The shrine at Mettancherry, where Archdeacon Thomas led a large group of local Christians in 1653 to swear resistance to Latin and Portuguese ecclesiastical authority. The act became known as “the Oath of the Coonan Cross.” The name denotes how the oath takers all held on to a rope tied to the cross because there were too many people gathered to touch the cross directly, and how the force of so many people holding the rope bent the cross over. “Coonani” means “bent.”
Dear Friends:

In the past three months I have been able to visit almost all 20 of our current manuscript digitization projects. In January a HMML team went to Kerala, southwest India, to advance our new partnership to preserve the heritage of the ancient Syriac Christian communities of that fascinating region. This issue of Illuminations will tell you much more about this thrilling project. In late February, I made a grand circuit through our sites in the Middle East. I traveled with our Field Director for the region, Walid Mourad, who is based in Beirut. I began in Turkey, continuing on to Lebanon and Syria, visiting our partners old and new.

Many of these projects have acquired even greater urgency because of the worsening political situation in the region. Some of them must even remain unpublicized until they are completed. In this issue, we highlight one of our projects in Lebanon and one in Syria, complementing the reports you have seen in previous issues of Illuminations about other collections “Where We’re Working.” We intend to do everything we can to ensure that the manuscripts of the Middle East will be photographically preserved as a safeguard against an uncertain future.

As I write this letter I am on my way to Rome, where I and other representatives from Saint John’s will participate in the presentation of the “Saint Peter Apostle’s Edition” of The Saint John’s Bible to Pope Benedict XVI. This particular copy is the very first one to become available from the full size, highest quality, facsimile version of The Saint John’s Bible. This is also the first time any of us have seen a full-size volume of The Saint John’s Bible bound as a book; it will be several years before the original folios complete their exhibition tour, are sewn together in their seven volumes, and placed between boards of old Welsh oak. This issue also highlights the efforts the HMML and The Saint John’s Bible staff have taken to conserve this magnificent new manuscript while it travels the world on exhibition.

Thank you for your vital support for our mission of preserving the handwritten legacy of traditional cultures. Never before has our work seemed so urgent, or manuscripts more vulnerable to forces beyond the power of any us to control. And never have we needed your help more to preserve what they have to tell us.

Sincerely yours,

Father Columba Stewart, OSB
Executive Director HMML
Unlocking the Modern History of the Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala, India

HMML helps preserve the palm leaf manuscripts that may trace the origins of Syriac Christians

By Phil Steger, Deputy Director of Manuscript Preservation

The Christian community traditionally believed to have been founded by the Apostle Thomas thrives in what is now the modern state of Kerala in India. Though diverse in ecclesiastical affiliation, the “Saint Thomas Christians” are unanimous in their Syriac, European and local traditions that have produced a culture that is both indisputably Christian and unmistakably Indian. Yet, despite the fact that for centuries they belonged to the robust literary and liturgical traditions of the Syriac-speaking church, the historical record of the Saint Thomas Christians is remarkably sparse. This is especially true for the millennium- and a-half of their history that precedes the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498.

Since 2000, a team of local Indian scholars and clergymen have joined with a determined Hungarian scholar to discover and preserve the primary sources of this history by digitizing Kerala’s Christian manuscripts. This January, Fr. Columba Stewart, HMML Executive Director, Wayne Torborg, Director of Digital Collections, and I traveled to Kerala to meet this team and solidify HMML’s relationship to the project as its financial co-sponsor, technical consultant, and guardian of its long-term digital archives.

Dr. István Perczel began the manuscript preservation project as its financial co-sponsor, technical consultant, and guardian of its long-term digital archives. T his team in India addressed this problem by creating the Association for the Preservation of the Saint Thomas Christian Heritage, which brings in additional scholars to serve the project’s expanded mission. One of these is Fr. George Kurukkoor, a scholar of Old Malayalam and Malayalam Karshuni. These materials promise to write the early modern and modern history of the Saint Thomas Christians and re-write the history of southwest India. They also intensify the mystery of India’s Christian history before the arrival of the Portuguese. How is it that, despite perhaps fifteen centuries of Christian history before the arrival of Portuguese Catholics, so few manuscripts from that period survive today?

Continued on page 7
Millennium Club Members

Come to India with HMML
January 10-24, 2009

Experience Kerala’s rich past and its exciting present with HMML executive director Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB, January 10-24, 2009. Enjoy the beautiful scenery, places of worship, culture and cuisine of India’s famed Malabar Coast. Plus, you will meet HMML’s partners in preserving Kerala’s ancient Christian culture, a culture which has peacefully co-existed with its Hindu neighbors since at least the 4th century.

