathers of the Church* (Catholic Univ. of America Press); *Ancient Christian Writers* (Paulist Press); *Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans: download from Christian Classics Ethereal Library at <http://www.ccel.org>)

7. SPECIAL PROTOCOLS

- 7.1 The midterm exam, research project, and final exam must be submitted by email:
ldysinger@stjohnsem.edu
- 7.2. Late work will be accepted for a grade only if the professor grants an extension of the deadline: requests for extensions must be submitted in writing with a clear explanation of the reason for the request. Out of fairness to those who submit their work on time, late work for which an extension has been granted will normally be graded down by one-half letter grade for each day it is late.
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8. PLAGIARISM POLICY

In research and on exams students must clearly distinguish between their own words and sources they cite, especially including online and A.I.-generated content from resources such as ChatGPT. Failure to credit sources that are cited constitutes plagiarism and may result in a grade of “F”. For details consult the “St. John’s Seminary Academic and Doctrinal Integrity Policy.”

9. RUBRICS for ASSESSMENT (Evaluation)

RUBRIC FOR OVERALL LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND BENCHMARKS FOR STUDENT PERFORMANCE

	Not Acceptable Student Performance	Acceptable Student Performance	Hoped -for Learning Outcomes
Application of relevant primary and secondary sources from the historical period	Does not cite or is unaware of relevant primary and secondary sources from the period	Misses some relevant primary and secondary sources from the period	Cites and is able to appropriately apply relevant primary and secondary sources from the period
Theology and History of Church teaching	Does not take note of the historical development of Church teaching	Has a general sense of history and theology	Demonstrates a thorough knowledge of history and theology of Catholic teaching
Application of <i>Catechism</i> and relevant biblical and Magisterial Texts	Does not cite or is unaware of catechetical, biblical, or magisterial norms.	Misses some magisterial, biblical, and/or catechetical applications.	Is able to apply magisterial, biblical, and catechetical teaching appropriately
Cultural Awareness	Ignores or is unaware of cultural differences in approaches	Does not take note of issues of cultural significance	Responds appropriately to cultural conditions

RUBRIC FOR THE MIDTERM, RESEARCH PROJECT, and FINAL EXAMINATION

A. Historical Context	Students describe the historical and ecclesiastical contexts but do not distinguish between the most important issues and/or pay unnecessary attention to less-relevant details.	Students describe the historical and ecclesiastical contexts and distinguish between significant issues, but miss important aspects.	Students clearly and accurately describe the historical and ecclesiastical contexts and demonstrate a deep understanding of the underlying issues.
	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
B. Use of Primary Sources	Students cite primary sources but do not distinguish between the most important issues, and/or pay unnecessary attention to less-relevant details.	Students cite primary sources and distinguish between significant issues, but miss important aspects.	Students cite appropriate primary sources and demonstrate a deep understanding of the underlying issues.
	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
C. Relevant Scripture and Magisterial Teaching	Students do not cite relevant scripture passages, or magisterial texts in their discussion.	Students demonstrate only limited use of scripture and relevant magisterial teaching.	Students cite and appropriately discuss relevant biblical texts and magisterial texts.
	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10
D. Pastoral Response	Students do not express themselves in language comprehensible to those they will be serving.	Students express themselves comprehensibly, but neglect significant issues.	Students cover significant issues in language comprehensible to those they will be serving.
	1 2 3	4 5 6 7	8 9 10

10. COURSE OUTLINE and READINGS

Numbers in brackets refer to the selections from the course textbook which should be read prior to the relevant lecture [Suggested readings from Macculloch (“*Mac.*”) and Hitchcock (“*Hitch.*”), in brackets, are optional].

1. JESUS and the HELLENISTIC WORLD (1 hr.)

COURSE TEXT: [1.1]. The General Situation; [1.2]. The Jewish Background; [1.3]. Jesus and the Disciples.

Patr.PrimaryTxt.: “Homer”; “Plato”; “Virgil” “Book of Enoch”; “Philo”. [Macculloch (“*Mac.*”), *Christianity, 1st 3000 Yrs*, ch. 1-2. Hitchcock, (“*Hitch*”) *Hist.Cath.Ch*, ch. 1]

2. THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH (1 hr.)

[2.1]. The Palestinian Christian Communities; [2.2]. Paul and Gentile Christianity; [2.3]. The Close of the Apostolic Age; [2.4]. The Interpretation of Jesus

Patr.1^oTxt.: “Clement of Rome,”:”Letter of Barnabas”. *Ben.XVI*: “Clement of Rome”. [Mac. Ch. 3]

3. GENTILE CHURCH and ROMAN EMPIRE (2 hrs.)

[3.1]. Gentile Christianity of the Second Century; [3.2]. Early Clerical Orders; [3.3]. Relations of Christianity to the Roman Government; [3.4]. The Apologists

Patr.1^oTxt.: “Cicero”, “Ignatius of Antioch”, “The Didache”, “Justin Martyr”, “Martyrdom of Polycarp”, “Pliny and Trajan”. *Ben.XVI*: “Ignatius of Antioch”, “Justin Martyr”. [Hitch. Ch. 2]

4. THE Gnostic CRISIS (2 hrs.)

[4.1]. Gnosticism; [4.2]. Marcion; [4.3]. Montanism; [4.4]. The Catholic Church; [4.5]. The Growing Importance of Rome; [4.6]. Irenæus

Patr.1^oTxt.: “Irenaeus”. *Ben.XVI*: “Irenaeus”.

