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**With this illumination in a medieval style, THE SAINT
JOHN'S BIBLE portrays the community of instruction under
the lordship of the risen Christ, reaching from the earli-
est days in Jerusalem to the current Saint John's Abbey
in Minnesota, the manuscript's patron.**

*Cover and Interior: LIFE IN COMMUNITY, Aidan Hart in collaboration with Donald Jackson, © 2002
THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's University,
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Illuminating the Word

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In the beautiful *Life in Community*, the calligraphers and illuminators of *The Saint John's Bible* interpret Luke's description of an ideal Christian community in Jerusalem, where "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them..." (Acts 4:32-34a). The artists portray a community of instruction bound together under the lordship of the risen Christ, reaching from those earliest days of the Church in Jerusalem down to the Benedictine community of Saint John's Abbey in Minnesota, the patron of this manuscript.

This work is not a new endeavor for the Benedictines, whose communities of monks have been the calligraphers and illuminators of Bibles for over fifteen hundred years. Now on the occasion of the second millennium of Christ's birth, *The Saint John's Bible* has been created "to inspire a renewed love of Scripture intertwined with art."¹ The *Bible* is a gift from the Saint John's community to all Christians, to enhance their worship and serve their catechesis for generations to come. As the first handwritten and illuminated Bible commissioned since the invention of the printing press in the late fifteenth century, it is "the one thing we'll probably be remembered for 500 years from now," writes Eric Hollas, OSB, a monk at Saint John's Abbey and Associate Director of Arts and Culture at Saint John's University who has been instrumental throughout the project.²

The Saint John's Bible grew out of a meeting between the distinguished calligraphic artist Donald Jackson and Fr. Hollas in 1995. Jackson, a native of Lancashire, England, decided at a young age that he wanted to do two things with his talent – to become the "Queen's Scribe" and to inscribe and illuminate the Bible. He achieved the first goal when he became scribe to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's Crown Office at the House of Lords at age twenty-six, and he will achieve the second in 2009 when *The Saint John's Bible* is completed.

The patron raised four million dollars over eight years from individuals, groups, and corporations. Then, on Ash Wednesday in the year 2000, Jackson penned the first words of *The Saint John's Bible*; they were the opening

verses of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, the Word was God."³

Jackson calls this project his "Sistine Chapel." In the medieval workshop tradition, he oversees the work of ten designers, illustrators, and illuminators at a scriptorium in Wales. Some of the artists return to their own studios with the pages after receiving direction from Jackson.⁴

The original manuscript of *The Saint John's Bible* will be bound in seven volumes (15 ¾" wide by 23 ½" tall when closed) with a total of 1150 pages and 160 illuminations. The lettering was devised by Jackson and replicated by the scribes. The *Bible* is inscribed on vellum (calf skin or parchment) using swan, goose, and turkey quills, natural handmade inks, hand-ground pigments, and gold leaf. Over 250 skins have been rubbed and sanded; on thinner pages lines were drawn for writing, and thicker skins were prepared for the illuminations. The volumes of the original manuscript will be a source for religious, artistic, educational, and scholarly programming and exhibitions. Selected pages are currently on tour throughout North America.⁵ Reproductions of the *Bible* are being produced at sixty-two percent of actual size (9 ¾" x 15") for purchase by congregations and individuals.

The text is carefully arranged on each spacious page to encourage readers to notice the lettering and ponder its meaning. In contemporary artistic jargon, this is truly a project of "mark-making." The illuminators use egg yolk to bind the colors together and give the images great luminosity, a technique borrowed from the tempera panel paintings in the Renaissance. In another ancient practice, thin slices of gold leaf are placed on gesso (sugar, fish glue, whole lead powder, and slate plaster) and then on to the vellum. *The Saint John's Bible* also incorporates modern themes, contemporary illustrations, and production technology of the twenty-first century. The pages of completed volumes may be viewed in their entirety online.⁶

In a significant departure from medieval practice, the words of Scripture are presented in English rather than Latin. The use of the New Revised Standard Version translation shows the influence of the project's Protestant and Jewish advisors. Its predecessor, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, had the distinction of being officially authorized for use by all major Christian churches—Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. The NRSV is a modern English translation that maintains traditional references to God but uses gender-inclusive language for humanity in an unobtrusive manner.

