



Fr. Sidney H. Griffith
(1938 – 2026)

In Memoriam: Fr. Sidney Griffith, ST, Professor Emeritus of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures at the Catholic University of America

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Father Sidney Harrison Griffith, ST, Professor Emeritus of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures at the Catholic University of America, reposed in the Lord on 1 July 2026. Fr. Sidney was a mentor and friend to countless scholars and professionals over the last five decades, and his impact on Arabic Christianity, Syriac Christianity, and Christian-Muslim encounters will continue to shape these fields in the future.

Fr. Sidney was born in Gaithersburg, Maryland, in 1938. He joined the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity (ST) and was ordained a priest in 1965. He earned his doctorate in Semitics from The Catholic University of America in 1978, with his dissertation on the theology of the ninth-century Melkite bishop Theodore Abu Qurrah. He remained at CUA for the duration of his career, earning Ordinary Professor status in 2001 and Emeritus status in 2014 upon his retirement, which did not slow down his research.

Fr. Sidney was known as one of the preeminent scholars of medieval Arabic-speaking Christianity and a founding father of the field in the United States. He also served as a leading figure for late antique Syriac Christianity and Christian-Muslim interreligious encounters. He composed more than 130 publications during his scholarly career. Fr. Sidney's books include *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (2013), *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (2008), *Yahyā ibn 'Adī: The Reformation of Morals: A Parallel English-Arabic Text* (2002), *Theodore Abū Qurrah: A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons* (1997), *Faith Adoring Mystery: Readings the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian* (1997), *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam* (1995), and two collected editions of his articles: *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period* (2002), and *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (1992).

Fr. Sidney edited numerous volumes with his colleagues, and he had a festschrift presented to him in 2011, honoring his life and works on Syriac studies (*To Train His Soul in Books: Syriac Asceticism in Early Christianity*). A full bibliography of his publications through 2018 is available in a festschrift presented to him for his 80th

birthday (*The Heirs of the Apostles: Studies on Arabic Christianity in Honor of Sidney H. Griffith*, 2019, pp. 495–517).

At The Catholic University of America, Fr. Sidney served in multiple leadership roles across the university including as chair of the Semitics department for three terms. For many graduate students, Fr. Sidney facilitated their introduction into the languages and literatures of Syriac and Arabic Christianity. Many future publications by his students had their origins in Fr. Sidney's seminars and his selected readings for class. Fr. Sidney could often be found in his office or delving into the books of the research library of the Institute of Christian Oriental Research (ICOR) in Mullen Library at CUA.

Fr. Sidney loved to travel for conferences, or for various guest lectures or guest appointments. An avid reader, he would often bring along some light reading for his journeys. Fr. Sidney was also blessed as a gifted conversationalist. Anyone who sat down over a meal with him would be in for a treat, whether he was discussing his own work, controversies in the field, or tales of his remarkable or humorous experiences during his sojourns. As a priest, he also faithfully served a parish community in the Washington, DC area for many years. Fr. Sidney was also committed to authentic dialogue for the Roman Catholic Church. He served as a representative of the United States Council of Catholic Bishops for ecumenical dialogues with Eastern Orthodox Christians and for interreligious discussions with Muslims. Fr. Sidney exemplified the best qualities of a dialogue partner, demonstrating historical knowledge, theological depth, scriptural acumen in the Bible (& Qur'an), and a commitment to genuine reciprocity instead of hollow statements of empathy.

Fr. Sidney's colleagues, students, and friends across the world are eternally grateful for his scholarly contributions, his integrity of character, his generosity of spirit, and the positive impact that he made upon our lives.