

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

In his introduction to Michael Olmert's *The Smithsonian Book of Books* (1992), Christopher de Hamel points out: "Until the 12th century, most books in medieval Europe were made in or directly for monasteries or other Church foundations. Books were the important part of the equipment of a monastery, and monks would go to great effort to keep their reference and liturgical collections comprehensive."

Hamel goes on to say: "From about 1150... professional secular scribes and illuminators started to take over the book business," which meant "that books were no longer the inalienable property of religious houses but were also bought by private individuals."

Today, books have proliferated until they have become one of the most characteristic human artifacts on earth. And so, in 1995, at the instigation of Spain, UNESCO (the United Nations Cultural and Scientific Organization) established World Book and Copyright Day, celebrated annually ever since on April 23 in more than 100 UN-member countries.

Since 2001, UNESCO has voted a World Book Capital City each year. After Madrid came Alexandria in Egypt, New Delhi, Antwerp, Montreal, Turin, Bogota, and Amsterdam. Beirut is World Book Capital City for 2009.

With Spain being the "mover and shaker" behind these literary initiatives, it's not surprising that the most unique day of the year for a bibliophile to be in Spain, but especially in Barcelona, is April 23, *La Diada de Sant Jordi* — the Day of St. George and the traditionally-accepted date of his death in 303 A.D. Certainly many of *Inside the Vatican*'s subscribers know that St. George is the patron saint of England, but some may not know that he is also patron of Catalonia, Portugal, Germany, Georgia,



ST. GEORGE DEFENDER OF THE FAITH — AND PROMOTER OF BOOKS



Bookstalls line La Ramblas, the main boulevard of Barcelona's "old" city, on World Book Day.

Top: The only sculpture of St. George in Vatican City is on display in the Borgia Apartments, now the Museums' modern picture gallery

Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, and that his symbolic Greek-style cross is venerated across Europe.

In Vatican City, the Sacred Military Constantinian Order of St. George is one of the most ancient Roman Catholic orders of knighthood. It still exists in many countries worldwide today. Since the 12th century, this Order has played an important role in defending and propagating the Roman Catholic faith. Over the centuries, many Popes have been among its members. For more information on this Holy See connection to St. George, go to www.constantinianorderofstgeorge.org to learn more about the Order's history, organization, leaders, spirituality and its American delegation. It's the primary duty of its members, who join by invitation only, "to live as true, exemplary Christians, and to dedicate themselves to any activity or endeavor that fosters the growth of religious principles among mankind, cooperating in every manner with the practice of the Christian way of life." The Order celebrates September 14 (The Triumph of the Cross) and, naturally, April 23, as its feast days.

La Diada de Sant Jordi is a major celebration in Barcelona — the city's alternative to St. Valentine's Day. Men give their *inamoratas* (sweethearts) roses and the women reciprocate with... books!

Observed since medieval times as the Rose Festival, the lover's *festa* became even more poetic in 1923 when, thanks to a local bookseller, Vincent Claval, it merged with *el dia del llibre* or "the day of the book" to mark the nearly simultaneous deaths of Miguel de Cervantes and William Shakespeare on April 23, 1616. (The same day was also Shakespeare's birthday 52 years earlier.)

Since 1997, "A rose for love and a book forever" has been

its official slogan. Approximately 4,000,000 roses and 400,000 books are sold on *La Diada de Sant Jordi*—that's 50 percent of annual sales in Catalonia. The approximately 6 million Catalans read more books than other Spaniards, ironically the least bookish Europeans.

Bookstalls run the length of the tree-, kiosk-, mime- and acrobat-lined *La Ramblas*, the "old" city's main boulevard and, according to author García Lorca, "the only street in the world which I wish would never end." They also appear overnight in spacious *Plaça de San Jaume*, originally the site of Barcelona's Roman forum and marketplace and since medieval times the Cathedral Square. On what is in fact an official workday, nearly all of Barcelona seems to take to the streets to browse through books and chat with their favorite authors, who are all too happy to sign their newest volumes.