I will discuss three images—*Life in Community*, *Life of Paul*, and *Birth of Christ*—as examples of the wonderful artwork in *The Saint John's Bible*.

LIFE IN COMMUNITY

This illumination based on Acts 4:32-34 is medieval, almost Byzantine, in its style. The perspective is splayed and hierarchical. In the uppermost register the risen Christ is positioned within a *mandorla*, an almond shape

that was used through fifteenth-century Christian art to indicate supernatural status. His right hand is raised in the traditional gesture of blessing, but in his left hand the open book displays not the expected Alpha and Omega letters, but the English words "I AM." On either side is an attending angel.

On the next level, the steepled modern church building on the left side is balanced on the right side by the signature bell banner of the Saint John's Abbey church.⁷ This acknowledges the Abbey community as the manuscript's patron. An inverted U-shape aligns both the seated group of men and women and the table at which they are to dine. In the center foreground is an altar table on which a single candle, Gospel book, loaf of bread, and chalice holding red wine are present. The flatness of the composition becomes evident when you think about how the feet seem to just be sliding down towards the table and what would happen if the figures were to stand.

The text of Acts 4:32-34 is written in the four quadrants defined by the circular figural area. The triangular shape of these corners is reminiscent of pendentives, the structural features in a Byzantine church building that support the weight of its massive circular dome over the square space where the altar is located. The pendentives unify the most basic geometric shapes, the circle and the square. Here, too, the words unify the figural illumination with God; they tell the story that is visually depicted in the illumination and inspired by God.

The action of instruction, or catechism, in this image centers upon a meal (the Eucharist) within a meal. The Virgin Mary sits at the middle of the table. The twelve Apostles surround her, six on her right and six on her left. In addition, five women (one holds a child) and two men in garb of different ages are seated around the table. Some figures raise their hands about to speak, while others listen attentively.

Luke presents the early Christian church in Acts 2 and 4 as debating its common life; the "ideal community" is one that exchanges ideas in order to reach a point of agreement. This is mirrored in the community that sponsored this image. "For the better part of a year, the Saint John's Board of Regents and the monastic community engaged in a spirited debate (yes, monks do debate) about the wisdom and value of embarking on this journey," reports the Web site, before the Abbey would decide, "Yes, we want to embark on this monu-

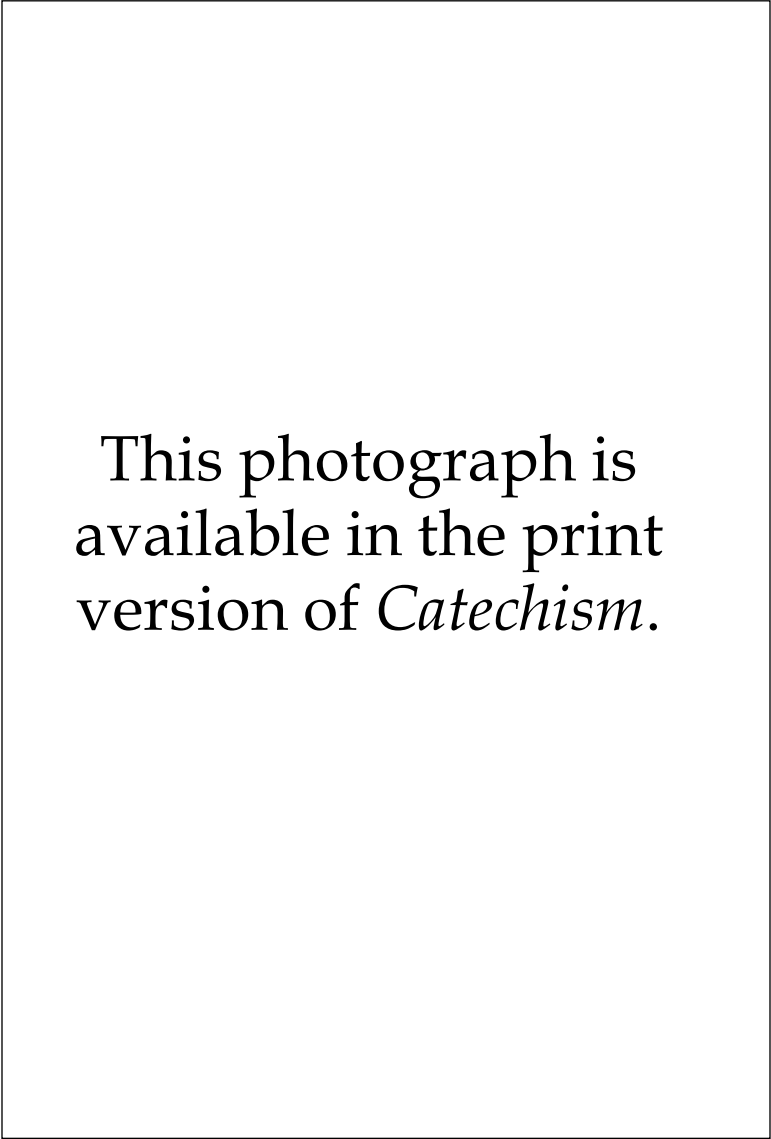
**The action of instruction, or catechism,
in LIFE IN COMMUNITY centers upon a meal
(the Eucharist) within a meal. Mary, the
Apostles, and other believers through the
ages are seated around the table.**

