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IN THE VALLEY THERE IS A GARDEN:

The Spiritual and Cultural Treasury of St. Catherine's Monastery



*Hieromonk Justin in
St. Catherine's library.*

From early Christendom, pilgrims have made their way across the fiery sands of the Sinai Desert to pray at the summit of the mountain where the Prophet Moses spoke face-to-face with the living God, where St. Helen provided for the chapel of the Burning Bush, where Emperor Justinian constructed the Church of the Transfiguration that would enshrine the relics of Great Martyr Catherine, and where St. John Climacus wrote his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. *Road to Emmaus* is very pleased to offer this interview with Father Justin, the librarian of St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, on the spiritual and cultural riches of the mount that God Himself has declared, "holy ground".

RTE: Father Justin, will you begin by telling us about your position as librarian of Orthodoxy's oldest continuously-inhabited monastery?

FR. JUSTIN: I came in February of 1996, so I've been at Sinai for over twelve years now, and it was in March of 2005 that they elected me librarian. That's a daunting responsibility because the library at Sinai is famous throughout the whole world – the accumulation of seventeen centuries of continuous tradition. We have 3,300 manuscripts in the old collection, not counting the additional manuscripts that are in the New Finds, or the archives. They are in eleven languages, the oldest dating from the fourth century. Two-thirds of the manuscripts are in Greek, which you would expect because the monastery has been predominantly Greek from its foundation, but we also have many imported manuscripts in Arabic, Syriac, Georgian, and Russian. Peo-

Opposite: The monastery below in the silence after the Paschal services.

ple have said that we are second to the Vatican in the number of Greek manuscripts, but that the Monastery of Sinai is also exceptional in the antiquity and importance of the Arabic and Slavonic manuscripts, and in the number of intact early bindings. In addition to the manuscripts we have 7,000 volumes in the old collection of early printed books, which includes 6,000 Greek printed books, and a thousand in other languages. We also have about 8,000 books in the modern library.

RTE: What is your oldest manuscript?

FR. JUSTIN: We have manuscripts from the fourth century. The most famous, of course, is the Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest complete New Testament. Most of the Codex Sinaiticus is today in the British Library. There are also pages at the University Library in Leipzig, and there are eight fragments that were retained in the State Library of Russia in St. Petersburg when the rest of the manuscript was sold to England in 1933. In Sinai, we have some twelve complete pages and forty fragments of the Codex Sinaiticus. So, although the majority of that is no longer at Sinai, it's still the most famous manuscript and we do have original pages and fragments.

We also have a Syriac manuscript that is from the fourth century. We are told that it is the oldest dated manuscript in Syriac. That was in the New Finds, so that catalog is just now in the press, and will soon be published. It will be a very important edition for the scholarly world.

The library was intended for the use and the inspiration of the fathers of the monastery, and so for the most part it contains the manuscripts you would expect – preeminently manuscripts of the Scriptures, the services, homilies of the Fathers, books of spiritual wisdom – anything that could be used in the services or that would inspire the monks in their commitment. But we also do have medical treatises, travel accounts, and classical Greek texts. Classical Greek is still the pinnacle of the Greek language. We have a manuscript of the Iliad from the ninth century at Sinai, not the sort of text you would expect at this remote desert monastery. And then, of course, the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* was written at Sinai, so we have many manuscripts of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, including pages that date from within a century of St. John Climacus himself. The most illuminated manuscript of the *Ladder* has been consolidated to allow it to travel, and was included in the exhibition of Sinai manuscripts and icons that opened at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles on November 14, 2006, and closed March 4 of the follow-

ing year. That was the first major exhibition devoted exclusively to the Sinai icons and manuscripts. I photographed the manuscript of *The Ladder* in its entirety, and the curators of the exhibition included touch screen monitors that allowed visitors to see a succession of images from this manuscript.

RTE: How have these manuscripts been preserved for so many centuries?

FR. JUSTIN: The humidity at Sinai is very low, averaging less than 20 in the summer, and rising to about 30 in the winter, which means that everything is exceptionally well preserved, but under these conditions parchment can become very brittle. This presents an issue when people want to read the manuscripts, since some of the texts are very fragile. Some years ago, the archbishop started a project for the photography of the manuscripts using a high resolution digital camera. That was my responsibility before

I became the librarian, photographing the manuscripts

and sending high resolution images to scholars. This allows scholars to read the manuscripts without having to come to Sinai, but it also preserves the manuscripts, because they aren't handled by the succession of scholars.

RTE: May pilgrims visit the library, and how do you meet the requests of scholars to study the manuscripts?

FR. JUSTIN: We have a treasury next to the church, where the most important icons, manuscripts, vestments, and ecclesiastical objects in metalwork are on display in high security display cases. In general, we do not take groups to the library anymore, but if a group expresses special interest in seeing the library, then we do open the room so that they can see the manuscripts from a protected area. We also have a number of manuscripts on display in the library. But to use the manuscripts themselves we request that scholars write the archbishop, and receive approval from both the archbishop and the holy council of the fathers of the monastery. We are very happy for scholars to use the manuscripts, so long as they obtain permission beforehand.



