



Christian Classics Reloaded: A Personal Selection of More Readable Translations

By James Catford

Introduction:

As we conclude this series and the Renovaré Book Club for another year, we leave you with a bonus summary of other contemporary translations of Christian classics. Each of these are best in class and recommended for first-time readers and experts alike. This bonus comes with a few tips about how to read a Christian classic and we hope you enjoy engaging with other primary sources that have shaped countless lives as well as the church as we know it today.

Getting Started with Christian Classics

Vintage cars, fine wine, French cooking, and world class cricket. These are just some of the things in life that I know next to nothing about.

To be honest, I can feel intimidated by those people who seem to know what they're talking about. Or is it perhaps the way they talk about these things that makes me feel so small?

When it comes to classic books in the Christian tradition, I'd like to do better. Not because I want to become the pious equivalent of a wine snob, or to know that John Calvin didn't team up with someone called Klein to start a successful line in underwear and jeans. (Actually, I did know that.)

Christian classics have little more than marginal interest unless they help us with the central pursuit of the Christian life — to become more like Jesus. As Richard Foster has put it, the best books are part of "the great conversation about the growth of the soul" that has been taking place right down the centuries. And it's why most of them became classics in the first place.

The good thing is that we can eavesdrop on the great conversation, but it might also help to know a bit about how to get started. So, here are a few tips.

First, get a more modern translation if you can. For example, *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St John of the Cross was originally written in Spanish, so why not get the modern translation by Mirabai Starr rather than a dusty old one? See my selection of ten of the best below.

Try to read classics slowly or, as I sometimes suggest, to eat them with a small spoon. My wife Sue read *Interior Castle* by Teresa of Avila (abridged by Emilie Griffin) as a devotional in the bath; or, rather, during many baths over many months.

How about reading classics with a pen in hand? (Not so good in the bath.) Underline the best quotes, or scribble in the margin the 'shockers' (really good bits) and 'blockers' (the confusing bits) as my friend Rob Hare likes to call them. The Westminster John Knox edition of *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* by William Law (introduced by Elton Trueblood) works well like this. [The very edition we are finishing up in the Book Club!]

As part of the great conversation on the growth of the soul, read these jewels of the Christian life in dialogue with each other. They do not come with the authority of Scripture and they are

not beyond contradiction. Indeed, they often correct each other or add new layers of meaning to the ones that have gone before. Feel free to pick out the sections you like and leave the rest for another time.

My other suggestion is to make sure to read the preface, introduction, or foreword and to go online and see if there's a Wikipedia entry on the book or the author. It just helps to know the background. In terms of readability, I was underwhelmed by Evelyn Underhill's translation of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, but I really love her introduction.

The most important thing to keep in mind is why we're reading these books rather than spending our time watching cricket or admiring vintage cars. It's for Christ to be formed within us (Galatians 4: 19), and to press ever deeper into his kingdom of love and freedom (Galatians 5:1).

We don't know who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* but the author's sole reason for writing it was "to help you tie the spiritual knot of burning love that will bind you to God in a communion of being and desire" (Chapter 47). And, yes, I've underlined this quote in my copy.

Where would I start? My top five classics are always changing. To the four I've already mentioned, I might add *Confessions* by Augustine because it is autobiographical (he actually struggled to follow Christ more in his sex life than in his intellectual life) and there are a couple of decent audio versions of the book available as well. (My personal selection of more readable translations avoids ones that overly edit or attempt to tidy up the contradictions.)

What am I working on next? I'm trying to find the best version of *Story of a Soul*, the autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux. There's one available by John Clarke OCD and published by ICS Publication, but if you find a translation that you like then please let me know.

James Catford
james@catfords.com

1	<i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i>	Anon	Carmen Acevedo Butcher	Shambhala Publications	
—	<i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i>	Anon	Halcyon Backhouse	Hodder & Stoughton	Foreword by James Catford
—	<i>The Cloud of Unknowing</i>	Anon	William Johnston	Image Books; Reissue edition	
2	<i>A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life</i>	William Law	John Meister and Others	Westminster John Knox	Introduced by Elton Trueblood



3	<i>The Dark Night of the Soul</i>	St John of the Cross	Mirabai Starr	Riverhead (US) Rider Ebury (UK)	Foreword by Thomas Moore
—	<i>John of the Cross: Selections from The Dark Night of the Soul and Other Writings</i>	John of the Cross	Kieran Kavanaugh Edited by Emilie Griffin	HarperOne	Harper-Collins Spiritual Classics
4	<i>The Interior Castle</i>	St Teresa of Avila	Mirabai Starr	Riverhead (US) Rider Ebury (UK)	
—	<i>Teresa of Avila: Selections from The Interior Castle</i>	Teresa of Avila	Kieran Kavanaugh Edited by Emilie Griffin	HarperOne	Introduction by Dallas Willard Harper-Collins Spiritual Classics
5	<i>The Practice of the Presence of God</i>	Brother Lawrence	Robert J. Edmonson Edited by Hal Helms	Paraclete Press 1985	
6	<i>The Showings</i>	Julian of Norwich	Mirabai Starr	Hampton Roads Publishing (US) Canterbury (UK)	Earlier and shorter version of <i>Revelations of Divine Love</i>
—	<i>Revelations of Divine Love</i>	Julian of Norwich	Barry Windeatt	Oxford	Edition also includes <i>The Showings</i>
7	<i>Confessions</i>	St Augustine	R. S. Pine-Coffin	Penguin	Other audio versions
8	<i>The Imitation of Christ</i>	Thomas à Kempis	William Griffin	HarperOne	Preface by Richard Foster
9	<i>Selections from the Writings of John Wesley</i>	John Wesley	Compiled and arranged by Herbert Welch	Eaton and Mains 1901	
10	<i>Christian Perfection</i>	François Fénelon	Mildred Whitney Stillman Edited by Charles F. Whiston	Harper 1947	