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ACTS 4:25–6:2, Sally Mae Joseph (Scribe) and LIFE IN COMMUNITY, Aidan Hart with contributions from Donald Jackson (Illuminators), © 2002 THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota

mental project. We want Donald Jackson to bring the Word of God to life on vellum for the next 500 years.”⁸

Occasionally an illuminator is identified in the online pages of the *Bible*. Aidan Hart, the creator of this image, was born in England and raised in New Zealand. He completed a degree in English literature and zoology but



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began painting and carving icons after becoming a member of the Orthodox Church at the age of twenty-five. He studied Greek for two years in Mount Athos, Greece, as part of a twelve-year period of testing a vocation to the monastic life.⁹ Hart's spiritual calling and artistic training are visible in his blending of eastern and western church imagery.

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LIFE OF PAUL, Aidan Hart with contributions from Donald Jackson, © 2002 THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition, © 1993, 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

LIFE OF PAUL

A highlight of the artwork in the Book of Acts is the full-page illumination, *Life of Paul*, which blends traditional method and iconography with contemporary imagery and symbolism. Usually when the Apostle is depicted in art, the subject is his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6). The text above Paul — “I saw a light from

heaven" (Acts 26:13; cf. 9:3 and 22:6) — refers to that event, but the symbols painted around him reference his later journeys and ministry. Traveling by the boat on the blue seas beneath his feet, Paul communicates the *koinonia*, or fellowship of the Christian community, to the great cities of the world. These cities, ancient and modern, are represented by a mélange of Turkish, Byzantine, Near Eastern, French Romanesque, Italian Renaissance, and contemporary buildings. Integrated into the sea waves at the bottom are the words of Paul and Barnabas's call, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47). Though he is clothed in first-century robes, Paul is holding models of two later church buildings: an Italian Renaissance dome in one hand and an Orthodox style building in the other. The Apostle literally holds the Church, West and East, in his hands.

Even the technique of this illumination, reminiscent of both a Byzantine mosaic and a twentieth-century collage, bridges past knowledge with modern experiment. A mosaic traditionally used cut pieces of glass or stone to form (when viewed from a distance) a figure with a black outline around the shape; the heavy linear quality of many of the buildings echoes this type of silhouetted form. On the other hand, the use of color, the overlapping of the figures, and the flatness of the composition are typical of a modern collage method. Light, reflective colors — reminiscent of the Venetian paintings of Titian and Giorgione — are used in the upper areas of the painting where the lines are blurred as the buildings shift into abstract forms. The strong, vibrant colors in the middle of the painting are more similar to the more acidic tones of some American realists during the Industrial Revolution.

BIRTH OF CHRIST

The *Birth of Christ* illumines the opening page of the Gospel of Luke, which contains the story of the angels announcing Christ's birth to shepherds (Luke 2:8-20). "Luke features more angels than any of the other evangelists. After these appearances, there are usually marvelous songs of praise and thanksgiving," notes Michael Patella, OSB, chair of *The Saint John's Bible* Committee on Illumination and Text.¹⁰ Immediately above the angels at the top of the painting are their words of praise to God, written vertically in two columns. The gold of their wings guide our eyes down a dense vertical slab of golden light that culminates in the crib of Jesus. Jesus is present but remains unseen in his mystery.

