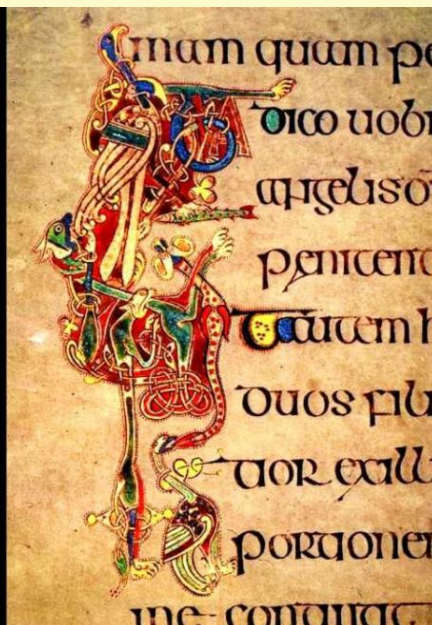




## SACRED WINDOWS

An invitation to gaze into heaven's stained  
glass windows  
Beauty, Truth, and Goodness



### Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 18, 2022

#### Ravishing Calligraphy Leaps Off Every Page of This Bible

Dear Thomas,

Readers of Sacred Windows may recall a previous newsletter in which I marveled at the amazing grace of **the Order of St. Benedict**. Their extraordinary [monastic libraries](#) dotting the landscape of Europe symbolize the ancient order's contributions to the world's learning and culture, and many right-thinking historians credit them, *literally*, with preserving Western civilization after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Well, they've done it again. This time out of a Benedictine monastery *in Minnesota!*

It's not that they've saved Western civilization again (although we may be calling on their services very soon) but rather that they've opened up **a sacred window of holiness and truth** for our civilization – not to mention a fountain of ravishing beauty – the likes of which has not been produced *since the invention of the printing press*.

It's known as *The Saint John's Bible* and is "The first hand-written, hand-illuminated monumental Bible to be commissioned by a Benedictine monastery in **500 years**." That is not a pious boast. It's a fact.

*Newsweek* called it, simply, "America's [Book of Kells](#)."

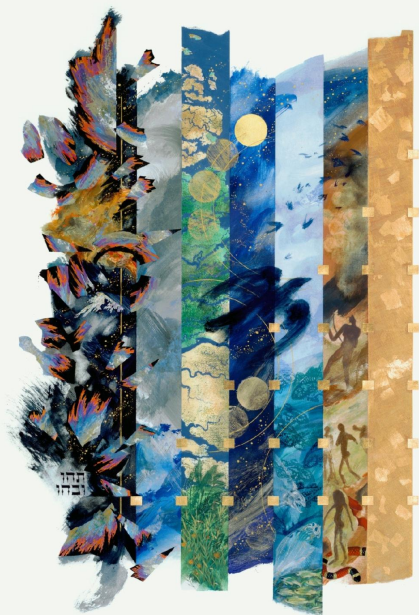


Given the number of images in this newsletter, I am placing the common reference for all of them here and then each image below will bear its specific title and creator information. **Note for all images:** Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition*, © 1993, 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

#### The "Genesis" of the Work

(Pun intended.) In 1995 Fr. Eric Hollas, OSB, collaborated with **the famous calligrapher, Donald Jackson**, on a seminar in Chicago, and over lunch, Mr. Jackson aired his great ambition: to create a "handwritten, illuminated, monumental Bible."

Mr. Jackson had nurtured this desire in his heart since he was a boy. He further noted that hand-printing the whole Bible "is the calligraphic artist's supreme challenge (our Sistine Chapel), a daunting task."



**Creation**, Donald Jackson with contributions from Chris Tomlin, © 2003, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Including the planning stages, the whole project of sacred illumination took fifteen years of arduous labor to complete (from 1996 to 2011), and perfectly expressed **St. Benedict's motto: *Ora et Labora*** (Pray and Work).

When presented with a copy of this Bible, Pope Benedict XVI himself remarked with wonder: "This is a work of art ... a beautiful work of art ... a work for eternity." Indeed it is.

