

**A Tribute to
Professor Samir Khalil Samir, SJ,
on the occasion of his 65th birthday***

Juan Pedro MONFERRER-SALA
Universidad de Córdoba

The opening lecture of the *7th International Congress of Christian Arabic Studies* was held on Thursday 23rd September 2004. The one hour lecture that bore the title “Les Suryan et la civilization arabo-musulmane” was delivered by Professor Samir Khalil Samir at the “Auditorium Pierre Y. Aboukhater”, in the Human Sciences Campus (USJ), Damascus street, in Beyrouth.

The lecture provided an occasion to Professor Samir Khalil Samir to develop some key aspects of the Islamic world in the formation, as well as the history, of this new ideological model, and in the Arabic civilization as a whole.

This session inaugurating the Congress was preceded by a brief speech of welcome to the participants delivered by the Rector of the Université Saint-Joseph, Prof. René Chamussy, S.J. Among other Deans and various celebrities in the Lebanese ecclesiastical, cultural and political environment the following attended: P. Fadel Sidarouss (Provincial Father), P. Bruno Sion SJ (Administrative Vice-Rector), P. Louis Boisset, SJ (Dean of the Faculty of Religious Sciences), P. Thom Sicking SJ (Research Coordinator), M. Jarjoura Hardane SJ (Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and Member of CEDRAC Advisory Board), P. Boulos Naaman and P. Touma Mouhanna (in the name of Kaslik University Rector and Lebanese Maronite Order General Father), Mgr Jean Jambart (Catholic Greek-Melkite

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Archbishop of Aleppo), Mgr Chukrallah Harb (Maronite ex-Bishop of Jounieh), P. Simon Atallah (Antonine Order General Father), Mgr Samir Mazloum (Patriarchal Vicar of Zghorta), Mgr. Francisco Javier Martínez Fernández (Archbishop of Granada, Spain) and the ex-Minister Mr. Ghassan Tueni.

Next, Professor Samir Khalil Samir read his lecture, which raised a warm round of applause at the end. After this, the planned time-table was closely followed but for one exceptional event quite unexpected for the actual guest of honour: the moment when he was going to be paid tribute by all those who had been devoted, in one way or another, to the study and spreading of the cultural Christian Arab and Syriac Legacy.

The contributors to that tribute session were Professor Rifaat Ebied from the University of Sydney and Professor Herman Teule from Nijmegen Universiteit. They both are the editors of the tribute volume, having undertaken the hard task of co-ordinating the papers of the invited collaborators. Professor Samir Khalil Samir, by the way, was totally unaware of the preparation of the volume in his homage. We are publishing a review of it in the present number written by Professor Clare E. Wilde from Georgetown University.

When Professor Samir Khalil Samir delivered the last words of his lecture, and in the course of the ensuing round of applause, both Professors Rifaat Ebied and Herman Teule went up to the platform and took their place at the lecturing stand. Then Professor Samir Khalil Samir became aware of the unexpected course of events. He raised from the table where he had been lecturing and he stood apart to listen intently to what both Professors had to say. He had been actually on the brink to discover what appeared some days before on the Internet, namely, that his Publishers were then planning to promote the present act of tribute to him. As it happened, Dr. F. Nagi Edelby prevented him from discovering this news in the last moment and from spoiling, therefore, the forthcoming events. As a consequence, the four-year long preparation was saved.

The first in the turn of speech was Professor Rifaat Ebied, who addressed the audience in English. He extolled the intellectual, scientific and humane facets of Samir Khalil Samir's personality, highlighting the hard work carried out throughout all his long life on Eastern Christianity, in both the Arabic and the Syriac aspects of it.

Rifaat Ebied's turn of speech was brief and dense, full of affection and sincere feelings, loaded with devotion, respect and admiration.

Following this, Rifaat Ebied and Samir Khalil Samir gave each other a warm hug. Then Herman Teule was next in the turn of speech. Herman reminded the audience in French of the full significance of Samir Khalil Samir's figure for our research area nowadays and in the past. He also provided us with a general outline of his vast scientific curriculum vitae published in various languages, namely Arabic, French, German, Italian, English and Spanish. Professor Herman Teule's words were full of emotion and sincere admiration, as he has known Samir Khalil Samir, as he had commented to us on a previous occasion, for over thirty years.

The guest of honour's reaction was that expected of a wise and humble man, in an emotional and thankful attitude. Professor Samir Khalil Samir, after hugging and kissing Herman Teule, was given the tribute volume by him. Such a volume was meant as a tribute for his great scientific and organizing work in Eastern Christian Studies. He then took the microphone and addressed some words to the audience. Still excited at the events, he thanked the editors for the hard work, although he did not know that it was the work of four long years, and also thanked all those who, in one way or another, had made a contribution to this collective endeavour.

