

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Seventh North American Syriac Symposium (NASS VII)

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The Seventh North American Syriac Symposium (NASS VII) was convened at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, June 21-24. Held every four years, the North American Syriac Symposium brings together university professors, graduate students, and scholars from the United States and Canada as well as from Europe, the Middle East, and India, in particular from the State of Kerala. The Symposium offers a unique opportunity for exchange and discussion on a wide variety of topics related to the language, literature, and cultural history of Syriac Christianity, which extends chronologically from the first centuries CE to the present day and geographically from Syriac Christianity's homeland in the Middle East to South India, China, and the worldwide diaspora. The first North American Syriac Symposium met at Brown University in 1991. It was followed by symposia at the Catholic University of America (1995), the University of Notre Dame (1999), Princeton Theological Seminary (2003), the University of Toronto (2007), and Duke University (2011).¹ With the most recent symposium, the Catholic University of America became the first university to host this prestigious event for a second time. As proposed and voted upon at the business meeting of NASS VII, the Eighth North American Syriac Symposium will be organized by Kristian Heal at Brigham Young University in the summer of 2019.

NASS VII boasted over sixty academic papers.² The papers covered a wide array of topics in Syriac studies. There were papers dedicated to most major Syriac authors, including Aphrahat,

¹ For the history of the North American Syriac Symposium, see S. P. Brock and A. M. Butts, "Syriac Conferences," in Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz, and Lucas Van Rompay (eds.), *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 389-390.

² The full program is available at <<http://semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/NASS-Program-Final.pdf>>. The abstracts for the papers are available at <<http://semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/NASS-7-abstracts-1-.pdf>>.

Ephrem, Isaac of Antioch, John the Solitary, Jacob of Serugh, Narsai, Gabriel Qatraya, Jacob of Edessa, Isaac of Nineveh, Dadisho Qatraya, John of Dalyatha, George bishop of the Arab tribes, Mushe bar Kipho, Barhebraeus, and Khamis bar Qardaḥe, as well as to some lesser known ones, such as Lazarus of Beth Qandasa. Papers also dealt with, *inter alia*, the Bible, liturgy, theology, and hagiography. In addition, no less than a dozen papers discussed topics related to the Islamic context of Syriac Christianity, including the Qurʾān, historiography under Islam, and contacts and conflicts with Islam. A selection of the papers presented at NASS VII will be published by CUA Press in a volume edited by Aaron M. Butts and Robin Darling Young.

One of the many highlights of NASS VII was the large number of papers presented by graduate students (twenty-six in total). The quality of many of these graduate student papers was truly impressive, and this speaks to the bright future ahead for Syriac studies. The Nijmeh Kiraz Award for the best graduate student presentation was awarded to Blake Hartung (Saint Louis University) for his paper on ‘The Significance of Astronomical and Calendrical Theories for Ephrem’s Interpretation of the Three Days of Jesus’ Death’. The selection committee for this award consisted of Susan A. Harvey (Brown University; chair); Kristian Heal (Brigham Young University); Scott Johnson (University of Oklahoma); Janet A. Timbie (The Catholic University of America); and Lucas Van Rompay (Duke University).

In addition to the regular papers, there were four plenary lectures: Bas ter Haar Romeny (VU University Amsterdam), ‘How Greek was Syriac Christianity?’; Dorothea Weltecke (University of Konstanz), ‘On sources for the social and cultural history of Christians during the Syriac Renaissance’; Adam Becker (New York University), ‘The Invention of the *Persian Martyr Acts*’; and Joseph Amar (University of Notre Dame), ‘Making Ephrem One of Us’.³ Each of these lectures provided a broad, far-reaching perspective by a leading expert in the field. The ground covered in the plenary lectures, with a nuanced and sophisticated command of the source material, was inspiring.

³ More information about these speakers is available at <http://semitics.cua.edu/keynotespeakers.cfm>.

