

# The New York Times

Sunday, January 2, 2022

Today's Paper  
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The Rev. David Nazar, the rector of the Pontifical Oriental Institute. The collaboration to digitize its books reminded him of a “**Mickey** Rooney film. Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times

## *A Vatican Library Shortens the Distance Between Its Works and Its Scholars*

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By Elisabetta Povoledo

Jan. 1, 2022

ROME — On April 13, 1923, a French prelate named Eugenio Tisserant and his assistant set sail from the Italian port city of Trieste to buy some books.

By the next year, after scouring bookstores and private collections scattered across the Middle East and Europe, they had returned with 2,700 volumes — and the library of the Pontifical Oriental Institute, a graduate school dedicated to the study of the Eastern branch of Christianity, was born.

“I was perched on a ladder, amid the dust and the heat,” Tisserant recalled years later of his time in Constantinople, where he examined volumes “one by one, for entire days.”

Modern-day church scholars may find the going a lot easier. Some of the texts at the Rome institute, which over the years swelled to some 200,000 works, have just been digitized, and will soon be at the fingertips of a global audience — no voyages or ladders needed.

The first digitized versions will be available to the public in mid-2022, the product of a charitable initiative that connected the institute with technology companies in the United States and Germany.

“You know, like a Mickey Rooney film: I got the costumes, I know a guy who has a barn, and we can put the play on there,” said the Rev. David Nazar, the institute’s rector.

The companies, he said, immediately understood the value of the project. Many of the books come from countries like Syria, Lebanon or Iraq, where war or other turmoil put entire collections at risk. Others come from countries where authoritarian censorship was equally threatening.



An illustrated Bible from 1540. Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times





A German company's scanner, used by the library. Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times



The institute's volumes cover the broad gamut that is Eastern Christianity. Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times



“We’re not a hospital, we’re not in the fields of Syria,” Father Nazar said, “but we have students that come from there, who study here because our resources haven’t been destroyed by war.”

Though most of the institute’s titles are not recognizable to the general public — the six-volume, 19th-century Eastern Orthodox canon collection “Syntagma tôn theiôn kai hierôn kanonôn” never did make a best-seller list — they are precious to scholars. They include volumes like a Greek first edition of liturgies of John Chrysostom, an early church father, printed in Rome in 1526.

“The library is unique in the world,” said Gabriel Radle, a professor at the University of Notre Dame who studied at the institute a decade ago.

Its volumes cover the broad gamut that is Eastern Christianity, a catchall term for the traditions and denominations that developed in the first centuries of the church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, spreading through Greece, Turkey and Eastern Europe, north to Russia, south to Egypt and Ethiopia, and as far east as India.

The first set of books to be digitized were scanned by an eight-member team from a Long Island company, Seery Systems Group, using scanning technology from SMA of Germany. The project was somewhat unusual for Richard Seery, whose company’s clients are typically state and local governments.

“I told people I usually don’t travel over the bridge to New Jersey on business, and now I’m going to Rome,” Mr. Seery said in a telephone interview. The material was a first for him, too.

“One page may be in German, the next page in Sanskrit or some other language,” Mr. Seery said of his experience scanning the texts. “And what was funny was that after going through page after page, book after book, all of a sudden I could read something — English, something in English.”



Fabio Tassone, the director of the library, said scanning priority had been given to the books most in demand. Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times

The digitized books will be managed via ShelterZoom, a New York company whose blockchain technology will ensure that the institute will retain ownership of the volumes and control over their consumption.