The studies of Eastern Christianity, especially ever since the 19th century, have been the subject matter of outstanding scientific figures in the various Western countries both in the field of Coptology and in the Arabic and Syriac Studies. Scholars and experts of various kinds and interests, deeply involved with Eastern Christianity like Ignazio Guidi, J.B. Chabot, the sisters Smith Lewis and Dunlop Gibson or, more recently Georg Graf, Julius Aßfalg and Sebastian P. Brock among many others, were the stimuli in a field of study that but for them would otherwise be neglected today and at a much lower level of development.

But notwithstanding the relevance of the scholars' efforts to promote the studies of Eastern Christianity, it is certainly no less relevant the emergence of the Eastern figure, namely F. Louis Cheikho, S.J. Born in Iraq, Louis Cheikho devoted his whole academic life to the spreading of Eastern Christianity in the Arabic language, both in his teaching post at the University of Saint Joseph in Beyrouth as in his vast scientific production. With his death a great loss was felt in the studies of Eastern Christianity.

Everything pointed to a new great difficulty in filling the gap left by such an important figure. Even Georg Graf, for all his great research endeavours, did not manage to shroud in a veil the work done by the leading figure of Saint Joseph. That widespread common saying that “only every one hundred years a wise man is born” seems to truly apply in this particular case in the issue of Eastern Christianity studies.

It is true, however, that there were outstanding specialists in the various fields of study in Eastern Christianity. All of them showed high scientific standards but none of them seemed to have outstanding organizing abilities, neither were they ideologically notable or had great articulatory qualities, so as to be able to establish links and connections between the apparently divergent paths in the studies of Eastern Christianity. Everything then seemed to be fading away, lost in the mist of private interests that each of them had.

However, in the year 1936, on the 10th of January, a child was born in Cairo¹ who, in the long run, was to be the successor of F. Louis Cheikho. His name was Samir Khalil Kusseim, later known as Samir Khalil Samir. He was not just a successor, but also the most outstanding researcher cum organiser ever known in Eastern Christianity Studies during the 20th and 21st centuries. Educated in Europe and a Professor in Universities of several countries (Italy, England France, USA, Egypt, Japan, Austria, Palestine, Canada, Holland and Lebanon), he stood out for his extraordinary research ability, for his oratorical gifts and also for his puzzling rhetorical skilfulness which enabled him to master, both in the speaking and writing mode, several languages such as Arabic, French, Italian, English and German.

Not very fond of compliments, naturally humble and wise, he is an academic man devoted to his work, at the same time of an amiable, open-handed and sympathetic character, a great conversationalist, a faithful friend and a most reliable person. Throughout the last decades both his scientific and humane qualities have been widely acknowledged by all the scholars in Eastern Christianity Studies.

¹ For a detailed biographical note, see Rifaat EBIED & Herman TEULE, “Father Samir Khalil Samir S.J. A Biographical Note”, in R. EBIED & H. TEULE (ed.), *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage in Honour of Father Prof. Dr. Samir Khalil Samir S.I. at the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Leuven – Paris – Dudley, Ma.: Peeters, 2004), pp. IX-XII.

His work of both synthesis and analysis, it ranges widely, incorporating a whole insight from social, cultural, political, textual, and religious history. He is an exceptionally fine, erudite, and often surprising Master of the entire run of Eastern Christian Studies. Meticulously accurate yet smoothly flowing, Professor Samir Khalil Samir's methods enlighten and delight knowledgeable and students alike. He has guided most of us through Christian Studies scholarship, providing engaging teachings thanks to his bright analytical interpretations of the events. There are few scientists as knowledgeable and clear about how this kind of studies, and as thoughtful about the methods and techniques as Professor Samir Khalil Samir.

But outstanding among all Professor Samir Khalil Samir's achievements are his organizing ability, the outcome of which is the creation of CEDRAC (in French "Centre de documentation et de recherches arabes chrétiennes"), based in the "Université Saint-Joseph" (Beyrouth). This Centre of documentation and research is currently, no doubt, the heart and reference for all those who devote themselves to the study of Eastern Christianity, and more specifically Arab Christianity.

Therefore, the legacy of Professor Samir Khalil Samir lies not only in his extraordinary scientific activity, in its various aspects, and also in his great humane qualities, but also of his most precious creation, the CEDRAC, and his clever selection of the generous and skilled staff of the CEDRAC as well: Dr. F. Nagi Edelby, Miss Lena Dabaghy, Miss Mona Dabaghy, Miss Jeanette Rizk and Miss Fadia Abou Samra.

All those of us who are interested in Eastern Christianity, and in the Arabic one in particular, must consider this Centre of documentation as belonging to us, as forming part of our own property, so that we can care for it, support it and protect it for the future generations.

Today, Professor Samir Khalil Samir constantly grants us the gift of his generous scientific production in books, articles and lectures, but he also gives us the invaluable gift of the mentioned important Centre. It is our task to make the CEDRAC grow in prestige and thriving activity. It is by doing this that we can give back some tokens of gratitude to Professor Samir Khalil Samir for all he cared to give us in the past few years.

May God preserve him for a long time!