

Gift Fit for a Pope; a Piece of Peace in Holy Land

Bodmer Papyrus Is Connection With 1st Christians

By Irene Lagan

ROME, APRIL 19, 2007 (Zenit.org).- As one might imagine, Benedict XVI receives gifts regularly, and not only on his birthday or on the anniversary of his papal election.

While the Holy Father undoubtedly appreciates the gestures, few have been as universally and personally significant as the gift of the Bodmer Papyrus 14-15 (P75).

The Bodmer Papyrus, dated around the year 175, is the oldest extant copy of parts of the Gospels of John and Luke. Discovered in Egypt in the early 1950s, the papyrus influenced the course of biblical scholarship.

When scholars saw such remarkable agreement between the texts, they had to acknowledge that the fourth-century Codex Vaticanus, the oldest complete version of the Gospel, was indeed authentic.

The papyrus came into the hands of Frank Hanna III, a businessman from Atlanta, Georgia. Through what Hanna called a convoluted but remarkable series of events, he was able to purchase the papyrus before it was auctioned, and present it in January to the Holy Father as a gift for the Church.

The Bodmer Papyrus is tangible evidence that the Gospel that circulated among the early Christian communities was set down well before the fourth century and handed down in the form we now know.

In short, Hanna said, "this papyrus helps us authenticate our Christian Bible. So we have the Church itself built over the bones of Peter, and then we have right next door in the Vatican Library an early text of the Word of God, which authenticates what we have always known to be true."

Moreover, it is one of the earliest known codices, or bound volumes, and is believed to have been used for liturgy, giving Catholics another concrete connection to the early Church.

I spoke with Hanna in Jerusalem, where he described his own discovery of the Bodmer Papyrus and its ongoing significance for his faith.

"This whole adventure has been a wonderful blessing for me and my family, and like so many blessings from God, it came out of nowhere," Hanna said.

He continued: "Prior to getting a phone call in May of last year I hardly knew what a papyrus was, and I had certainly never heard of the Bodmer Papyrus.

"So, just one of the benefits of this experience is how much I have learned about Scripture."

Hanna said that he "received a call from Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the papal nuncio to the United States, who emphasized the Church's interest in this papyrus. He also emphasized the personal interest it held for Benedict XVI, who is an incredible scholar and knew about the papyrus."

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, Vatican archivist and librarian, presented a page of the papyrus to the Holy Father last January after Hanna presented his gift.

Notably, it was a middle page marking the end of Luke's Gospel and the prologue to the Gospel of John, showing the order of the texts already in place in the early Christian communities.

"Benedict XVI is especially devoted to the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John, as well as the explication of God's word. So this page held special significance," Hanna said.

He continued: "It was wonderful to see the very evident joy on Benedict XVI's face when he received this. The text is so clearly preserved that if you know how to read biblical Greek, you can read it like you are reading a newspaper.

"So, the Pope asked for his glasses and began reading with a smile on his lips. You could see that he was really able to enjoy the text."

Among the many blessings, said Hanna, was the unfolding of so many events, including the fact that his 16-year-old daughter Elizabeth was able to witness all of it transpire.

He said: "When my daughter was 10, we memorized the prologue to John's Gospel and recited it together on the way to school. She also has an unusually strong devotion to the Nativity.

"After we dedicated the trust to Mary, I learned that Luke's Gospel is often referred to as Mary's Gospel or the Nativity Gospel."

All of these things, Hanna said, were blessings that he could never have known to ask for.

During a Holy Week visit to Jerusalem, Hanna said that he came to appreciate the papyrus even more.

He said: "Rome and Jerusalem are the two centers of the Church. The fact is that however much we Christians want to focus on our spiritual nature, we cling to all of this physical evidence.

"Here in the place Jesus lived, we see that when we talk about Jesus we are not talking about a legendary figure like Paul Bunyan or Zeus hurling his thunderbolts.

"Christ was a real man who was born in a little town called Bethlehem, who grew up in Nazareth and lived in Capernaum and walked these roads."

Hanna continued: "Last night I had the privilege to be in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and in the early morning of Good Friday, to place my hand where the cross was and to be in the tomb.

"But at some point, Christ swung his feet around as if getting out of bed and put his feet on the ground. These physical pieces of faith have an impact that can be really unexpected.

"Being able to have those tangible manifestations should not be seen as a crutch. They are an enhancement of our faith.

"Clinging to these things is like clinging to physical affection of a loved one. It is part and parcel of what makes us human beings."