

Bad bookworms: Precious library collection on Christian East risks ruin

VATICAN CITY – The Pontifical Oriental Institute has the best general collection in the world on Eastern Christianity.

It boasts some 184,000 volumes, including rare and precious imprints and manuscripts, documenting centuries of Eastern Christian culture in a multitude of languages.

But the library's oldest and most valuable collections are in a serious state of degradation, including an extremely rare 1581 edition of the Ostrog Bible – the first complete Bible printed in Slavic.

“For the Slavic churches, this is the Gutenberg” Bible, said U.S. Jesuit Father Robert Taft, former prefect of the library and former vice rector of the institute.

Rome's temperatures swing wildly from bone-chilling cold in the winter to hot, high humidity in the summer. Then add that to the ordinary wear and tear on volumes that are hundreds of years old.

What's left are works whose covers and bindings are disintegrating, metal clasps that are broken, and pages that are fragile, molding, water-damaged or riddled with the boreholes of bookworms.

“Everybody knows that that the only way to preserve material like this is to have a standard uniform temperature with humidity control and climate control throughout

the entire year,” he said.

“Thank God for Scotch tape,” he said sarcastically as he pulled a manuscript of Byzantine liturgical music from a steel gray fireproof case. Brittle bits of yellowed adhesive tape flaked off the worn binding and large green rubber bands held together other volumes that were completely lacking spines.

“This is a sin against the patrimony of the human race,” said the priest.

The institute and library are funded, like all pontifical institutes, by the Vatican. However, the portion they receive is only enough to increase their holdings and keep the place running. Major expenses for modern equipment, renovation, and preservation are just not in the books, he said.

The institute’s rector, U.S. Jesuit Father James McCann, said he is looking for outside funding for its preservation efforts.

Jesuit-run Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., hopes to provide a grant to the library that would pay for a high-tech digitizing machine plus a year’s stipend for one person to do the scanning, he said.

Digitizing the collections would help preserve many of the works, especially the most fragile, since scholars could work off the scanned pages, Father Taft said.

The library would also be able to put the content online so scholars could avoid the trouble and expense of traveling to Rome, he added. Having digital copies would mean works would be “preserved permanently in case of stealing or loss or destruction,” he said.

While digitizing the collections will save on further wear and tear, funding must still be found for repairing the degraded volumes, which Father Taft said “costs a

fortune.”

“You just don’t send it out to your corner bindery; these have to be handled by experts who work in a lab.”

Father McCann said he also wants to look for potential donors outside the church, such as “people who love books or specialists who recognize the value of these materials.” One student told the rector he should start an Adopt-a-Book campaign.

A climate-controlled system for the library and its collections could cost a quarter of a million dollars, said Father McCann. Not only would it protect the books from heat and humidity, he said, the library would be able to stay open year round instead of having to shutter its doors from mid-July to mid-September because of the stifling temperature.

The institute, which is a graduate school specializing in the study of the Christian East, was founded in 1917 by Pope Benedict XV to demonstrate Catholic Church’s concern for its Eastern heritage and for the communities continuing to live according to the Eastern traditions.

When Pope Benedict XVI met with staff and students from the institute in 2007, he told them that “drawing from the patrimony of wisdom of the Christian East enriches us all.”

The pope praised the world-renowned library as being a powerful instrument “for eliminating eventual prejudices that could harm cordial and harmonious coexistence among Christians.”

On one rainy afternoon in March, the reading room was filled with students from India and Arab, Scandinavian, and European countries. Many students were poring over old volumes while typing away on 21st-century laptops.

Because the institute attracts religious and lay students and experts from many Christian traditions, it plays a key role in the future of ecumenism, Father McCann said.

Fifty of the 360 students enrolled this year are from the Orthodox Churches, he said, including the Coptic, Ethiopian, Greek and Russian traditions.

The Orthodox students finish their studies at the institute with “a positive view of the Catholic Church,” he said, and this is important for fostering Christian unity since many of them will be bishops someday. One of the institute’s most famous Orthodox alumni is Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.

More than 9,000 scholars a year peruse the metal stacks. It’s a gold mine for people interested in Eastern Christian culture, especially during the Czarist Empire in Russia when religious life and studies were flourishing, said Father Taft.

Soviet scholars used to flock to the institute’s collections during the communist era, he said, even though the same texts existed in their own country. Soviet policies restricted people’s access to the collections, he said.

Ironically, “access to the archives has become more restricted” again in Russia, which means many scholars are again choosing Rome over Russia for doing their research, said Father McCann.

Unfortunately for scholars, some precious collections are increasingly being put under lock and key or plates of museum glass for reasons of preservation, the two priests said.

The oriental institute, however, “is not an archival library or a museum library. Our things aren’t here to be oohed and aahed over; they’re here to be put into somebody’s hands and used,” said Father Taft.