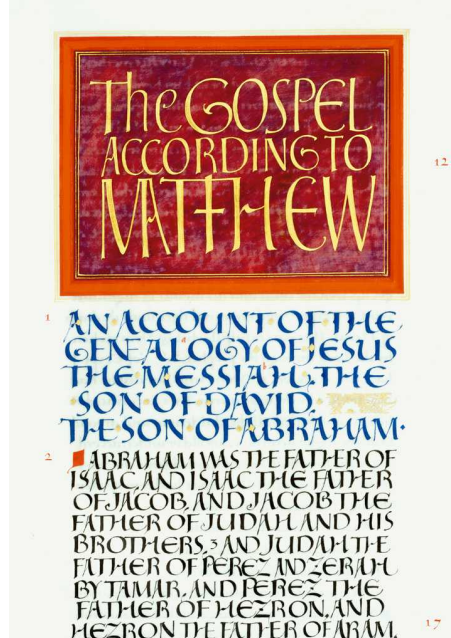
## The Calligrapher

Mr. Jackson, a Welshman, was the primary calligrapher and artistic director of the project. He is perhaps the most accomplished calligrapher of our age: **a former Senior Scribe to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II**; past Chairman of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators (UK), and Master of the Guild of Scriveners of the city of London, a professional society that has been in existence since the late Middle Ages.

From his **scriptorium in Monmouth, Wales**, he worked with a team of five other calligraphers and more than a dozen other artists and support staff who hand-lettered and illuminated (illustrated) the pages. Jackson's deep-seated artistic gift, applied to this amazing work, is **the fulfillment of a dream**: the Benedictines gave him a chance to realize his life's great ambition, and the result is spectacular, as we will see below.

## A Few Fun Facts about *The Saint John's Bible*

- The Bible is divided into **seven distinct volumes** with each page measuring 15 7/8 " wide x 24.5" high.
- It contains **1127 handlettered pages** made of vellum, namely, specially prepared calfskin pages (**not paper** – although the reproductions are made of a type of paper that approximates the vellum.)
- It incorporates images from the **Hubble Telescope** and drawings of different types of modern technology.
- The art in the margins are primarily local **flora and fauna** designed to geographically place the Bible in central North America.



**Opening to the Gospel of Matthew**  
(detail), Donald Jackson, Scribe, ©2002  
*The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's  
University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

· The images of **buildings** in the manuscript reflect structures on Saint John's campus. Like its medieval counterparts, these elements tie *The Saint John's Bible* to a **place and community**.

· And my favorite detail: the calligraphy quills that the writers used to create the scripture were made from **goose, turkey, and swan** feathers!

## The Process and Timeline

When Saint John's Abbey decided to sponsor the project, they first established the Committee on Illumination and Text (CIT), which chose the **New Revised Standard Version** of the Bible as the basic text to be written and illuminated. The NRSV is a translation accepted by Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox alike.

Thus, **this Bible is entirely in English**, not Latin as the [Book of Kells](#) or Greek as the ancient [Codex Sinaiticus](#) (although there are many Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and even Arabic letters incorporated into the imagery.)

During the long process, the committee debated about which passages to illuminate and then gave direction and feedback to Mr. Jackson's artistic team in Wales as they created the pages. **Bridging the gap** between the committee in Minnesota and the artists in Wales, however, was easier said than done.

In the early 2000s, *email and the Internet* hadn't yet been refined enough to be able to send huge graphic files efficiently across the ocean in cyberspace.

In fact, at one point they **crashed the university's email system** with the size of their files! So they sent color versions of the manuscript designs by fax machine for a while. (What would St. Benedict think of that?)



**Raising of Lazarus**, Donald Jackson, ©2002, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

But they persevered, of course, and the two teams on either side of the Atlantic delivered this gift to the world in amazing time for a project of this magnitude.

On **Ash Wednesday of 2000**, Donald Jackson crafted the **first words** of The Saint John's Bible: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, the Word was God..." (John 1:1). From there the various segments of the project were completed in the following order:

**2002** – Gospels and Acts of the Apostles.

**2003** – The Pentateuch (first 5 books of the Bible).

**2004** – The Psalms.

**2005** – The Prophets.

**2006** – The Wisdom Books.



Donald Jackson **calligraphed the final word** of the entire manuscript on May 9th, 2011. One month later, **Abbot John Klassen** and University President, Fr. Robert Koopman consecrated the work to God on the main altar of Saint John's Abbey Chapel bringing more than a dozen years of planning and artistic creation to completion – for the greater glory of God.