Wide angle view of the library, manuscripts above, early printed books below.

We prefer to give them photographs, and many scholars also prefer this, for it allows them to study the Sinai manuscripts in the convenience of their own office. But if a manuscript is in good condition, then the scholar can read the original manuscript. Some of them are so fragile that I hold the manuscript and the scholar just reads it – I don't let the scholar handle the manuscript. A few are so fragile that they cannot be opened safely until they have been conserved.

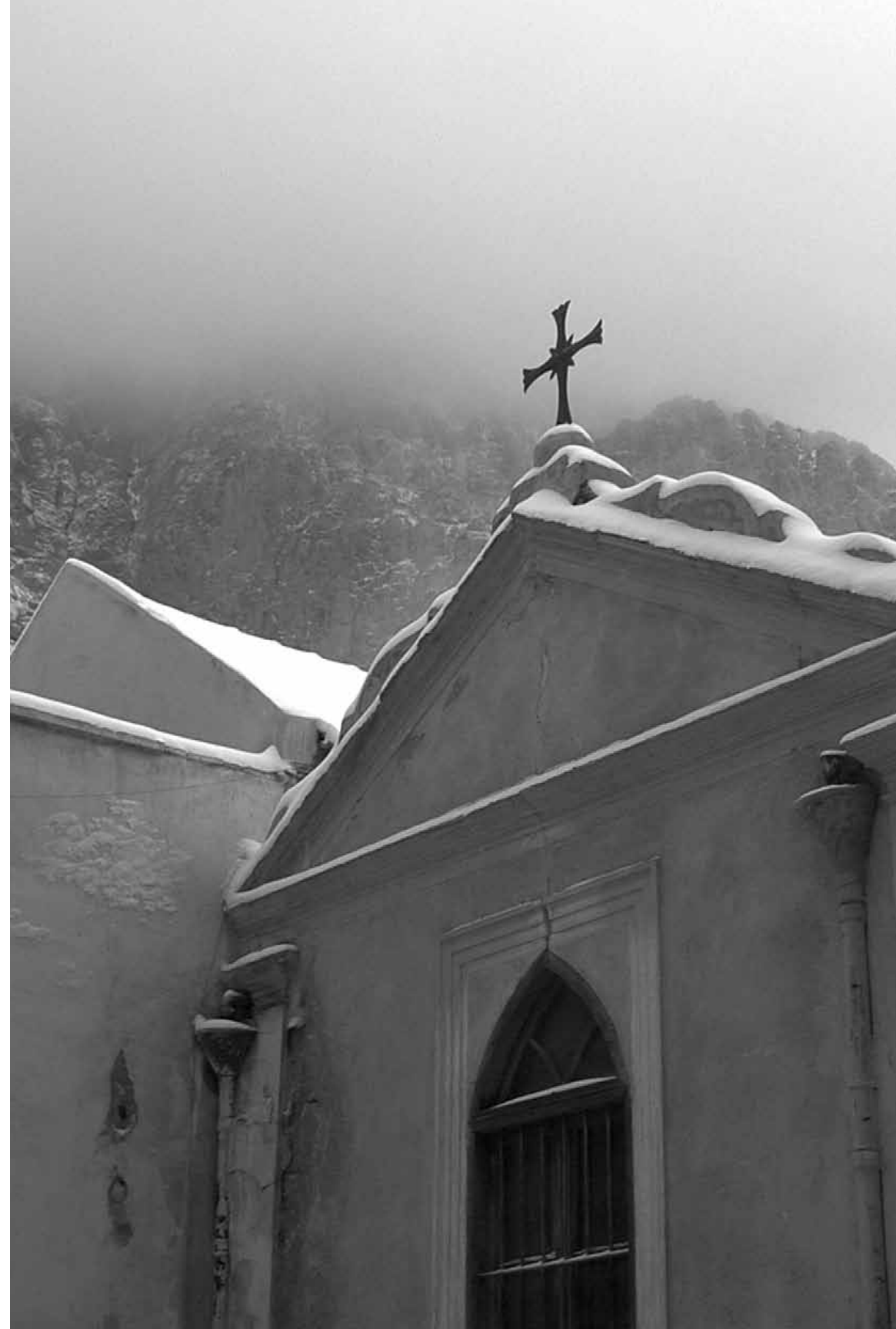
We also have a very important project now, which is the renovation of the library building. The library was built along the south wall of the monastery; construction began in 1930 and was completed in 1951. The purpose of the present building was to have a better place for the manuscripts and the icons, so it's been a valuable addition to the monastery. But the building needs to be brought up to modern standards. Since it is a relatively new building, it only needs to be renovated. An architect has drawn up final designs and these have been approved by the Egyptian authorities. The renovation will begin later this year. We will have a seminar room, conservation workrooms, digital photography rooms. We need to enclose many of the manuscripts in protective cases, and this renovation will give us the additional space required for the cases.