Surrounding the crib on the left are the shepherds — both male and female, and one is holding a baby — and the farm animals. On the right side are Mary and Joseph, and the silhouette of a bull taken from the cave paintings in Lascaux, France. Patella, who assisted the illuminators in the iconography of the images, believes that the shepherds in ancient Palestine (as they are today) were predominantly women and that although they are usually depicted as adolescent boys, it should not be assumed that they were all

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BIRTH OF CHRIST, Donald Jackson, © 2002 THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition, © 1993, 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

men.¹¹ The placement of the Lascaux bull (15,000-13,000 B.C.), which is one of the earliest known achievements of human creativity, emphasizes the humanity of Christ in a unique way. Instead of using the traditional iconography of an ox and lamb (often thought now to be anti-Semitic), *The Saint John's Bible* illuminator depicts an animal known to and painted by human beings for as long as we have recorded evidence.

The concluding phrase of Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1:79 – "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" – is written

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NATIVITY (from NOTRE SEIGNEUR), central window of the three lancets in the west façade of Chartres Cathedral, Chartres, France. 1145-1155. Stained glass. Photo: © Bridgeman-Giraudon / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

above the Lascaux bull in a lyrical, fluid script. Iconographically it connects the birth with the passion of Christ. Across the lower section of the page in yet another style of calligraphy is the beginning of Zechariah's sentence, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us" (Luke 1:78). The golden slab of light that bisects the image and radiates from the manger now represents the beginning of a new day for humanity.

The colors and composition of this illumination are similar to medieval nativity scenes in stained glass window cycles, like the beautiful one in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres, France, which is located southwest of Paris. *Nativity*, one of thirty scenes composing the Infancy of Christ window, was created between 1145 and 1155. It survived the fire that destroyed all but the west façade of the cathedral (and much of the town) in 1194. The entire window is 11 meters wide by 3.8 meters high and there are nine registers with three panels in each. The window is much like a mosaic, composed of small pieces of colored glass that are held together by strips of lead. The odd-shaped pieces require the hand of a master to assemble them into something decorous and useful to the worshiper. Like the illuminations in a

manuscript, the Chartres windows teach biblical stories and convey spiritual messages to the viewer.

The two artistic traditions of manuscript illumination and stained glass worked hand-in-hand in instructing believers during the Middle Ages. Most parishioners were illiterate. Their understanding of the faith was guided by public readings from the beautiful handwritten manuscripts of the Bible and by the interpretations of scriptural themes in the colorful church windows.

Today we are more familiar with the contemporary recovery and development of the stained glass tradition as a way of teaching the central themes of our faith.¹² *The Saint John's Bible* seeks to develop the parallel tradition of manuscript illumination as a visual pathway into the meaning of Scripture. The artistry of its calligraphers and illuminators may once again instruct believers and inspire all people by reflecting the spiritual aspirations of the twenty-first century. As the selected pages from the original manuscript of the *Bible* travel to North American venues, they may touch the hearts of those who view them with the biblical message of forgiveness.

NOTES

1 The Web site for *The Saint John's Bible* is www.sjbible.org. This quote comes from a brief history of the project at www.sjbible.org/discover/discover_chronology.html (accessed 2 March 2007).

2 www.sjbible.org/faqs.html (accessed 1 March 2007).

3 www.sjbible.org/discover/chronology_timeline.html (accessed 1 March 2007).

4 www.sjbible.org/faqs.html (accessed 1 March 2007).

5 The schedule for *The Saint John's Bible* exhibition tour, "Illuminating the Word," is available at saintjohnsbible.org/exhibits.html (accessed 2 March 2007).

6 On the Custom Prints page (www.sjbible.org/custom_prints.html), you may select each of the completed volumes to view in Adobe Flash Player.

7 For photographs and discussion of this church complex (1953) in Collegeville, Minnesota, designed by architect Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), see www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/St_Johns_Abbey.html.

8 www.saintjohnsbible.org/why/dream.htm (accessed 2 March 2007).

9 www.saintjohnsbible.org/people/hart.htm (accessed 2 March 2007).

10 www.saintjohnsbible.org/educator/birth.htm (accessed 2 March 2007).

11 Ibid.

12 See, for example, the stained glass windows designed by David J. Hetland at www.hetland.com. I have discussed his work in "Joyous Innocence," *The Moral Landscape of Creation*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics 2 (Winter 2002), 36-37.



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