5. CARTHAGE and ALEXANDRIA (3 hrs.)

[5.1]. Tertullian and Cyprian; [5.2]. The Triumph of the Logos Christology in the West; [5.3]. The Alexandrian School; [5.4]. Church And State from 180 To 260

Patr.1°Txt.: “Tertullian”, “Cyprian”, “Plotinus”, Clement of Alexandria”, “Origen”.

Ben.XVI: “Tertullian”, “Cyprian”, “Clement of Alexandria”, “Origen”.

6. LEADERSHIP and LITURGY (2 hrs.)

[6.1]. The Hierarchical Development Of The Church; [6.2]. Public Worship And Sacred Seasons; [6.3]. Baptism; [6.4]. The Eucharist; [6.5]. Forgiveness Of Sins; [6.6]. Sinners in the Church

Patr.1°Txt.: “Hippolytus”, “The Didache”.

7. PERSECUTION and TRANSFORMATION (1 hr.)

[7.1]. Rest And Growth, 260-303; [7.2]. Rival Religious Forces; [7.3]. The Final Struggle; [7.4]. The Changed Situation

Patr.1°Txt.: “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity”. [*Mac. Ch. 4*]

8. THE ARIAN EMPIRE (2 hrs.)

[8.1]. The Arian Controversy To The Death Of Constantine; [8.2]. Controversy Under Constantine's Sons; [8.3]. The Later Nicene Struggle;

Patr.1°Txt.: “Athanasius”. *Ben.XVI*: “Athanasius”. *Ecum.Cncl.1-7*: “Nicaea”. [*Mac. Ch. 5*]

9. THE ORTHODOX EMPIRE (1 hr.)

[9.1]. Arian Missions and the Germanic Invasions; [9.2]. The Growth of the Papacy; [9.3]. Ambrose And Chrysostom.

Patr.1°Txt.: “Basil”, “Gregory Nazianzen”. *Ben.XVI*: “Athanasius”. *Ecum.Cncl.1-7*: “Constantinople 1” [*Hitch. Ch. 3*]

10. CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM (2 hrs.)

[10.1]. The Ascetic Movement; [10.2]. Egyptian, Byzantine, and Palestinian Monasticism; [10.3]. Evagrius, Cassian, and Benedict.

Patr.1°Txt.: “Evagrius and Cassian”, “The Desert Fathers”, “Benedict”. *Ben.XVI*: “Boethius”, “Cassiodorus”. *Ecum.Cncl.1-7*: “Anathemas Against Origen”

11. CHRISTOLOGY and DIVISIONS (2 hrs.)

[11.1]. The Christological Controversies; [11.2]. The East Divided; [11.3]. Catastrophes And Further Controversies In The East.

Ben.XVI: “Leo I”. *Ecum.Cncl.1-7*: “Ephesus”, “Chalcedon”. [*Mac. Ch. 6-7; Hitch. Ch. 4*]

12. WORSHIP and PIETY (1 hr.)

[12.1]. Developing Hierarchies; [12.2]. Public Worship And Sacred Seasons; [12.3]. Developing Eucharistic Liturgy; [12.4]. The Liturgy of the Hours; [12.5]. Popular Christian Piety

Patr.1°Txt.: “Dionysius the Aereopagite”. *Ben.XVI*: “Cyril of Jerusalem”, “Pseudo-Dionysius the Aereopagite”.

13. WESTERN THEOLOGY and ISOLATION (2 hrs.)

[13.1]. Some Western Characteristics; [13.2]. Jerome; [13.3]. Augustine; [13.4]. The Pelagian Controversy; [13.5]. Semi-Pelagianism; [13.6]. Gregory the Great

Patr.1°Txt.: “Augustine”, “Gregory the Great”. *Ben.XVI*: “Jerome”, Augustine”, “Gregory the Great”. [*Mac. Ch. 9; Hitch. Ch. 5*]

14. BYZANTIUM and the RISE of ISLAM (2 hrs.)

[14.1] Justinian [14.2]. The Lombards; [14.3]. The Rise of Islam; [14.4]. The Constitutional Development of the Church;

Ecum.Cncl.1-7: “Constantinople 2”, “Constantinople 3”. [*Mac. Ch. 8*]

15. MONASTIC MISSION and the TRANSMISSION of LEARNING (2 hrs.)

[15.1]. Missions in the British Islands; [15.2]. Continental Missions and Papal Growth; [15.3] The Transmission of Learning

Ben.XVI: “Columban”, “Bede the Venerable”, “Boniface”. [*Mac. Ch. 10*]

16. THE CAROLINGIAN EMPIRE (2 hrs.)

[16].1. The Franks and The Papacy; [16].2.. Charlemagne; [16].3. Ecclesiastical Institutions; [16].4.. Collapsing Empire and Rising Papacy. [*Mac.* Ch. 11]

Ben.XVI: “Scotus Erigena”, “Hrabanus Maurus”.

11. PROGRAM LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The Course Learning Objective §3.2, above, (“In written essays and oral presentations students will cite, explain, and pastorally apply biblical and Catholic magisterial texts and other relevant primary sources that illustrate the development of Catholic doctrine and practice . . .”) corresponds to the following Program Objectives for the Master of Divinity Degree (SJS 2020-22 Catalog, p. 50):

1. [formation in the Roman Catholic tradition]
 - [1.1.] The student interprets Scripture from within the living tradition of the Church.
 - [1.3.] The student demonstrates a complete, unified vision of the truths contained in the doctrinal, moral, and liturgical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church.
2. [effective communicator, teacher, ... of the Word of God]
 - [2.4.] The student teaches clearly and faithfully the message of Jesus Christ and his Church.
4. [pastoral skills]
 - [4.1.] The student demonstrates competent theological inquiry, reflection, and application in pastoral ministry.
 - [4.2.] The student provides competent spiritual and pastoral guidance.