The manuscripts will be at the lower level of the new library, either enclosed in protective cases or stored in cabinets. But we want to continue to have an appealing display, and this will be accomplished by having the early printed books exposed on shelves at the upper level of the library.

RTE: Did the monks of earlier centuries actually use these finely decorated manuscripts to study with, or were they seen primarily as works of art to glorify the sacred texts?

FR. JUSTIN: In the life of Saint John Climacus, it is recorded that when he was living as a solitary, he dispelled despondency by praying much and copying books. The copying of books was a handwork that contributed towards concentration and prayer, while also bringing edification to anyone who would read that text. That would also be true of the beautifully wrought manuscripts decorated with gilded letters and illuminations. But these tended to be the work of the scriptoria of Constantinople. In Sinai it was always difficult to find the necessary writing materials, and the texts written here

Opposite: Rare photo of the monastery with low-lying cloud and light snow. The Chapel of Saint Stephen.





were for the most part humble texts written in the midst of privations and ascetic struggles. A brilliantly-illuminated manuscript could have been the gift of some king or ruler, kept as a treasure, and as a witness to the piety of the donor. But we do see signs of use on some of the most splendid manuscripts. The tenth-century Codex Theodosianus has signs of use on the Gospel reading that is appointed for the feast of the Nativity of Christ. So even such a splendid text as that was brought out on very special occasions and used in the Divine Liturgy. And it could still be used today. At Sinai, the language and the readings have remained the same from the tenth century to the present day.

RTE: How far do you go in restoring manuscripts?

FR. JUSTIN: People have pointed out that the Vatican has over four thousand Greek manuscripts, but only two percent of them have their original bindings. Sinai is unsurpassed today for the number of intact early bindings. As recently as 1960, one of the great benefactors of Harvard University, Arthur Houghton, came and visited Sinai during the time that Princeton professor Kurt Weitzmann was there studying the icons. Houghton was particularly a patron of Harvard's rare books library, and he had an amazing collection of printed books and manuscripts himself. He was appalled at finding so many of the Sinai manuscripts in a dilapidated state and he offered a large donation to make a major rebinding effort. Both Weitzmann and Houghton put a lot of pressure on the archbishop to accept this exceptional offer. But the monks rejected it, saying, "We don't want foreigners touching our manuscripts." Today conservators say, "Close call," because if this had been carried out, Sinai would not be the repository of intact early bindings that it is today.

Today, conservators seek to arrest deterioration. If an object is stable, it may be best to leave it alone. If you intervene, you do so with complete documentation, so that there is a record of everything before and after the intervention. You preserve everything that might have been removed during the intervention, and everything is kept so that there is a complete record. We are fortunate that only now, when there is this much more cautious approach, are we seeking to address these conservation issues.

RTE: What is your own particular favorite among the manuscripts?

Opposite: View of the monastery just after it enters into the morning sunlight, from the mountain to the north.

FR. JUSTIN: My favorite is a lectionary – a book of passages of the gospels read during services – written in the tenth century. A modern lectionary will have over five hundred readings, including daily readings and festal readings for the entire year. This manuscript has only seventy-one. It was a lectionary reserved for the most important feast days. At the beginning of the manuscript are seven brilliant illuminations. There is an illumination of Christ, the Virgin Mary, Hosios Petros of Monovatos (the saint in whose memory this lectionary was commissioned), and then the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The first three illuminations are on right-hand pages with blank pages on the left. The four evangelists are on left-hand pages, so that the illumination of St. John faces the beginning of the Gospel of St. John. Every letter on every page is written in gold, in majuscule script (all capital letters) with wide margins. As a result, relatively few verses fit on each page. It is breathtaking to see how well preserved it is and how exceptionally beautiful it is. There is a gleam of light across the gilded letters when you turn the pages, and you can imagine it being used in the liturgy, illuminated by lamps and candles. I wrote an essay on this manuscript, which was included in the catalog for the Getty exhibition. It is called, “The Sinai Codex Theodosianus: Manuscript as Icon.”

RTE: Do you have any manuscripts that you know were handled by saints?

FR. JUSTIN: You can be confident that they were, though I think that most saints are known to God alone, and they will be revealed at the Last Day.

RTE: Have you come across interesting colophons – additional notes from copyists or readers in the margins or ends of manuscripts?

FR. JUSTIN: The most common are threats to anyone who would dare take this manuscript out of the library. Anyone who would do such a thing will have the condemnation of the 318 Holy Fathers. This refers to the bishops who were gathered at the First Ecumenical Council.

Another one says, “In the year of our Saviour 1662 AD, on the twelfth day of March, at the third hour, the strength was not that of the ink or the paper or the hand or the pen; the strength is God’s, the creator of all things. It is the labour of me, useless and unworthy, named Leontius, basest of hieromonks. If there are errors, grant me forgiveness, because I am ignorant, and this is my first writing.”