Watch for more details later this summer. Space is limited. Contact Jennifer Cahoy at 320-363-2217 or jcahoy@csbsju.edu if you would like to make a reservation.

Left: A crowd of more than 25,000 worshippers gathers around a line of gold-adorned elephants at the climax of the Ernakulam Siva temple’s most important feast of the year.

Bottom left: The walls of the new church of St. George being built at Malaikurishi (“Cross on the Hill”). The new church is being built around the old church, of which all but the altar has been demolished. The parish has preserved the old church’s altar so that the Holy Qurbana (Mass) can be offered while the new church is still under construction.

Above: Singer Kalamandalam Prabhakaran presents the paranyan thullal at the Ernakulam Siva temple festival. The paranyan thullal is the slowest of the three thullal—solo songs and dances that tell traditional stories in ways known for their frank, outspoken humor.

Top right: Left to right, Mr. Fabian da Costa, Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB, Mr. Geejo George, and Fr. Ignatius Payyappilly at Katamattam Church, halfway between Ernakulam and Kothamangalam.

Right: Brightly-colored frescoes decorate this Portuguese-era church in Thrissur.
The Association’s recent discoveries lead him to hypothesize that Syriac was not much used before the arrival of the Portuguese, but was revived during the colonial period. Yet, like much of the Saint Thomas Christian past, this interpretation is not certain.

“I am amazed, for example,” says Dr. Perczel, “by the Syriac literary activity of early Jesuit missionaries. Impressive by itself, this is also an indirect indication: for the Jesuits to have been able to communicate with Indian scholars in Syriac, the latter must have known this language very well. This notion was proven by our recent discovery of Syriac poetry by Alexander the Indian, a local hymnographer of the seventeenth century.”

Dr. Perczel believes that pre-Portuguese documents will surface as later materials lead to the discovery of earlier texts written in languages other than Syriac, “like the layers of an onion.” Thus, it may turn out that manuscripts written in Vattezhuttu, Kolezhuttu, Malayalam and Old Tamil – not just Syriac – will tell the Saint Thomas Christian story from before 1498. If so, they will not diminish the role of Syriac in Saint Thomas Christian history, but complement and enrich our understanding of it.

The received wisdom is that the disappearance of this record is due to the decision by Portuguese church authorities in 1599 to burn the local community’s Syriac manuscripts. While large numbers of Syriac manuscripts were in fact destroyed, Dr. Perczel now doubts that this is responsible for the pre-1498 void. The Association’s recent discoveries lead him to believe these stories are important.

The Association invites you to join in preserving these stories of past cultures and traditions. To learn more about planned giving opportunities at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library and you can join the Stotts in preserving these stories of past cultures and traditions. To learn more about planned giving opportunities at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, visit our web page at www.hmml.org and click on “Support” or contact HMML Development Director, Erin Lonergan, 320-363-2095 or elonergan@csbsju.edu.

We lift off from Cochin airport. The sun is shining. Endless forests of coconut palm trees surround smaller plantations of rubber, nutmeg, cinnamon and pepper. Soon, we fly over a bright band of beach that marks the border between the information-rich land and the featureless sea. It is like the manuscript record of the Saint Thomas Christians. Going back in time to 1498, the record is thick with sources and voices, but beyond it, there are only a few faint whispers. Yet, who knows? Perhaps tomorrow, new manuscript discoveries may change all this, and India’s ancient Christian past will start to speak.

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Chouerite Basilian Order, Khonchara, Lebanon

The Monastery of Saint John the Baptist sits high up in the hills north of Beirut. For 300 years it has been the home of the oldest monastic congregation in the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church, the Chouerite Basilian Order ("Chouerite" comes from the French transliteration of the traditional name of the place).

Around 1700, the first members of the nascent Chouerite Basilians came from the Orthodox monastery at Balamand in northern Lebanon, hoping to establish a community in union with Rome. After being formally constituted as a religious congregation, they established the first truly indigenous Arabic-language printing press in the Middle East. This great project was the work of the ingenious Deacon Abdallah el Zahir (1684-1748), a former Syriac Catholic who had learned printing in his native city, Aleppo, and who had designed, cut, and cast the Arabic type himself. The Chouerite press was active for more than 150 years, producing a total of 69 complete works of biblical, liturgical, and devotional literature. HMML is fortunate to have an early 19th century prayer book from the Chouerite press in its Rare Book Collection.

It is fitting that HMML is working with the Chouerite manuscripts, as their mother monastery at Balamand was the site of HMML’s first project in the Middle East.