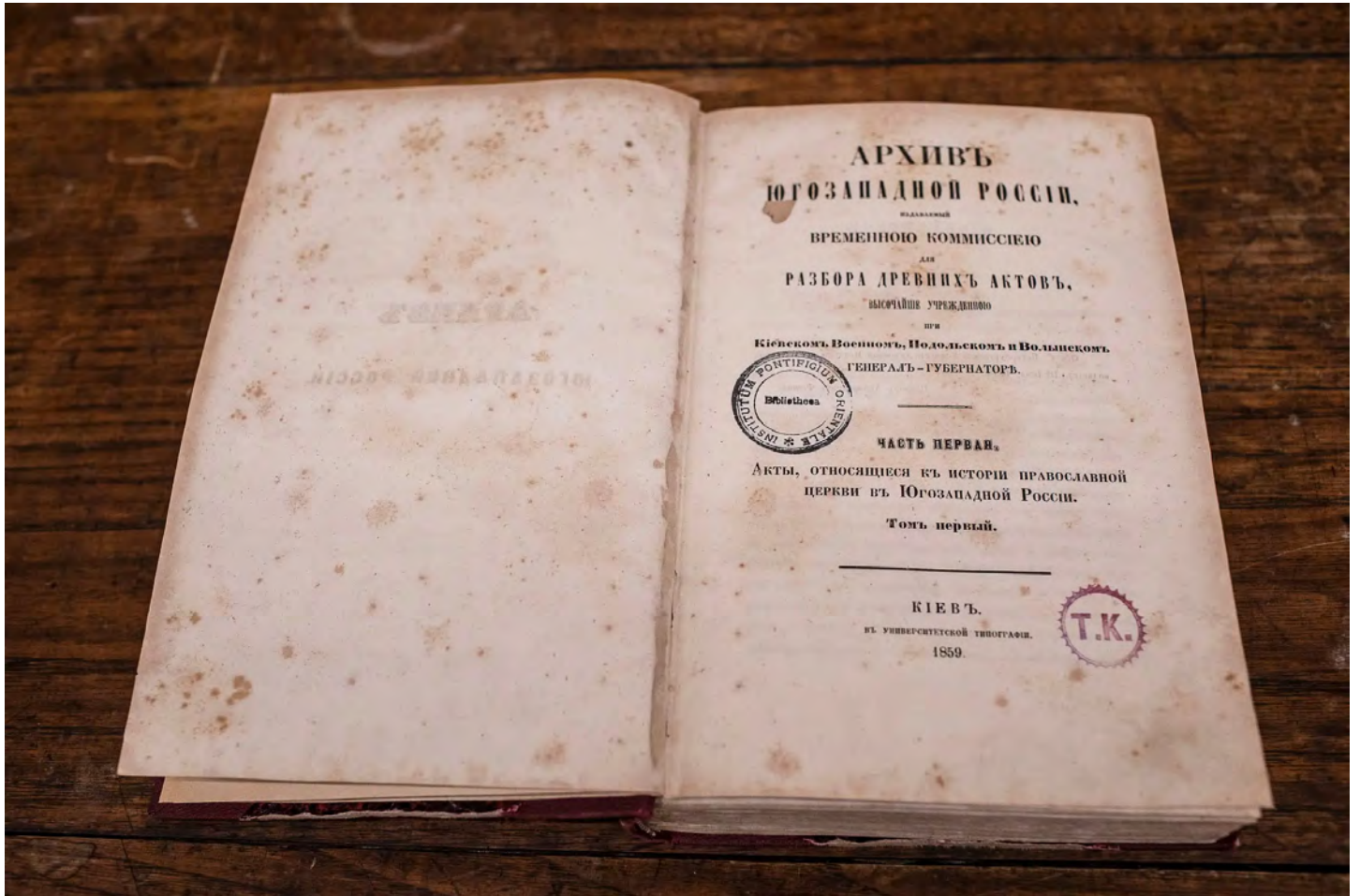
Chao Cheng-Shorland, the chief executive of ShelterZoom, said she visited the library this past year and got very excited about the project.

“It’s unique, not just in the technology sense but also in the sense of contributing to such a wonderful piece of history,” she said in a telephone interview. ShelterZoom is underwriting the first phase of the project.

Fabio Tassone, the director of the library, said scanning priority had been given to the books most in demand, those that deal with Eastern liturgy and the study of the early Christian writers of the Eastern churches.

Journals published by the institute itself, particularly issues that included unpublished manuscripts, their translation and scientific analysis, were also among the first to be digitized. In all, about 500 volumes have been digitized so far, he said, with plans to continue the process in the future.

The material reflects the uniqueness of the institute, where “you can study all the Eastern churches, not just one,” Father Nazar said. “We preserve the resources of so many of these Eastern cultures and churches for people to come back and look at their roots, especially when things are in disarray.”



A book bearing the stamp “T.K.,” marking it as part of the original collection gathered by Eugenio Tisserant and Cyrille Korolevskij. Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times

Tisserant’s own book-buying efforts reflected the breadth of the institute’s mission, and the depth of its commitment

Back in 1923, his assistant, the Eastern Catholic priest Cyrille Korolevskij, split off for Romania, Transylvania, Hungary and Poland, before finally arriving in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania.

“He was hoping to reach Bosnia, but was forced to give up,” Tisserant recalled in a letter written in 1955, by which time his own star had risen. Tisserant had gone on to head the Vatican Library and, as the dean of the College of Cardinals, later presided at the funeral Masses of Pope Pius XII in 1958 and Pope John XXIII in 1963.

Many of the books the institute went on to collect came from countries that were part of the former Soviet Union.

The library has some unexpected gems as a result, like a complete collection of the newspapers Izvestia and Pravda from the Soviet period, including issues that cannot be found in Russia, Mr. Tassone said, “because they were made to disappear.”

The institute, which is working out a fee schedule for access to the digitized volumes, will continue digitizing the collection even after its charitable partners have gone. It ended up purchasing the scanner with that in mind.

The pandemic has driven home the value of the project, another former student said.

The former student, Lejla Demiri, now the chairwoman of Islamic doctrine at the University of Tübingen, Germany, wrote in an email that two years of shutdowns and lockdowns had proven “how crucial it is to have digital access to academic sources.” No ladder required.





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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: A Global Effort to Bring Rare Books In Rome to an Online Audience