Sometimes you want to know who wrote a manuscript, who donated it, how it reached the monastery. Sometimes there are colophons that give this information, but often there are no such indications. You are grateful when you do find a colophon; then you understand more about the history of the manuscript.

Mohammed’s Letter of Protection

RTE: Another element in the preservation of these treasures would be the fact that St. Catherine’s Monastery has never been destroyed. Having been given shelter there by the monks, Mohammed offered the monastery his protection, an edict that is still respected throughout the Muslim world.

FR. JUSTIN: The tradition of the monastery is that Mohammed dictated a letter giving protection to the monks and to the Christians in the area. This is a very important document, called the *Achtinames*. The first part of the document lists conditions for the protection of the monastery. One example is that if the monastery has a church, the church is not to be confiscated, it is to be left to the monastery. An example of the second set of conditions is that if a Christian woman marries a Moslem husband, she is free to go to her Christian services. So they are rules that would ensure harmony among the Christians and the Moslems, very soon after the Moslems came to the area.

RTE: Did that second condition only apply to the Christians around St. Catherine’s?

FR. JUSTIN: It was dictated for the Christians living there, but it is not limited only to them. This is an extremely important document. But Mohammed dictated many letters of protection for different peoples. The largest Christian settlement in the Arabian Peninsula was in Najran, which is today in Yemen. He dictated a letter of protection for the Christians of Najran. There were also Jews living in the Arabian Peninsula, in Kheybar, and he dictated a letter of protection for them.

Some of these letters survive to this day, including the letter he wrote to the king of Ethiopia, and the letter he wrote to the viceroy of Alexandria. The Ottoman sultans saw themselves as the protectors of Islam, so anything that was associated with Mohammed was taken to a special room in the Topkapi palace in Istanbul. That is where the letter to Sinai was taken by the first Ot-

toman sultan to rule Egypt, Sultan Selim, in about 1516. The letters that we have are copies made at that time. The sultan ordered that enough copies be made so that every church would have a copy, and then in earlier times the monks would use this like a passport when they traveled through the Ottoman lands.

In later years, Mohammed had a signet ring, and he would stamp the document with his ring. But in earlier years, because he did not write, he would dictate, and then he would touch the original, and the scribe would write, "I put my hand on this." That is why they paint a hand on the copies, as a symbol that he touched the original. On one copy that we have on display in the library, the hand is small. Many people think that it is like an inkprint of the original hand, and so the perennial question of every group visiting the library is, "Why is Mohammed's hand so small?" One of the Egyptian guides came up with a very clever explanation. He said, "Well, my grandmother is much smaller than I am, and if you think about that extending over the centuries, back in the seventh century they would have been very small people."

The document we have on display in the museum has the hand executed in gold leaf. It was written in Turkish because the rulers at the time were the Ottomans. Next to that we have another copy of the same document written in Arabic, so that Arabic-speaking visitors can read it.

The Sinai Bedouin

FR. JUSTIN: Another important element in the preservation of the monastery and its treasures are the Bedouin. The Bedouin trace their descent to the soldiers who built the monastery in the sixth century, and who became Moslems at the coming of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. But the monastery has always had not only peaceful relations with them, but an amazing rapport and mutual respect. We couldn't maintain everything at the monastery today without their help. And the monastery has always given them support. It's an amazing symbiosis that has continued from very early times. One person told me that the Sinai Bedouin are the oldest racially distinct group in the Middle East, second only to the Samaritans. Traditionally, the Bedouin marry within their own tribe. They don't intermarry with other tribes, so they've remained racially distinct from the seventh century. They are called Jebaliyah, from the Arabic word *Jebel*, which means "mountain,"

Opposite: One of the kitchen storerooms before renovation.





so they are the “People of the Mountain,” referring to Mount Sinai. They will not allow Bedouin from other tribes to work for the monastery, because they think of the monastery as theirs. Many of them speak English very well, and one of them told me, “Our bond with the monastery is genetic,” because it has been there from the seventh century.

With the additional responsibilities as librarian, I was having trouble finding time for the digital photography of the manuscripts, and I explained to the archbishop that I needed an assistant to help me. We thought about bringing people from Greece, but that is difficult. You have the cost of airfare, you have the expenses of providing room and board, and wages – and how long can you expect a person to stay? One month? Three or four months? Not more. So I said, “Give me one of the Bedouin. As long as he is instinctively careful, I can teach him the computer part.” Some of the fathers were not very welcoming to the idea of a Bedouin working with the manuscripts, because they were very concerned for the manuscripts, and rightly so. But one of our Bedouin, Hamid, had recently taken a degree in economics and computer science – the first Bedouin ever to graduate from university. He’d thought about working in a bank, but when he could not find such work, he asked if he could work for the monastery. The archbishop assigned him to be my assistant. He has caught on to the process very quickly. He has worked for me for about two years now and he has been a tremendous help. When I get a succession of visitors and distractions, and my photography of the manuscripts would have ground to a halt, he is able to continue, and we’ve been able to do a lot with his help.

