

American's donation lets pope peruse oldest copy of St. Luke's Gospel

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) - A donation to the Vatican by a U.S. businessman enabled Pope Benedict XVI to peruse a few pages of the oldest existing copy of the Gospel of St. Luke and one of the oldest copies of the Gospel of St. John.

The Catholic businessman, Frank J. Hanna III, and his family were present in the pope's library Jan. 22 when Pope Benedict got his first look at pages from the famous Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV.

Hanna is the Atlanta-based chief executive officer of HBR Capital Ltd., an investment management company, and co-chairman of President George W. Bush's Presidential Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, the Vatican's archivist and librarian, presented both the papyrus and the Hanna family to the pope.

The Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV, handwritten in Greek around the year 200, contains "about half of each of the Gospels of Luke and John," Cardinal Tauran explained.

"With this new precious papyrus, the library of the pope possesses the most ancient witness of the Gospel of Luke and among the most ancient of the Gospel of John," he said.

For the presentation, Cardinal Tauran and his staff brought only a few pages of the papyrus to the papal apartment.

He invited the pope to "come in person to the library to meditate, if I may say so, in front of that which can be considered a true relic, given that the church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord."

Claudio Piazzoni, vice prefect of the Vatican Library, told Catholic News Service Jan. 23 that the new acquisition includes the oldest existing copy of the Lord's Prayer, which is found in Luke 11:1-4.

The new acquisitions join the Bodmer Papyrus VIII, a copy of the First and Second Letters of St. Peter, which Martin Bodmer personally gave to Pope Paul VI in 1969.

Bodmer died in 1971, entrusting his vast library to a foundation he established. The Gospel texts were acquired from the Bodmer Foundation in Cologne, Switzerland.

Piazzoni said he had no idea how much money was involved in the transaction, although it must have been "significant."

The day after the papal presentation, the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, dedicated a full page to the manuscripts.

Before the Bodmer documents were discovered in Egypt in 1952, it said, biblical scholars relied on references to the Gospels in the writings of the early church theologians to assert that by the year 100 the Christian community had accepted only four Gospels as inspired texts.

The Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV, containing the last two Gospels, the newspaper said, provides concrete evidence that the four Gospels were circulating among Christian communities as a complete set by the year 200, although the twin papyrus containing the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark has not been found.

The Vatican took possession of the papyrus in late November and already new discoveries about it have been made, the Vatican newspaper said.

The Bodmer Foundation commissioned a transcription and facsimile of the text in 1961, and 13 years later researchers discovered that at least one fragment had not been transcribed and reproduced.

In the last few months, the Vatican Library's experts have been working to restore the rough binding, which they believe was placed as a protective covering around the papyrus in the early 300s, when the text was already too fragile to use in the liturgy.

The binding was made of layers of parchment and paste and, in restoring it, the newspaper said, new fragments from the external pages of the text itself were discovered.

"The research on an ancient manuscript can never be said to be finished," L'Osservatore said.

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