The purpose of the whole project? Simple. [Fr. Michael Patella](#), who chaired the CIT, said “*I hope that people are drawn to the faith because of it. Beauty is a way of proclaiming the gospel too.*”

I couldn't agree more about the evangelistic power of beauty, especially when that **beauty is combined with the Truth of God's Word**. In *The Saint John's Bible*, the Benedictines, once again, have given a unique and precious gift to the world.



**Ten Commandments**, Thomas Ingmire, ©2003  
*The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University,  
Collegeville, Minnesota.

## And the Word Was Made Flesh

As we make our way through the final days of Advent, we are beginning to see the Light at the end of the tunnel, “*the true light that shines on every man*”(John 1:9). Soon we will **celebrate the feast of the Word made Flesh** who came to dwell among us – the greatest Gift God has ever given to the world! Let the pages of *The Saint John's Bible* take you there.



**Suffering Servant**, Donald Jackson, © 2005,  
*The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's  
University, Collegeville, Minnesota.



**Transfiguration**, Donald Jackson and Aidan  
Hart, © 2002 *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint  
John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.



**Valley of the Dry Bones** (detail), Donald Jackson, © 2005, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.



of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this he called his officers and said to them, "Now tell us, who among you did with the king of Israel?" Then one of his officers said, "No, my lord king, I did not. The prophet in Israel came into the king of Israel the words that you speak to your husband here." He said, "Go and find where he is; I will send and get him." He went and found him in the field. He came home and showed them to great army; they came by night and surrounded the city. When the multitude of the army of Israel came to the morning, they went out, an army with harve & chariots all around the city. His servant said, "What counsel shall we do?" He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more within than there are without." Then Elisha prayed, "O Lord, please open to me that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw: the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. When the Ammonites came down against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord and said, "Strike this people, please, with blindness." He struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked. Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not the city where we are; I will bring you to the town where you seek." And he led them to Samaria. As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "Open your eyes, for the eyes that they may see." The Lord opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria.

**Elisha and the Six Miracles**, Donald Jackson in collaboration with Aidan Hart, © 2010, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.



**Birth of Christ, Luke Frontispiece and Incipit**, Donald Jackson, © 2002, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.





**Road to Emmaus**, Donald Jackson, © 2002 *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

**Fulfillment of Creation**, Thomas Ingmire, © 2011. *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

I am greatly indebted to Mr. Tim Ternes, Director, *The Saint John's Bible*, at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, for his provision of all the images and for his amazing help on the details of this article.

## Explore *The Saint John's Bible*

You can literally view every one of the 1127 pages of *The Saint John's Bible* on their website if you wish. I can assure you that it's **well worth the time** to view this masterpiece online. Click on titles of individual books and then on the right or left edge of the image to turn the pages like a book:

[The Saint John's Bible Website](http://www.saintjohnsbible.org)

*"A commissioning like this has not been made since the Sistine Chapel."*

Watch a Fabulous Short Documentary (duration, 3:56)

The **clearest images of the artwork and artistry** of *The Saint John's Bible* can be found on this page, which details the amazing exact reproductions of this blessed work of grace. They are called the...

Heritage Edition Reproductions

## Feature

In December we celebrate **three great Marian feasts**: the Immaculate Conception and the feasts of Our Lady of Loreto and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Then, following Christmas, we rejoice in the Feast of the Holy Family. Mary is no marginal figure in these two great seasons.

## The Greatest But Least Known Ave Maria

If you want another experiencing of sublime beauty, make sure you listen to the performance in our article, "[The Greatest But Least Known Ave Maria](#)" and I'm sure it will make your Advent.



Also be sure to check back to the [Sacred Windows](#) website on Christmas – next Sunday! – for Christmas cantata that will transport you to another world. In anticipation of next week...

*I wish you and your families a most blessed Christmas!*

Peter Darcy

[Visit our Newsletter Archives](#)



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