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## Oldest Christian Monastery Renovated

### Monks Open Doors to Pilgrims

AL-ZAAFARANA, Egypt, FEB. 11, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- After eight years of renovation, the Monastery of St. Anthony, the world's oldest, opened its doors to pilgrims.

The Coptic Orthodox monastery was built around 356 at the burial site of St. Antony of Egypt, also known as St. Anthony the Great, at the foot of the Red Sea mountains near the town of Al-Zaafarana.

Last week, a \$14.5 million renovation project was completed, and the monastery, which still has monks living in it, was opened to pilgrims as well.

The project restored a wall surrounding the monastery, two of the seven churches, the monks' living quarters and a tower that was used as a fortress during times of attack in the Middle Ages.

The American Research Center in Egypt worked along with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to restore paintings dating back to the 7th century.

The renovations uncovered monks' cells from the 4th century, the oldest discovered to date. Project leaders covered some of these findings with glass so that they can be viewed by pilgrims from above.

Other treasures of the monastery include over 1,700 handwritten manuscripts contained in the library.

### Desert Father

The cave where St. Antony lived as a hermit is a little over a mile from the monastery, some 2,230 feet above the Red Sea level.

Born in the year 251, St. Antony is recognized as the first known ascetic who went into the desert in order to pursue a deeper living of his Christian faith.

His lifestyle attracted many followers, who built the monastery on his burial site immediately after his death.

Zahi Hawass, head of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, noted that this project to renovate the more than 1,600-year-old monastery was carried out through the collaboration of both Christians and Muslims.

He stated that all of these antiquities, whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish, are a part of Egypt's national heritage.

The unveiling took place one month after a drive-by shooting killed six Coptic Christians exiting Christmas Midnight Mass, escalating interreligious tension in the country.

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Hawass, while unveiling the monastery, told journalists that he hopes everyone will now forget that violent incident.

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