RTE: I was told by a pilgrim to Sinai that when the Bedouin have problems among themselves, they go to Archbishop Damianos to settle their differences.

FR. JUSTIN: Actually, they have elected sheiks who are responsible for settling their various problems. But if they can’t settle them, then they appeal to the archbishop. He is thus like the grandfather for all the Bedouin.

Another person who knows them very well is Fr. Pavlos, who has been a priest at St. Catherine’s for about thirty years. He is very compassionate, and concerned for the Bedouin. When they have a problem, which is many times a financial problem, they appeal to him, and he is able to help them out. But he is also very discreet; he knows who genuinely needs help and

Opposite: One of the earliest cells, preserved inside a complex within the monastery.

who might be taking advantage of his kindness. Fr. Galakleon, the *Economos*, is in charge of the workmen and of the many gardens that belong to the monastery, so he knows all of the Bedouin who maintain the gardens. Father Moses, who lives as a hermit about half an hour's walk outside of the monastery, is also very concerned for the Bedouin. He started a project to support their traditional crafts, and he has been able to find venues for the sale of these crafts.

RTE: Do you have much relationship with the other desert monasteries in Egypt, like St. Paul's and St. Anthony's, and Wadi Naturn?

FR. JUSTIN: All of the other monasteries in Egypt are Coptic monasteries, so we have cordial relations with them, but we are separate Churches. I have visited St. Anthony's and St. Paul's. I have not yet had the opportunity to visit the monasteries of the Wadi Natrun.

The Codex Sinaiticus

RTE: Can you tell us more now about the Codex Sinaiticus, which was taken from the monastery in the nineteenth century under false pretences.

FR. JUSTIN: The story of the Codex Sinaiticus is very long and complicated, but to tell it briefly, Constantin von Tischendorf, the great German biblical scholar, recognized the importance of the Codex and took it from the monastery on two different occasions. That was how it was lost to the monastery, in spite of his promise to return it.

But a recent development, which is encouraging, is that the British library, the University Library in Leipzig, the State Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, and St. Catherine's Monastery are now all cooperating so that we will conserve and photograph the existing pages, and have a range of products as a result of that collaboration. One will be a complete facsimile of the text, which will be the first facsimile ever to contain all of the existing pages and fragments. It will be a large, heavy book printed in full color.

There will also be a website, and likely also a DVD. These will have a general history of the manuscript so that if a person doesn't know Greek or anything about the Scriptures, they will be able to appreciate why it is such an important manuscript. There will also be very advanced study tools. A scholar will be able to see high resolution images of the entire manuscript, and a transcription of the text. If you move your cursor over the image, you

will see the transcription of that part of the text. And if you move your cursor over the transcription, you will be able to see every possible variant for each word, and a complete listing of the manuscripts that contain each of the variants. These are unprecedented amounts of information that will be available to scholars to enable them to make a detailed analysis of the text of the Scriptures. This study is fairly advanced for the text of the New Testament, but much yet needs to be done for the Greek text of the Old Testament. Much of this will be work in progress, and as scholars complete work, it will be added to the project website. This is a very ambitious project, and we hope it will set a precedent for similar projects, because there are other manuscripts that deserve such a special study.

Archbishop Damianos agreed to participate in this project under two conditions. One, that participation in this project would not be seen as acceptance of the status quo. We still think that the legal questions concerning the Codex Sinaiticus are open questions. The second condition was that there would be a complete search through the archives in Sinai, Russia, Germany, and England concerning the Codex, and that scholars would be commissioned to draft a recent history of the Codex based on the archives, many documents of which have never been published. The scholars must be approved by all of the participating institutions, and their history must also be approved by all of the participating institutions. It is an extremely complex history, but the record needs to be set straight, and the archbishop was eager to see this accomplished.

RTE: How does the Codex Sinaiticus compare to Vatican Library documents. Do they have manuscripts that are as early?

FR. JUSTIN: The most famous manuscript they have is the Codex Vaticanus, and people say that the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus are sister manuscripts, because the text is remarkably parallel, and the manuscripts date from about the same time. They date from about the first half of the fourth century, and are thus contemporary with the Emperor Constantine. The Codex Vaticanus breaks off in the New Testament, while the Codex Sinaiticus is complete, and is thus the oldest complete New Testament. The Codex Sinaiticus is missing part of the Old Testament.

In 1881, Wescott and Hort, the great English scholars from Cambridge, published a critical edition of the New Testament that scholars respect to this day. They felt that the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus were the

two preeminent manuscripts of the New Testament, so much so, that if the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus agreed on a reading, one could set aside the rest of the manuscript tradition. They were that important. Scholars today would be much more cautious about taking the whole of the evidence into account, but the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus are still extremely important for people studying the text, especially of the New Testament, but also the Greek Old Testament as well.



