

# Letter from the President

This past summer I visited the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library at St. John's University and Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. It was an exulted experience because I was able to see the exhibits of the *Saint John's Bible*. This book is the first hand written, illuminated Bible in modern English published since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. Not surprising, it was commissioned by the Benedictine Community at SJU and Abbey, one of the largest Benedictine communities in the world. In the Catholic book world St. John's is important for the HMML and the home of The Liturgical Press.

This opportunity to visit the HMML immerses one in the Benedictine tradition of reverence for the human spirit, work, study, prayer and worship stretching back to the sixth century when the Benedictine monasteries preserved the writings and culture of civilization. In other words, integral and at the heart of preserving civilization is the reverence for the book which enables the *lectio divino* of prayer to happen.

To ignite the spiritual imagination at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century SJU and Abbey commissioned a work of art to illuminate the Word of God, continue and revive the Benedictine charism and commitment to the study of the scriptures, to the book arts, along with the educational, artistic, and spiritual refinement of the human spirit. To implement this undertaking Donald Jackson, the official calligrapher to Queen Elizabeth, was chosen. In 1970, in an interview by Barbara Walters on the Today Show, he mentioned that his greatest dream would be to write the Bible by hand. "The Bible is the calligraphic artist's supreme challenge, our Sistine Chapel, a daunting task." He reiterated this desire again on Minnesota Public Radio in 1985 and again in 1995 at the Newberry Library in Chicago. His aspirations were heard and thus the foremost Western calligrapher of our times undertook the challenge with SJU and Abbey.

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000, Ash Wednesday – the first word of the *St. John's Bible* was penned by Donald Jackson on vellum. We are not surprised the words were: "In the beginning was the Word...." The *Gospels and Acts* were completed in 2001. The *Pentateuch* was completed in 2003, the *Book of Psalms* was completed in 2004, and the *Prophets* should be completed by the end of 2005. In all there will be seventy-three books of the Bible in seven volumes, two feet tall and three feet wide, 160 illuminations, 1,000 pages, each letter rendered by hand, using the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. This is indeed an historic undertaking.

Why this Bible is such a spectacularly beautiful work of art and scholarship is because of the spirit, which motivates not only the Benedictine community, but the artist himself. Donald Jackson said: "The continuing process of remaining open and accepting of what may reveal itself through hand and heart on a crafted page is the closest I have ever come to God.... So the pursuit of closeness to God, a lifetime's dream continues, a fearful challenge. What better reason can there be for starting a journey."

Isn't this close to what we as librarians try to achieve, when we order a title, catalog a document, process a volume, negotiate a reference transaction or inter-library loan? Isn't this what we try to do when we bring information to a patron, so that this knowledge will bring that person closer to the Truth. "In the beginning was the Word..."

Donald Jackson was right. "What better reason can there be...?"

Fr. Kenneth O'Malley, C.P.  
President.