THE LAND OF GOD

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:1–5)

The monks of Saint Catherine's call it "the God-trodden Mount of Sinai." This is where Moses encountered the Burning Bush, communed with God, and received the Ten Commandments. This is also where Saint Catherine's monastery has stood for over 1,400 years. Located at the foot of Mount Moses in Sinai, Egypt, the monastery and its fortifications are built around what is believed to be the original Burning Bush. Many believe that this is also where angels brought the body of the martyr Saint Catherine of Alexandria, from whom the monastery takes its name.

Since the sixth century, when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian ordered its construction, Saint Catherine's has remained largely unchanged, protected by its remote location and bounded by its sacredness. In this desolate, inhospitable region, where the days are hot, the nights are cold, and the land is filled with choking sand and sharp rocks, Saint Catherine's stands like a spiritual beacon at the outer edges of civilization. Here, monks continue to live much as they have in the generations before, maintaining the ancient cycle of services and way of life, and watching over some of the oldest and most precious religious icons of early Christianity, as well as an exceptional library. Some 3,500 ancient manuscripts in Greek, Arabic, Syriac, Georgian and Slavonic, with additional manuscripts in Latin, Hebrew, Coptic, Armenian, Polish and Ethiopian, are housed here.
Christian pilgrims have been coming to this harsh region since the second century, even before the present fortress was built, traveling through the same wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula as the ancient Israelites after their flight from Egypt. Even with the coming of Islamic rule to the region, Saint Catherine's continued to operate and welcome the pious from all parts of the world. The monastery holds a document said to have been dictated by the prophet Mohammed himself, giving his protection to the monastery.

Visitors today behold many of the same sights as pilgrims did centuries ago. The granite walls of the fortress still surround the monastery. Visitors enter the basilica by passing through the original 1,400 year-old wooden doors and under beams that bear inscriptions honoring the Emperor Justinian and his wife, the Empress Theodora.

Today, Saint Catherine's, with its magnificently preserved architecture and artifacts, surrounded by an unchanging landscape, and strengthened by its isolation and enduring traditions, is a living link to history. It sits at the crossroads of three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

An important component of the exhibition *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, will be to offer the museum visitor a better understanding of the importance of this holy site and insight into how the objects on view are a part of daily life at Saint Catherine's monastery.