Gregory of Narek: The Holy Translators (Saturday, October 11)
A High School Activity

Introduce your high schoolers to Narekatzi as follows (it would be great if you could get a copy of the book to hold up. There's a wonderful, very readable translation by Dr. Thomas Samuelian available through the DRE catalogue. There's a smaller-sized version for $20. See your Superintendent).

From Lives of Armenian Saints
Illustrated by Suzanne Anoushian Froudjian

"Yesterday, the Armenian Church marked a very special feast—the Feast of the Holy Translators. This day commemorates the work of Sts. Sahag and Mesrob, founders and propagators of the Armenian alphabet and the first Armenian translation—the Holy Bible itself. Yet not only are *these* men and their colleagues honored on this feast, but the many who followed in subsequent centuries, men who translated great works of theology, philosophy and history into Armenian and also wrote original masterpieces. Indeed, the "Holy Translators" are a diverse group of brilliant writers whose dates extend as late as the 12th century and include the brilliant clergymen, St. Gregory of Narek (951-1003) and Catholicos St. Nersess Shnorhali (1102-1173)

"Let's take a closer look at St. Gregory of Narek (in Armenian Kri-kor Na-re-gah-tzee), one of the greatest mystic poets in the history of the Armenian Church. Why do we call him "mystic?" Because his poems focused on the wonder and mystery of his relationship with God. He was born in the village of Narek (southern shore of Lake Van). He was educated and spent his entire life at the monastery of Narek—taught and encouraged by his father, bishop Khosrov, and his uncle, the famous scholar Ananias. Among many other well-known works, his most famous is "The Book of Lamentations" which confessed his unworthiness before almighty God. This collection of poems, eventually called simply the "Narek" were considered so full of strength and life that they were placed at the side or under the pillow of anyone ailing. In them, St. Gregory is said to have coined many new words as other great poets, such as Homer and Shakespeare, have."

Reproduce and distribute the poem below.

"Let's take a closer look at one of his poems."*Have students read silently or aloud.*

> I am a living book,
> written like the scroll in the vision of Ezekiel, inside and out,
> listing lamentations, moaning and woe.
> I am a city without walls or towers,
> a house empty without doors for protection,
> salt in looks but without taste,
> salty water, unfit for drinking to quench the thirst,
> land, unfit for cultivation,
> field, barren and covered with briars.
> My personal acres, cared for by God,
> but formerly cultivated by the devices of the Slanderer,
> an olive tree that is wood without fruit,
> trees that do not bear fruit to be cut down,
> a hopeless, twice dead, talking plant,
> a completely burnt out candle that cannot be lit.
>
> <div align="right">Prayer 39</div>

Questions:

1. What are the images St. Gregory uses to describe himself? He says he is a . . . (living book, etc. just look for the simple image, not the elaborations)
2. How does he elaborate on each image? (now discuss the phrases that follow each simple image)
3. What would you say his mood is? (depressed, despairing, feeling useless—but point out to students that Narekatzi talks just as often about the power and beauty of God to make him feel real, useful and alive).
4. What was the most powerful image for you?

"Now we are going to become mystic poets. Take a moment to pray for inspiration. Then start your poem like this (*you can write on a board or just dictate*) "Lord, I am . . . and communicate 5 images of yourself as you feel right now. First a simple image, then follow with a bit of elaboration. For example: 'Lord, I am a budding rose—a flower in a big garden, soft and bright and all ready inside to bloom' or 'Lord, I am a dull book—filled with pages and pages of rambling stuff that no one's going to care about in ten years.'" *Go around and help students identify first feelings and then images that could represent those feelings. Share results. End with positive images!*