Illuminated manuscript in the library of St. Catherine's Monastery.

The Codex Sinaiticus is also very, very beautiful. It is the only fourth-century manuscript of the Scriptures written four columns to the page. The pages are very large and the parchment is very thin and fine, so it would have been an extravagant and costly

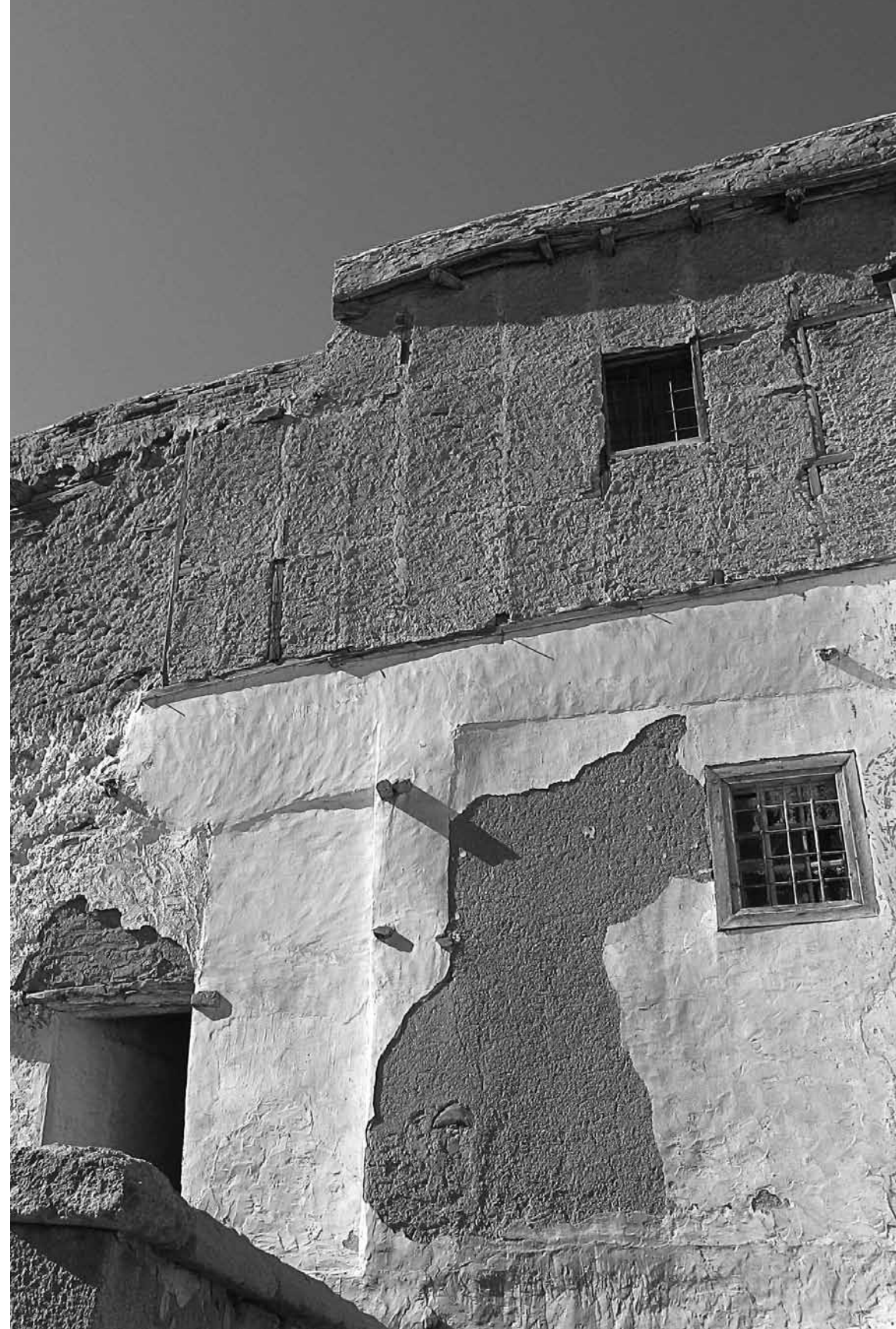
manuscript to produce. The Codex Vaticanus had faded and a scribe rewrote the text, so you don't see the beauty of the original script except for the few letters that he missed. The Codex Sinaiticus wasn't subjected to that treatment. It very easy to read because it is written in all capital letters, and these were beautifully written. There are decorated borders, which are most often added at the end of each particular book.

RTE: Would St. John Climacus have read from the Codex Sinaiticus?

