

SAINT JOHN'S ABBEY CHURCH AND THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE: QUANTUM ENTANGLEMENT

By Patrick Henry*

During the celebration of the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity in Saint John's Abbey Church on June 18, 2011, Donald and Mabel Jackson walked up the central aisle to present to Abbot John Klassen the final folio of The Saint John's Bible. That stunning illuminated sheet of vellum, blue and red and gold, placed on the altar of the church built a half century earlier, triggered in me a cascade of connections across time and space.

High on the world's weirdness list according to modern physics is "entanglement"-the property of a particle at the quantum level of "knowing" what another particle, perhaps even on the other side of the universe, is doing, and reacting to it. Einstein called it "spooky." Many physicists recently have speculated that entanglement operates also on larger scales.

I certainly don't claim to grasp quantum mechanics (even Nobel laureates admit they don't really understand it), but entanglement is a metaphor ripe for plucking and placing in the bowl alongside coincidence, correlation, and synchronicity.

The folio on the altar suggested to me an entanglement between the architectural imagination of Marcel Breuer and the artistic imagination of Donald Jackson. Each "knew" what the other was up to, and reacted accordingly. The passage of time didn't matter.

Modern physics talks also about "fields," the setting or conditions in which things happen, like magnetic fields, and functions that describe what happens, such as wave functions. Above my pay grade, too, but making another metaphor raid, I'll say that the Breuer-Jackson entanglement requires the Benedictine field with its functions of community, patience, and courage.

My teacher, and great friend of Saint John's, the late Jaroslav Pelikan, wrote that "tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Benedictines are true keepers of tradition, because they are committed to doing *as* their ancestors did, not *what* they did. They know things take time, must be done together, and will have to overcome resistance and discouragement. Yet they know, too, that what seems traditional to us was not the product of traditionalism, but the result of boldness and innovation.

Saint Benedict's Rule sets forth not an experiment, but the conditions for an experimental way of life, and at the end Benedict says that even if you do it all, you'll still have made only a good beginning. Like monks in every age, those of Saint John's don't get stuck in the past, nor do they expect the story culminates in them.

They need a new church? Who says it needs to look like "a church"? Why not ask a path-breaking architect to re-imagine what might count as a church? As Marcel Breuer said, "In architecture you buy something that doesn't yet exist." This is as true of Gothic arches in 12th-century Paris as of pleated concrete in 20th-century Collegeville. Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis and Abbot Baldwin of Saint John's both had to break with traditionalism in order to keep tradition alive. And so will Abbot X of whatever monastery in the 23rd century.

The White Queen in *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* says, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." In a delicious historical irony, Saint John's Abbey and University at the very end of the 20th century remembered forward for the 21st century. It had been half a millennium since a monastery had commissioned a handwritten, illuminated Bible; Gutenberg made such productions obsolete.

One might suppose that contracting for such a work would be an instance of doing *what* their forerunners did, not *as* they did. But sometimes—after a hiatus of 500 years, for instance—what is very old becomes very new once more. A Bible written and illuminated by hand, with persistence and patience over a period of thirteen years, is these days so startlingly counter-cultural that people all over the world take notice. Words, their flavor diluted in oceans of printer's ink, suddenly taste again.

The story of Saint John's Abbey Church and the story of The Saint John's Bible are entangled in many ways. Both their distinctness and their resonance are gathered up in a tale told about Saint Benedict by Pope Saint Gregory the Great. "According to Benedict's own description, the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light. . . . Of course, in saying that the world was gathered up before his eyes I do not mean that heaven and earth grew small, but that his spirit was enlarged. Absorbed as he was in God, it was now easy for him to see all that lay beneath God."

In the Benedictine field, Abbot Baldwin and Abbot John and Marcel Breuer and Donald Jackson and the Abbey Church and The Saint John's Bible all happen simultaneously. And I suspect that the entanglement was/is orchestrated by the late Brother Dietrich Reinhart, president of Saint John's University, who, when the Bible project was first broached, said, "I need this like I need a hole in the head"—and then, immediately afterwards, "But wouldn't it be grand!"

NOTES

Quantum entanglement: Vlatko Vedral, "Living in a Quantum World," *Scientific American* 304/6 (June 2011), 38-43.

Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, Vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9.

Breuer, in Hilary Thimmesch, OSB, *Marcel Breuer and the Committee of Twelve Plan a Church: A Monastic Memoir* (Collegetown: Saint John's University Press, 2011), 20.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, ch. 5; Krista Tippett titles ch. 2 of her book, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters—and How to Talk About It* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), "Remembering Forward."

Gregory the Great, *Second Dialogue* 35, in Odo John Zimmerman, OSB, trans., *Saint Gregory the Great: Dialogues*, Fathers of the Church 39 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), 105-06.

*Patrick Henry, a member of the Benedictine Institute Advisory Council, retired in 2004 after 20 years as executive director of the Collegetown Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research.