Syriac Christian Archbishopric of Aleppo, Syria

Syriac Christians encountered Catholic missionaries in Aleppo, Syria, in the 17th century, and a Catholic party started to grow within the Syriac Orthodox Church. Eventually the Syriac Catholic Church received legal recognition from the Ottoman government, with its patriarch based first in Aleppo and then, in Mardin, Turkey, near his Orthodox counterpart. Turkish persecution forced both patriarchs to flee in the 1920s. The Syriac Catholic patriarch is now based in Lebanon.

The Syriac Catholic Church is one of the several extant branches of the great church of Antioch. In its earliest centuries, the patriarchate of Antioch was culturally Greek in some of its major cities but Semitic in both the countryside and the great cities to the east such as Edessa and Nusaybin. There the Christian dialect of Aramaic, Syriac, was used in the liturgy and for theological writings. The majority of Syriac Christians resisted the decisions of the Council held in 451 at Chalcedon, near Constantinople, and during the sixth century developed their own ecclesiastical structure with a Patriarch and complete episcopate. In the 11th century, the Patriarch moved from Antioch to what is today southeastern Turkey. After a golden age of expansion and scholarship, the Syriac Orthodox Church was devastated by the Mongol invasions of the 14th century.

Syriac Christians encountered Catholic missionaries in Aleppo, Syria, in the 17th century, and a Catholic party started to grow within the Syriac Orthodox Church. Eventually the Syriac Catholic Church received legal recognition from the Ottoman government, with its patriarch based first in Aleppo and then, in Mardin, Turkey, near his Orthodox counterpart. Turkish persecution forced both patriarchs to flee in the 1920s. The Syriac Catholic patriarch is now based in Lebanon.

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The staff at The Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) is accustomed to trekking to far-away places to digitally photograph and preserve centuries-old manuscripts. Their efforts ensure that the brittle pages of these ancient documents will be preserved and accessible forever.

The Saint John’s Bible, however, is a contemporary manuscript—a manuscript that is traveling the world and being viewed by over a million people. Meeting the special challenges of conserving this extraordinary new manuscript while it is on exhibition has required creativity, ingenuity, and considerable teamwork among The Saint John’s Bible staff.

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) hosted the first major exhibition from The Saint John’s Bible, “Illuminating the Word,” in 2005. Roxie Ballard, the museum’s exhibition designer, spoke with artistic director Donald Jackson beforehand about how he would like to see his work presented. According to Ballard, Jackson didn’t want to see the pages of The Saint John’s Bible hung on the wall “like laundry on a line.” Jackson’s hope was for something more intimate that would engage the viewer.

The solution to both the conservation and exhibition challenges was a set of custom cases, designed by MIA consultant Jeanne Eaton and built by Metropolitan Picture Framing of Minneapolis. The cases take the unbound vellum pages and secure them in a humidity-controlled environment while giving the impression of open pages in a book.

The final result of Eaton’s design and construction was so successful for presenting and transporting Illuminating the Word that it was decided additional cases should be made for all folios that will be loaned to museums. These cases were not assembled by Eaton and the staff at the MIA, as they were for the first exhibition—but by the staff of The Saint John’s Bible at HMML’s Arca Artium, the repository for the art collection donated in 1995 by Frank Kacmarcik, an Oblate of Saint John’s Abbey. Arca Artium is currently housed in the lower level of Saint John’s University’s Science Hall, and maintains the appropriate humidity level for handling the calfskin vellum pages of the Bible. Following Eaton’s specifications, it takes a team of up to four people 20 hours to assemble just one case and install the folios from the Bible inside it.

The base of the folio assembly is constructed of 4-ply museum board. Wood brackets are attached to hold the pages lightly. The vellum pages themselves are not attached to the brackets but are sewn along the outer edge to sheets of 2-ply cotton mat board. Since this board touches the pages, it must be carefully sanded smooth so that no sharp edges will come in contact with the vellum pages. The edges with the sewing will be trimmed when the pages are eventually bound. The mat board holds the pages in a curved shape, approximating the open pages of a book. Photo by Donna Kelly, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
After the exhibition of folios from *Prophets* closed last fall at HMML, the staff disassembled the frames and replaced them with pages for the *Wisdom Books* exhibition. Almost immediately, the removed pages demonstrated the success of their finely-crafted micro-environment. “We could see them just relax as we took them out,” according to Carol Marrin, director of *The Saint John’s Bible*. “This told us that the humidity seal had worked, and also that the vellum was comfortable in this firm but gentle housing.”

The cases do more than merely protect the pages; they also allow for intimate viewing of the pages. Says Marrin, “Thanks to these unique cases, people are able to see the folios with as little distance between the viewer and the pages as possible, and tilted forward so that you can see the pages as you walk toward them.”

