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Monks in the world

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Quad 136

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Last week was a big week for Saint John's on the world stage. On Friday a small group from Saint John's had the pleasure of delivering the last volume of *The Saint John's Bible* to Pope Francis in Rome.

On Thursday the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) marked the 50th Anniversary of its founding. Both were important reminders of the exceptional community the men of Saint John's Abbey have formed.

The Saint John's Bible project, which reached the end of a particular chapter in its history with the delivery of the last of seven volumes to the Pope, was an ambitious undertaking that began in the late 1990s. Artist and calligrapher Donald Jackson had long dreamed of a hand-written Bible, which had not been done in 500 years, but it took the vision of Fr. Eric Hollas and Br. Dietrich Reinhart, and the support of the Saint John's community, to bring the dream to reality. The project was not without its bumps: the financial breakeven point, while in sight, has not been reached yet and there remain more than a few skeptics. But I think it is safe to say that the final work and its impact in the world have exceeded the initial hopes of the cultural entrepreneurs who undertook it.

Both the audacity and generosity of the vision are striking. The creation of the *The Saint John's Bible* was not for Collegeville, or even just for Catholics. It was an ecumenical act for the world, "to fire the spiritual imagination" of those who experienced the art and theology of the illuminated text. It was financially risky and certainly beyond the previous conception of Saint John's mission. Yet the monks felt it was important to give this gift to the world.

In many ways HMML was an even more generous decision. Monks had long played a role in preserving culture and, in 1965, the Saint John's community decided to use technology to continue this longstanding Benedictine charism. Fr. Oliver Kapsner was the

Father Oliver Kapsner, OSB, and his microfilming team at the Kodak offices in Vienna, Austria (September 1971) via Books from the HMML Basement

visionary in this case, but the Abbey made a commitment of time, treasure and labor to build a microfilm library of ancient manuscripts, both to preserve them and to make them available to scholars. This was a pure gift to the academic world. Unlike *The Saint John's Bible*, there would be no commercial opportunities to repay the financial investment in HMML.

Monks traveled the world, negotiating with various communities and governments for the privilege of microfilming ancient documents. The microfilm was brought back to Collegeville where HMML has cataloged the materials and hosted scholars from around the world. This project has made the University well-known among historians, even as the rest of the world sometimes can't quite place Saint John's. Modern digital technology has made capturing the images easier and the internet has made dissemination potentially world-wide. At the same time, the need to preserve cultural artifacts appears to be just as great, if not greater, than it was in 1965. Terrorism and war in Africa and the middle east in particular threaten ancient cultural artifacts and the prescience of monks in 1965 has been rewarded with an even more pressing mandate with each new conflict.

Saint John's Abbey Church

The presence of Saint John's in the news this past week is a powerful reminder of the spirit of the monastic community. Monks might quite understandably choose a quiet life of study, prayer and contemplation. The community could live apart from the world: *ora et labora*. But from the beginning, when they came west to serve the German Catholics of Minnesota, the community has been outward looking, fully living in the world and serving those both near and far.

The Saint John's Bible and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library are but two of the innovative things that can be credited, at least in part, to the monastic community. The list is long and varied: the ecumenical movement that spawned the Collegeville Institute, the liturgical reforms that were part of Vatican II, the founding of Minnesota Public Radio, the decision to invite Marcel Breuer to design and build some of the most striking modern architecture in the world, the creation of the Abbey Arboretum and Outdoor University, bringing one of the first mainframe computers to a Minnesota college, the establishment of the Saint John's Pottery and surely others of which I know too little.

Those of us who have studied at the University, as well as the faculty and staff, have benefited from the ferment, energy and entrepreneurial spirit that the monks bring to all they do. It is one of the things that makes our educational experience unique

and truly differentiates Saint John's University from the many other fine residential, liberal arts colleges in the United States.

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] PrezHemesath.