In Barcelona, Sant Jordi is everywhere. The Generalitat, Catalonia's seat of government (open to the public only on April 23), displays no fewer than 17 representations of Sant Jordi in bronze, silver, wood, bas-relief, oil painting and a tapestry; one is in the center of its main façade. Sculptures by art-nouveau master Eusebio Arnau show the gallant knight piking the dragon on *Palau de la Música Catalana*, the *Casa Amatller* and café *Els Quatre Gats* (the site for Picasso's first public exhibition in 1899). Eccentric native-son architect and mystic Antoni Gaudí's *Casa Batlló* has the cross of Sant Jordi implanted in its scaly roof, which represents the dragon, Barcelona's mascot.

One of the most venerated of all historical figures, Sant Jordi is generally identified as a Palestinian soldier in the Roman army who was martyred for adhering to his Christian faith in the early 300s during the persecution of Diocletian. His cult flourished not only in the Middle East, but also in England during the Crusades, probably because the very Crusaders brought it back with them from Palestine. In 1264 or thereabouts, Italian writer Jacobus de Voragine further spread the Sant Jordi story in his biographical histories of the saints, the *Legenda Sanctorum* (*Legend of the Saints*, also known as *The Golden Legend*). Thanks to the legend of George and the dragon, he became the patron of horses, cavalry, equestrians, knights, archers, and armorers. He is also invoked against the plague, leprosy, and syphilis.

Probably because his feast day is in April, the name George is universally connected with springtime, agriculture and the greening of the fields. Hence he's also the patron saint of farmers, and many Sant Jordi's Day roses come



Antoni Gaudí's *Casa Batlló* has the cross of Sant Jordi implanted in its scaly roof, which represents the dragon, Barcelona's mascot.

Bottom: This Vatican stamp was issued on the 700th anniversary of St. George's death in 2003

with a spike of wheat to augur a rich harvest.

But why books? If Cervantes and Shakespeare aren't enough reason, there's much more: According to the *BMC* (the *Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century Now in the British Museum*), the first books were printed in Spain by itinerant Germans in Barcelona. They were Aristotle's *Ethica ad Nicomachum*, typographer Henricus Botel's contract dated January 5, 1473, and Niccolò Perotti's *Rudimenta Grammatices*, typographer Johannes di Salzburga, a volume dated December 12, 1475.

This later volume had first been published in Rome two years earlier, on March 19, by Pannartz and Sweynheim, also itinerant German printers, who printed the first book ever in Italy at the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco in 1465, and then the first book ever in Rome in 1470 in their workshop in the Palazzo Massimi. *Rudimenta Grammatices* was one of the first modern Latin school grammars. Described by Erasmus as "accurate, yet not pedantic," it became a bestseller overnight, going through 117 printings and selling 59,000 copies in Italy, Spain, Germany, France, and the Low Countries by the end of the century. Its autograph manuscript, completed in 1468, is preserved in the Vatican Library.

Besides *Rudimenta Grammatices*, Perotti (1429-1480) wrote another bestseller about Martial: *Cornu Copiae*—part commentary, part dictionary, printed posthumously in 1489 and dedicated to the warrior-book collector Duke Federico of Montefeltro. As a young man in 1447, Perotti became the secretary to the humanist bookhunter Cardinal Basilios Bessarion and published his biography in 1472. A bookhunter himself, together with the Florentine bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci, Perotti collected books for the papal library, now the Vatican Library, founded in 1475. A collection of fables by the Greek poet Phaedrus, not known from any other source, was discovered

by Perotti in a manuscript now lost. Perotti's transcription is preserved in the Vatican Library and is known as "Perotti's Appendix."

To return to Barcelona, in 1490 the Valencian Joanot Martorell published *Tirant Lo Blanc* there. It's a bawdy epic narrative considered to be the first true European novel and described by Cervantes as "the best book in the world."

Today Barcelona, though still a predominantly Catalan-speaking city, is the publishing capital of the Spanish-speaking world, as well as the planet's fourth-ranked book producer overall. ○