FR. JUSTIN: It is mentioned in his life that during the forty years he lived as a hermit, he dispelled despondency by praying much and copying manuscripts. This is evidence of the copying of manuscripts at Sinai in the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

One of the pages of the Codex Sinaiticus that survives at Sinai contains the passage in the Book of Numbers that describes how Moses struck the rock with his staff, and waters came forth for the children of Israel. The beginning of that section has been marked with an "M," and on the edge of the page, there are the remains of a tab. When the pilgrim Egeria visited Sinai around 384, she mentioned that the monks read those passages of scripture concerning each of the events that took place there. This page of the Codex Sinaiticus has been marked to allow exactly such a reading.

Opposite: Ancient cells to the south of the basilica.



RTE: It may have been the very volume she heard it from.

FR. JUSTIN: Some might say this is going a little too far, but it's marked in exactly that same way.

The Oldest Christian Manuscripts

The Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus were the oldest known manuscripts of the Scriptures in the middle of the nineteenth century, but in the latter nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, even older manuscripts of the Scriptures were found, written on papyrus. These tend to be either one of the gospels, or the collected epistles of St. Paul. At the Bodmer Library outside Geneva, they have a copy of the gospel of St. John dating from about 180. It is very well preserved. The oldest manuscript of the collected epistles of St. Paul dates from around the year 200. Unfortunately, when that was discovered, the dealer thought he would get more by dividing it up, so part of it is owned by the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, and part of it is owned by the University of Michigan. It is felt that manuscripts of the collected epistles of Saint Paul would have been copied from about the year 100, and we have an extant manuscript of these texts, from only one century later. These are older manuscripts for the study of the text of the Scriptures, but even so, the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus continue to be of great importance to textual scholars.

In 1997, I visited the University of Michigan with a Greek friend whose father had been one of the teachers of the curator of the papyrus collection there. He took us to the climate controlled vault and slid out the glass plates. With my own eyes I was able to read the second-century text of the epistles of Saint Paul. The pages were easy to read because they're very well preserved, and beautifully written.

Sinai's Icons

RTE: Can you say something about the icons of St. Catherine's, such as the famous Sinai icon of Christ Pantocrator?

FR. JUSTIN: Sinai is more famous for its icons than for its manuscripts, as exceptional as the manuscripts are. I have read that of all the Byzantine icons

Opposite: A view of the sixth-century mosaic of the Transfiguration before renovation.



that survive in the entire world, half of them are at St. Catherine's Monastery. The oldest ones, including Christ Pantocrator, date from the sixth century. They were painted using the wax encaustic technique, and they are exceptional. We think that early means primitive and later means more developed, so it is astonishing to see that some of the earliest surviving depictions in the world are amazingly spiritual and yet also amazingly realistic. This is due in part to their having been executed in the encaustic technique, but also because the artists were drawing on the whole heritage of classical portraiture. In later icons, after iconoclasm, everything became more stylized.

By the time you come to Cretan icons, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, you have names and you have dates. Earlier icons are dated by making comparisons, and Kurt Weitzmann, the professor of art history at Princeton University, pioneered this method of dating. If you have fifteen manuscripts of one text, and they have variants, you can compare the variants and say, "This is likely the derivative, and this is likely the earlier reading," and you can then arrange the manuscripts in sequence and work your way back towards the archetype. He applied that same technique to icons. Icons have certain similarities, but then you can look at the differences and say, "This is likely the derivative and this is likely the earlier depiction." The icons at Sinai are exceptional because we have icons from the sixth century all the way through to icons painted only recently. By ranging those in a probable historical sequence, he was able to compare them to other collections and then expand and develop his theories to come up with a much more informed way of dating early icons.

Weitzmann felt that the Sinai encaustic icons could only have come from Constantinople, and he was able to make artistic comparisons to confirm such an attribution. With the increasing study of the Fayum portraits, other scholars have said that the Sinai encaustic icons wouldn't have had to come from Constantinople. They might have been painted in Alexandria, for example. But there are no icons from Alexandria that survive from the sixth century to compare them to. So there is nothing to substantiate such an attribution. In fact, they might also have been painted at Sinai.

RTE: Does Sinai have its own lineage of icon painters?

FR. JUSTIN: We know that exceptional icons were painted at Sinai in the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. These icons are distinguished by the polished halos that catch the light. The last surviving icon painter of St.

Catherine's was Fr. Pachomios, who died in 1958. Very important icons are being painted on Athos, and certainly the creation of very traditional, very beautiful Orthodox icons continues in Greece, but unfortunately, there is no one at Sinai who paints icons. Many people come to study the icons, but no member of the community is an icon painter.

Exhibiting the Monastery Treasures

RTE: So now, you have begun exhibiting some of these manuscripts and icons. It must take an immense amount of preparation to send them abroad.

FR. JUSTIN: We had never participated in any exhibition until 1997, when the monastery sent one manuscript and nine icons to New York for an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art called, "The Glory of Byzantium." Then, about three years later, the monastery sent some of its larger icons to the Hermitage for an exhibition there in St. Petersburg. We want to encourage the Russians to recover their spiritual heritage. The funding for the exhibition was from benefactors in England, and the icons were later on display in London before returning to Sinai. The exhibition at the Getty Museum, in Los Angeles, held in 2006-2007, was the first exhibition devoted exclusively to the icons and manuscripts of Sinai.