On Monday evening of NASS VII (June 22), there was a Tools Session, organized and chaired by Scott Johnson (University of Oklahoma), which highlighted ongoing Digital Humanities projects dedicated to Syriac studies. A Syriac Language Pedagogy Workshop was held on Tuesday afternoon (June 23) of the symposium. This was organized by Ute Possekkel (Harvard Divinity School) and included a group of scholars with many years of experience in teaching the Syriac language: J. F. Coakley (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London); Kristian Heal (Brigham Young University); Ute Possekkel (Harvard Divinity School); Monica Blanchard (The Catholic University of America); and George Kiraz (Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute). On Tuesday evening (June 23), Robin Darling Young organized a forum on Creating a Syriac Cultural Archive, chaired by Fr. Ron Roberson CSP of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, during which the Syriac Heritage Project was launched. This project, which is directed by Young, seeks to establish a digital repository for the preservation and dissemination of the cultural record of Syriac communities.⁴ The Tuesday evening forum also provided an opportunity for symposium participants to reflect on the current situation in the Middle East and the irreparable losses being suffered by Christian communities there.

Throughout NASS VII, there was an exhibit of manuscripts, objects, and photographs related to Syriac studies in the May Gallery of the John K. Mullen of Denver Memorial Library.⁵ This wonderful exhibit was curated by the ever-resourceful Monica Blanchard (The Catholic University of America) as well as the indispensable Michelle Datiles (The Catholic University of America). The items in the exhibit are all permanently housed in the Institute of Christian Oriental Research Library (ICOR) and derive ultimately from the collection of Rev. Dr. Henri Hyvernât (1858-1941), affectionately known as ‘the grand old man of the university’, who was the first professor appointed to the faculty of the new Catholic University of America and who would go on to play such an important role in its Department of Semitic and Egyptian Languages and Literatures. As a souvenir, all participants

⁴ For more information about this project, see <<http://syriacheritage.cua.edu/>>.

⁵ A guide to this exhibit is available at <<http://semitics.cua.edu/res/docs/TravelsExhibittiny1.pdf>>.

received a series of postcards featuring pictures from Hyvernat's trip to the Middle East in 1888-1889.

NASS VII was attended by over one hundred and twenty-five participants. The Catholic University of America was especially well represented with participants from that institution including the acting dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, Claudia Bornholdt, the acting dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies, Paul McPartlan, as well as the president of the Catholic University of America, John Garvey. Many of the participants, however, had a longer distance to travel, including not only participants from across North America, but also a number from Europe, the Middle East, India, and even Australia. Two bishops were in attendance at NASS VII, their excellencies Saad Sirop Hanna, Auxiliary Bishop of the Chaldean Patriarchate in Baghdad, and Francis Y. Kalabat, Bishop of the Chaldean Eparchy of Saint Thomas the Apostle of Detroit.

NASS VII was held under the auspices of the North American Supervisory board, which consists of Joseph P. Amar (University of Notre Dame); Aaron M. Butts (The Catholic University of America); Philip M. Forness (Princeton Theological Seminary, student representative); Sidney H. Griffith (The Catholic University of America); Amir Harrak (University of Toronto); Susan A. Harvey (Brown University); George A. Kiraz (Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute); Kathleen McVey (Princeton Theological Seminary); Lucas Van Rompay (Duke University); and Robin Darling Young (The Catholic University of America). The planning and organizing of NASS VII fell largely to the local steering committee, which consisted of Aaron M. Butts (The Catholic University of America; organizer); Robin Darling Young (The Catholic University of America; chair); Monica J. Blanchard (The Catholic University of America); Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (then of Dumbarton Oaks, now of the University of Oklahoma); Joel Kalvesmaki (Dumbarton Oaks); Stephen D. Ryan (Dominican House of Studies); Shawqi Talia (The Catholic University of America); Janet A. Timbie (The Catholic University of America); and Lev Weitz (The Catholic University of America). NASS VII received generous support from the following entities at the Catholic University of America: School of Arts and Sciences; Center for the Study of Early Christianity; School of Theology and Religious Studies; Department of History; Department of Semitic

and Egyptian Languages and Literatures; and the Institute of Christian Oriental Research (ICOR).