

U.S. Lutheran seminary returns rare manuscript to Greek Orthodox Church

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue

It was an “act of ecumenism” and a true gift—since the giver could not receive anything of equal value in return.

That’s how Archbishop Demetrios, head of the Greek Orthodox Church in America, and James Nieman, president of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, described the school’s decision to send a ninth-century New Testament manuscript back to the Greek monastery where it resided for centuries.

A scribe in Constantinople wrote the scriptures on sheepskin in minuscule cursive script. It is the oldest complete New Testament manuscript in that style. In the 12th century the codex joined a repository of more than 400 documents near Drama, Greece.

During the Balkan Wars, as the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the early 20th century, the area became contested. Soldiers raided Kosinitza Monastery in 1917 and took many of its precious manuscripts as spoils of war.

Levi Franklin Gruber, later president of one of LSTC’s predecessor institutions, purchased Codex 1424 from a European book dealer in 1920.

A year ago, a representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, head of the global Orthodox churches, asked LSTC to consider returning the manuscript, which forms the basis of the official version of the New Testament used by the Greek Orthodox Church.

“It’s a cultural and religious lodestone for the Greek church,” Nieman said.

After receiving the letter from the Orthodox church, LSTC checked with attorneys and learned that Gruber’s purchase of Codex 1424 was permissible under international antiquities law then and now, Nieman said.

“We realized this was not a legal question, it was a moral question,” Nieman said. “What do we do with something that is obviously ill-got gains? We didn’t gain it illegally, but somebody did. What do you do when you have the opportunity to set

that right?”

Nieman checked with the school’s various stakeholders and found consensus supporting the return of the document—but also sadness.

Codex 1424 was “the crown jewel of our collection, far and away the most important and valuable document out of all of our rare books,” Nieman said. “It’s painful to do this.”

He noted that most gifts are actually a delayed exchange.

“A true gift is one that is costly to the person who is the giver and cannot possibly be reciprocated,” Nieman said.

At the ceremony LSTC hosted on November 15 to begin the manuscript’s journey from Chicago back to Kosinitza Monastery, Nieman spoke of giving this true gift to the Orthodox, “knowing the joy it brings you, our friends in Christ.”

Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, spoke of the history of Orthodox dialogues with the Lutheran World Federation.

“This is an important step toward reconciliation,” she said of returning the manuscript.

Demetrios crossed himself, bowed to kiss the book, and crossed himself again as he received the codex in its protective box.

The document has particular significance in that it features a different order to the New Testament, with the Pauline epistles coming after Revelation. It also omits some New Testament passages—and not by accident, Demetrios said. Notations in the text indicate that it was to be used in worship as a lectionary. The manuscript also includes commentary in the margins.

“This volume has comments from the fathers of the church, and comments on the comments,” he said. “This text offers to scholars the opportunity for a multi-level study.”

Codex 1424 is one of 60 complete Greek New Testament manuscripts extant and is included in the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament used by scholars. It is fully digitized and available through the Center for the Study of New Testament

Manuscripts at csntm.org/manuscript/View/GA_1424.

Demetrios noted that there are many other similar texts that were taken from their original place and are now in universities, museums, and private collections. He hopes they will follow LSTC's example in voluntarily returning those documents.

"This constitutes an act of generosity of immense proportion," he said. "'Given back by free will' is not an adequate description."

He spoke of the return of the codex as a *d'var*, Hebrew for both "word" and "matter about which one speaks."

"We are familiar with dialogues; they are productive, interesting," Demetrios said. "They take plenty of time, patience, tolerance, doubts. But here is a plain, clear act of ecumenism."

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