It is Hill Museum & Manuscript Library’s job to apply the highest standards of curatorial attention and conservation to the Bible so that centuries from now audiences can have the same kind of intense visual experience that people have today. Marrin continues, “As caretakers of *The Saint John’s Bible* we must serve the present as well as the future—not a charge we take lightly. Balancing our commitment to provide access to as many people as possible with the need to respect the integrity of this spiritual and artistic work and to protect it for future generations is a continual process.”

Susan Sink is author of *The Art of The Saint John’s Bible: Pentateuch, Psalms, Gospels and Acts.*

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*The Saint John’s Bible* Exhibition Schedule

The primary touring exhibition in its original cases has completed showings at the Phoenix Art Museum and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

This summer *The Saint John’s Bible* may be seen at the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington from July 11 through September 5, 2008, and this fall at the Mobile Museum of Art in Alabama from October 10, 2008, through April 10, 2009.

Smaller groups of pages have previously been exhibited at The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the San Diego Natural History Museum, the British Library in London, and the Museum of Biblical Art in New York City. From February 15 to May 24, 2009, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland will present *The Saint John’s Bible: A Modern Vision through Medieval Methods*. This exhibition will feature forty-four original folios from *Prophets* and *Wisdom Books* in the context of the Walters’ historical manuscript collection.

Twenty-eight pages from *Wisdom Books* are on display at HMML through December of 2008. The exhibition, library and gift shop are open to the public free of charge from 8:00 AM-4:30 PM, Monday-Friday; Noon-4:00 PM Saturdays (May 1 to December 15). Walk-ins are welcomed, but it is suggested that large groups schedule in advance by calling Linda Orzechowski at (320) 363-3514. For more information on *The Saint John’s Bible*, visit the website at www.saintjohnsbible.org.
Nicky Carpenter Named “Outstanding Individual Philanthropist”

Upon nomination by the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Josephine (Nicky) Benz Carpenter was named “Outstanding Individual Philanthropist” by the Minnesota Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals. She was honored on National Philanthropy Day, November 22, 2007, at a luncheon with over 500 guests from Minnesota charitable organizations in attendance. Carpenter served as a Regent of Saint John’s University and is currently a member of the university’s Capital Campaign Steering Committee. She joined the board of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library of Saint John’s University in 1994, serving at its chair from 1999 to 2004. Based on her exemplary leadership and commitment, she was awarded lifetime membership on the HMML Board in 2005.

“I am constantly humbled and overwhelmed by Nicky’s leadership and development support for Saint John’s University and HMML,” said Brother Dietrich Reinhart, OSB, president of Saint John’s University. “She is a person of extraordinary generosity, active in so many charitable activities on behalf of the wider human community.” Carpenter has been self-employed as an educational consultant in Wayzata, Minnesota since 1977. Upon accepting her award Carpenter encouraged everyone to become a philanthropist, saying, “I urge everyone of some means to evaluate carefully and thoroughly opportunities which come their way. They may be able to make a significant difference in our world.” She is married to Thomas K. Carpenter.

From Books to Bytes

When the students at the College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University select courses, they scrutinize the on-line syllabi, purchase the required books, download others, bookmark class web sites, and Google their research topics. A new humanities course offered by the Department of History, “From Books to Bytes,” is outwardly similar to the institution’s other offerings.

It is, however, the only course in the catalogue that requires the students to dissect a book. “It’s okay,” assured Dr. Theresa Vann, who created the course. “They took apart outdated reference books I pulled out of Alcuin Library’s dumpster.” “From Books to Bytes” is a history of the book that places it in the context of information technology, not art history or manuscript studies. Vann, the Joseph S. Micallef Curator of the Malta Study Center, designed the course to introduce undergraduates to book history and to HMML’s collections. “The students learned the basics of codicology by taking apart a book to see how it was made. They also learned how content and technology affected book format,” says Vann. “There’s a very real difference between books meant to be read aloud and books meant to be read silently, between books written as scrolls and books written as codices. We were able to read the texts in translation, and then look at the originals to see the differences.”

The 12 students met at HMML to make full use of its resources. Matthew Heinzelman, the Curator of the Austria and Germany Study Center and the rare books cataloguer, presented the evolution of the printed book using examples from HMML’s collection. HMML’s executive director, Fr. Columba Stewart, lectured on the evolution of Scripture from the Dead Sea Scrolls to The Saint John’s Bible. The class also visited Rachel Melis in the Book Arts Studio on the College of Saint Benedict campus, where they printed their own Christmas cards.

The course will be offered again in the spring semester of 2009. Vann is keeping her eye on the library dumpster, and making plans for the next time around. “I think, though,” she said, “I’ll have to warn them about the book dissection part. Some of the students really got upset by it.”