We try to be very selective with requests for exhibitions. Because of the very low humidity at Sinai, icons and manuscripts must be exhibited in airtight display cases, where the same low humidity levels can be maintained. That's very difficult to achieve, and very costly. The Getty Museum, for example, made their own crates for the transportation of the icons and manuscripts to their exhibition. Each crate had three separate containers. There is an inner container that is lined with aluminum and sealed with aluminum so that it is like a metal box. That fits into an intermediate box which is cushioned. Then there are partitions made of further cushioning between that and the outer box. Then the whole thing is wrapped in plastic with vibration absorbing cushions underneath. So, for two manuscripts, you end up with an immense shipping crate when you add all of the layers and all of the insulation. But that absolutely insures that they are transported in the best possible way. Then, they are opened under controlled climate conditions, and immediately put into display cases. Each display case has a data-logger, so that you know not only the precise temperature and humidity readings, but you have

a complete record of the conditions for each of the display cases throughout the whole exhibition.

Some museums have a policy that no paintings on panels ever travel because they are so fragile, and so sensitive to changes in humidity. We fully appreciate the risk involved in transporting panels from a very dry desert atmosphere for exhibition in museums. But it seems to the monastery that it is critically important for us to share the amazing spiritual heritage that we have inherited, especially in these days, when so many are eager for spiritual consolation. That is why we participate in these exhibitions.

Pilgrimage to Sinai

RTE: What would you say to pilgrims coming to Sinai?

FR. JUSTIN: It is very important to remember that as exceptional as the icons and the manuscripts are, they were created for use in prayer and liturgy. With the living community and the continuing daily cycle of services, everything exists within its original context.

Sinai has always been a small monastery. Today the largest Greek Orthodox monasteries are on Athos, which is thus a center for Orthodox monasticism. Sinai has always been a few monks living in the desert and it remains so to this day, but it is exceptional that it's been a living community for seventeen centuries. When you attend services at Sinai, you become aware of this long continuity, praying in the very basilica that was constructed at the command of the Emperor Justinian, where St. John Climacus, where Saint Gregory of Sinai, where so many saints have prayed and worshipped. I think that Sinai is the oldest monastery that has never made a prohibition against women visiting. Women cannot go to Athos, nor can women enter the monastery of Mar Sabbas near Jerusalem. But women can visit Sinai, where they venerate the relics of St. Catherine, and are present in all of our services.

Most visitors come in the evening, climb to the peak of Sinai in the early hours of the morning to see the sunrise, and then come down to see the church and the museum. Or, they come on a day excursion from the coast, and visit the church and museum in the latter part of the morning. To really appreciate Sinai, I think you need to be there for two, three, or four days. Then you can get away from these large groups that come every morning,

Opposite: Spring of Moses, Sinai.





and fully appreciate the profound quiet in the very early morning when we have our own services, or in the evening after all the visitors have left. You can experience the traditional Sinai that can be hard to find if you are only there in the morning in a group.

Visitors should climb to the peak of Sinai, but then, if time allows for anything else, they should go to the cave of St. John Climacus. There are no true caves at Sinai, but there are places where immense boulders have come together to make a little enclosure. That is the traditional place where St. John Climacus lived for forty years as a hermit before he was elected abbot of Sinai. There are many little chapels and gardens, and given the time, you can visit a number of them. There are very holy places with beautiful chapels that are seldom seen by visitors who come there for only a brief time.

RTE: To end our interview, the monastery's foundation is bound up with Mount Sinai as the place where Moses received the tablets of the law, and where he saw the Burning Bush. Does the monastery hold to the tradition that the bush in the courtyard is the original Burning Bush? According to Jewish sources, Moses was born in the month of Adar, 2368 (about 1400 BC) which would make this bush extremely old.

FR. JUSTIN: Egeria mentions the Burning Bush. "In the valley there is a garden, and in the garden there is a church next to the bush," so from the fourth century, there is a recorded history of the chapel and the bush growing beside it. When Egyptian botanists were asked, "Can this possibly be the same Burning Bush?" they pointed out that a bush constantly renews itself on its root stock. A tree can be very, very old, but then there comes a time when it doesn't renew itself anymore, but a bush can go on indefinitely. So there are botanists who have said that it is physically possible for a bush to be that old.

But it is the place, and not just the bush itself, that is significant. God said to Moses, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." It is the place that has been hallowed by the revelation of God to Moses. In the life of Saint John Climacus it is said, "He took up the monastic yoke in Mount Sinai, and, I think, by the visible nature of the place itself, he was impelled and guided towards the invisible God." That is what I pray everyone would be able to come to Sinai and experience for themselves. ✦

Opposite: The Chapel of Saint Anne is built on a promontory of granite, on Mount Horeb, about an hour's walk from the summit of Sinai.